

VIII. Encouraging Words

January 5/6, 2011

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Aim: To be encouraged and comforted by the certain knowledge of our resurrection and transformation at the return of Jesus Christ in glory.

Having dealt with the problems posed by the ‘weak’ and the ‘unruly,’ (cp. 5:14), Paul addresses himself in the third place to the ‘fainthearted,’ an element in the fellowship who were concerned about their departed loved ones (4:13-18) and indeed about their own hopes for salvation (5:1-11).

From this point to 5:11, Paul is absorbed with explaining more about the Second Coming of Christ. Paul’s purpose in dealing with eschatology was not to provide an exhaustive account of all that will take place at the end. Nothing is said here, for instance, about the resurrection of unbelievers. The idea of the personal return of the Lord Jesus had clearly been central to the gospel preached in Thessalonica (cp. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13). Paul is writing not to acquaint the Thessalonians with this event, but to clear up difficulties concerning it that had arisen in the minds of his friends in Thessalonica in the months since he had left them.

Two difficulties were troubling at least some in the church and which were, no doubt, relayed to Paul by Timothy. The first (4:13-18) was the fate of Christians who die before Jesus comes back. Would they miss out on being part of that event, or at least be disadvantaged in some way? Secondly (5:1-11), apparently some were anxious about the timing of the Lord’s return. To allay unnecessary fears on these two points, Paul explains more about the return of Christ. In doing so, he takes the facts of the Second Coming and shows that a proper understanding of them affects one’s life *now*, because Paul’s concern was not just doctrinal, but pastoral.

A. The Concern of the Thessalonians (1 Th. 4:13-14)

Paul’s argument in these verses suggests that a number of believers from the church in Thessalonica had died since he himself had been there. Their grieving relatives and friends appear to have been worried that since their loved ones had died prior to Jesus’ return, they would somehow be at a disadvantage compared to those who ‘are alive and remain’ (v. 15). Had they perhaps jumped to the conclusion that salvation depended on being alive at that time? Whatever the precise nature of their problem, the apostle was at pains to reassure them that their departed loved ones would be none the worse for having gone before.

1. Unhelpful Ignorance (4:13a)

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep...

Paul starts out by saying, ‘We do not want you to be ignorant.’ This common formula or its equivalent is frequently used by Paul to introduce a new topic in his epistles (cp. Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:12; Col. 2:1). Here, Paul pinpoints the root of their anxieties. He traces them to a lack of knowledge, to ‘ignorance’ (*ἀγνοεῖν*, *agnoein*). He does not describe them as ‘uninformed’ because he has never discussed the future resurrection with them, but because their current understanding of the state of the dead Christians indicates that they do not properly understand it or apply it to their own situation.

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‘Sleep’ (*koimaō*, here *κοιμωμένων*) was a term used widely in the ancient world for death. It is not surprising that many cultures refer to death as a kind of sleep. The word ‘cemetery’ is derived from a Greek word that means ‘place of sleep’ (*κοιμητήριον, koimētērion*). Among pagans, ‘sleep’ was a euphemism to soften the dread that death inspired. But among Christians it was a fitting expression of the hope they cherished. The frequent use of ‘sleep’ in both Old and New Testaments shows that it was a wonderful metaphor, rich with meaning, to describe the state of those who had died with a trust in God (e.g., Gen. 47:30; 2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Kgs. 2:10; Mt. 27:52; Jn. 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 2 Pe. 3:4). To the believer, death was like falling asleep at the end of a long period of toil (cp. Rev. 14:13) in the anticipation of awakening refreshed on a new day.

Of course, the metaphor of sleep is referring here to the body, and not to the soul. The Christian’s body will in the future ‘awake’ from its slumber by being remade into a gloriously transformed body, and will be united with the soul that has been in heaven.

Some believers have concluded from this that the dead are not conscious, that the soul is at rest as well as the body and will remain so until Jesus comes once more. Over against this, the Bible affirms that while the body sleeps, the soul goes immediately to its reward to be reunited with a glorified body when the believing dead are raised to life (cp. Lk. 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21). ‘Soul sleep,’ the false teaching that the souls of the dead are in a state of unconscious existence in the afterlife, is foreign to Scripture. Believers go consciously into the Lord’s presence at death. The Christian hope, while it is not fully realized until the Second Coming, is not deferred until then.

From what we can gather, the Thessalonians were worried about what would happen to dead Christians when Jesus returned. The improper grief of the Christians centered on the doubt over whether the dead Christians would have a future, resurrected body.

2. Unwarranted Grief (4:13b)

...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

Paul opens his treatment of this subject by saying that he wanted his teaching to have an effect on their conduct. He is eager to see their minds put to rest about it. He does not want them to grieve like others who have no hope. Once they understood the true situation as it affected their deceased brothers and sisters they would not be prone to the same desperate grieving as their pagan neighbors.

Death was a prospect people dreaded in Paul’s day, even as they do in our own. For pagans, the netherworld was a shadowy and chilly realm to be feared. In the pagan world in general, there was little hope of an afterlife, and virtually no hope at all of an afterlife with a resurrected body. Only the living had hope. There was no hope in death; there is an awful, terrifying, hopeless finality for unbelievers when a loved one dies, a sorrow unmitigated by any hope of reunion. According to Theocritus, ‘hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.’ Consequently, the grief of the pagans was often marked by despair. No ray of hope relieved their sorrow.

This is not to say that Christians do not grieve at all. Paul is not saying that they cannot express sorrow when friends and relatives die, even deep, heart-numbing sorrow. There is a normal sorrow that accompanies the death of a loved one, caused by the pain of separation and loneliness (cp. Rom. 12:14). Grief itself, even intense grief, is not the point at issue. What is at stake is grief without hope. Christians can and should grieve, but it is always sub-Christian to

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grieve without hope. Hope is one of the chief emphases of the gospel; it is a feature of Christian existence.

John's account of the only sinless man shedding tears beside the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35) is a pointed reminder that it is not wrong as such to mourn someone who was dear to us and who has been taken from us. The difference, however, between the Christian and the 'others' is that he grieves over a temporary separation. When one believer looks at the coffin of another, there is no cause to give way to that heart-wrenching cry: 'I'm never going to see him again!'

3. Unbreakable Union (4:14)

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

Paul here gives the antidote to excessive grieving. In the first place, those who are sleeping will be raised; and, secondly, those who are currently sleeping will be fully brought into the present of Christ at the Second Coming. Therefore, Paul's antidote to the grief of the Thessalonians is to remind them that believing in the reality of the death and resurrection of Christ also includes believing, on the grounds of their union with Christ, in the reality that dead Christians will not only be raised but will be bodily present with Christ at the Second Coming.

The object of our faith is a crucified and risen Savior who will certainly return to the world that He left at the time of His resurrection. The twin facts that Jesus both died and rose again were foundational truths of the gospel that both Paul and his readers believed. The hope of resurrection is based, as it is later in 1 Corinthians 15, on the assurance that Jesus died and rose.

'If' does not suggest uncertainty or doubt, but rather logical sequence. Paul's meaning is 'since,' or 'based on the fact that' the belief in the death and resurrection of Christ that certain things follow. Significantly, Paul did not use the metaphor of sleep to refer to Jesus, but says that he 'died' (*ἀπέθανεν, apethanen*), to stress the reality of His death, as something not to be alleviated by any euphemism. Jesus experienced the full fury of death in all its dimensions. His death transformed death into sleep for believers. When believers die, their spirit goes immediately into conscious fellowship with their Lord, while their bodies temporarily sleep in the grave, awaiting the resurrection.

The reality of His death points to the divine miracle accomplished in His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ indicates that the Father accepted His sacrifice. The phrase 'even so' links believers' resurrections inextricably with the resurrection of Christ. Fellow believers who died will not miss out on the resurrection but will return with Christ in glory.

His will not be a solitary return; Christ will be escorted by an enormous multitude, for he 'will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.' Just as we believe Jesus to have died and risen again, so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have died in Him. Certainty about the second reality is grounded in the certainty of the first.

When the Lord Jesus returns, He will bring with him those who have already died and gone to be with Him. True, they will return still as disembodied spirits, but the vital thing is that they will not miss out on the presence or coming of the king (the *parousia*) as some evidently feared they would. The people who return are those who have died, but who even in death are still in Jesus. Death does not dissolve the bond between a believer and our Lord.

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How does Paul connect these two grand objects of faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the dead in Christ with Him at His triumphant return? Evidently he holds the death and resurrection of Christ as both the pattern and guarantee of what lies ahead for all who believe in Him and who are consequently united to Him through faith. Did Jesus die and then rise again in bodily form from the grave to live to God? Then all who are in Him, though they die, will also share in the experience of bodily resurrection (cp. Rom. 6:5). And when will that happen? It will happen when Jesus returns, just as He Himself said it would (cp. John 5:28-29). That being so, the dead in Christ must return with Him at His coming so that they, too, can share in the glorious event of resurrection.

According to Paul's logic of union with Christ, if one truly believes that Christ rose from the dead, one should just as strongly believe that Christians will also be raised (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:20-23; 2 Cor. 4:14) because our union with Christ guarantees that what Christ did, we did or will do.

B. The Coming of the Lord (1 Th. 4:15-18)

Paul wants to assure anxious Christians that those who die in the Lord will not be left out of the events that take place when the Lord Jesus returns. In doing so, he provides the fullest description of the *parousia* or coming of the Lord that we have in the New Testament. To must be realized, however, that Paul is not attempting to tell us everything that will take place at that time. For example, he says nothing at all about what will happen to non-Christians when Jesus returns. They are not mentioned because they are not relevant to the specific pastoral issue Paul is addressing – the participation of those who have died in the coming *parousia*.

1. Paul Answers Their Question about the Second Coming (4:15)

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.

Two groups of people will participate in the *parousia* (*παρουσίαν*) or 'coming' of Jesus: both those who are alive in Christ and those who have died in Christ. The essence of what Paul wants to say is that those who are still alive will not precede those who have died. Paul is emphatic: the readers are assured that their dear departed Christian friends will not be at a disadvantage at the Second Coming.

Paul's authority for saying this rests on 'the word of the Lord' (*ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου*, *en logō kyriou*). Sometimes this phrase is used to refer to preaching (e.g., 1:8, 2:13). It could possibly refer to a direct revelation made to him by Christ (cp. 2 Cor. 12:8-9). It is clear that there is no record in the Scripture of this saying of Jesus during his earthly ministry. Some commentators agree that Paul is probably referring to an unrecorded saying of the Lord Jesus while He was on earth that became part of the oral tradition of the early church. This is usually termed an 'agraphon' (Greek for 'not written'), which refers to sayings by Jesus during His earthly life that were not written down in the canonical gospels (cp. John 21:25; Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10).

Other commentators view this as unlikely; Paul does not state or imply that he is directly quoting Christ's words. Rather, Paul's teaching here was new revelation, possibly given by God through a prophet (such as Agabus; Acts 21:11), but more likely directly to Paul himself.

Does Paul believe that he will be alive at the Second Coming? Paul's use of the word 'we' is a grammatical device. For example, in 1 Corinthians he includes himself among the dead (1 Cor. 6:14) and also among those who are alive when Christ comes (1 Cor. 15:52). On this basis, we

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should conclude that here in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul is using ‘we’ to mean whoever is alive at the Second Coming.

2. Paul Describes the Sequence of the Second Coming (4:16-17)

The apostle provided his friends with an outline of the events of the final day of our planet’s history. This description further explains the manner in which what Paul described in verse 15 will occur. The Advent of the Lord is described in terms associated with manifestations of the divine glory in the OT. The archangelic voice and the trumpet-call add emphasis to the shout of command which summons the dead back to life; the clouds in which Christ gathers His people to Himself are the clouds, which in OT and NT imagery alike, envelop the radiance of the divine presence.

a) *The Lord Returns (4:16a)*

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven...

The Lord Himself will come down from heaven, where He has been since His ascension (Acts 1:9-11). He will return to earth from there, descending in the same way that His disciples saw Him leave (cp. Acts 1:11). His coming will be personal (*i.e.*, it will be the Lord Himself who comes), bodily, and visible (cp. Rev. 1:7).

b) *The Lord Calls (4:16b)*

...with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.

It must be stressed as well that His return will be audible (cp. 2 Pe. 3:10). His descent will be marked by mighty sounds. Three sounds are mentioned – a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God. Are the shout, the archangel, and the trumpet one noise or three distinct noises?

‘Shout’ (*κελεύσματος, keleusmati*, ‘command’) has a military ring to it, as if the Commander is calling His troops to fall in. The dead saints in their resurrected bodies will join the living believers in the ranks. The ‘shout’ recalls the great word of power which brought Lazarus of Bethany out of the tomb (cp. John. 11:43).

The ‘voice of the archangel’ (*ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου, en phōnē archangelou*) is picked up in John’s apocalypse (cp. Rev. 10:6). In Jude 9, the only other passage in Scripture that mentions an archangel, the archangel is Michael. Scripture does not say whether or not he is the only archangel. According to Jewish tradition, there were seven archangels (Tobit 12:15). In 1 Enoch 20:1-7, they are called *ἀρχαγγέλος (archangelos)* and their names are listed as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel, and Remiel.

The clear, piercing note of the ‘trumpet’ (*σάλπιγγι, salpingi*) points us back to the Old Testament (cp. Lev. 25:8-17; Is. 27:13; also Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:15-16; Zech. 9:14; Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; Rev. 11:15). Trumpets were used in Scripture for many reasons. They sounded at Israel’s feasts (Num. 10:10), celebrations (2 Sam. 6:15), and convocations (Lev. 23:24), to sound an alarm in time of war (Num. 10:9), or for any other reason it was necessary to gather a crowd (Num. 10:2; Jdg. 6:34) or make an announcement (1 Sam. 13:3; 2 Sam. 15:10; 20:1; 1 Kgs. 1:34, 39, 41). The trumpet sound seems to have a twofold purpose: to assemble God’s people (cp. Ex. 19:16-19) and to signal His deliverance of them (cp. Zech. 1:16; 9:14-16).

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All three of these sounds – the shout of God, the angels, and the trumpet are related in Scripture. There is a close association with angels and trumpet blasts in Matthew 24:31 and Revelation 11:15. Psalm 47:5 connects the shout of God with the sound of the trumpet.

One view says that they are different ways of describing one colossal eruption of sound which will impinge on the consciousness of every human soul, both the living and the dead. No one will sleep through it! The one spoken summons will have a radically different effect on those who hear it. To some it will be a call to rise to an eternity of joy; to others it will be the prelude to their being dispatched to endless loss and misery.

The alternate view sees these as three separate sounds: Christ's shouting a command to dead Christians; an additional general announcement of the Second Coming by an archangel; and a general loud trumpet blast related to the Second Coming.

Whether these are three distinct noises or are simply different ways of saying the same thing is debatable. But it is plain that the three expressions all refer to authoritative and irresistible summons. They all have a ring of authority and note of urgency about them. The command resembles the cry of the charioteer to his horses, the archangel is the powerful messenger of God, and the trumpet is an instrument of summons and celebration. The Lord returns as a conquering king and announces His coming with a mighty sound.

c) The Resurrection of the Saints (4:16c)

And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Next the dead in Christ rise. Of course, this refers to those who died as Christians. It is also a reference to the intermediate state (*i.e.*, after physical death and before the resurrection) in which dead Christians are connected to Christ. It would appear at this point the saints who have accompanied the Lord on His triumphal return are reunited with their bodies, now risen and glorified. The bodies of the dead will rise at the sound of the Lord's voice (cp. John 5:28). The resurrection ('will rise') will entail, firstly, new bodies on the pattern of Christ's resurrected body, and, secondly, a restoring of the soul, which has been in heaven, back to the body (see 1 Cor. 15:35-58; 2 Cor. 5:1-5). Their glorified bodies are joined with their glorified spirits to make them into the image of Christ. The point Paul establishes is that those who have died are active participants in the events of this great moment in history. Far from suffering any disadvantage at the *parousia*, the faithful departed would actually have precedence over those still alive. *Their* resurrection would be the first result of the coming of the Lord; only after that would those still alive enter into their heritage.

d) The 'Rapture' of the Saints (4:17a)

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them...

The dead Christians (including Old Testament believers) are resurrected first and are apparently now at ground level. Then both the resurrected Christians and those who are alive go 'together' to meet Christ, and they do this in the air. Because Paul is focusing on the dead Christians, he does not explicitly say that the bodies of those who 'remain alive' will also be changed, but that is to be assumed.

Following the resurrection of the dead, those who have not tasted death will be 'caught up' together with those who have. The phrase 'caught up' translates a term which is very dramatic. It means to be firmly plucked up from our present position and placed elsewhere.

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The Greek *harpazō* (here *ἀρπαγησόμεθα*) is translated ‘caught up.’ Possibly a more vigorous translation on the lines of ‘seize’ or ‘snatch up’ would be more appropriate. It refers to a strong, irresistible, even violent act, sometimes indeed to the benefit of its object. In Matthew 11:12 it describes the taking of the kingdom of heaven by force. In John 10:12 it describes a wolf snatching the sheep; in John 10:28-29 it speaks of the impossibility of anyone’s snatching believers out of the hands of Jesus Christ and God the Father; in Acts 8:39 it speaks of Philip’s being snatched away from the Ethiopian eunuch; in Acts 23:10 it describes Paul being snatched from the rioters in the Jerusalem council-chamber by Roman soldiers; in 2 Cor. 12:2, 4 it describes Paul’s being caught up into the third heaven; and in Rev. 12:5 the male child in the apocalyptic vision was caught up to God to preserve him from the great dragon.

Nothing is said here of the transformation to fit them for the conditions of their new existence; Paul deals with these questions later, especially in 1 Cor. 15:50-52. It is when living believers are ‘caught up’ that they are transformed and receive their glorified bodies (Phil. 3:21). ‘In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye’ believers ‘will be changed’ (1 Cor. 15:52), rescued from the grasp of Satan, the fallen flesh, the evil world system, and the coming wrath of God.

This event has often been called the ‘rapture.’ The word ‘rapture,’ which nowadays usually describes a state of unusual emotional intensity, once meant that a person had been forcibly seized; it ultimately comes from the Latin word *rapere* meaning ‘to seize’ (same Latin root as the word ‘rape’), which translates the Greek *harpazō* (as shown in the Latin Vulgate). It aptly conveys the ideas of force, suddenness, and irresistibility implied in the original verb Paul used.

Dispensationalists see this verse as describing a ‘secret rapture’ of the saints before a seven-year period of great tribulation. The Rapture, according to dispensationalists, is not the Second coming, but Christ’s taking only the New Testament believers (both dead and alive) up to heaven at the beginning (or according to some, the middle or the end) of a great tribulation on earth. While a ‘rapture’ is taught in this verse, there is no support for the idea that it will be secret. The trumpet call and the appearance of the Lord of glory will make it the most public event in the history of the globe.

e) The Meeting in the Air (4:17b)

...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

The purpose of the ‘rapture’ is that we might ‘meet’ the Lord. Where do believers go after they meet together with Christ? The text does not explicitly say, but the Greek word Paul used for ‘meet’ (*ἀπάντησις*, *apantēsis*) strongly suggests that Christ and believers go from the air to the earth. It may well be that for Paul, the reunion of believers with Jesus in the air forms the prelude to His coming to earth to judge the world.

The word ‘meet’ is a technical term for the meeting between a kingly figure and his people. In the ancient world the visit made to a particular city by an important dignitary, perhaps even the reigning monarch was called a *parousia* (*παρουσία*, ‘coming’). While the eminent personage was still on his way to the favored city, the leading officials and citizens would go some distance outside the city walls to ‘meet’ (*apantēsis*) him and then accompany him on the remainder of his journey. Then the dignitary enters the city with all the people following him. Examples of this type of process in the Bible include the Lord metaphorically coming to the temple (Ps. 24); the triumphal entry (Mt. 21:1-11); and the parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25:1). It seems likely that Paul is using *apantēsis* in a technical sense of the people coming to ‘meet’ their king. Hence, he is saying that, as Christ comes towards the earth (the city), but before He reaches it, His people

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come out to greet Him as they meet in the air. Then Christ leads the procession to earth (into the city) with the people (cp. 3:13). Upon Christ's coming to earth, the judgment and remaking of the current heavens and earth into the new heavens and earth will occur.

This helps us to complete our picture of the events of that tremendous day. The King of kings will have an escort of overjoyed people from among the inhabitants of this planet. They will comprise two contingents. The souls of the believing dead, now reunited with their bodies, will rise to meet the Sovereign of the skies, while those believers who are alive will also form part of the throng of those who go out in joy to join the train of the approaching monarch. Not all will have 'slept,' but all will have been 'changed' (1 Cor. 15:51-54).

Fittingly, this takes place in the 'clouds' (*νεφέλαις, nephelais*) in the air. Clouds do not simply suggest themselves as convenient vehicles for transportation through space; rather clouds are a regular feature of biblical theophanies. The divine glory is veiled in clouds, shines forth from them, and retreats into them. Clouds are symbols of God's presence and serve as His royal chariot (Ps. 104:3). The glory-cloud of God (cp. Ex. 16:10; 19:16; 24:16; 40:34; 1 Kgs. 8:10; Ps. 97:2; 104:3; Dan. 7:13; Nahum 1:3; also Mt. 17:5; 24:30; Acts 1:9; Rev. 1:7) shows the awesome wonder and power of the divine Christ at His Second Coming. Before descending completely to earth, then, the divine Lord calls His people to meet with Him in the air. They are to be identified with Him in all that follows, even in the judgment of angels and of the world.

[According to F. F. Bruce: While the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of His journey to earth by His people is suggested by the use of *apantēsis*, there is nothing in the word or in this context which *demand*s this interpretation. It cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with His people) continues His journey to earth or returns to heaven.]

[John MacArthur believes that 'such an analogy is arbitrary and assumes a technical meaning for "meet" not required by either the word or the context... That explanation also renders the Rapture pointless; why have believers meet Christ in the air and immediately return to earth?... The most that can be said of such a "Rapture" is that it is a rather secondary sideshow of minimal importance.']

f) The Eternal Reunion (4:17c)

And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Then comes the grand reunion. This meeting with the Lord is the high point of the *parousia* as Paul describes it here. This is the climax of blessedness. It is a personal reunion or gathering together of the Lord with His redeemed saints in their glorified bodies. The heavenly groom welcomes His bride into His immediate presence forever. The word 'together' is particularly important. It reminds us that the conclusion of these tremendous events will be the most thrilling reunion that ever took place. Separation will be a thing of the past.

First of all, every believer, all those who have died in years gone by as well as those who are alive at the time, will be united with the Lord. Secondly, we shall be together with our brothers and sisters – the whole family reunited at last. This will be the beginning of believers being with Christ in the fullest sense forever and ever.

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3. Paul Makes an Application regarding the Second Coming (4:18)

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The benefit of understanding the events of the Second Coming is not to fill the gaps in one's eschatological scheme. Paul's goal in teaching the Thessalonians this doctrine was to 'comfort' (*παρακαλεῖτε, parakaleite*) them.

Paul's words are encouraging because they confirm that dead Christians will be resurrected – which also implies that their souls are living now with Christ – and also because the dead Christians will not be at a disadvantage at the Second Coming. This message is also encouraging to all the Thessalonians as they realize that, although they themselves may die, all believers will have perfected bodies and souls and will live forever with Christ.

If the troubled believers in Thessalonica would keep these things before them, their fears concerning the future of dead Christians would evaporate. Christian comfort is grounded in more than sympathy. It is based upon hope conveyed in truth.

No one is exempt from the pain of separation. Believers, however, can encourage one another. Not for the Christian the bleakness of the grave and the emptiness of eternal ruin. Paul would have us spur one another on. Jesus is coming! Many dear friends are coming with Him. Soon partings will be abolished, undertakers will all be redundant, for the Lord and His people will all be together, never to be separated. No wonder Paul calls the return of Christ 'the blessed hope' (Titus 2:13).

C. Postscript: A Pre-Millennial View

1. Position of John MacArthur

The Thessalonians' fears that they were in the Day of the Lord and thus had missed the Rapture imply that the Rapture precedes the Tribulation. If the Thessalonians knew that the Rapture came at the end of the Tribulation, persecution would not have caused them to fear they had missed it. Instead, that persecution would have been a cause for joy, not concern. If the day of the Lord had arrived, and the Rapture was after the Tribulation, then that blessed event would have been drawing near. But of gravest concern to the Thessalonians were those of their number who had died. Would they receive their resurrection bodies at the Rapture, or would they have to wait until after the Tribulation? Would they miss the Rapture altogether? Would they therefore be second-class citizens in heaven? The Thessalonians' fear that their fellow believers who had died might miss the Rapture implies that they believed in a pre-tribulational Rapture. If the Rapture precedes the Tribulation, they might have wondered when believers who died would receive their resurrection bodies. But there would have been no such confusion if the Rapture follows the Tribulation; all believers would then receive their resurrection bodies at the same time. Further, if they had been taught that they would go through the Tribulation, they would not have grieved for those who had died, but rather would have been glad to see them spared from that horrible time.

This passage does not describe the general resurrection of believers (and non-believers), but describes the Rapture of believers only. It does not teach that the spirits of dead believers immediately return to earth with Christ for the establishing of the millennial kingdom. That view places the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation and essentially equates it with the Second

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Coming. It trivializes the Rapture into a meaningless sideshow that serves no purpose. A post-tribulational Rapture is pointless. There is little or no apparent reason to Rapture believers when the Lord returns and just prior to setting up the long-awaited kingdom with all of its joyful prospects.

The view that the raptured saints return to earth with Christ also contradicts John 14:1-3. The phrases ‘My Father’s house’ and ‘where I am’ clearly refer to heaven (cp. Jn. 7:34). Jesus promised to take believers back to heaven with Him when He returns to gather His people. There has to be a time interval, then, between Christ’s return to gather His people (the Rapture) and His return to earth to establish the millennial kingdom (the Second Coming). During that interval between the Rapture and the Second Coming, the believers’ judgment takes place (1 Cor. 3:11-14; 2 Cor. 5:10); a post-tribulational Rapture would leave no time for that event.

The timing of the Rapture cannot be discerned from this passage alone. But when it is read with other Rapture texts (Jn. 14:3; Rev. 3:10; cp. 1 Cor. 15:51-52; Phil. 3:2-21), and compared to judgment texts (Mt. 13:34-50; 24:29-44; Rev. 19:11-21), it is clear that there is no mention of judgment at all in the Rapture passages, whereas the others major on judgment. It is therefore necessary to conclude that the Rapture occurs at a time other than the judgment. It is best then, to separate the two events. That initiates the case for the Rapture to occur imminently, before the elements of judgment described in Scripture as leading up to the Second Coming in judgment.

The following arguments present a strong case in favor of the pre-tribulational Rapture. First, the earthly kingdom of Christ promised in Revelation 6-18 does not mention the church as being on earth; this is because the Lord has removed it from the earth and relocated it to heaven by means of the Rapture. Second, Revelation 19 does not mention a Rapture even though that is where a post-tribulational Rapture (if true) would logically occur. Thus, one can conclude that the Rapture will have already occurred. Third, a post-tribulational Rapture renders the Rapture concept itself inconsequential. Fourth, if God raptures and glorifies all believers just prior to the inauguration of the millennial kingdom (as a post-tribulational Rapture demands), no one would be left to populate and propagate the earthly kingdom of Christ promised to Israel. The Rapture needs to occur earlier so that after God has raptured all believers, He can save more souls—including Israel’s remnant—during the seven-year Tribulation. Those people can then enter the millennial kingdom in earthly form. Fifth, the New Testament does not warn of an impending tribulation, such as is experienced during Daniel’s seventieth week, for church-age believers. Sixth, Paul’s instructions here to the Thessalonians demand a pre-tribulational Rapture because, if Paul were teaching them post-tribulationalism, one would expect them to rejoice that loved ones were home with the Lord and spared the horrors of the Tribulation. But, in actuality, the Thessalonians grieved. Seventh, the sequence of events at Christ’s coming following the Tribulation demands a pre-tribulational Rapture. Eighth, certain of Jesus’ teachings demand a pre-tribulational Rapture (cp. Mt. 13:24-30, 47-50; Mt. 24-25). Ninth, Revelation 3:10 teaches that the Lord will remove the church prior to the Tribulation. Thus, the Rapture (being ‘caught up’) must be pre-tribulational, before the wrath of God described in the Tribulation (Rev. 6-19).

Comparison between the Rapture and the Second Coming (point seven above). 1) at the Rapture, Christ gathers His own (1 Th. 4:16-17), but at the Second Coming, angels gather the elect (Mt. 24:31); 2) at the Rapture, resurrection is prominent (1 Th. 4:15-16), but regarding the Second Coming, Scripture does not mention the resurrection; 3) at the Rapture, Christ comes to reward believers (1 Th. 4:17), but at the Second Coming Christ comes to judge the earth (Mt. 25:31-46); 4) at the Rapture, the Lord snatches away true believers from the earth (1 Th. 4:15-

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17), but at the Second Coming, He takes away unbelievers (Mt. 24:37-41); 5) at the Rapture, unbelievers remain on the earth, whereas at the Second Coming, believers remain on the earth; 6) concerning the Rapture, Scripture does not mention the establishment of Christ's kingdom, but at His Second Coming, Christ sets up His kingdom; and 7) at the Rapture, believers will receive glorified bodies, whereas at the Second Coming, no one will receive glorified bodies. [Note: this last point implies that when the millennial kingdom is inaugurated on earth, glorified believers will be mingling with non-glorified believers – those who were saved during the Tribulation.]

2. Some Feedback from F. F. Bruce

Nothing is said here—or, for that matter, anywhere else in the Pauline corpus—of the resurrection of those who are not in Christ. In Acts 24:15 Paul tells Felix that he shares the Pharisaic hope ‘that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.’ In John 5:28, 29 it is apparently one and the same voice of the Son of God which calls all who are in the tomb to come forth, ‘those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.’ On Paul's principles, any resurrection of unbelievers would be different in character from the resurrection of believers: the resurrection of believers was their participation in Christ's resurrection, and this could not be said of the resurrection of unbelievers. It is precarious to draw inferences from Paul's silence about his views on the nature and timing of the resurrection of those not in Christ.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.