

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Second Coming and Resurrection

Introduction

There are many references to the second coming in the New Testament (it is mentioned over 300 times, equivalent to once in every 13 verses), but this is the most detailed passage of all.

It does not give detailed account of events, or the events which follow the second coming which are the subject of much controversy, but we have a satisfactory answer to anxieties expressed by the Thessalonians. The church members were facing the problem of bereavement. And Paul shows in this passage that the answer (as with so many other problems) lies in the Gospel. The Christian hope is grounded in the fact that those in Christ who died and rose again, now ascended, in whom they had put their trust, is coming again in glory. Paul does not rebuke them, but gives sympathetic explanation and encouragement.

Bereavement, however firm our Christian faith, is a profound emotional shock. To lose a loved one is to lose part of one's self. The painful adjustments which follow take many months to accept. Where are the dead? Are they alright? Will we see them again? We ask these questions because we become aware of our own mortality and prospect of death. The Thessalonians were especially concerned about those who had died before the Lord's return. Would they be at a disadvantage? Indeed, would they be lost? Or would they only have souls, because their bodies were in a tomb? Would they have a lesser glory?

Negative introduction

Paul says, **We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope** (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The phrase, "Do not want you to be ignorant", is one which occurs several times (about spiritual and personal matters). There are many problems in the Christian life and faith which are caused by ignorance. Knowledge is the key to many blessings. For this reason, we should know the Bible, read good Christian books, and go to a church where the exposition of the Word is central. (The ignorance among some church members is unbelievable – they have never been taught).

Paul is not saying it is wrong to grieve. Mourning is emotionally necessary. It would be inhuman not to mourn when we lose someone near and dear to us. Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb. But Christian grief is not a hopeless grief – such as was expressed by some of the pagans of Paul's day - "Once a man dies, there is no resurrection", "When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep", and as one ancient tombstone says, "I was not, I became, I cannot, I care not." One second-century Egyptian lady wrote of her grief, "Against such things one can do nothing". The ancients had only a vague hope – the dismal realm of Hades, where the dead bemoan their existence, their flimsy uncertain existence. Essentially utter

despair, grim resignation and bleak hopelessness. No hope at all. We find a similar hopeless tone nowadays among non-Christians.

Total contrast with the triumphant confidence of the Christian about our glorious future which will be far better than this life. Triumphant joy. Only in the Gospel is there solid hope. Safe and secure in His presence now. To be reawakened to fuller life and grand reunion with all God's people. Above all, joy and peace in His near presence. Christ's death and resurrection has transformed death. No longer the door to punishment, darkness and dread, it is the gateway to glory. If a man has lived in Christ, and has died in Christ, he is still in Christ now though he is dead, and he will rise in Christ. The believer is in a relationship which is independent on time and unaffected by death. **Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:39). The Christian is in Christ in life and in death. It is a union which nothing can break. Death has no terrors for the Christian. Therefore he does not sorrow in the same way as the unbeliever.

Condition of the dead now

Fallen asleep in Him (1 Thessalonians 4:13,14,15). "Sleep" is a common word in various religions to describe the dead, found in both Greek and Roman literature. It is used in Old Testament (Genesis 47:30), and fourteen times in the New Testament (e.g. John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:6; Revelation 14:13). The word "cemetery" literally means sleeping place, dormitory. The word to pagans meant the end of real life, but had very different meaning to Christians.

"Sleep" suits the physical appearance of the dead, and suggests there is going to be an awakening. It is also an attractive idea to older people, who are aware of their weariness and exhaustion through the duties and heaviness of life. But it does not mean unconsciousness. Asleep to this world, but not to our own world. The soul is very much alive, in conscious existence, c.f. Parable of Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19f), and the dying thief going to be with the Lord in Paradise (Luke 23:43).

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far (Philippians 1:21, 23). Paul longed for a closer and richer experience of Christ than ever he enjoyed here. This is hardly unconsciousness. The dead know who they are and who their companions are. Therefore when we sorrow, it is not in the same degree and in the same way as unbelievers.

Events of the Second Coming

God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him, i.e. at the Second Coming their souls will come from heaven and will be reunited with their bodies, now raised from the dead. Their raised and glorified bodies will be like Christ's resurrection body (Philippians 3:21). If God did not abandon Jesus to death, He will not abandon the Christian dead.

The Greek word *παρουσια* "coming" is an official term for a visit from someone of high rank, especially used of a king coming to a province. Hence it implies a personal, powerful visitation of Jesus the King, **The Lord Himself will come down.**

Furthermore, those who are alive when the Lord comes will not go in front of those who had fallen asleep. So the Christian dead are not disadvantaged in any way. God will treat the living and the dead alike. Here is the answer to the Thessalonians' worry – the Christian dead are not separated from Christ or from the Christian living. Unbreakable solidarity of all Christian people with Him and with one another. Death cannot harm them in any way. The dead in Christ are at present out of sight and reach, but not forever.

N.B. There is nothing here about the resurrection of unbelievers, just dead and living believers. They alone are blessed. **Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord** (Revelation 14:13).

So here is a picture of the Second Coming. **The Lord Himself**, a personal coming. **With a loud command** κελευσμα, c.f. charioteer to horses, ship's captain to sailors, general to soldiers. Clear authoritative command for the dead to raise, c.f. **Lazarus, come out** (John 11:43). **With the voice of the archangel**, possibly a reference to Michael (the only archangel named in the New Testament, Jude 1:9).

With the trumpet call of God. The sound of the trumpet is associated with divine authority, c.f. **We will all be changed.. at the last trumpet** (1 Corinthians 15:52). The dead and the living are going to be **caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air**. The Christian living and the Christian dead will be united to one another and to the Lord. "Clouds" indicates majesty and presence of God. The cloud was the symbol of God in the story of the exodus from Egypt. Also at Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:7), the ascension (Acts 1:9), and in His teaching about His coming again (Mark 13:26; 14:62). Why does Paul refer to the "air", when the air is the abode of evil spirits? Paul shows that now God is supreme over all evil (Ephesians 2:2).

So we will be with the Lord for ever. Everlasting fellowship with the Lord. This is the highpoint of the Lord's return and heaven. There will be reunion, and the answers to our questions, and the end of pain and sorrow etc. But above all, we will be with the Lord.

Three questions before we go on. What was Paul's authority, how did he know these things? **According to the Lord's own word** (1 Thessalonians 4:15). May be a saying of historical Jesus which was unrecorded (there must have been many). Or it may have been the ascended Lord speaking through one of His prophets. Or a direct revelation to Paul.

Was Paul expecting the Second Coming in his lifetime, so was he mistaken when he says "we who are still alive"? Like Jesus, Paul himself said the time of the second coming was unknown – even in this epistle (5:1,8). Therefore Paul is merely saying the Second Coming may come about during his lifetime, and if it did, we who are alive will not precede the believing dead. Twin emphasis in Paul's letters – watchful about the Lord's return because it could be in his lifetime, yet also considers he may die and later be raised.

Thirdly a question about our resurrection bodies, our new glorified bodies which will be like Christ's Resurrection body. Continuity, and yet differences from the present

body. Our natural body is the seed, the spiritual body is the plant. But how is this possible if our bodies decompose, or are blown up, or eaten by animals, or cremated? Various suggestions have been offered, e.g. that the germ or organising principle of our present body is preserved by God to be the seed of our new body; or that certain parts of the body, e.g. the teeth, are indestructible, and therefore provide material for our future body. There is a mystery here – just as there is mystery about how a seed falls into the ground and turns into a beautiful flower. God who created things from nothing and raised the body of the Lord Jesus will not find a problem creating new resurrection body from present natural body.

Conclusion

The answer to the fears and doubts of the Thessalonians concerning the Second Coming are put to rest. Christ has died, risen, ascended, sent the Holy Spirit on the Church, and the next saving event on God's calendar is the second coming – the next, and the last. Paul describes a glorious, majestic, thrilling picture of the personal, audible and visible coming. The Devil is not going to have the last word. God will not be defeated. Christ returns as conqueror. His coming will be sudden and swift. No time to consider conversion.

Paul does not answer all questions, but gives enough to give us solid grounds for comfort, assurance and confidence about the future. Perfect reunion of all God's people. A future of perfect unending blessedness. We can know Him and have fellowship with Him now, but then our happiness will be complete. We will see Him and we will be like Him. This has enthralled many hymn-writers:

“But sweeter far Thy face to see”

“Partaker of Thy grace, I long to see Thy face”

“When by His grace I shall look on His face”

We will share His perfect life. No longer will our hearts and minds wander from Him. We will never grieve Him again by our sin. No more luke-warmness in our devotion to Him. Doubt will never spoil our consecration to Him.

Heart and hope cannot imagine anything more or better than the glory which has yet to be revealed. The whole picture – the supremacy of God, His control over events, the consummation of His purposes. Here is comfort, strength and assurance.