

# *“Asleep in Jesus”*

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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## Introduction:

It has been said that America is the only country in the world where people think that death is optional. We look around us, and we see people doing everything possible to avoid the inevitable. We see an ongoing obsession with diet and exercise, and yet in spite of how important it is to be healthy, and in spite of how hard people may try, we understand that week after week, thousands of people will die.

Here in this nation, we sometimes deal with death in some very unusual ways. A company in Iowa will stuff your ashes into duck decoys, basketballs, or even shotgun shells. Sometimes we handle the subject of death with humor. Perhaps some are like the older man who said, **“I wake up each morning, dust off my wits, pick up the paper and read the obits. If my name is not there, I know I’m not dead, so I eat a good breakfast and go back to bed.”** Perhaps others are like Woody Allen who said, **“It’s not that I’m afraid to die, it’s just that I don’t want to be there when it happens!”**

And yet we look at the Scriptures, and we understand that death cannot be avoided. As the Bible says in Hebrews 9:27, **“...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”** Since death is the one appointment that none of us will miss, we need to know the truth about it, and so we need to have a word from the Lord that will help us through that experience. **What happens when we die?**

This morning, I would like for us to look together at 1 Thessalonians 4—a passage written by the apostle Paul to a brand new congregation in the city of Thessalonica—a passage that focuses in very specifically on what happens when Christians die. We are not talking about those outside of Christ, we are not talking about the destruction of the Universe, but we are being very specific: **What happens when Christians die?** In our pew Bibles, the Scripture is found on page 1849. **»PPT»**

You may remember that Paul established the church in Thessalonica on his Second Missionary Journey. He had only been there about three weeks, though, when he was forced out of town by an angry mob. In those three weeks, he did the best he could, but the church had some misunderstandings. For example, Paul had taught that Jesus was coming back and that they needed to be prepared. Well, it appears that in their excitement, some of the members apparently quit their jobs and were just sitting around waiting for the Lord to come—they thought it would happen

immediately. And so Paul had to write and tell them to get back to work. And in our passage for this morning, Paul apparently answers another concern. As the early Christians were waiting eagerly for the return of Christ—fully believing that it would happen in their lifetime, some of their loved ones started dying, and as time went on, they started to get worried. They worried that their Christian friends who had died would miss the Lord's return. If you can picture this, these people are all sitting around waiting for the Lord to come back, and then a Christian dies, and they think, **"Oh no! This guy just missed the Lord's return! This guy died too soon! He's gonna miss it!"**

And so in **1 Thessalonians 4**, the apostle Paul deals with this concern: **What happens when Christians die?** Do they really miss the Lord's Second Coming? He does not ridicule them for asking the question, but he treats it with great seriousness and he gives them an answer from God. If you will, then, please look with me at **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**...

***<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore comfort one another with these words.***

As we think back over this paragraph, I would like for us to consider three questions:

- First of all, what will happen to those who die in Christ?
- Secondly, what will happen when the Lord returns?
- And finally, will we see our loved ones again?

I. **But first of all, let us consider the question: WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THOSE WHO DIE IN THE LORD?** **»PPT»**

We notice right away in **verse 13** that Paul did not want these people to be **"uninformed."** Other translations refer to being **"ignorant."** And certainly there is a lot of ignorance out there concerning what happens when we die. This past week, I read the story of a man who died and went to judgment. And according to this story, anyway, Peter meets him at the gate and says, **"Before you meet with God, I thought I should let you know—we've looked at your life, and you really didn't do anything particularly good or bad, so we're not really sure what to do with you. So, can you tell us anything you did that might help us make a**

decision?" The man thought for a moment and said, **"Well, once I was driving along and came upon a woman who was being harassed by a gang of bikers. So I pulled over, got out my tire iron, and went up to the leader of the gang. He was a huge, muscular, hairy guy with tattoos all over his body and a ring pierced through his nose. Well, I reached up and tore the ring out of his nose, and I told the guy that he and his gang had better stop bothering the woman, or they would have to deal with me."** And Peter says, **"Okay, I'm impressed. So when did this happen?"** And the man says, **"About two minutes ago."**

Well, that is a good example of ignorance concerning what happens when we die. The Bible never says that we will have to face St. Peter at the gates of heaven. However, Paul does say here in **verse 13** that we as Christians do not need to grieve, **"...as do the rest who have no hope."** We notice here that Paul is not telling us not to grieve. Some of the great heroes of the Bible were those who knew how to grieve. We think of Abraham who mourned the passing of Sarah. Isaac was still grieving three years after the passing of his mother. David wept when his friend Jonathan died. We think of the grief experienced by Job at the loss of his ten children. We remember the example of Jesus at the death of His good friend Lazarus. In **John 11:33**, the Bible says that Jesus was **"deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,"** and in **verse 35**, the Bible says that, **"Jesus wept."** According to **Isaiah 53:3**, Jesus was, **"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."** And so it is fine and good for a Christian to grieve, but we are not to grieve (according to Paul), **"...as do the rest who have no hope."** We can grieve, but as Christians our grief is to be different.

And the reason for our different kind of grief is given in **verse 14**, where Paul says that at the Second Coming, **"...God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."** In other words, our grief for a fellow Christian is different than the grief of those in the world, because as Christians, we know that those who die **"in Christ"** are with the Lord. The body appears to be sleeping, but the soul is very much awake and goes to be with the Lord immediately. We think of what Paul wrote in **Philippians 1:23** where he spoke of his willingness to die, because as he put it, he had the **"...desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better."** In other words, Paul knew that if he were to die, he would immediately **"...be with Christ."** As he also said in **2 Corinthians 5:8**, **"...we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."** Paul knew that death for a Christian meant being **"...at home with the Lord."** And so it was not a matter of people *missing* anything, but they actually have the advantage, because when Christians die they go to be with the Lord right away.

We think about Jesus and His statement to the thief on the cross in **Luke 23:43**, **"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."** The thief, in his saved condition, was going to be with the Lord that day in Paradise. It was not something that would happen somewhere way off in the future, but he was going to be with the Lord in Paradise that very day.

The point is this: Our loved ones who have died (those who are Christians)—our loved ones are with the Lord right now. They are living face-to-face with God right now. And so we do not need to wonder where they are—but when they died, they went immediately to be with the Lord in Paradise, and they will never be separated from the Lord.

Again, we are talking about Christians here. Those who are lost are outside the scope of this passage. But when it comes to those who have fallen asleep *“in Jesus,”* these people are with the Lord right now. And so the apostle Paul says, therefore, that we are not to grieve, *“...as do the rest who have no hope.”*

**II. As we continue looking at this passage, I would invite you to consider with me a second question, and that is: WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN THE LORD ACTUALLY RETURNS? »PPT»** I know we look around us at the religious world, and there is all kinds of speculation—a lot of far-out, elaborate theories. But in this passage, as we look at the text itself, the answer is fairly clear.

**A. We notice, first of all, for example, that THE LORD WILL DESCEND FROM HEAVEN WITH A SHOUT.**

Many in the denominational world have an idea that they have labeled as the *“rapture”* (a term, by the way, that is never found in the Bible). But their idea of the *“rapture”* is that Christians will be suddenly, silently, and secretly snatched away from the earth—the silent, secret, sudden, snatching. But please look with me very carefully at **verse 16**, and please ask yourselves the question: Does this verse describe a silent, secret, sudden, snatching? No! **1 Thessalonians 4:16** is one of the noisiest verses in the entire Bible! *“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God....”* That is one noisy verse!

One thing I really appreciate here in **verse 16** is the emphasis on the fact that the *“Lord Himself”* will descend—not an angel, not a representative, not a vision of the Lord, not Moses or Elijah, not Peter or Paul, not a look-alike or a body double, but the Lord—the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout.

This same emphasis is repeated in the account of the Lord’s ascension in **Acts 1:9-11**, where Luke, a medical doctor, gives his account of what happened. Several weeks after the resurrection, Dr. Luke says that while the disciples were looking on, a cloud received Jesus out of their sight, *“And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”* As the angels said, *“This Jesus”* will return. Or, as Paul says, *“...the Lord Himself will descend.”*

Another parallel passage is found in **Revelation 1:7**, where John refers to the Lord's Second Coming and says, ***"BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen."*** And again, this will not be a silent, secret, sudden, snatching, but ***"...every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him."***

Paul says that the Lord will descend from heaven ***"...with a shout."*** The Greek scholars tell us that this word refers to a command that is shouted, and it will be a command that cannot be ignored. We have a little more detail concerning this particular shout in **John 5:28-29**. Jesus was referring to Himself in the third person, and he said, ***"Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."*** The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, and it will be a shout that cannot be ignored.

**B. But let us also notice here that when the Lord returns not only will the Lord descend with a shout, but we also find (according to this passage, at least) that THE DEAD IN CHRIST WILL RISE FIRST.**

Again, according to that passage we just looked at from **John 5**, the resurrection of the righteous dead and the wicked dead will all happen in the same hour. Remember, Jesus said that ***"an hour is coming"*** when these things will happen. The resurrection of the good and the bad will happen at the same time. We remember the parable of the tares in **Matthew 13**. The end of the world is compared to a great harvest. The wheat and the tares will all be harvested at the same time—the wheat will be gathered up and brought in, but the tares (or the weeds) will be thrown into the fire.

But please remember: Paul is not talking about the wicked here—he is talking about those ***"...who have fallen asleep in Jesus."*** And so when he refers to the dead in Christ rising ***"first,"*** he does not mean ***"first"*** in terms of the righteous dead rising, and then the wicked dead rising 7 or even 1000 years later (as some denominations teach), but he is referring to the concern in Thessalonica. Remember, these people were worried that their dead Christian friends were going to miss the Second Coming of Christ. And so the apostle Paul basically says, ***"Don't worry about it—they will actually rise first—they will get there even before you will!"*** And so there is an order to it. As Paul says in **verse 15**, ***"...we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep."*** In other words, Christians who have died will not miss a thing—that is something that we do not need to worry about.

This great resurrection will include Peter and Paul, those who died 2,000 years ago, a hundred years ago, those who died last week or even a day ago. It will include those who die at sea, those whose bodies are cremated, those who die in battle, those who die in hospitals, those who die in the air. The Bible teaches in **1 Corinthians 15:52** that at that moment, at the last trumpet, ***"...the dead will be raised***

*imperishable.*” At that moment, *“...this mortal must put on immortality”* (**1 Corinthians 15:53**). So do not worry about the dead in Christ missing anything, because (as Paul says), they will *“rise first.”*

C. Before we move on from this question of what will happen when the Lord returns, I should also point out from this passage that after the great resurrection, **ALL CHRISTIANS WILL BE CAUGHT UP IN THE SKY FOR A GREAT REUNION**—certainly a reunion with the Lord, but also a great reunion with one another—the dead and the living!

In **verse 17**, we find that those of us who are alive 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.”* The word *“caught up”* refers to being seized or being snatched away—like a firefighter would reach in and snatch a child from a burning building or like the coast guard snatching a sailor off the deck of a sinking ship. And it will happen in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye—one moment we are mowing the lawn, and the next moment we are flying through the air; one moment we are in the shower, and the next moment we are flying through the air being blown dry at 30,000 feet!

And the key here is that we will *“meet the Lord”* and we will then be with the Lord forever—face-to-face, in person, the ultimate family reunion—Christians from every land, and nation, and language—God’s people from every generation—all coming together to be with the Lord. We remember the Lord’s promise in **John 14:1-3**, *“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”*

Haven’t we all had the experience of meeting someone at the airport? Maybe a relative we haven’t seen for a while, maybe a dear friend, and we stand down there at the bottom of the escalator at the Dane County Airport and we eagerly wait to see a face we recognize. The Second Coming of Christ is like that...only the face we are looking for is the face of our Lord. We are looking forward to that day more than anything! Well, all of this brings us to the ultimate question, and that is...

### **III. ...WILL WE SEE OUR LOVED ONES AGAIN?** ▶PPT▶

Well, it depends—it depends on us, and it depends on them. Not everyone will go to heaven. If our loved ones died in Christ, and if we die in Christ (or if the Lord returns while we are living the Christian life), then we will all be reunited. For those of us who are here this morning: Let us make every effort to make sure that our families go to heaven with us—write a letter, make a phone call, talk to them face-to-face, pray about it, and certainly let us do everything possible to bring our children up in the Lord.

And then, once we all die, we all get buried—side-by-side, the saved and the lost, in cemeteries all over the world. The only thing that makes a difference is whether we have accepted the Lord's free offer of salvation. And on the last day when the trumpet sounds, we will all hear the great shout—some will rise to a resurrection of life, and others will rise to a resurrection of judgment.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close, I would like to share the story of a man by the name of Horatio Spafford. Mr. Spafford was a successful attorney in post-Civil War Chicago. However, like many others, he lost nearly all of his possessions in the great Chicago fire of 1871. He and his wife and four daughters were spared, and yet in 1873, Mr. Spafford decided to give his family a change of scenery and decided to travel to England. In November 1873, just as they were about ready to sail across the Atlantic, Spafford was detained by business, but he sent his wife and four daughters on ahead as scheduled, planning to join them later. However, halfway across the Atlantic, the ship collided with another vessel. Their ship and just about everyone on board went down in twelve minutes. Two-hundred twenty six passengers drowned, including all four of the Spafford daughters. Mrs. Spafford survived.

When he received the tragic news, he immediately dropped everything and booked passage to join his grieving wife in England. On that journey, he asked the captain to let him know when the ship passed the place where his daughters had drowned. The heart-broken father stood on deck and stared into the cold, grey waters of the Atlantic. He poured his heart out to God, but he held onto his belief that Christ would come again, that the dead in Christ will rise, and that he would be reunited with the Lord and those four little girls.

In that grief, Mr. Spafford wrote the words to a song that we sometimes sing, **"When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say: It is well with my soul. Tho Satan should buffet, tho trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate and shed His own blood for my soul. And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll: The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend; even so, it is well with my soul."**

***"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."*** Paul's conclusion then comes in **verse 18** as he says, ***"Therefore comfort one another with these words."*** In other words, the passage is practical. We are to use these words to comfort one another.

As I mentioned earlier, unless the Lord comes back first, all of us here this morning will die. There is no special diet that will prevent death from happening. It really does not matter if we load or ashes into shotgun shells or whether we shoot our ashes into outer space. Nevertheless, all of us can be prepared for that time to



come. And once we are ready, it is pretty exciting to think that every hour we live we are one hour closer to meeting the Lord face-to-face! No matter what happens, the Lord's Second Coming is closer now than it has ever been before!

The Bible says that we prepare for that day by listening to the gospel message, by turning away from sin, by publicly stating our belief in Jesus as God's Son, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you would like to talk about it, we would be glad to meet with you sometime during this week. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)