

Lesson 6

The Hope of Christ's Return

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

In Thessalonica, a young church wrestled with serious questions about life, death, and hope. Paul, recognizing their struggle, addressed these concerns in this part of his letter, which has served as a source of hope through the ages. During his time with them, Paul had effectively communicated the doctrine of Jesus' second coming to the Thessalonians, ensuring they understood its certainty. However, because of his quick and unplanned departure, not all issues related to this event were addressed, with new challenges emerging after his departure. One such problem, the importance of sustaining oneself by working while waiting for Christ to return, was previously discussed in chapter 4. Paul now focuses on other concerns, addressing them in a manner that has significantly influenced Christians ever since. You may have heard Paul's teachings here used in funeral services, illustrating Paul's words' deep imprint on church life for the rest of time.

4:13 – How a Christian Grieves

Many in Thessalonica found themselves in confusion and grief. The early believers, living in anticipation of Jesus' imminent return, faced the unsettling reality of death as their loved ones died before Jesus returned. Questions abounded. Had they missed the Lord's return? What would become of those who had passed away? Amidst these questions, Paul offers answers and hope grounded in the reality of Jesus Christ—His death, resurrection, and promised return. These serve as our steadfast anchor for the soul, inseparably connected to the truth of the Gospel. *Death does not have the final say.*

To the Thessalonians mourning their loved ones, Paul acknowledges their grief. Yet, he distinguishes the Christian experience of grief from that of the world. The Greco-Roman worldview typically envisioned death as the final cessation of life, with myths like crossing the River Styx and entering the Elysian Fields being exceptions rather than the norm¹⁹. While philosophers often debated the soul's immortality, such concepts were not widely embraced by the masses, who frequently expressed despair over death's finality in various inscriptions. Paul contrasts this pervasive sense of hopelessness with the Christian perspective, which, rooted in the promises of God, offers a fundamentally different outlook on death. He suggests that the type of grief experienced by the world, characterized by despair and a lack of hope, is incompatible with the hope-filled stance that defines Christian belief.

Remember, the principle detailed in verse 12 is still in view. Christians are responsible for behaving properly in the presence of outsiders, including how they grieve. Possessing hope in the face of death greatly enhances the testimony of the power available to those in Christ. When death comes, we do not despair because death does not have the final say. Our hope goes beyond the grave, resting on the certainty of Christ's victory over death.

The resurrection at the end of time will unite deceased believers with the Lord and those still alive on earth. This reunion ensures that every Christian, regardless of their physical state at Christ's return, will participate in His second coming and the everlasting fellowship. Paul's writings in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and Philippians 1:20-23 provide more assurance that death cannot disrupt our bond with Christ but enhances our fellowship with Him. This teaching is further supported by Romans 14:8: *whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord*. Death is a vanquished foe for those in Christ²⁰. The Christian awaits a future resurrection that defeats death decisively.

4:14-15 - The Basis of Our Inheritance

Our hope is built on two events: Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus Died

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

His death was the ultimate sacrifice, satisfying the demands of God's justice and opening the way for us to be reconciled with God. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, it is written: *He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. The penalty for our sin has been paid in full. Jesus was the offering that turned away God's wrath.

Jesus Rose Again

Jesus' resurrection proves God's acceptance of His sacrifice and our assurance of justification before God. Paul says: *He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification* (Romans 4:25). In 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23, Paul says Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruit" to guarantee our future resurrection. Just as the appearance of the first fruits in a harvest assures the farmer of the coming yield, Christ's resurrection assures us of our own.

Here, we see the certainty of resurrection for those who have died in Christ. Paul explains that deceased believers will be raised and accompany him at Christ's return. This suggests that upon death, the soul of the Christian is transported to heaven to be awakened in the presence of Christ. This would have corrected any misunderstanding that the dead are in a state of disadvantage or "soul sleep" concerning Christ's second coming. Saints who have died in Christ will return with him to meet the living. Christ is central to our death and resurrection; the one through whom we "fall asleep" also enables our resurrection and reunion with him. God will fulfill his promises to all his people, even those who have died. These events form the bedrock of our hope, assuring us of our inheritance in the kingdom of God.

4:16-17 - The Return of Jesus

While Paul's writings hint at the possibility of Christ's imminent return, especially evident in his discussion in 5:1-11, there is no explicit indication that he was sure this event would occur within his lifetime. Paul treated the timing of the Lord's coming as unknown, emphasizing the need for vigilance and readiness. Jesus taught the same thing, urging for preparedness and faithfulness amidst uncertainty about the timing of His return (as seen in Matthew 25:1-30). The teaching here is also consistent with

what Peter expressed in 2 Peter 3:1-10, suggesting that an indefinite waiting period for the Lord's return was familiar and not unknown during the early church.

Now, let's focus on our primary text. In verse 16, when He does return, the Lord himself will come into the sky from heaven, much like a ruler's grand entrance into a city, celebrated with pomp and ceremony. The focus will be on the Lord himself, the supreme King, descending to gather his people, reminiscent of a city's population joyfully meeting their sovereign.

The "shout" signifies a moment of attention, like a military or governmental order. This command, likely issued by Christ as he descends, echoes John 5:25, 28-29, where the dead are resurrected at the sound of God's voice:

“And I assure you that the time is coming. Indeed, it's here now when the dead will hear my voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live. Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.

The mention of "the voice of an archangel" highlights the involvement of high-ranking angels, with archangels being leaders within the angelic hierarchy. Their role, particularly in the context of divine judgment and the resurrection, signifies angelic participation in these final events. Angels are often connected to the day of the Lord²¹.

The "trumpet call" was used throughout history for various purposes, including military actions, worship, and royal proclamations. In this context, it identifies the significant moment of resurrection and the assembly of God's people, marking the commencement of end-time events and the resurrection of the dead in Christ.

Paul also says, "the dead in Christ will rise first," uniting their souls with resurrected bodies "in the air," then the living believers will be caught up. What awaits God's people is extraordinary. Whether we are alive or have passed away at the time of Christ's return, we are promised an eternal, flawless, and glorified body. This new state of being will be free from sickness or lack, marking our transformation into eternal inhabitants of God's kingdom, as described in Philippians 3:20–21.

4:18 - Living in Hope

Our hope in Christ is not passive; it propels us to live differently. Here we discover:

- **Encouragement:** Just as Paul concludes, we are to encourage one another with the hope of Jesus' return. In times of grief and uncertainty, these truths provide comfort and strength.
- **Holiness:** The hope of being transformed motivates us to pursue a life of holiness as we prepare to meet Him.
- **Evangelism:** We are compelled to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others because we recognize the urgency and beauty of our hope.

Our hope culminates in the glorious inheritance that awaits us—a reality where we will be entirely like Christ, free from sin, suffering, and death. This hope purifies us as we await seeing Him as He is and being transformed into His likeness (1 John 3:1-3).

A Call to Action

As we partake in this hope, let us commit to living lives that reflect the glory and assurance of our future inheritance. Let us love more deeply, serve more passionately, and share the gospel more boldly, knowing that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). May we all not just be hearers of the Word, but doers (James 1:22) transformed by the living hope we have in Jesus Christ.

What's In This for Us?

Cultivating a Hopeful Perspective: In facing life's challenges, including grief and loss, Christians are encouraged to anchor their hope in the promise of the resurrection and the second coming of Christ. This hope is not based on wishful thinking but on the certainty of Christ's victory over death. By focusing on this hope, we can navigate difficult times with peace and assurance, knowing that death does not have the final say.

Living a Life of Purpose and Holiness: The anticipation of Christ's return and the transformation it promises should motivate Christians to live lives that reflect the values of the Kingdom of God. This involves pursuing holiness, striving for righteousness in personal conduct, and actively seeking to embody the love and compassion of Christ in interactions with others. It also means being stewards of the time and talents given to us, using them to serve others and spread the gospel.

Engaging in Compassionate Outreach: The hope of resurrection and eternal life with Christ should compel us to share this good news with those who do not yet know it. Understanding the temporary nature of our earthly existence and the eternal significance of our relationship with Christ should drive us to engage in evangelism. This includes comforting those who mourn, offering support to those in need, and advocating for the hurting with the love and gentleness that comes from a hope secured in Christ.

Conclusion

Paul's teachings on the resurrection and the second coming of Christ offer hope and guidance for navigating the complexities of life. By anchoring our lives in the certainty of Christ's victory over death, we can confidently face the future, knowing that our ultimate destiny goes far beyond this world's temporal struggles and sorrows. This hope sustains us in times of grief and motivates us to live purposefully, pursuing holiness and engaging in compassionate outreach. As we await Christ's return, let us encourage one another with this hope, striving to reflect the light of Christ in a world in need of His love and salvation. May we witness the gospel's incredible power and the glorious future that awaits all who depend on Christ for salvation through our words and actions.

For Discussion

1. How does Paul's message in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 comfort Christians with grief and uncertainty about death?
2. In what ways does the Christian perspective on death and hope differ from the Greco-Roman worldview presented by Paul?
3. What is the significance of Christ's resurrection being described as the "first fruits" in the context of Christian hope for the future resurrection?
4. How does the promise of a glorified body free from illness or deprivation upon Christ's return influence the way Christians view physical suffering and death?
5. Why is the concept of "soul sleep" contradicted by Paul's teachings, and what implications does this have for our understanding of the state of believers after death?
6. How does Paul use the imagery of a royal entrance ("parousia") to describe the Lord's return, and what does this suggest about the nature of Jesus' second coming?
7. According to Paul's description, what role do angels play in the events surrounding Christ's second coming?
8. How is the Christian call to holiness and evangelism reinforced by the hope of Christ's return and the resurrection of believers?
9. How should the hope of our future inheritance in Christ impact our daily lives and interactions with others, both within and outside the Christian community?
10. How does Paul's exhortation to "encourage one another with these words" serve as a call to action for Christians to support and uplift each other in the face of life's challenges and uncertainties?

¹⁹ Osborne, Grant R. *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Verse by Verse*. Edited by Elliot Ritzema and Danielle Thevenaz. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018, p. 105.

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

²¹ See Matthew 13:39, 24:31, 25:31; 1 Corinthians 6:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; Jude 14.