

Prayers

To God

Pray in thanks for the day you have been given. Rejoice in it, and bless God the Father who has given you so much.

For myself

Weekly theme: Food and eating

Dear Jesus, I find it so hard to even think about what I eat and drink, and it would be so much easier if I just ate what I wanted and my body dealt with it, without any further problems. However, I know I have a responsibility to eat properly for the sake of my body and for the work of the Spirit You have intended for my soul. Lead me to eat and drink what is appropriate for my call and my witness, so that I do not fail to serve you where it counts, in what may appear to be the little things of life. **AMEN**

For others

Pray for the situation in the UK where a vote will be taken on a piece of legislation preparing the way to redefine marriage. It is a shocking piece of legislation that serves no-one and cuts across the church's teaching on marriage. I urge you to pray against the redefinition of marriage in the UK.

Meditation

Do not worry, the Lord will provide for you,
Whatever you do and wherever you may go.

Do not stray, the Lord has shown you His path,
A safe route to follow that is tried and tested.

Do not delay, the Lord calls you onwards,
There's no security if you stay where you are.

Do not sin, the Lord has warned you before,
To turn to Him if you have trouble, not to Satan.

Do not fear, the Lord will keep you secure,
He will bind all forces that can frighten you.

Do not weep, the Lord has seen your distress,
The source of your pain has been covered over.

Do not be fickle, the Lord will not change,
Be secure in Him who has shown He cares for you.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, fellow believers, about those who have 'fallen asleep', lest you should grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have 'fallen asleep'. ¹⁵ For we say this to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will most certainly not precede those who have died.

¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up with them altogether in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air! So we will be with the Lord forever!

¹⁸ Therefore, encourage one another with these words!

Review

These are some of the best known words about the return of Christ in the Bible! So if we want to know what Paul thought would happen when the Lord returns, this passage must be added to 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, and possibly Romans 8:18f.. These words of wisdom must be added to other Scriptures if we want to form as broad a Biblical picture of the end of the world as possible. These include Jesus' own description of his return (Matthew 24), various pictures from Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 35, and also the vision of John as recorded in his book of 'Revelation'.

Looking at what Paul reveals here, however, he maintains the consensus that Christ will come at a moment known only to God. When this happens, God's people are not to be afraid of their circumstances (4:13,14), and neither is there any advantage in being alive or having already died (4:15). Jesus will appear with heavenly power and authority, at the command of God and at the sound of a '*last trumpet*' (4:16), and this will be the call for God's people to rise dramatically to meet Jesus '*in the air*' (4:17), and come under the rule and authority of Jesus forever (4:17).

Without question, Paul writes to enlighten and encourage. He does not dwell on any part of this as if he must correct some confusion, but teaches the Thessalonians as if this was on his heart to add to what he had said. Here, the subject of the Lord's return is not like a theological mystery, as it seems to us today, but a fact to be faced, revealed by the Lord, by Scripture, and by plain experience. So if we are to assess our passage, this is where we must start!

Going Deeper

Some details from other passages

We can learn a little from other Scriptures that speak of this theme. So, when Jesus spoke about these events he spoke of the *'birth-pangs'* of a *'new age'* (Matt 24:8), before which the Gospel would be declared to all nations (Matt 24:14). He spoke about catastrophic signs that would happen on earth and in heaven (Matt 24:15-29) before the Son of Man arrived in glory *'on the clouds'*, heralded by angels and to the sound of *'a loud trumpet call'* (Matt 24:31). Then, *'the elect'* (God's chosen ones) will be gathered together from, *'from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other'* (Matt 24:30,31), before God judges the righteous and the wicked (Matt 24:37f., 25:31-46)

The book of Revelation is different. It is a series of complex pictures and visions of the end, sometimes called a *'apocalyptic prophecy'*. However, one great theme dominates this work after warning the church to be obedient (Rev 1-3). It presents seven interweaved prophecies presenting God's gradually unfolding victory over all evil, so that when this finally happens (in Rev 20), God is able to create a *'new heaven and a new earth'* (Rev 21) which is the eternal home of God's elect.

The very last vision contains the famous prophecy of a *'thousand years'* in which Satan is bound. From this comes the idea of a *'thousand year rule'* of God's saints before the world's end (see Rev 20:4,5). We must be careful with this prophecy however because John is not using plain speech here, but painting an apocalyptic picture of the End with mysterious and hidden meanings, some of which scholars are still trying to fathom. His prophecy is in sharp contrast to Paul's style of teaching as in this passage, which has some plain words of teaching about what to expect!

Beliefs about Christ's return

Paul wrote to teach the Thessalonians the standard *'doctrines'* of the day, yet feared they had not understood them, perhaps because of the speed of the evangelistic operation (Acts 17:10-13). He said, *'we do not want you to be uninformed, fellow believers ...'*, referring to what would happen when Christ returned. But Paul's concern went deeper.

A problem may well have arisen because of a commonly held belief that those present when the Messiah came were more blessed than those who had already died. This idea is found in the apocryphal book *'Esdras'* which was used as Scriptures in many early churches, although it is now regarded as Apocryphal writing and has been excluded from Protestant Bibles. This book includes the text; *'those who are left (i.e. until the end of the world) are more blessed than those who have died'* (2 Esdras 13:24). Clearly, this taught that those who were alive received different blessing from those who had died!

Paul did not believe this, and taught differently (which is one reason why Esdras is no longer included in Scripture), and neither did John. At the end of his Gospel, he specifically told his readers that Jesus did not say that anyone would be favoured at His return, not even the disciples who had lived with him (John 21:22-25)!

Those who have 'fallen asleep'

With all this in mind, much of what Paul says here becomes obvious. He is reassuring the Thessalonians that God will honour the faith of all, including those who have died before Jesus' return. Paul describes the Christians who have died as having *'fallen asleep'* (4:13); remember Jesus did the same, notably when speaking about Lazarus (John 11:11). He tells the Thessalonians not to mourn those who have died as if they are lost to the Kingdom; *'lest you grieve as others do who have no hope'* (4:13). He says that Christ's passage through

death to life gives hope to all who have died (4:14), and adds, '*we who are alive ... at the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have died.*' (4:15). His point is simple. All people of faith will be caught up in the glory of God at Christ's return, whether dead or alive at the return of Christ, which he now describes further!

Paul's picture of the return of Christ

What is said here about Jesus' return is one of the earliest writings about this in the Bible. Remember, the Gospel records are recollections of the life of Christ written some time after this letter of Paul. He teaches about this subject firmly, saying that he has '*a word from the Lord*' (4:15); this is serious stuff! He presents us with a clear list, even though it leaves us with many, many questions. He gives us a list of events:

1. Jesus will return with a '*cry of command*', the '*voice of an archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God*' (4:16)
2. Those Christians who are dead will rise to glory first (4:16)
3. Then those on earth at the time will be '*caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*' (4:17)
4. All God's people will thenceforth be with Him for ever.

This is a straightforward sequence of events but without a clear timescale, and we can easily slot this into a number of other Biblical teachings. For example, in later years Paul speaks about a time when '*the mortal body must put on immortality*' (1 Cor 15:53), which fits with what it means to be caught up with the Lord '*in the air*'. Jesus also teaches that there will be anguish on earth before this happens (see above, Matt 24), that when God's people are caught up to meet Him there will be a separation between those who are the Lord's and those who are not (Matt 24:40f.). The big mystery of course is that Paul says nothing about the great theme of the '*thousand year rule*' (see above), so whatever this is or means, it is in addition to this picture given here by Paul.

Perhaps this is all we need to know, at least by way of encouragement (4:18). Everything Paul says here has been studied and interpreted in many different ways; for example, the phrase '*meet the Lord in the air*' has been interpreted literally as well as metaphorically, to mean 'up there somewhere'! Undoubtedly, however, it means that we will meet our Lord in His domain, where He lives.

Paul's writing here simply describes the glorious moment when we finally get to meet our Lord. But tomorrow, we will find that Paul has some more to say about all this, and we must reserve any further conclusion to our study until we have seen what else is said in chapter 5!

Discipleship

Application

Expecting the Lord's return

When asked, people believe a wide variety of things about the Lord's return. On the one hand, this is only to be expected due to the very different Scriptures that deal with the subject and the illusory nature of the book of Revelation. We can only work through these things with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with an intent to live and die in the service of our Lord, so that we are indeed His when He comes in glory to claim His own. Our duty, as it taught throughout Scripture, is to be ready for what God will do both in this life, and also for when He will return to earth to complete His Creation.

Many scholars have debated these things over the years, and I remember a large number coming together in the late 90's to find agreement about the sequence of events. They could not agree, and more than that, virtually no two scholars could agree on any aspect of the teaching! They were in the same place as Christians who go to church every Sunday, each of them passionately believing various things about what the end of time will entail, but all worshipping God and loving Jesus! In the end, if we focus on Christ we will not go wrong, whether we are theologians or ordinary Christians!

The timescale

Because of my scientific background, I have a belief that God made time, and because of this, when we die, we may well escape the time frame of this world in which we live and experience a new 'time' in God's heavenly order of things. This is purely speculation, of course. However, this belief of mine enable me to handle the notion that we who die 2,000 years after Jesus' death, will not feel as if we are arriving in heaven at the end of the party! I reckon that all who die are transported into God's order of things in which we see each other in an equality of time; it is beyond our comprehension, but it makes perfect sense to me! I also reckon that the thousand year rule may, as Scripture says, feel like just a day, or perhaps more like forever! We are not told, but with time being in GoHd's hands, we must surely be ready for anything! However, we must do our best to make sure that our pet theories do not cut across what Scripture says!

Ideas for what to do

- Look at each of the things Paul says about the coming of Christ in glory, and make a list of the things that you believe will happen. Keep this list to hand, and when you hear people talking about this in church, use this list as a means of checking out the Scriptural truth of what is said!
- Pray for the day to come when Christ will come in glory. Then ask yourself what it felt like to pray for this. What do your feelings say about your attitude towards this great coming event?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what people most want to know about the coming of Christ in glory?
2. As far as you are aware, what can be said, for sure, about what will happen when Christ comes in glory?
3. What does it mean for Scripture to say that we who have not died will have no priority at the resurrection over those who have?

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, have done for me what is impossible for my mind to grasp, my heart to comprehend or my feelings to appreciate; and somewhere within my spirit lies the unspoken yet powerful bond by which You draw me heavenward and I do not let go. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for Your amazing Love for one such as me! AMEN