

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (a)

Lesson #8

Introduction

We're about to begin a study of some verses in this epistle of 1st Thessalonians that are part of a group of verses which form a significant portion of the foundation for a particular point of view, or theological perspective, known as eschatology. Which is simply the study of how things all end up, particularly the sequence of events leading up to the culmination of God's creation plan. It's interesting to note that there are many who don't consider this subject to be of any interest or concern, and if so, that's their decision, but this is divine revelation to the believers as to their lives and eternal futures, and I for one find these things fascinating and enriching; and they impact the whole mindset and outlook towards everyday life, as well as the hope for the future.

This is one of those issues that generates considerable passion on both sides. Kind of like Arminianism and Calvinism. Like the sovereignty of God versus the free will of man. Until He returns and clears everything up Himself, there will always be controversies, and it's entirely possible that nobody has all the intricate details exactly right. But, this doesn't mean that we're not to use all possible resources at our disposal to fully know and understand, with all possible certainty, the things that the Scriptures were written to teach us.

So, if our goal is to rightly discern the truth, then we can enter into our study of these verses free of any encumbrances, and seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit in deriving a proper and reliable interpretation. When our study's concluded, some will agree with our conclusions and some will not, this is inevitable, but let every person be fully persuaded in their own mind by the preponderance of evidence of Scriptures, and not by any prior preconceptions. Now having said this, let's embark on this journey.

As we said earlier, these passages of Scripture are part of a group of passages that deal with the subject we're going to be discussing. There are also significant groups of passages in the books of Daniel, and in first Corinthians, as well as numerous other shorter references in other books. One of the things that I've discovered is that there are definite patterns that can be discerned.

For instance, how one interprets the passages in Daniel chapter 9, versus 24 through 27 have a profound effect on how they interpret the verses in first Corinthians chapter 15, versus 51 through 54, and in first Thessalonians chapter 4, versus 15 through 17. One's initial concept of a particular idea, form a foundation for how they interpret all the subsequent information related to that idea. One teacher that I listen to occasionally has said that one's entire eschatological viewpoint will usually be formed by their interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27. I can't say that I necessarily disagree with this assessment. So we'll make sure that we take a good look at these verses also in the course of this study.

However, before we get to these matters concerning the Lord's descent from heaven with a shout, and with the archangels voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ rising first, and we who are still alive being caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air so we will always be with the Lord. Before we get to these verses, which will undoubtedly be the main theme of this study, we must get there the same way Paul gets there, or we'll distort the context and introduce the risk of error in our interpretation. So, let's work our way through this group of passages just as Paul taught it, leaving nothing out, so that our interpretations will be consistent with his context.

Paul starts this group of passages with this statement:

13 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.

1 Thess 4:13 (HCSB)

This group of passages begins with Paul's concern for the matter of grief. He says he doesn't want the believers to grieve like those who have no hope of resurrection. Like the unbelievers who think that everything ends with this life, and the death of the physical body. Like those who are ignorant of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and consequently, have no basis for any hope of life beyond the here and now. So when someone they love passes away, they have only intense, eternal, and hopeless grief. There's no basis for comfort or consolation to those who are ignorant of Jesus Christ and His promise of resurrection and eternal life. They put their departed loved ones into graves and keep coming back to that grave over and over, year after year, and bringing pretty flowers and other mementoes, as if their loved one was somehow still there in the ground. Their grief is never ending and their sorrow is inconsolable.

Paul isn't telling the believers that they aren't supposed to be saddened and grieve over the passing of their loved ones; he's telling them that they aren't to grieve hopelessly and inconsolably like those who have no hope of resurrection and eternal life. Grieve, yes, weep yes, but not in hopelessness, but rather in hope of the promised resurrection of all those who believe and love the Lord Jesus Christ; who also himself died, and was put into a tomb, but then demonstrated His power to rise again to eternal life, as he had promised beforehand that He both could do, and would do.

The grief of the believer is still present and painful, but it's greatly mitigated by the knowledge that the Lord has promised resurrection and eternal life to all who are truly His. While we can't see it immediately with our eyes, and we can't yet touch it with our hands, nevertheless we embrace these promises of resurrection and eternal life by a faith that cannot fail, because it is kept by the power of God. (1Pet 1:5)

All that Paul says in the immediate verses after this is mostly intended to be a further explanation of some of the details of this resurrection, and the comfort that it provides to those who believe the word of the Lord, whether they can see it with their eyes or whether they can't. Faith isn't about believing something that we can see and touch and verify. Faith is about believing the testimony of someone whom we trust; that He both can, and will, do everything that He's promised, whenever He's good and ready to do so. This kind of faith puts reasonable boundaries on our grief and sorrow, and all the unavoidable tragedies of life, which are all ordained by God to demonstrate His glory, and prepare us for His kingdom.

But, at the same time, biblical faith isn't based on blind ignorance either, but rather on informed cognitive truth. And this is what Paul is providing those believers. He's providing divine revelation about the resurrection of both those who have already died, and those who may still be alive at His return, because, he doesn't want them to be ignorant of the particulars involved. So, he goes on to provide some clarity as to how, and in what order, this all takes place, so that they won't be easily deceived and disheartened by the false teachings that were cropping up. The nature of that false teaching that was beginning to surface is described in the second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians:

1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him: we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be easily upset in mind or troubled, either by a spirit or by a message or by a letter as if from us, alleging that the Day of the Lord has come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. For [that day] will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction. 2 Thess 2:1-3 (HCSB)

From these two epistles that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians we can trace the progress of the misunderstandings that the Thessalonians had step-by-step. Paul had told the Thessalonians while he was there with them about the resurrection, and about the tribulation, and about the believers being caught away before this happened. But he wasn't able to stay there very long and when he left it didn't take long before they started to have questions.

The Thessalonians understood the promise of resurrection to the believers, but they weren't entirely sure if this resurrection extended to those who passed away before he returned, so they begin to ask questions. And these questions quickly gave way to speculations and opinions. This first epistle Paul wrote was to assure them that the resurrection was both for the living and the deceased. And, as we're going to see from our study of second Thessalonians, the initial questions gave way to several speculations. The first was that the Day of the Lord's tribulation had already begun, and the Thessalonians were about to experience the full wrath of God because they hadn't been taken away.

Now you can see that one's whole outlook on life would be seriously affected if they thought that they, or their loved ones in Christ, had missed the resurrection, and the next seven years of their lives were going to be the most horrible time the earth would ever know. We can see immediately what this would do to the goals and the outlook of the believers. This would bring anything but comfort. It would bring sadness, despair, and disillusionment to the believers. And such was the situation confronting the church, as Paul wrote this first epistle.

Therefore, let's not lose sight of the reason that we're being given these divine particulars of the resurrection and the disposition of the believers, which is - to comfort our hearts, affirm our faith, and prevent us from being ignorant as to what's happening to our loved ones who have died in Christ; and what's our own expectations as we get older every day.

From these next few verses from Paul's epistle we're going to be given some amazing revelations that we classify as eschatology, but again let's clarify that the stated purpose of that eschatology that's being revealed, is to dispel ignorance, mitigate grief, and comfort us with divine truth concerning resurrection and eternal life, in which we may confidently anchor our faith. And this is further affirmed by the next verse:

Verse 14:

14 Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.

1 Thess 4:14 (HCSB)

What a magnificent job Paul does in this simple verse of literally defining what it is to be a Christian. Christians are those who believe that Jesus died, literally and bodily, and rose again, literally and bodily, and ascended into heaven forever to be with his Father. This is foundational Christian doctrine. If someone asks "what is a Christian" a very good answer would be "one who believes that Jesus is the divine son of God who died and rose again." Oh there's certainly more to it than that, but there certainly isn't any less. Believing that Jesus died and rose again is the foundation of His promise of resurrection and eternal life to all those who believe in Him.

There is no such thing as a Christian who does not believe that Jesus lived in the flesh, was crucified on the cross and died, and then three days later rose again to eternal life. No form of Christianity can exist that denies this fact. Remove this truth and every promise fails, and His credibility collapses. The Apostle John wrote in his 1st epistle:

1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

3 But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now. (The spirit, not the antichrist himself)

1 John 4:1-3 (HCSB)

Apart from resurrection and eternal life, there would be no point in redemption. There would have been no point in the crucifixion of Christ unless there is some kind of life after we pass from this tangible body. Unless there is resurrection and eternal life, redemption is irrelevant. Unless there is resurrection and eternal life, sin is irrelevant, righteousness is irrelevant, obedience to God is irrelevant, and everything is irrelevant, unless there is a final outcome of life and creation that extends into eternity. If human beings simply live, and then die, and pass into oblivion forever, then there's no point to anything except the enjoyment one can get in this life.

I think we all understand and agree, both Christians and atheists alike, that if there is no afterlife, then there is no point to life, and the old adage "eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," would be the appropriate slogan. Therefore, for Christians to ever expect righteous and godly behaviors from atheists is absolutely irrational. What would be the point? The answer is obvious, there isn't any. And this is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is one who believes that there is an afterlife, and accountability to God in that afterlife, and we base this belief on the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who told us this, and then demonstrated it himself by being publically put to death, and then rising again and displaying himself to over 500 people.

That is what this verse is saying, that we Christians believe this as foundational doctrine, and because we do believe this, we have faith that in the same way that Jesus died and rose again, he will bring back with him, when he returns, all of those who have died “through Him” prior to his return. Of all that the Father gave him He will lose not one, (Jn 6:39) whether they are alive or whether they have passed away. This is what we believe, and this is an essential part of what makes us distinctively Christian. Although there is certainly more to being a Christian than this, nevertheless, one cannot be a Christian without this. Any, and all, claims to Christianity that question this doctrine are counterfeit claims.

Now let’s pay careful attention, because there’s an important part of this verse I don’t want us to miss, and that’s the portion that says, that in the same way that Jesus died and resurrected, God has given Him the authority to likewise raise up all those who are His. And this is the meaning of the term “in the same way.” This is saying that if Jesus could raise himself, then he can certainly raise us also. It says he has the power and authority to do so. Do you remember His words recorded in John’s gospel? He said:

17 "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it [up] again. 18 "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father." John 10:17-18 (NASB)

But let’s be careful to make a vital distinction regarding this verse. This verse says that Jesus will bring back with Him those who have fallen asleep, that is passed away, died, “through” Jesus. Note this verse doesn’t say he’ll bring back everybody who’s ever died; it says those who died “through,” some translations say “in,” Jesus. This passage is making a very clear distinction as to “who” Jesus Christ brings back with him at His return. It is only, and exclusively, those who have died “through” Him.

That means, those who have passed from this life into the next life through the provision of redemption afforded by the substitutionary death of Christ Jesus. Which provision is attained exclusively through the gift of saving faith bestowed by the Father upon whomever He wills. None of these will ever be lost, because their names were recorded by God in His Book of Life before creation ever took place. (Eph 1:4-5; 1Pet 1:2; Rev 13:8, 17:8)

This verse, verse 14, is speaking of the actual physical and visible bodily return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this planet earth. This is described in detail in the book of Revelation, chapter 19, and it follows a seven year period of the wrath of God being poured out on a rebellious mankind. (Rev 6-18) When the Lord returns He will lead a procession consisting of myriads of angels, and, every human being that his Father appointed to Him as His church and his bride from before creation. He will not lose a single one, but will lead them all back to earth to witness his really true triumphal entry. It is at this triumphal entry that He takes his place as King of kings and Lord of lords. It is at this triumphal entry that every knee of the living inhabitants of earth bows to Him, and every tongue confesses that He truly is the Lord.

This is that biblical event known as the second coming, or the return of Christ. The Lord visibly descends from heaven down to earth for all to see. His feet touch ground on the Mount of Olives, at which point He walks across the Kidron valley and enters into the temple through the eastern gate, but we’ll get to all that later. I’m saying this to make the distinction between His second coming, being spoken of here in verse 14, and an entirely different event that’s going to be explained to us in the next few verses. Not recognizing the distinction between the two is the root cause of much controversy, as was the first coming of Christ to the Jews of that day.

It’s a very common practice to simply lump all of the various elements and aspects of future prophetic events into a single term like “the second coming” and fail to make the distinctions of time and sequence that’s involved in those various elements. And this is precisely what happened to the Jews concerning all the things that their Prophets had told them. Rather than examining all of the things carefully, and making vital distinctions, they simply lumped it all into one event that they called the coming of their Messiah, and this caused them catastrophic harm.

Playing fast and loose with the Scriptures is dangerous, as history has proven. So, let us avoid this mistake, and examine everything very carefully, taking note of every specific detail, so that we make those vital distinctions, and recognize the full sequence of events that accompany our eventual resurrection to be eternally with the Lord.

Verse 15: (A Revelation From The Lord)

15 For we say this to you by a revelation from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. 1 Thess 4:15 (HCSB)

Now we come to a point in Paul's epistle where he considers it important to preface his next few statements with an initial qualifying declaration. He says "we say this to you by a revelation from the Lord" before he continues with his next couple of statements.

Now I think it's safe to say that both Paul, and all those who read his epistles know, that Paul was speaking inspired holy Scriptures in all that he wrote to them. But even so, there are times when Paul wants to make it very clear that he's not speculating, or theorizing, but has in fact been given direct revelation from the Lord himself. And this is one of those occasions. He wants to make it absolutely clear that what he's about to say isn't open to debate, because he didn't make it up himself. What he's about to say is very significant revelation, afforded to Paul through the Holy Spirit, to be declared to the churches for their comfort, education, and edification.

Therefore, with this thought in mind, let's very carefully read and examine, thoughtfully and meticulously, every word and every implication that Paul is about to reveal in the next few things that he writes. He continues with this statement "we who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep," that is, those who have died. In other words, those who have died before Christ's return to earth will have missed absolutely nothing, and lost absolutely nothing.

Now, because this was written in the Greek language, and translated into our language, there are often debates as to the proper interpretation of various words in the sentence. Some like to say that it's better translated as those who are alive will not "precede" those who have fallen asleep. If we wished to do so, we could spend a good deal of time considering this debate, but before we do that the first question should be, does it affect the meaning of Paul's statement? In this particular case I would say it does not, because the point that Paul is making with this particular statement is that there is no eternal advantage, of any kind, in living until the Lord's return as opposed to passing away. In fact, if anything, he suggests exactly the opposite.

If we're careful to keep in mind that Paul's point is to comfort the believers concerning their deceased loved ones, and their participation in the resurrection, then we get the point of Paul's statement don't we? Which is – that they will not miss out on the resurrection, and they have lost nothing concerning the eternal promises of God. Which goes back to the previous statement in verse 13 where he had just told them not to grieve over their deceased loved ones in the same hopeless manner as those who do not know the Lord Jesus, and His promise of resurrection and eternal life.

As important as this statement was to that first generation of Christians, who were alive during the time of Christ's incarnation, how much more significant it is to those of us now, nearly 2000 years later. Because we cling to that very same hope as all of our dear brothers and sisters, who have preceded us for all those years. Whether it's in our lifetime, or our children's lifetime, or millennia away, our hope is all the same, and nothing will ever be lost in the passing of time. Concerning this thought, and the passing of time, and the death of our loved ones, and eventually even ourselves, the Lord had this to say:

14 "I am the good shepherd. I know My own sheep, and they know Me, 15 as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father. I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 But I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:14-16 (HCSB)

If we are among those who have heard His voice and responded, among those who are following Him, then this verse is speaking directly about us. We are the other sheep that were not of that original fold that was alive during Christ's time. Neither are we necessarily ethnic Jews, but rather a vast and diverse mixture of every nation, and tribe, and tongue, and people. (Rev 5:9; 14:6) But he said "**I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then, there will be one flock, with one shepherd.**"

In this verse we just read out of John chapter 10, the Lord made two emphatic statements. One he said “I must” and the other He said “they will.” How can he make these statements so emphatically concerning things that were thousands of years in the future? Was it just some kind of wishful thinking, or perhaps divine precognition? No not at all. He used this form of speech because he was thoroughly aware of the absolute sovereignty of his God and Father, who has predestined the outcome of everything whatsoever before He ever set creation into motion. All those who truly know God have no difficulty whatsoever with these doctrines, but rather find great comfort in them.

Now we’re about to move into the portion of our study that presents us with some very specific details and sequence of events. What these verses are about to tell us isn’t difficult to understand. The wording is clear enough, and the thoughts that they’re conveying aren’t mysterious or ambiguous. But, where we run into difficulty is in putting them into their proper place within the bigger picture. Like pieces of a puzzle, when you put them in the right place they’re a perfect fit, but if you try to put them where they don’t belong you just can’t get them to fit. And furthermore, by themselves alone they’re mostly just a mystery, and seem to create more questions than answers.

And it’s for this reason that we have to comprehend the bigger picture, the whole puzzle, to be able to properly fit these next verses into their proper place in the eschatological events of the prophetic scriptures. Many are those who try to force these next few verses into places that they don’t belong, or, even worse, try to make some kind of sense out of them all by themselves, without placing them into their proper position in the big picture. And this has led to many diverse interpretations which persist even to this day. *(Give some examples)*

Once we get into these verses were going to find out that it’s the “when” and the “where” and the “why” that makes these verses have meaning. We’ll understand what the verses say easily enough, but unless we understand when this event happens, and where it happens, and finally why does it happen? Unless we understand these, it will simply be information without any context, it will simply be puzzle pieces without the puzzle, and we won’t derive the intended benefit from it. So let’s take our time and slowly and carefully go through these next two verses.

Verses 16-17 (The Announcement and the Sequence)

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are still alive 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. 1 Thess 4:16-17 (HCSB)

Unpacking and examining all of the elements of these verses is going to be both challenging and exciting. To do it right we have to lay the foundation, we have to see the big picture if we want to know where these specific pieces fit within it. Doing this is going to take some time and work, but it will surely be worth it.

To start that now however would exceed our available time. So we’ll start this next week. We’ll start a slow and careful pilgrimage, and make every effort to assure that we don’t miss any details, or go off on any tangents, but rather we carefully follow the accurate scriptural path to our destination. See you next week.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church, Miami
Robert W. Andrews, Pastor
07/15/09