

# 1<sup>st</sup> THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

## 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (b)

### Lesson #9

#### Introduction

As you know, we're involved in a study of first Thessalonians chapter 4. Last week we discussed verses 13-15, and from these we concluded that the main point Paul was emphasizing was the issue of resurrection. Some concerns had arisen in the church there about what would happen to various loved ones who had passed away before the promised catching away to be with Jesus Christ. Would they miss out on this event? Paul assures them that they certainly will not miss out on any of the promises of God, or the benefits of reconciliation, whether they are alive, or whether they have passed away. And with this information he comforts their hearts, mitigates their grief, and affirms their faith.

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 itself 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 right. And furthermore, by themselves alone, apart from the bigger picture, they mostly just seem to promote endless speculations.

And it's for this reason that we have to comprehend the bigger picture, to be able to accurately 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 sense of them all by themselves, without placing them into their proper position in the big picture. And this has led to the many and diverse, and sometimes even bizarre interpretations that have emerged over the years, and are even still popular today.

Once we get into these verses we're 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 it happens; unless we understand these, it will simply be information without 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)

Verse 16 says that the Lord himself will descend from heaven. Descend from heaven to where, to the earth? That's what we would naturally assume isn't it? But the verse goes on to tell us something otherwise. It says that we will be caught up into the clouds to meet Him in the air. So, if we're caught up into the clouds to meet him in the air, then what that's telling us is that He hasn't descended down to the earth in this verse that we're studying. He has descended from his position in heaven clearly enough, but at this point in time He has not literally returned to the earth to establish his rule. According to this verse, He has descended from heaven to come and get the remaining living members of his church and take them to be with Himself forevermore, as he said He would in John 14:1-3.

In Revelation, chapters 1-3, John has been presented with a vision of the churches throughout the church age. Then, in chapter 4, he immediately hears a voice from heaven that he describes as sounding like a trumpet, and that voice shouts to him to "come up here" off the earth and into the heavens to be where the Lord Jesus is. While this vision of John goes on to show what's about to happen on the earth for the next seven years, nevertheless we pretribulationists believe this is that same event that's being described by Paul in these verses in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, except that John's vision is directed toward the earthly perspective of wrath, and Paul's is from the heavenly perspective of salvation.

Now a couple of questions immediately comes to our mind. Like, why did He do this, and where is He taking them? The verse says that all of those He comes for, both the living and dead, will always be with him from this point on. With him where, and doing what? These are like the mysterious puzzle pieces that I mentioned earlier. It's impossible to know what to do with these little pieces unless we see the big picture that they fit into. So, to answer these questions we must display the larger picture, so let's start doing that right now. We'll start in Daniel, chapter nine:

#### Seventy Weeks and the Messiah

*24 "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. 25 "So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. 26 "Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. 27 "And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."* Dan 9:24-27

We've just read a prophetic passage recorded by the prophet Daniel while he was among the captives of the Babylonians. Both the northern and southern portions of Israel had been overthrown and taken captive, and the temple had been ransacked and destroyed. Everything they had done, and everything they had built, since the day the Lord brought them out of Egypt was now completely gone. And they were either dead or captives in a foreign land.

It was from this background that the Lord gave the prophet Daniel the prophetic passages that we just read. I'm not going to insult you by saying that they're simple, obvious, and easy to understand. Like a great deal of the Scriptures one must search them and examined them diligently, if they desire to rightly understand the truth that they contain. And this is what many have done with these passages we've just read. One could spend a career in this section if they chose to do so. But that's not our intention. Therefore, if you'll permit me, I'll summarize these verses based on the best interpretations and understandings of many theologians and scholars with whom I agree.

A very important distinction is necessary here. And that is, that this is a prophecy given to the Jews regarding themselves and their holy city, Jerusalem. The 70 weeks represent 70 time periods. By this it means a week of years. One week would be seven years, two weeks would be 14 years, and so on. In these 70 time periods the Lord is going to do the following:

Finish transgressions, make an end of sin, make atonement for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, seal up, that is complete, visions and prophecies, and finally, anoint the most holy Place. In other words, He's going to wrap up this whole present creation age, and bring in a whole new one, and He's going to do this in these 70 distinct periods of time.

To finish transgressions means to allow the intended transgressions that God has predetermined to do the job they were intended to do. Sin and transgressions entered the creation because God had a purpose for them to serve. They will serve that purpose for which they were intended. Then they will be put to an end. Not one more sin will be permitted than God has predetermined to serve His purposes. Within that time He will provide an atonement for those sins through His Son Jesus, and He will fulfill all prophecies recorded in the scriptures and anoint the final holy place for His kingdom.

For the sake of brevity lets understand that of these 70 weeks that have been decreed, 69 of them have already taken place. We know this because it says at the end of those 69 weeks that the Messiah was cut. In other words Messiah came and was crucified. So, there yet remains one more time period of the 70 that were decreed.

Think of it like this. Think of a stopwatch that began with 70 minutes on it. 69 of those 70 minutes have already counted down, but then the stop button was pushed on the watch and it stopped counting. Earthly time didn't stop moving, only the watch stopped counting. Eventually the start button will be pushed again, and the last minute will continue to count off. But, the Messiah's death has stopped that watch temporarily. And it is in this temporary period of time that the entity called the church was born, will grow to maturity, and finally be taken up to be with the Lord.

It is in this time period that the promise that God gave to Abraham regarding all of the Gentiles eventually being blessed comes to fruition. Through Jesus, a direct descendent from Abraham, comes the blessing of the Gentiles. And that blessing is extended to the gentiles because of the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews. (Rom 9,10,11) From before Abraham was ever called, God had chosen a mate, a bride for his Son Jesus. And it is in this time period, between the 69<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel's prophecy, that this whole process transpires. (Like a temporal parenthesis)

It had a definite beginning, and it has a definite ending. It began with the crucifixion of Jesus, and it ends when the full number of the predestined elect have come in. Paul speaks of this with clarity and detail, in the passages in Romans chapter 11, concerning the situation between the Jews and the Gentiles:

*25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;***

Romans 11:25 (NASB)

So, what we see is that this interruption in the 70 week clock was predestined by God, and set aside to be that prophesied time when He extends his blessing to the Gentiles, and builds the church to be the bride of Christ. But it also has an end as well. So when is that end? What causes the clock to start ticking again for that last prophesied week? Well, for one thing, Paul says, in the verse we just read, that it comes when a final number of predetermined Gentiles has come in. Come in where? Come into the body of Christ through God's gracious gift of repentance and saving faith. It will not end one minute sooner, as the Apostle Peter tells us in his epistle:

*8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for **any** to perish but for **all** to come to repentance.*

2 Peter 3:8-9 (NASB)

If you don't understand that this verse is speaking **exclusively** to the elect of God, then you will completely miss the whole point, and come up with a totally erroneous conclusion that God wants something that He never gets. If that were the case we would have a problem with His omnipotence wouldn't we? What this verse, and the verse in Romans 11:25 are saying is, that there is a definite and specific number of predetermined elect, who must come to salvation before the end of the gentile period is declared, and this is what delays the Lord's promise of return for His chosen. He will not cut the time short, and thereby forfeit the predestined elect who have not as yet had their full time for salvation. This is what He is not willing to do. The Lord Jesus declared that of all the Father had given Him, from eternity past, that He would not lose a single one. Therefore, the allotted time cannot be cut short or some would be lost.

So now, to sum this up. Of the 70 weeks prophesied by Daniel to wrap up the current creation age, 69 of them have already passed. Then the Messiah was crucified, which is what it means by cut off, which brought the 70 week clock to a temporary halt, and commenced the birth of the church at Pentecost, the bride of Christ. This period of time also has a definite predetermined ending, which is signified by the coming to salvation of the full number of the predestined elect. (Rom 11:25) At which time this group will be caught up into the presence of the Lord Jesus, (1 Cor 15:51-52; 1Ths 4:16-17) and the 70 week clock will immediately begin to start counting down again for that final time period that remains.

If you're hearing this for the first time, you're probably asking yourself, how in the world does this guy come up with all of this from just these verses? The answer to that question is that we don't get all of this from just these verses alone. And this is exactly what we spoke about before, when we were saying that while the words of these verses are clear enough to understand, they are nonetheless, by themselves alone, just like random pieces of a very big puzzle.

Therefore, for any teacher to teach these verses, it becomes absolutely essential to lay the backdrop, which is the big picture puzzle, otherwise these pieces won't achieve their fullest result. And worse than that, they will cause an endless stream of baseless speculations and opinions, as people interject their own personal perspectives.

Forming the background is going to add much more time and effort to teaching these verses. But we've already decided that it's impossible to meaningfully teach these verses without that background. So, it would appear that we have no choice, if our goal is to accurately deduce the truth. Now, we've established a good portion of the background from Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks, but we still need to have a clear understanding of the "what" and the "why" and the "where" before we can put it all together into a sensible, logical, and understandable picture.

So, let's start with the "what" portion. Just what is it that's happening here in this verse? Verse 16 says *"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."* This is speaking specifically about the resurrection, or transformation if we're still alive, of our bodies. Those who have formerly deceased, and whose spirits are with the Lord in his presence, will receive their new tangible, glorified, and eternal bodies. According to the Scriptures this happens first. Then, the Lord makes his return with a shout, and a trumpet blast, and catches all of those who are still alive up into the clouds to be with him, and likely with the previous deceased, to be with him forevermore.

Please take notice that this verse says that the Lord descends from heaven, it does not say that he returns to earth. Now you might feel like we're splitting hairs here, but the wording is such that there is a clear distinction as to where He returns to. And the living are caught up into the clouds to meet Him in the air. If he were coming to the earth this would seem to be senseless wouldn't it? But that's not enough to rule it out. To rule it out one must understand "why" He doesn't come all the way to the earth at this particular occasion, and we'll get to that in just a minute. But first let's recap just exactly what's going on here. The verse says that all those believers who have already died, and are with the Lord in spirit, are granted tangible resurrection bodies, and those who haven't yet died are caught up off the surface of the earth into the clouds to be with the Lord forever. And their bodies are transformed in the twinkling of an eye into imperishable and eternal bodies like those who were deceased received.

Now just to be clear, the intent of this verse is not to insinuate that the clouds are where the believers will live forever more. The term "into the clouds" is used to make the specific distinction that this is not something that happens on the earth, but rather up beyond the clouds and out of view. It's this language that's used to clearly separate this event from the actual second coming of Christ to the earth with His saints. At this coming He's coming **for** his saints, at His next coming He will be coming **with** His saints, and He will come all the way to the earth. Okay, now we have a picture of what's happening, but to fit this into the big picture we have to know why.

So for that, let's start at first Corinthians Chapter 15: (The Mystery of Resurrection)

*50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, 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 imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Cor 15:50-57 (NASB)

From these companion verses we get an immediate answer to part of the "why." And that is – because our corrupted flesh and blood bodies cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and perishable materials cannot inherit the imperishable promises of God. You cannot put imperishable materials into a perishable container. And so, for this reason there must be a resurrection into an imperishable and undefiled new body, suitably fashioned for eternity and glory. And this is precisely what is being described in these two parallel passages of scriptures. They are describing the physical and tangible resurrection of the believers of Jesus Christ into their new glorified bodies. Before anything else heavenly and eternal can transpire with them, this change of physical container is a must. And it's for New Covenant believers only.

Okay, this makes sense, but we still don't know "why" this has to be a separate event from the actual second coming. Why doesn't this simply happen right then at His second coming, as many seem to think? Again, unless we see the entire picture, then we won't know where to put the specific pieces, or even why there are specific pieces. The answer to this question is that there is a specific event that has been designated by God for this body of believers, called the bride of Christ, which hasn't yet taken place. So what is that event, and when does it take place? Again, we have to go to the Scriptures for the answer:

*10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*

1 Cor 3:10-15 (NASB)

*10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

2 Cor 5:10 (NASB)

The event that's being described here is not to be confused with that event in Revelation regarding the Great White Throne judgment. This event being described here, in first and second Corinthians, is an awards ceremony. Only the elect and chosen and redeemed are present, so, it has absolutely nothing to do with judgment for punishment. This is a judgement for rewards. This is a very intimate time between the Lord Jesus himself and His eternal bride.

This time is symbolized in the Jewish tradition of marriage. The Father selected the mate and negotiated the deal. But before the actual ceremony took place there was an undesignated time period where the future groom returned to his father's house and made the living quarters ready for his mate. (Jn 14:1-3) And the bride began to be taught all of the necessary skills to make herself ready to manage a household. Then when the father of the groom felt the time was right he would tell his son to go get his bride, and the groom would dash off to snatch up his mate and bring her back to his home. When he did so he would take her into his chambers and consummate the marriage. The door would be locked and guarded for the entire seven days while the bride and groom came to know each other intimately and thoroughly. Then at the end of those seven days the groom would bring his bride out of those chambers, remove the veil from her face, and present her to the waiting family and the rest of the world as his loving bride.

This is the event that is happening immediately after the catching up of the believers to be with the Lord. It is that time period of intimate relationship. It is at that time when the bride is thoroughly examined and evaluated, as we just read in these verses in first and second Corinthians, and appropriately rewarded for her faithfulness. We're not told what the rewards might be, but we have been told previously in scriptures that *"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, the things that God has prepared for those who love him."* (1Co 2:9) It would appear that it's His planned intention to surprise us beyond our human comprehension.

But this is only one-third of what's happening during this seven year time period. While the redeemed of Christ are with the Lord in heaven, being evaluated and rewarded, the unbelieving masses of gentiles are experiencing the wrath of God described in Revelation, chapters 6 through 18, and the final week of Daniel's prophecy to the Jews, which is also called the time of Jacob's trouble, is purging and preparing them for the second coming of their long awaited Messiah.

In the heavens, the bride is being made ready, on the earth disobedient humanity is suffering the wrath of God, and when the seven year period is complete, the bride will have become ready and the Lord Jesus will return with her and display her to the inhabitants of the earth, and take His place on this earth, for one thousand years, as King of kings and Lord of lords, with His bride as His coheirs and ruling representatives. (Rev 19)

This fulfills all of the earthly tenets of the Abrahamic covenant made to the Jews concerning their land and their kingdom. After this millennial period comes the new heaven and the new earth, because the former ones will pass away. Revelation chapter 21. Thus we have the “what”, the “where”, and the “why” of these prophetic verses. This is good, sound, scripture based eschatology. It’s logical and sensible. It isn’t based on opinions, human logic, or personal feelings, but entirely on the literal interpretations of the scripture verses we’ve read and presented. It provides the saints with understandable doctrine regarding the resurrection of the chosen believers, and to the final disposition of those who have died and those who might still be alive when the catching away takes place.

It affirms without a doubt that the resurrection is physical and tangible, not some mystical experience, and provides certain indicators to use as guides so that the saints cannot be easily misled. The closing verse that we haven’t yet discussed sums up the purpose of the preceding teachings. It says **“therefore, comfort one another with these words.”**

Now I confess that it would be enjoyable to go deeper into this subject. For instance, what’s happening to the subsequent believers on the earth after the snatching away, who are caught in the tribulation period? And what becomes of these when the Lord returns? What about the ones who were killed during this period?

Is there any way to tell when this is all going to happen? Are there any signs or indicators that let us know that it’s imminent? Could it possibly happen without our even knowing it? Or, could it even have already happened?

Chapter 5 answers some of these questions, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians answers some more. So, as tempting as it is to go into all of this right now, it simply doesn’t have anything to do with Paul’s immediate teaching in this specific group of passages. So I’m going to try to resist the temptation to expand this teaching beyond its intended scope, and stay within the boundaries of Paul’s intention for the verses that we’re studying. And we’ll save these other questions for the appropriate sections of scripture that deal with them, when we get there.

But, as verse 18 says, the purpose of the preceding teaching was to comfort the believers concerning the reliability of the earlier teachings given to them regarding their being resurrected unto eternal life, and being in the tangible, physical presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, whether one is still alive at His return or has passed away, makes absolutely no difference whatsoever.

### **Conclusion:**

What we’ve just been through is a systematic study of the events, and their sequence, that present the clear distinctions between the catching away of the believers into the air to be with the Lord, and His bodily return to earth with those believers seven years later. We’ve seen why it’s essential that the catching up of the believers to be with the Lord, is a separate event from the bodily return of the Lord. And we’ve seen that there are parallel events happening during that final 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel’s prophecy. Now admittedly we haven’t covered every single aspect. There is a great deal that we haven’t investigated regarding what’s happening to national Israel, which is the Jews, during this last seven years. They’re being tested and purified until they are ready to accept the Lord Jesus as their prophesied Messiah, and are ready to proclaim “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Mat 23:39; Luk 13:35)

Admittedly there’s still plenty of things regarding the eschatological events that we haven’t thoroughly covered, but what we have covered is the intent of Paul’s teaching in these specific verses that we’re studying here in first Thessalonians. Now I acknowledge that there’s considerable controversy, and differences of opinion, regarding the precise meanings and time sequences of the things we’ve just discussed, and that’s mostly attributable to an inconsistent view of the big picture. But, what cannot be said is that this teaching isn’t biblical, as I’ve heard some suggest. I recently saw a television documentary declaring that this teaching wasn’t found in the Bible, but was contrived for the first time by a mentally disturbed young girl and expanded by John Nelson Darby.

Now this is exactly the same nonsense as declaring that the doctrine of justification by faith alone isn't taught in the Bible, but was contrived by a 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic monk named Martin Luther. Unfortunately, passions, often based on little more than personal opinions rather than a broad scale understanding of the overall picture, run so heavy on this issue that many are willing to make ill-considered emotional accusations that are absolutely not true. And what this does, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is upset the faith of many young believers, as well as create considerable discord within the body of Christ.

Whether one agrees with the interpretations presented in this teaching or not, it is untruthful to declare that the things that we've presented here are not found in the Bible. To our beloved brothers who hold a different interpretation we say God bless you, but on our part, we've presented what we believe to be sound biblical exegesis, we've declared what we believe, and we've meticulously demonstrated, through a literal interpretation of the scriptures, why we believe it, and unless we're persuaded otherwise by those same scriptures, and sound reason, we must continue to teach what we believe, as you must also.

It is my sincerest hope that this teaching, so far, has accomplished the purpose for which it was intended. Which is to firmly establish the reliability and authenticity of a tangible, physical, bodily resurrection of every believer, both alive or deceased, who has ever received the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ. Since we believe that He died and rose again, we therefore believe that He can, and He will, also raise us up to be with Him where He is forevermore. To Him alone be the glory forever.

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