

# 1<sup>st</sup> THESSALONIANS

4:13-18

Introduction

"Sleep" is the word the Bible uses to describe the physical death of Christians:

1. When you fall asleep at the end of the day your body lies temporarily still and resting from its labor until you awaken.
2. When you die at the end of your life your body lies temporarily still and resting from its labor until it arises.

Your physical body arises in resurrection at the coming of Jesus. The Greek word from which we get our word "cemetery" means *resting place or sleeping place*. It is the same word you would use for *dormitory*. **Cemeteries are dormitories for the dead!**

The apostle Paul had taught the believers in Thessalonica about what is commonly called "the Rapture of the Church." The Rapture of the Church is the event in which Jesus will return to remove Christians from the earth. Saints who are alive at this coming will be taken to heaven ***without ever experiencing death!***

The saints in Thessalonica lived in the daily anticipation of the Rapture. They believed it was **imminent** – and by "imminent" I mean that it could happen at any moment. They were so certain that the Rapture could occur at any moment that some of them had quit their jobs to sit around awaiting the Rapture.

Some of them had already "fallen asleep" in death. Their physical bodies were in death's dormitory. This raised some serious questions for the young Church. What would happen to the saints who had already fallen asleep at the Rapture? Would they somehow **miss-out** on the Rapture? Would the Raptured saints **meet-up** with them?

It is to address these concerns that our text was written. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Will Not Miss-Out On The Rapture If You Are Asleep When Jesus Comes For His Church, and #2 You Will Meet-Up In The Rapture If You Are Alive When Jesus Comes For His Church.

#1 You Will Not Miss-Out On The Rapture  
If You Are Asleep When Jesus Comes For His Church  
(v13-15)

You're told three times in three verses that some of the believers were "asleep." Since this letter was written, many millions more believers have "fallen asleep." Have they **all** missed-out on the Rapture?

They have not missed-out on the Rapture. If anything, *they have gained something!* The apostle Paul would later write, "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). In Philippians 1:23 he said he had "a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." Even in the Old Testament, with its limited revelation of the afterlife, the Psalmist declared, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Discussing death with the Corinthian Church, the apostle Paul said that when you are "absent from the body" you are immediately "present with the Lord" (Second Corinthians 5:8). The very moment a believer dies he or she is consciously alive in heaven with Jesus. **There is absolutely no doubt about that.** The physical body is left behind to await its resurrection from the grave; but the spirit and soul are immediately with the Lord.

The first thing to know about death is that believers who have "fallen asleep" are to be envied, not pitied. So Paul wrote and said,

1 Thessalonians 4:13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

The use of the word "ignorant" was not a rebuke; *not at all!* He immediately called them "brethren." If anything Paul was acknowledging that he had not fully instructed them regarding this issue but now wanted to bring them up to speed. Remember: He had

only been with them three weeks and he held down a full-time job while he was there. He wasn't able to cover the relationship of believers who had fallen asleep to the Rapture.

Paul did not want them to "sorrow as others who have no hope." The "others" would be unbelievers. It's true that people who are not Christians have ideas about death and the afterlife. But it cannot ever be said that they have "hope." Christian hope is certainty based on the truth of God's Word. The Bible alone speaks with authority about life, death, and life after death. Everything else is a false hope, a fool's hope.

"Lest you sorrow..." is not suggesting that it is improper to grieve or feel immense pain when a loved one dies. Even our Lord, Jesus, wept outside the tomb of His friend Lazarus.

The "sorrow" in these verses is related to their fears that those who had fallen asleep were somehow at a disadvantage in having missed-out on the Rapture. One thing is certain in this letter: They believed that Jesus could return at any moment to take the Church from the earth to heaven. Anyone who suggests to you that the Rapture of the Church is not an imminent, any-moment expectation, is just not reading the Bible correctly.

It is also insightful to notice that Paul's way of comforting them is to give them instruction from the Bible. Perspective is important and only God's Word can provide a truth-perspective.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

The word "if" does not suggest doubt. It suggests a logical sequence. "If" something is true, *then* other things follow from it. It's better to understand the word "if" by substituting the word "since."

What is it that we believe is true? "We believe that Jesus died and rose again." The death and resurrection of Jesus are the foundation of our certain hope.

In His resurrection Jesus is called the "firstfruits of those who are asleep" (First Corinthians 15:20). "Firstfruits" were the *first installment* guaranteeing the rest of the future harvest. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead guarantees the future resurrection from the dead of **all** those who are "asleep in Jesus."

Those "who sleep in Jesus" means those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and have been born-again. They are the believers who comprise the unique group of people the Bible calls the Church. The Church are those Christians from the Day of Pentecost until the coming of the Lord in the Rapture. The Church should not be confused with the Old Testament saints or with the nation of Israel. God has a separate plan and program for each of these groups.

1 Thessalonians 4:15 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 by no means precede those who are asleep.

"The word of the Lord" was a direct revelation to Paul. When writing to the Church at Corinth, he would call the Rapture a "mystery" (First Corinthians 15:51). A "mystery" in the Bible is something that was previously hidden but is now being revealed. There are *types* of the Rapture in the Old Testament; but the *teaching* about the Rapture is not revealed until the New Testament.

The word "we" is important, in "**we** who are alive and remain." Paul always included himself among those who could be alive when Jesus returned to Rapture the Church. He would also speak of his impending death in certain passages; but this is no contradiction. The Lord *could* and *can* return at any moment... But if He doesn't, I might die – "fall asleep" - and not be "alive and remain until" His coming.

It's important that you understand that the Doctrine of Imminence is *not* contradicted by comments in the Bible that indicate the writers planned for the future. If anything, the very opposite is true. Since I believe Jesus could return for me at any moment, I am motivated to press forward and accomplish all that I can before His appearing.

Those who are alive and remain do not "precede those who are asleep." This means they will have *no advantage* over them. Paul

hadn't explained why yet; but he wanted them to know that those who had fallen asleep would definitely *not* be at a disadvantage in the Rapture. They would *not* miss-out when Jesus came to Rapture the Church.

*Neither will your loved ones who have fallen asleep... Neither will you or I should we fall asleep before the Rapture. To die is gain; when I'm absent from my body I am present with the Lord.*

Still: I'd like to remain alive until the Rapture. What happens if I do? And how is it that those who have already fallen asleep do not miss-out?

## #2 You Will Meet-Up In The Rapture If You Are Alive When Jesus Comes For His Church (v16-18)

These next verses give you the orderly sequence of the events that occur at the Rapture of the Church. Four words capture the sequence: *Return... Resurrection... Rapture... and Reunion.*

The Savior returns:

1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God...

We know that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven forty days later. He said He was going to heaven "to prepare a place for you" and that He would "come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3). He was going to heaven to build your mansion; He would return to bring you there. This return to bring you to heaven is *not* His Second Coming to earth to establish a kingdom on the earth. That occurs later. This return is the Rapture.

When Jesus returns there are three sounds:

1. The "shout" is a word of command. These things occur by the power of His word. Jesus needs only to speak in order to accomplish these things.

2. The "voice of an archangel" indicates an accompanying archangel. The only archangel mentioned by name in the Bible is Michael, although there may be others.
3. "With the trumpet of God" may indicate that the archangel blows a trumpet; or that Jesus' voice is as the sound of many trumpets.

These are three separate sounds but they should be taken together. Taken together they signify a great army being mustered for its move. God's saints are being mustered for their move from earth to heaven by "the Lord Himself."

The saints are resurrected:

1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. **And the dead in Christ will rise first.**

The "dead in Christ" are all the saints who have "fallen asleep" prior to this return of the Lord. They are all the saints of the Church. This resurrection does *not* include the saints of the Old Testament. They have their own resurrection to look forward to, at a different time, described in other Bible passages.

The "dead in Christ" will be resurrected. Their bodies have been "asleep." Whether they were properly buried or whether they were cremated or whether their bodies were dissolved or destroyed in some other manner... No problem. The resurrection of those bodies is *not* a reconstruction of their original molecules. Resurrection is described in the Bible by comparing your body to a seed that is planted in the ground. The seed dies and dissolves; out of it arises a beautiful flower. The flower is connected to the seed but is very different from it.

If you fall asleep before the return of Jesus, your body is like a seed. God will raise it and it will be a new, glorified body that is fit for eternity. Your soul and spirit will have been with Jesus in heaven from the moment of your physical death. At the resurrection your soul and spirit will become housed in your glorified resurrection body.

I don't have all the mechanics of it! Think of Jesus, the "firstfruits" of the resurrection. He is also called the "First born from the dead"

(Colossians 1:18). "Firstborn" means He was the first to be raised from the dead never to die again; "firstfruits" guarantees believers will follow and be like Him in their resurrection. Jesus died on the Cross and His physical body was put in the Garden Tomb. His soul and spirit were alive and three days later His soul and spirit were housed in His resurrection body – a new, glorified physical body that was transformed from the body in the tomb. What happened to Jesus will happen to all those who have fallen asleep in Him.

The rapture of the saints:

1 Thessalonians 4:17 Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

"Caught-up" is the word that catches your attention! It is the Greek word *harpazo*. In Latin it is *rapere*, from which we get the word **Rapture**.

Some people try to confuse you by saying that the word "Rapture" never occurs in the Bible; that we made it all up. Well, it does occur in Latin translations. But if it troubles you, then call it *the harpazo!* Or *the snatching away!* The *expression* is not as important as the *event*.

If you are alive and remain, in order to be taken to heaven your physical body must be first transformed into a glorious body fit for heaven. In First Corinthians 15:51-53 you read,

1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed -

1 Corinthians 15:52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

1 Corinthians 15:53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality.

The "dead will be raised" and we who are alive and remain "shall be changed" and gotten ready for "incorruption" and "immortality."

Will your clothes be left behind? What will happen to pregnant women? *Your mind boggles!* I would suggest to you that the Rapture will be an unprecedented global disaster for unbelievers to deal with. Just think of the traffic accidents when millions of cars are suddenly without their drivers!

We will "meet the Lord **in the air**." The Lord does not return to the earth at the Rapture; He is not coming yet to establish His rule over the earth. Something has to happen before He establishes His kingdom – the seven year Great Tribulation. In the Rapture Jesus is coming to take His Church home to heaven *before* the Tribulation.

I should point out to you that Christians disagree as to exactly when the Rapture occurs in relation to the Tribulation. There are four views:

1. The view we take is that the Rapture occurs prior to any part of the Tribulation on earth. It is therefore called the **Pre-tribulation Rapture**.
2. Some say that the Rapture will occur in the middle of the Tribulation on earth. It is called the **Mid-tribulation Rapture**.
3. Some say that the Rapture will occur towards the end of the Tribulation on earth. They say that the Church will suffer the wrath of men but *not* the final wrath of God; so they call their view the **Pre-wrath Rapture**.
4. Still others say that the Church will go through the entire Tribulation on earth. When Jesus returns in His Second Coming He will first Rapture the surviving saints and they immediately return with Him to rule and reign. This is called the **Post-tribulation Rapture**.

There are many, many biblical reasons why we reject all but the Pre-trib position. We'll see some of them in chapter five, and more of them in chapter two of Second Thessalonians. For our purposes today let me just say this: The Rapture of the Church is presented as **imminent**. It could occur at any moment.

1. Paul believed it was imminent; he always included himself as a possible participant.
2. The Thessalonians believed it was imminent; so much that some of them quit their jobs to wait for it. It would have been the perfect opportunity to tell them it was not imminent, but Paul did not. He maintained that the Rapture could occur at any moment but exhorted them to work hard in order to maintain their witness.

The Doctrine of Imminence is very definitely taught in Scripture. **Every position other than the Pre-trib Rapture is incompatible with imminence!** The Tribulation has a very definite starting point, mid-point, and ending point. If the Rapture occurs anytime after the Tribulation starts it cannot be said to be imminent at all.

The reunion of the saints:

1 Thessalonians 4:17 ... And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

"We" includes those who have "fallen asleep" *and* those who are "alive and remain" when the Lord returns in the Rapture. **All** the saints of the Church Age will be in their glorified bodies and taken to heaven to "always" and forever "be with the Lord."

"Comfort one another with these words" is just as applicable today as it was in the first century. I almost always share this passage of Scripture at a funeral, especially graveside. In it is the certain hope of reunion for Christians. If those who die are Christians, they are fallen asleep in Jesus; and you - if you, too, are a Christian - will be reunited with them in eternity. **No** other religion or philosophy can give anyone anything other than a false hope, a fools hope, of reunion.

Conclusion

The early church had a special greeting for one another. It's recorded in First Corinthians 16:22, "Maranatha!" "Maranatha!" consists of three Aramaic words: "Mar" ("Lord"), "ana" ("our"), and "tha" ("come"), meaning "our Lord, come."

As with many other New Testament passages, *Maranatha!* only makes sense if an any-moment, **imminent** coming of Jesus to Rapture you is understood.

It might be today!