

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Paul comforts the Thessalonians who were worried that if they died before Jesus' second coming, they would remain dead and would miss out on spending eternity with Jesus. Paul clarifies that dead believers will be resurrected and meet Jesus in the air at His coming, and living believers will subsequently join them, and all will be with the Lord forever.

While explaining how to be sanctified, Paul turns to address the end times, and to answer a question the Thessalonians had about Christ's return. Paul's main exhortation regarding looking forward to the end times is to live a holy life now, to be sanctified, not to sit back idly and wait for Jesus to return. He has just urged them to live a quiet life and to work with their hands, to not be in need, to get busy serving and providing, because Jesus is returning (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

The Thessalonians understood, correctly, that Jesus could return any day. So, apparently, some decided to just "retire" and enjoy "the good life" until Jesus comes. Some thought, "Why keep up the rat race when Jesus will be back so soon?" The answer is because we should be found faithful when Jesus returns, for that greatly be in our best interest.

Jesus actually addressed this in His parables. Jesus told a parable where a master returned and found his servants goofing off, so he chastised them severely for not being industrious (Luke 12:43-48) Jesus clearly expects His servants to be industrious, and remain industrious until His coming.

There is an Old Testament picture of what it looks like to be industrious, even though we know this world is not our permanent home.

In Jeremiah, the prophet has a message for those who have been exiled to Babylon:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵ 'Build houses and live *in them*; and plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. ⁷ Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.'" (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

We can see in this quote that God commands the exiled Israelites to be industrious while exiled in Babylon, even though their real home is in Israel. He wants them to work, invest, build, and be productive while living in a place that is not their permanent home.

This mirrors the entire human race. We are in exile from our real home, an earth in which righteousness dwells, like God initially designed in the Garden of Eden. The believers' true

citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). But we are to live on earth like the Israelites were to live in Babylon. We are to “seek the peace” of where we live. Which is here on earth. To “build houses” and “plant gardens.” To be industrious. There is no secular or sacred distinction in this. When we work at our job, performing honest work, we are being sanctified. This principle is stated explicitly in this passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”
(Colossians 3:23-24)

We see in this verse that anything we do, no matter what it is, we receive the “reward of the inheritance” when we do that thing “as for the Lord.” To do something “as for the Lord” is to do something in order to gain the approval of God, rather than to gain the approval of men.

God will make great things come of a faithful walk during our difficult sojourn here on earth. For one, we will silence the enemy (Satan), when we are faithful, and follow Jesus in service ([See commentary on Psalm 8](#)). We can also become overcomers, and gain special rewards and intimacy with Christ from our service. Those faithful to walk in the obedience of faith, trusting God for their rewards, are the ones that win the great prize of life, and gain the great reward of being elevated to our intended purpose, to rule the world as gentle and caring stewards, in harmony with one another, and Jesus, our head (Revelation 3:21). This is the path to our greatest fulfillment as humans.

God expresses this idea, that God blesses through difficult circumstances, through Jeremiah,

“For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.’”
(Jeremiah 29:10-13)

This passage makes clear that the people of Israel were going to be exiled. This exile would be attended with terrible loss of life and property. This occurred due to their unfaithfulness (1 Chronicles 9:1). It was a consequence of breaking their covenant with God, as God had stated clearly in the covenant. Notwithstanding, since they were God’s chosen people, God would work this terrible fall for their good, just as He does with every believer, who is His chosen child (Romans 8:28-29).

This principle still applies to us today. God has promised to redeem and reward any and all of our faithful service on earth. When we seek to be sanctified we are doing the will of God for our lives (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Even when we fail, and suffer loss, God promises to turn it to our good.

To walk in faithfulness, gaining the greatest rewards from this life, requires setting aside fleshly appetites, such as fulfilling sexual appetites outside of God’s design (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and

instead serving the best interest of others in love (1 Thessalonians 4:9). This would include treating sex as it was designed, in obedience to God (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). We are not to seek our rewards in circumstances. Neither are we to seek our rewards from “making others behave” or by judging, acting as busybodies. Rather, we are to seek to please God by following His commands, being industrious in working, laboring, serving. This is the will of God (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

All these instructions from Paul serve the larger message of living faithfully now, while still waiting eagerly for the end times, when Jesus will return and restore all things. We should live for the end times, knowing they are coming. We should be constantly aware that the end times are looming. It should impact our every move. We are warned to not be caught unprepared for Jesus’ return (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2). It should drive us to be sanctified. Like an Olympic athlete training for the big event. Paul says there is a special reward called the crown of righteousness that will be given to anyone who was prepared for, looked forward to, and was living for the return of Jesus (2 Timothy 4:8).

The way to train for the end times is to do God’s will in all things.

Paul told us “This is the will of God: your sanctification” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). To be sanctified is to be set apart for the special purpose of living as Jesus intends us to live, walking in the good works which He prepared for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). In this letter Paul has given us three important points regarding being sanctified:

- Sexual purity—serve rather than exploit (1 Thessalonians 4:3).
- Hard work, “If you don’t work, you don’t eat” (1 Thessalonians 4:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:10).
- Judge yourself, not others (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12).

To be successful in our quest toward sanctification, we need one another. Life is a team sport. That we need one another in order to live sanctified lives is a central reason we should gather together regularly. One of the major verses that tells us why we are supposed to assemble together tells us the reason why we should do what we usually call “church.” That reason is to stir one another up to love and good works, particularly since the day of Jesus’ return draws closer with each passing day (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The English word “Church” is generally a translation of the Greek word “ekklesia” the literal meaning of which is “assembly.” The Greeks used it to describe the assembly of citizens to vote on things, during phases of democracy within Greek city states.

Here is the verse where the author of Hebrews tells us to gather together, to assemble:

“and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near”
(Hebrews 10:24-25)

We are supposed to gather as a church to stir up “love and good deeds...encouraging one another.” Why? Because “the day” is approaching. Living in sanctification is the way to properly prepare for “the day” of judgement, “the day” of Jesus’ return.

The very essence of our purpose for assembling together is to constantly remind one another “the end is coming, be prepared.” To “stir up to love and good works” is to encourage one another to live in a sanctified manner. To follow the commands in this chapter.

This “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” because “the day is drawing near” is exactly what Paul did in Thessalonica. Paul was not in Thessalonica very long before the Jews who disagreed with him got envious and chased him out (Acts 17:10). But during that time, the primary thing Paul taught the Thessalonians was what he echoes in this letter: Live a life that is sanctified, because Jesus is coming back to judge the earth; look for Him every day.

Now he answers questions the Thessalonians had about Jesus’ return, *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep* (those who have died already), *so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.* Unbelievers *grieve* without true *hope* because they don’t know Christ or His promises to resurrect the dead who believe in Him. Unbelievers might think death is permanent, or believe something that is not true. It seems the Thessalonians also thought death was permanent, and were anxious about two points of confusion:

- The “rapture” (being caught up), and what happens to believers who die before Jesus returns?
- How can we know Jesus hasn’t already come? What’s the sign of His coming?

Earlier in this epistle, Paul expressed his relief that the Thessalonians were holding onto their faith and were looking forward to Jesus’ second coming:

“...how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

(1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10)

The Thessalonian believers appear to have really embraced and believed the idea that Jesus was coming back soon. But they did not seem to understand the point about Jesus resurrecting those who died before He returned. This shows how imminent they believed was Jesus’ return.

Paul dispels this notion of permanent death for believers: *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.* To *fall asleep in Jesus* refers to a believer who dies physically. Any believer who dies will apparently be brought back to earth with Jesus, when He returns. We might see a picture of this in the scene in Revelation when Jesus returns. Jesus returns with the “armies which are in heaven” (Revelation 19:14). Since this army is “clothed in white linen,” it might fit the description of being an army of believers, since earlier in chapter 19, believers are said to be clothed in white linen as a reward for their “righteous acts” done while living on earth (Revelation 19:8).

If we have enough faith to *believe that Jesus died and rose again*, then it follows that we should have enough faith to believe that *God will bring with Him those believers who have fallen asleep*, or died, *in Jesus*. When a believer dies, he or she dies *in Jesus*. It is worth noting that Paul chooses to describe Jesus' return in this verse as *God will bring with Him*. Jesus is God, and will return to earth as the visible manifestation of God. His nature as being fully God and fully man will be in full display.

The Apostle Peter emphasized Jesus' imminent return. In Acts 3:19, he told the Jews listening to his sermon that if they repented, Jesus would return right then, in that generation. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD likely was a physical manifestation of that offer period being terminated. This is similar to when God told the first generation who came out of Egypt they could not enter the Land. They had an open offer period during which they could choose to enter Israel, but that offer period was terminated due to unbelief and disobedience (Numbers 14:22). We have an offer period to choose to be sanctified and enter God's kingdom work during this life, and should be diligent to make the most of it.

Paul cites the authority of God on the truth of this matter of the dead in Christ rising: *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that those believers who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep*. Those who are living at Christ's return will not meet Jesus before the dead believers do. The dead believers will rise first. This appears to mean that the dead believers will be resurrected first. When believers die, their spirit goes to be in the presence of Jesus, as Paul taught (Philippians 1:23). However, it appears from this passage that believers will not receive their newly resurrected bodies until Jesus returns to earth.

Christ will definitely be leading this heavenly army, *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first*. It appears here that God will form a resurrected body that then unifies with a human spirit that came from the presence of the Lord. It seems that these bodies will be resurrected from earthly materials. The passage says both that Jesus will "bring with Him" those who died in Christ, as well as saying *the dead in Christ will rise first*. Thus, believers who died in Christ appear to be both descending, as well as rising. This might indicate that believers' spirits are descending from heaven with Christ and meeting their resurrected bodies in the air, prior to touching down on earth along with Christ.

The prefix "arch" in Greek means "head" or "lead". So here it appears that Jesus is being referred to as the head of all angels, by the use of the term *archangel*. When the Old Testament uses the term "angel of the Lord" it may refer to the preincarnate form of Jesus. Jesus was "made a little lower than the angels" by becoming human, even though He was, and is, the head of the angels (Hebrews 2:9). This seems likely to be a reason the angels marveled, and glorified God at His birth. The angel Michael is also called the *archangel* in Jude 1:9. That might mean that he is the head angel, and Jesus is the head over all angels.

Jesus also *will descend from heaven with two sounds: a shout of the voice of the archangel as well as the trumpet of God*. This might picture Jesus as the second Joshua. The words "Jesus" and "Joshua" are the same word in Hebrew, and mean "Yahweh is salvation." When Joshua led

Israel against Jericho, the city's wall fell when the people shouted, and they blew the ram's horn (Joshua 6:5,20). In this case, Jesus is shouting, and blowing the *trumpet of God*. If this pictures the rapture, the wall of death will fall, making certain that Jesus will return again to take earth, and reign over it. If this refers to the rapture, then this entire group would return to heaven, then return later to actually possess the earth (Revelation 19:11-16). When Joshua blew the trumpet and the people shouted, the wall fell. But they still had to invade the city.

When Jesus takes the believers with Him, it will also open up the world to God's judgment. The job of believers is to be salt and light that protects the world from judgment, reconciling people with God. Like the wall of Jericho protected the city of Jericho, in some sense, the presence of believers delays the final days of the earth. Just like 10 righteous men would have preserved Sodom from judgement, the redeemed in the earth protect the world from judgment. This could be the time when the Holy Spirit is removed from the world, which seems to be what 2 Thessalonians 2:6 refers to, making way for Satan's antichrist to take over, and then be destroyed by Christ when He returns to establish His kingdom.

This should have comforted the Thessalonians greatly, for not only did they not have to worry about believers who had died before Christ's return—as it turns out, the dead believers go to the front of the line and will meet Jesus in the air before the living believers are taken up. It appears from this passage that at the return of Jesus, both those believers who have died as well as those who are living will receive a resurrection body. Eventually all believers will live in a new earth, with a new body (Revelation 21:1). The resurrected body will be a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Paul concludes this amazing description of what Jesus' coming in the air will be like. After those believers who died prior to Jesus' return are resurrected: *Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.* After the "dead in Christ" are resurrected bodily, then *we who are alive and remain* also appear to receive a resurrected body, and join Jesus in the air. (It does not seem our current bodies would be able to survive such a trip.)

That Paul says "we" indicates that he too eagerly expected Jesus to return any day. Notwithstanding Paul's eager expectation, Paul also lived as though Jesus' coming would not be in his lifetime. He spoke of dying as a martyr, and running his race to the end of his life (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 1:19-26). He appears to have held this tension in faith, both looking forward to and living like Jesus was returning any time, while also living in this world as though he would be here for a full lifetime.

From that day forward, after we are caught up, we will always be in the presence of Jesus, with resurrected bodies. Paul adds, *Therefore comfort one another with these words.* We can participate in this glorious moment when it occurs whether we are dead or alive. This is a promise that appears to apply to all who have believed on Jesus, having enough faith to look at Him on the cross, hoping to be delivered from the venom of sin (John 3:14-16).

This passage likely describes what is often called the "rapture." The word "rapture" does not appear in the Bible. It means to ascend into heaven without dying. Paul makes clear here that

some who are living *will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*. There is controversy about when this happens, which indicates that we don't know when this will happen. But we can be sure it will happen. We can equally be sure that we need to be ready at all times to meet Jesus. There is no guarantee we will breathe another breath.

There are a number of "raptures" (being caught up) in the Bible.

A man named Enoch was raptured:

"By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God" (Hebrews 11:5)

This is not certain to be a rapture, but that seems to be the best reading.

The prophet Elijah was most certainly raptured. A flaming chariot came from heaven, picked him up, and took him to heaven with his servant Elisha watching:

"As they were going along and talking, behold, *there appeared* a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven." (2 Kings 2:11)

Then, of course, Jesus was raptured:

"And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9)

In the future there will be at least two more raptures, and perhaps three. Of course there could be more.

One rapture that might happen is a rapture of the wicked out of Israel. In the parable of the wheat and tares, it is the tares that get harvested out and thrown in the fire (Matthew 13:24-30). This is interpretive, but that interpretation fits the passage. All Israel will be saved.

Another future rapture that will happen for certain is the two witnesses of Revelation, who will resurrect, then ascend into heaven:

"But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them. And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' Then they went up into heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them." (Revelation 11:11-13)

These two witnesses are God's prophets on earth during what Jesus calls the Great Tribulation. The Great Tribulation is the last 3 ½ years of the seven year period that is the 70th week of Daniel (Daniel 9:24-27).

Many think that, since the book of Hebrews says it is appointed unto man once to die (Hebrews 9:27), that these two witnesses are Elijah and Enoch, since neither has yet experienced physical death. In this future event as witnesses of God, they die, resurrect after 3 ½ days, then rapture/ascend for a second time.

Another rapture that is coming is what the Thessalonians are concerned with, what Paul is describing: *Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

This resurrection of the saints and going to be with Jesus speaks of the third tense of salvation, the future tense. The past tense of salvation is that we were delivered from the penalty of sin when we believe and were born again (John 3:14-16). The present tense of salvation is that we are being delivered from the power and consequences of sin today as we are walking in obedience and are being sanctified. This is God's will for us, and is a choice we make, with rewards/consequences for our choices (1 Thessalonians 4:3). We will be saved from the presence of sin, and our fleshly bodies when we are resurrected, and glorified together with Christ.

Paul's emphasis is to make good choices in the present, in hope of great outcomes/rewards/consequences in the future, particularly when Jesus returns. We can learn from, but can't alter the past. We can hope for, but not live in the future; the future does not exist in the present. We can only act in the present. And what Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to do is to focus on following the will of God, and make choices that lead them to be sanctified, and be prepared to meet Jesus.

But we have a blessed hope, a *comfort*. And that is that we will receive a new body, and be *caught up* with *the Lord*. This is true for all who have died before, and it is also true for all who are alive when Jesus returns.

Christ's return to earth is spoken of in both the Old and New Testament.

We see it in Revelation,

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it *is* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses.”

(Revelation 19:11-14)

In this description, Jesus returns with a heavenly army. This seems to be the ultimate day of the Lord. Some believe this is also the time where we meet Jesus in the air, as described here in 1 Thessalonians 3. The idea would be that we meet Jesus in the air, then join Him in coming to earth, to touch down on the Mount of Olives. But it seems more likely that the rapture of believers to meet Jesus in the air described here in 1 Thessalonians 3 refers to an earlier time.

This is because this “rapture” return of Jesus is spoken of as something that can happen at any time. But the day of the Lord expressed in Revelation 19, when Jesus returns to defeat His foes and set up His reign, will only come after certain prophesied signs take place. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul will answer a concern that the Thessalonians had, in that they are worried that “the day of the Lord” had come, and they had missed it. Paul comforts them, saying that return of Jesus will not occur until the “man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4). So it does not seem to fit well that we would be looking forward to something happening any day that is the same as something that will not happen until after certain signs occur.

Jesus also spoke of the appearance of the “man of lawlessness,” who will commit “the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (Matthew 24:15). Paul’s “man of lawlessness” will be one who “exalts himself above every so-called god” and “takes his seat in the temple of God.” This fits Jesus’ description of the same lawless man, with the reference to the man described in Daniel as “standing in the holy place” (Daniel 9:27).

So it seems the best interpretation is that there is an event of believers being “caught up in the air” with Jesus, that could occur at any time, and then a later, separate return of Jesus, where He will set foot on the earth, defeat His enemies, and take up a physical reign on the earth. It is important to remember that prophesy gives a picture of some, but not all of what will transpire, like still photo frames from a full length movie. So it is important to focus on Paul’s primary message to us, which is that it is the will of God for us to walk in obedience, being sanctified, and to be prepared for the imminent and inevitable return of Jesus.

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah speaks of Jesus’ certain return to earth in the following passage:

“In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south” (Zechariah 14:4)

After being raised from the dead, Jesus departed from earth to return to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9). The angels then told the gawking disciples that Jesus would return, just as they saw Him leave (Acts 1:11).

That apparently means He will descend from heaven and land back onto the earth at the same place from which He ascended after rising from the dead. And when He touches down, the Mount of Olives will split in half. This Zechariah passage prophesied the return of Jesus to the Mount of Olives hundreds of years prior to Jesus being born in Bethlehem, dying and raising from the dead, then ascending into heaven, as recorded in Acts. And it has now been thousands of years since Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives.

Some think that means God is slow in returning. The Apostle Peter prophesied that this would be said of men in the latter days:

“Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’”
(2 Peter 3:3-4)

Peter answers this critique, noting that God is delaying because of His mercy, and that to God a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day (2 Peter 3:8). When Jesus returns, the Mount of Olives will split in half, and the entire topography and ecology of the surrounding area will be transformed (Zechariah 14:8-11; Ezekiel 47).

The Thessalonians fully understood that Jesus would return, and when He returned, those would be greatly rewarded who had been faithfully obedient, living in a manner that is sanctified (Revelation 22:12; 3:21). This is why they endured persecution gladly (1 Thessalonians 3:4-8, Romans 8:17b).

Biblical Text

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.