

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN JESUS COMES?

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Christ is the theme of the whole Bible. Christ is coming is the theme of the Old Testament. Christ has come is the theme of the four gospels. Christ is coming again is the theme of the Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation.

That Christ is coming again is a certainty because this great event is purposed in the mind of God, prompted by the love of God, promised by the Son of God, and proclaimed by the Spirit of God through messengers from heaven -- "And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; who also said; 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven' (Acts 1:10-11); through the apostles, like Paul who said: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" (I Thessalonians 4:16); and through the Lord's Supper, concerning which Paul said: "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come" (I Corinthians 11:26)

Thousands of faithful Christians are looking for the coming of Christ, and would be overjoyed if He were to come during their lifetime. But the majority would be greatly surprised if He were to come. They have neglected the great biblical truth of His return. Some people do not believe that Christ is coming again. Some even laugh at the idea of His coming. When they do this, they are giving proof that He is coming again. The Bible says that in the last days there will be scoffers who ridicule the idea. So when people laugh and scoff at the idea of His coming, they are simply fulfilling the scriptures and proving the fact that He is coming again.

Let us now turn our attention to this passage in First Thessalonians 4:13-18.

I. The Reason For This Scripture. I Thessalonians 4:13.

On his second missionary journey Paul had stopped at Thessalonica for about two weeks. During his stay there he preached the gospel of Christ in its purity, fullness and power. As a result of his preaching, a number of the Thessalonians were saved and became constituent members of the church which was established there. Paul not only preached the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, but he also proclaimed various other doctrines, including the second coming of Christ. Because of the persecution to which he was subjected on account of his preaching, it became necessary for Paul to flee from the city. He left before he had time to indoctrinate the Christians thoroughly in many of the great and important truths.

The Thessalonians had welcomed the teachings which they had received from Paul. They, too, were having a hard time, so the wonderful truth of the coming of the Lord meant much to them. Evidently they believed in the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ, and were waiting, watching and expecting Him to come during their lifetime. While they were waiting for the Lord Jesus to come, some of the believers in Him died, or as the text says, "fell asleep." This confused them greatly because they had expected that all of them would live until Christ returned.

Since Paul had only spent two weeks in their midst, his teaching on the second coming of Christ was rather fragmentary and lacking in many of the details. While he had told these young Christians about the coming of Christ, he had not informed them concerning the fate of those who had died before the Saviour arrived. The survivors were disturbed and distressed by the fear that their loved ones, who were Christians before Paul left and had died after the Apostle had taken his departure, would have to occupy a position secondary to those who would be living when Christ came again. They were perplexed and wondered about these and their place in the kingdom. They were fearful that when Christ

came the believers who were living would enter the kingdom with Him, but that their loved ones who had already departed this life would not share in this privilege. Naturally, they were confused, depressed and sad.

Upon hearing about their confusion, perplexity and sadness, Paul sat down and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, wrote this, his first, epistle in order to give them the proper instruction and set their hearts at rest. God did not want them to remain in ignorance of His plan, and on that account to experience undue and unnecessary sorrow. Paul wrote and gave the reason for this passage of scripture being recorded, namely, "I would not have you to be ignorant brethren, concerning them which are asleep" (4:13). "Sleep" is a softened expression for death, which for a Christian is very much like sleep. Of course, we understand that this term refers to the bodies which are laid in the graves. As far as the souls of the Christians are concerned, they go immediately into the presence of the Lord. "To be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord." We believe in the sleep of the body, but we do not believe in the sleep of the soul. The souls of the Christians who have departed this life have already gone to be with the Lord Jesus in paradise, but their bodies are now sleeping in the graves and will be raised when Christ returns. God does not want us to be ignorant of these great truths, and for this reason this passage of scripture was written.

II. The Return Of The Saviour.' I Thessalonians 4:16.

No one can read and believe the Bible and not believe in the second coming of Christ. His return is taught clearly, definitely and unmistakably in the Word of God. Many church members today consider His coming incidental, but the first century Christians considered it fundamental, and so should we.

The Bible teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ will come in like manner as He went away. After His resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus appeared to His disciples and talked with them, ate with them, and remained with them for forty days, showing Himself alive by many infallible proofs. Then He took them out to the Mount of Olives, and after a final talk with them, while they beheld, He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

When Christ Jesus comes again, His appearance will be personal, visible, sudden, unexpected and glorious. His appearance will be visible only to those who believe on Him. The Bible states emphatically that the time of His coming is not known to any man. About this Christ Himself said: "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matthew 24:36). /The Lord's coming will be at a time when the world will be absorbed in its own pursuits and occupations. Luke 17:26-27 says: "And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all." So far as we know, Christ may come at any time.

This world is full of pessimism. We read our current newspapers and news magazines, and we listen to the news programs on the radio, and we watch the television newsreels unfold the tragic drama of a world in the midst of pessimism, frustration and confusion, and our heart fail us because of fear. The only light penetrating the darkness, the only hope on the world horizon, is the hope which is expressed and held out on the pages of the Bible, that Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, is coming back to the earth. As Christians, then, we do not have the right to go around wringing our hands and wondering what we are to do in the face of the present world situation. God's Word says that, in the midst of persecution, confusion, wars and rumors of wars, we are to comfort one another with the knowledge that Christ is coming back in triumph, glory and majesty.

When Christ returns, He will descend in person into the atmospheric heaven with a shout. This word "shout" is a peculiar one. It is a word for a command. It is as the shout of a military officer giving a command, such as "Forward, march." When Christ comes again He will give a shout of command. At the tomb of the one whom He loved dearly, Christ said: "Lazarus, come forth," and Lazarus arose from the dead and walked out of the tomb. As His commanding voice reached Lazarus in the grave, so those who have died in the Lord will respond en masse to Christ's authoritative voice. The archangel, or the chief of the angels, will give a shout of victory for men and for angels. Even though it is a work of Christ and not of the angels, the archangel rejoices and exults in the tremendous victory over the forces of evil that is occasioned by the resurrection from the dead of the saved. The trumpet, as used here, is like the sounding of a trumpet to an army. In the scriptures the trumpet seems to be a sign of assembling, of going forward, of taking a new step, of unfolding something that has not been revealed before. Here it is a call addressed to the saved. The trumpet was used to herald great manifestations of God and was also used to call the Lord's people into Himself (Exodus 19:13, 16; Numbers 10:2). Here it is God's trumpet blast calling the saved to their heavenly glory.

III. The Resurrection Of The Saved. I Thessalonians 4:16.

Pagan literature reveals a hopelessness in the face of death, and it is matched by the inscriptions on the tombs. The unsaved Greeks did not have any hope. In contrast, the Christian has an anchored hope of bodily resurrection, the clothing of the body with glorification, a body which is not susceptible to disease and death, which hope is grounded in the certainty of the promises of God. Moreover, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, which is historically trustworthy, is a guarantee of our own resurrection. He said: "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19).

Christ said: "It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost" (John 19:30). For His followers He transformed death into sleep. Christians who have died have simply fallen asleep in Christ, and they will awake at His call. Clearly, in the face of this prospect there is no reason for despair.

When Christians die, their souls go to be with the Lord and their bodies are buried. Then, when Christ comes again, He will bring with Him the souls of those who died in the Lord and have been with Him in paradise. Their bodies will be raised, and their souls and bodies will be reunited. The bodies of our Christian loved ones will arise out of those cemeteries where we lovingly placed them, and will undergo a wonderful change when they come forth from the graves. The Bible tells us that they will be changed into the glorious likeness of Christ. They will never be subject to pain, disease, deterioration or death, but they will last for all eternity and be suited for the presence of the Lord.

This world does not hold forth any comfort for those who stand by the graves of their departed loved ones, realizing that these bodies must be committed to the ground until the day of the resurrection. Only as we look beyond the empty grave into the open heavens from whence Christ will come to bring the souls of these departed loved ones with Him, and then raise these corruptible bodies and change them into incorruptible ones, can we find any comfort which causes a bit of light to shine through the darkness of our sorrow and tears. This has been the hope of every true believer in every age. How thankful I am that the day is coming when the dead in Christ are going to receive those new and glorified bodies which will never again know the pains, the infirmities, the frailties and the weaknesses of the flesh as these things are experienced in this life.

At the shout of the Lord, when He comes again, "the dead in Christ shall rise first." The rest of the dead will remain in their graves until the time for the second resurrection, and the judgment at the great white throne, at which judgment their condemnation will be ratified.

IV. The Rapture Of The Saved. I Thessalonians 4:17.

Paul told the Thessalonian Christians not to worry about their departed loved ones not sharing in the glory of Christ's kingdom, for the Christians who shall be living when the Lord Jesus comes again shall certainly not go on to be with Him before those who are asleep in Him. All who are Christ's are to share in the rapture at His coming. Just as soon as the dead saints are raised, then all the living Christians will be changed into the likeness of Christ and caught up in a moment to join them and the Lord Jesus.

When Christ comes to call the sleeping bodies of His followers to arise, He will bring with Him their spirits which are now with Him in paradise. He will bring down their spirits and call up their bodies. Then shall they be conformed to His own image to which He has predestinated them. "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

Immediately after the resurrection of the dead in Christ, in the twinkling of an eye, the Christians who are living on the earth will be changed from mortals to immortals. Those who will be raised from the dead and the living Christians who will be changed will be brought together, and together they shall rise to meet the Lord in the air. They shall be snatched away from danger and caught up together to meet the Lord in the atmospheric heaven. From the atmospheric heaven, in which together they shall meet the Lord Jesus, the resurrected dead and the transformed living shall go into the immediate presence of the Father in the third heaven. Whether one has been a Christian a long or a shorttime, every saved person will be caught up. "Caught up" is an expression which was used of the divine power which will transfer a person marvelously and swiftly from one place to another. The rapture will be our glorious nonstop flight from the woes of earth to the wonders of heaven. What a day that will be when the saints will be called up to meet their Saviour and Lord!

V. The Reunion Of The Saved. I Thessalonians 4:17.

The Lord knows the grief which is experienced when human ties are broken by death and our loved ones are taken away from us. He knows how attached we are to our loved ones and friends. In this passage we are assured that when Christ comes again, even before we shall be caught up to meet the Saviour Himself, He is going to give us that blessed privilege of first of all being gathered together and reunited with all of those who have died in the Lord, and then as a group we shall rise to meet our Lord in the air.

This work "together" is worthy of note. It certainly suggests the blissful reunion our lonely hearts anticipate. Now we are not together. Some of us have empty homes. Loved ones have been called away from us. But Christ is coming again, and when He does, we are going to be reunited immediately to those whom we have "loved long since and lost awhile." On the way up to meet our Saviour, we are to have the joy of meeting our dear ones, and then together we shall hail our blessed Lord unitedly. This meeting of redeemed loved ones and friends is one of the many glorious hopes which Christians have, and this hope will be realized when Christ comes. We shall recognize and know those who have preceded us in death. Blessed message of comfort! I realize that we, with our finite minds and limited understanding, do not have the capacity to appreciate what ecstasy we will experience when for the first time we behold our blessed Saviour face to face. What a thrill and joy that will be! "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."