

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 “*Caught Up Together in the Clouds*”^{**1}

Current series: “*Stay Awake: The End Is Coming*”

Main Idea: In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 we learn about an amazing, hope-giving experience that is coming to all who are in Christ. We will be caught up together in the clouds. Paul’s teaching on this subject works through three points.

- I. The Dilemma (13)
 - A. What happens when Christians die?
 - B. How should we grieve?
- II. The Discourse on Future Events (14-17)
 - A. Consider it from the perspective of the dead in Christ (14-15).
 - B. Consider it from the perspective of the Lord (16).
 - 1. The first sound will be a shout.
 - 2. The second sound will be the voice of the archangel.
 - 3. The third sound will be the trumpet of God.
 - C. Consider it from the perspective of living Christians (17).
 - 1. We will experience a grand reunion.
 - 2. We will meet the Lord in the air.
 - 3. We will be with the Lord forever.
- III. The Decision (18)
 - A. We must personally take these words seriously.
 - B. We must purposefully talk about them with each other.

Make It Personal: Am I encouraged by the knowledge of what is coming?

Note: Make sure you pick up your envelop with the proposed Articles of Faith.

We’ve been doing a series in August entitled, “Stay Awake: The End Is Coming.” We have marveled at Jesus’ predictions in Mark 13 concerning the future. This morning we’re going to zero in on a future event explained by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4 called the rapture.

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

On Thursday morning I watched the live online broadcast of the launch of a Delta 4 rocket. Now that was impressive. It cost some \$200 million and has a lift capacity of 62,540 pounds which it used to put a U. S. Air Force GPS satellite into orbit.

As impressive as that sight was, it’s nothing compared to another transport into the sky that’s coming and maybe soon.

If an incredible experience is coming, would you not want to know about it? In the passage I just read we’re told about an experience that’s coming that almost defies our categories of thought. The Lord wants us to know it’s coming. It’s intended to affect the way we live our lives now.

The experience? We who know Christ are going to be caught up together in the clouds. That’s right. Caught up. There will be no airplane involved. Just instant transport. From here to there. Caught up in the clouds.

I think most of us could use a shot in the arm today. To revitalize us. To motivate us. To stir us up and on as the church of Jesus Christ.

What can do it? Nothing like the topic addressed in the passage of God’s Word before us today. The return of Jesus Christ and the gathering of His people.

Eschatology is the doctrine of the end times. We have a tendency to go to extremes when we think about it. One extreme is to sensationalize eschatology. When sensationalized, it

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous message from this passage at WBC, see the 1 Thessalonians series in 1990.

becomes nothing more than a doctrine for debate, a sanctified form of Christian entertainment. Fascinating. Intriguing. Controversial. Popular. Yet with little relevance for daily life.

The other extreme is to ignore, even neglect, eschatology. The defeatist approach. Who knows? Since eschatology is controversial, leave it alone. Why worry about future events? What matters is the here and now. Right?

I was challenged in preparing this message by the words of Leon Morris, in his commentary on I Thessalonians, "It is worth asking ourselves whether the comparative neglect of the doctrine in much modern Christianity has not resulted in great loss." (136)

Both extremes have caused great damage to the church today. So today, let's explore the wonderful, hope-giving passage of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

What happens when Christians die? What will happen when Jesus Christ returns? What affect should this have on our lives now?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 we learn about an amazing, hope-giving experience that is coming to all who are in Christ. We will be caught up together in the clouds. Paul's teaching on this subject works through three points.

- I. The Dilemma (13)
- II. The Discourse on Future Events (14-17)
- III. The Decision (18)

NIV "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words."

ESV "¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord,^[a] that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words."

I. The Dilemma (13)

The dilemma had to do with a couple of questions.

A. What happens when Christians die?

Verse 13 "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

In the AV, "But I would not have you to be ignorant. . ." The letter of 1 Thessalonians was written by Paul, Silas, and Timothy and sent to the church in Thessalonica in 51 A.D. The church was perplexed, confused by a dilemma. It had to do with the second coming of Christ. The confusing issue was this. What will happen to Christians who die before the second coming of Christ?

We get the impression from v 18 that the Thess had understood Paul to mean that Christ would return within their lifetime. But He hadn't returned yet. And some of their membership had died. Did that mean that the dead in Christ had lost their share in the events associated with that great day of Christ's return?

To this dilemma, the Holy Spirit directed Paul to speak. "But I would not have you to be ignorant". Uninformed.

Death is not a popular topic. Most people avoid the subject. It's uncomfortable. Disturbing. Unnerving. But it's a reality. And inevitable. Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed unto man to die once, and then the judgment."

E.g.—When it comes to dealing with death, some deny it, while others reimage it and put a positive spin on it.

There's a great deal of difference between the way the world handles death, and the way we can. We have hope. The world does not. Death is the ultimate sorrow for the person who does not know Christ. But Paul reminds us it need not be for the child of God. The LB captures the optimism of the apostle with the following paraphrase, "And now, dear brothers, I want you to know what happens to a Christian when he dies, so that when it happens, you will not be full of sorrow, as those who have no hope."

Notice that Paul doesn't refer to the dead, but to "them who are asleep". For the Christian, death is no longer a terrifying adversary. Death has been overcome by our conquering Savior.

Heb 2:14-15 "Forasmuch then, as the children are partakers of flesh and blood. . . that He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

Death is merely a "sleep" for the Christian. A fact of life, but not the end of life. For this reason, Paul elaborates here that we need not sorrow as "those who have no hope."

B. How should we grieve?

The world is without hope when it comes to death. Oh, there are some people who say they don't fear death, and should. They have a false hope to which they cling. Not Jesus Christ, but their own merit. But the typical attitude of the world towards death is one of hopelessness.

The following is part of a letter written in the 2nd century from a person to a friend who was bereaved. "Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. . . But nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort ye one another."

Are you a person of hope? Can you face your own death, and the death of brothers and sisters in Christ with confidence? Paul told the believers at Thess not to sorrow. He was not urging them to adopt a calloused indifference to death, nor forbidding the natural expression of grief over the loss of a loved one. But he is exhorting us to remember that we can have hope. Through Christ.

On Wednesday I was at the hospital bedside of our sister Joyce Sammons as she faced a very delicate surgery, facing the sobering reality that she might not make it through. As we talked we affirmed the truth of the gospel. She was ready for the surgery for she knew what

was going to happen to her. A win-win situation. She would either receive benefit from the surgery and get better, or she would die and see the Lord.

It's such a joy to be with people who have this hope. It makes all the difference.

Look again at those words "who have no hope." There are people in the world, millions and millions, who have no hope. They have no confidence, no assurance regarding what will happen to them after they die. Thankfully, by the undeserved grace of God, we are not in that number of people who have no hope. We have hope, not because of the way we live, not because of anything we have done, but based on the promise of God in Christ Jesus.

He who has the Son has life. These things have I written to you who believe in the name of the Son that you may know that you have eternal life, says 1 John 5:11-13.

So Paul first deals with the dilemma. What about the dead in Christ? Secondly. . .

II. The Discourse on Future Events (14-17)

What's going to happen when Jesus Christ comes again? What will it be like to participate in the day of Christ's return? The drama of future events unfolds here. Paul elaborates on the events of the future from three perspectives. There are three primary groups/people involved in Paul's discourse.

A. Consider it from the perspective of the dead in Christ (14-15).

Verse 14 [ESV] "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."

Our Christian hope rests on a sure historical foundation. In the Av, "If we believe"—not that there's any doubt we do. Paul is drawing out an implication of a historical fact. "Since" we believe that Jesus died (not "sleep" here) and rose again, this is the gospel message, we can also know with great certainty about the status of the dead in Christ at the return of Christ.

What will happen to Christians who have already died. . .? Notice verse 14b, "God will bring with Him." The literal order, "So God the ones who sleep through Jesus will bring with Him." When a Christian dies, his spirit goes directly to be with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-7). But the day is coming when he will receive a new body. The resurrection is the guarantee of the Christian hope. Just as God raised Jesus from the clutches of the grave after three days, so in due time He will raise the bodies of those who are dead in Christ. Guaranteed.

Jesus will bring the faithful departed "with Him" when He comes back. Just because they've already died doesn't mean they'll miss out on the splendor of that day! In fact, verse 15 makes it clear that God has reserved a front row seat for them!

Verse 15 "For this we declare to you [lit. "for this to you we say"] by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep."

Paul doesn't mention the resurrection of the faithful here, as he will in verse 16. Perhaps he takes it for granted. What worried the Thessalonians was not whether their friends would rise, but whether they would have any share in the great events associated with Christ's glorious return. To this question, Paul offers a resounding "Yes!"

When Christ returns, He will bring the dead in Christ with Him. Their sleep has ended. They shall rise first.

Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 [ESV], Paul elaborates on the return of Christ from the perspective of the dead in Christ. "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For

the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.
⁵³For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

Paul had just elaborated on the nature of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

By word of application, most here have lost a loved one. We've grieved. But we have hope. What a grand day that will be when Christ returns, accompanied by those who have gone before us. What a grand reunion!

Next, Paul probes us to consider that day from a second perspective.

B. Consider it from the perspective of the Lord (16). “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

People have slept through a lot of things. Movies. Graduation speakers. I remember our kids sleeping through ball games. Church services.

But I guarantee you that God's people will not sleep through this event, the return of Christ. Why not? Notice the three audible noises associated with Christ's return.

1. *The first sound will be a shout.*
2. *The second sound will be the voice of the archangel.*
3. *The third sound will be the trumpet of God.*

Someone has well said, "We are not looking for signs but listening for sounds." Indeed, there will be three great sounds which will be heard at this event known as the rapture.

1. *The first sound will be a shout.* When God created the universe, how did He do it? According to Genesis 1:3, "And God said, Let there be light." Genesis 1:6, And God said, Let there be a firmament." Genesis 1:9, "And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered." Gen 1:11, "And God said, let the earth bring forth vegetation." God spoke. So it will be in that great day.

The Lord will descend with a "shout". This is a military term denoting urgency and authority. When God speaks, things happen. Remember Jesus' encounter with Lazarus? In John 11:32-43, when He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth, that's what Lazarus did!

Some day Jesus will call for His Bride to leave this earthly scene, and every born-again believer will be caught away. There's power in the voice of Jesus.

John 5:28 declares, "Marvel not . . . for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth: they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

2. *The second sound will be the voice of the archangel.* Some have tried to speculate which archangel Paul has in mind. Michael is the only archangel named in the NT. Gabriel is mentioned in Luke 1, but he is simply called an angel. Actually, there is no definite article here. It actually says, "the voice of an archangel."

Probably, the intent is this. The Lord will descend uttering His authoritative shout. Furthermore, some archangel will add his voice to the call which will wake the dead. Some people set two alarm clocks to make sure they don't miss a big appointment. No believer will miss this big event.

Then, there's a third sound.

3. *The third sound will be the trumpet of God.* In the Bible, trumpets were used in connection with judgment, as well as majesty and honor, and even festivity and triumph. Here a trumpet will add to the pageantry and majesty of The Day. In the OT, prophets used a trumpet to bring the congregation of Israel together. So the day is coming when the heavenly trumpet will sound and Christ will call unto Himself His own ransomed Church.

The songwriter had this in mind when he penned:

*One day the trumpet will sound for His coming,
One day the skies with His glories will shine;
Wonderful day, my beloved one's bringing;
Glorious Savior, this Jesus is mine!*

So three great sounds, and one inescapable conclusion. For the believer these sounds will be full of cheer. This will be Christ's shout. It will be the voice of His archangel. It will be God's trumpet. These will be the sounds of God's deliverance for His people.

Are you listening for the sounds? Oh, you won't miss them, but are you listening for them? Are you living in anticipation of your Savior's return and this glorious meeting in the air? These three sounds remind us to keep looking up. That's where our help comes from. A lot of people are looking for help in the wrong places.

I chuckled years ago when I read Willard Stull's missionary letter. He told of his 4 year old grandson who visited his neighbor's home to play with friends. During the visit the boys had a squabble. Willard's 4 year old grandson was getting the worst of it, but he knew where to get help. He rushed to the telephone and dialed 911 for the police. Fortunately the call didn't go through. But it showed that even a 4 year old knows where he can get help.

Help is available for you. Do you know where to look? And listen? As the drama unfolds, Paul presents the future from the perspective of another group.

C. Consider it from the perspective of living Christians (17). "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

The Romans had an interesting word used whenever a dignitary paid a visit to their town. Before the emperor reached the city, the leading citizens would go out and meet him and escort him back the final stage of the journey. That word is translated "meet" in verse 17. It also appears in Acts 28:15 where Christians from Rome walked south along the Appian Way to meet Paul and his company and escort them the rest of the way to Rome. The word "meet" has a formal elegance to it, the thought of a royal reception.

So it will be for those Christians who are alive when Christ returns. They will be caught up:

--*together*, for this will be a family event

--*with them*, with those who were dead and raised first; what a grand reunion!

--*in the clouds*; the clouds were often thought of as the abode of demons in first century, but we have no such fear. Literally, "in clouds." Marshall says this appears to refer to the

mode of transport rather than the destination and indicates that believers will use the same means of transport as did Jesus.²

--to meet the Lord in the air; The last time His followers saw Him, where was He? Remember Acts 1:9? “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” And so when He returns, in a cloud, in the air.

Let’s make it personal, brothers and sisters. This is what is coming for us and all who know Jesus Christ personally.

1. *We will experience a grand reunion.*
2. *We will meet the Lord in the air.*
3. *We will be with the Lord forever.*

I read Warren Wiersbe’s comments on this passage, and he shared some insights I’d like to share with you concerning this verb “caught up”. Wiersbe says, “I once heard the Greek scholar, Dr. Kenneth S. Wuest, preach on this passage and explain the various meanings of the Greek word that is translated “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Each of these meanings adds a special truth to the doctrine of our Lord’s return.”

“To catch away speedily.” This is the translation in Acts 8:39, where the Spirit “caught away Philip” after he had led the Ethiopian to Christ. When the Lord returns in the air, we who are alive will be caught away quickly, in the twinkling of an eye. This means we should live each moment in the expectation of our Lord’s return, lest He come and find us out of His will (1 John 3:1–3).

“To seize by force.” See John 6:15. Does this suggest that Satan and his armies will try to keep us from leaving the earth? I trust it does not suggest that some of the saints will be so attached to the world that they must literally be dragged away. Like Lot being delivered from Sodom, they will be scarcely saved (Gen. 19:16).

“To claim for one’s own self.” This views the Rapture from our Lord’s point of view as He comes to claim His bride.

“To move to a new place.” Paul used this word when he described his visit to heaven (2 Cor. 12:1–4). Jesus Christ has gone to prepare a home for us (John 14:1–6), and when He comes, He will take us to that glorious place. We are pilgrims and strangers in this world. Our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20–21).

“To rescue from danger.” See Acts 23:10. This suggests that the church will be taken home *before* the time of Tribulation that will come to the world from God. First Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9 seem to state this clearly.

Will the unsaved world be aware of what is happening? Will they hear the shout, the voice, and the trumpet? First Corinthians 15:52 indicates that this will happen so suddenly that it will be over in the twinkling of an eye. Since the shout, voice, and trumpet apply to God’s people, there is no reason to believe that the unsaved masses will hear them. If they do, they will hear sounds without meanings (see John 12:27–30). Millions of people will vanish instantly, and no

² I. Howard Marshall, p. 130.

doubt there will be chaos and great concern. Except for those who know the Bible teaching, the world will wonder at what has happened.³

The drama comes to a close with the climactic statement, "and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Everything in Paul's discourse leads up to this. Having said it, there's nothing more to be said. Being with the Lord is the greatest longing of God's people, to see the One who created us, died to rescue us, and conquered sin, death, and the devil for us. Seeing and being with Him is the hope of all hopes. And this hope is certain.

Application:

There are many questions about Christ's coming. The Thessalonian believers wrestled with one and we've considered the dilemma. What will happen to those who die before Christ returns? We've seen Paul answer the dilemma with a dramatic discourse. He painted the portrait of Christ's imminent return from the perspective of the dead in Christ, of the Lord Himself, and of those living Christians. This leads to one final point.

III. The Decision (18)

What must I do with this truth? Verse 18 "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

Two thousand years ago, Jesus came the first time, born of a virgin, into a peasant's home. He lived a perfect life. He willingly subjected Himself to the unjust, cruel deeds of men. He died a criminal's death, in our stead, for our benefit. He conquered the grave, revealed Himself to a small band of followers, commissioned them to tell others of Him, and then left. With no fanfare, quickly, silently, abruptly, He disappeared from them, ascending back to heaven.

Is that it? Is Jesus gone, out of sight, out of mind, no more to be reckoned with? No. We saw the emphatic answer in verse 16 that the One who will come at the end of this age is no less than "The Lord Himself," the Person of Jesus Christ Himself.

So now You and I are faced with a decision. We know what's going to happen. We know He is coming. We know what's going to happen to those who have died in Christ. We know that those who are in Christ will be caught up in the clouds and forever remain with their Lord.

So how should we respond? What should the imminent return of Christ mean for us? What are we supposed to do with this knowledge? The answer? "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

To put it simply...

A. We must personally take these words seriously. And...

B. We must purposefully talk about them with each other.

We are to "encourage, comfort, exhort, stimulate, motivate, strengthen one another with these words."

Friends, we are supposed to talk to each other about the Lord's return. Talk to each other, not debate, not speculate, but comfort. Why? It will give us a shot in the arm. It will revitalize us. What a motivational message for saints in a hostile world! Jesus is coming again, and we shall be with Him.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 180–181). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Many years ago, my uncle, in response to the question, what will happen after you die, said: "I guess they'll put my body in the ground, it'll decay, and turn back to dust, and I'll be long gone and forgotten."

The following epitaph was discovered on the tombstone of an ancient Greek. It read, "I was not; I became; I am not; I care not."

How tragic! Are you a person of hope? Do you know for sure that you'll participate in the drama we've observed today? Have you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?

May I say this to my non-Christian friend? You will not experience the event we have just considered, not unless you repent and put your trust in Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes He will take His own to Himself and will then judge this world for its rebellion against Him.

Today is the day of salvation. Please, don't wait. Repent and call on Christ. Receive Him as your Savior and Lord.

Make It Personal: Am I encouraged by the knowledge of what is coming?