

Grieving with Hope – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what happens after you die? I have, I think most of us have. Some people think they are going to be reunited with their family but that is only a good thought if you have got a good family. Others believe you become one with the universe or you return to some kind of life force. There are those who believe in reincarnation and so after you die, you become someone else. And then there are those who don't believe that you go anywhere. When you die, that is the end of it and your body just decays. But what about the Christian, the follower of Jesus? What does the Bible say about what happens after you die? 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is one of those Bible passages that people turn to to answer that question. The problem is that I do not think that Paul was trying to answer that question. I think that the Thessalonians were asking a different question. You see, I think they were facing a crisis of faith, not about what happens after death, but about whether they were going to be in God's Kingdom if they died before Jesus' second coming.

No Hope

When Paul went on his missionary journeys, we know that he told people the Gospel or the Good News about Jesus. Of course, that involved telling people about how they could be saved from sin, death and judgement but he also spoke about Jesus being the King of God's Kingdom. Part of the Gospel message was that the King of God's Kingdom had come in Jesus and that Jesus would return as King to take his people to be with him.

One of the great hopes of Christianity is that we will be able to spend eternity with God, in his eternal Kingdom, and Jesus is the King who brings us into that Kingdom. And so, as Christians we wait anxiously for Jesus' return. "Come, Lord Jesus, come!" we pray, and we live as if Jesus will return at any moment.

As I read this passage, it makes me think that someone, or maybe many people, in the Thessalonian church who were longing for Jesus' return had died. And so, the question of this passage is not so much about what happens after you die, it is about what happens if you die before Jesus returns. You can imagine, that if you believed that the only way to be in God's Kingdom was for Jesus to come and physically take you with him to heaven before you died, then you will have missed out if you die before Jesus returns. Their loved ones had died and they thought that there was no hope of eternal life for them. It was all over, they had missed out. And what if Jesus did not return before those people died? Well, they would miss out too. They had longed for Jesus' return! They had waited for him! But Jesus had not come and so what hope was left for those who had died? No wonder they grieved like people who had no hope.

Spiritually With Christ

So, Paul took them back to the most important part of the gospel...

1 Thessalonians 4:14a For we believe that Jesus died and rose again

There is nothing more central to Christian belief than the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, Jesus died, but Jesus rose again! He defeated death and so death is not the end for the follower of Jesus. Paul goes on in the second half of verse 14...

1 Thessalonians 4:14b *and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Now, Paul is not silly. He is not saying that dead people are just sleeping, he knows that they really are dead. But sleeping people wake up. They get up out of bed. Christians believe that death is not the end. Just as Jesus rose up from the grave, so too will we rise up from the grave. This was important for the Thessalonians to hear, for their loved ones had not missed out on Jesus' return just because they were dead, in fact the dead had an advantage over the living. Notice that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. That means that they are already with Jesus in some spiritual sense. My dad was a follower of Jesus, and he longed for Jesus' return as King of God's Kingdom, but dad has not missed out because he is dead. His body maybe nothing more than ash but right now he is spiritually alive with Jesus. Yes, I grieve for my dad, but it is not grief without hope. It makes me think of the criminal on the cross beside Jesus.

Luke 23:42-43 *Then he [the criminal] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

So, it is not that the dead have missed out, they are already with Jesus in spirit, but they are still waiting for the Resurrection Day, the day when Jesus will return and raise our resurrection bodies from grave. Paul continues in verses 15-16...

No Missing It

1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 *According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

We have already heard that believers who have died have the advantage over believers who are living. They are already with Jesus spiritually and God will bring those dead believers with Jesus on the Resurrection Day. So, Paul turns the question around. If the dead are not going to miss out, will the living miss it altogether? What if Jesus turns up and no one notices? What if the living are away on holidays, or happen to be in bed, or are busy working and accidentally miss the return of Jesus? Then they will miss out on being in God's eternal Kingdom because Jesus did not pick them up on his way through town. Paul said that it will not be like that. There is no way that you will miss Jesus' Second Coming.

When the Queen of England comes to Australia, there are all kinds of pomp and ceremony. She has people guarding her, they play "God Save the Queen", and people come to shake her hand and give her flowers. The same with the American president. There are all kinds of secret service officers guarding him, they play "Hail to the Chief" everywhere he goes, and they line the streets to pay homage to their leader – or at least they used to. Well, in the days of Paul, when the Roman Emperor came to town, there would be loud commands and shouting voices telling you to stop, make way, and possibly even bow down to the emperor. They blew trumpets, beat drums, and played loud music to let everyone know that the king had come. If the emperor was in Thessalonica, you could not miss it. Everyone would know what was happening, whether they liked the emperor or not.

When Paul says that Jesus will come "with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God", I am not sure that he is describing exactly what will happen. I am not sure that Jesus will

have his own theme song which the trumpet players will play, or that the archangel will be the one shouting out loud commands. Maybe it will happen exactly like this, but I do not think that is Paul's point. I think that Paul is saying that when Jesus returns, you will not miss it. Just like you do not accidentally miss knowing about the emperor being in town, so too you will not accidentally miss King Jesus coming to take his people to be with him into his eternal Kingdom. Therefore, you do not have to die to receive your resurrected body and you don't have to be alive to make sure you do not miss out on being in Jesus' Kingdom.

Meeting in the Clouds

That is why Paul can talk about both the living and the dead in Christ being caught up together and meeting him in the air. No one will miss out!

1 Thessalonians 4:17 *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

But what does it mean for us to be caught up with Jesus in the air? Why do we hear about the believers being in the clouds with Jesus? I mean, that just sounds really strange. Well, again, this may or may not be what it will really look like. So, what does it mean for believers to be flying around like Superman in the air with Jesus? I have four reasons that I can think of for Paul to talk this way about Judgement Day, the day we will receive our resurrection bodies. The first reason is the weakest reason, and I would be okay if Paul told me that this is not what he had in mind. In Ephesians 2 Paul wrote...

Ephesians 2:1-2 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

The sky, or the air, was thought of as being the place where evil spiritual forces lived. For Jesus to come as King of God's Kingdom and to meet his people in the air, was a way of showing that Jesus had defeated the enemy of his Kingdom, namely Satan.

The second reason could be that Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world. When Jesus was questioned by Pontius Pilate, he was asked if he was the King of the Jews. As part of his answer, Jesus said...

John 18:36 *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

What better way of showing that Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world than to have the people meet their King off this world?

The third reason is the connection between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension. We do not talk about Jesus' ascension into heaven as much as we should, but it is just as important to believe in Jesus' ascension into heaven as it is to believe in the resurrection. You see, after Jesus rose from the dead, he did not die again, he simply ascended into heaven. In fact, if Jesus did die again then he was not resurrected, he was resuscitated. If he died again then he had not defeated death because death came back to get him. Jesus' ascension into heaven is very important because it shows us that Jesus is the victorious King who will come gather God's people together. It makes sense that God's people will not only be resurrected but will also have a type of ascension into heaven.

The fourth reason, and I think it is the most important reason, is based on a Bible passage which Jesus believed he had come to fulfill. Jesus often called himself the “Son of Man”, and most of the people of the time thought he was just talking about himself being a human being. But what Jesus was really saying was that he was The Son of Man in Daniel’s vision of Judgement Day.

Daniel 7:13-14 *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

What Daniel saw in his vision was Jesus, The Son of Man, entering God’s throne room and being given all the authority and power of the King of God’s Kingdom. On that day, the King will judge, defeat and condemn the enemies of God’s Kingdom, but also on that day the King bring his people from every nation and language to be with God. During the night before his death, Jesus was questioned by the high priest as to whether he was The Son of God. Jesus said to him...

Matthew 26:64 *"You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Can you see why Paul spoke about the believers being caught up together in clouds with Jesus? Can you see why Paul said that we will be meeting him in the air? It is not about some crazy idea that we are all going to sprout wings and start flying, though we may still do that in some way. No, Paul is telling the Thessalonians, that whether they are dead or alive, Jesus will bring them all to be with him on Judgement Day. Yes, they will receive their resurrection bodies! Yes, they will never die again! Yes, they will ascend into heaven or at least be part of God’s new created order, whatever that looks like, because God’s Kingdom is not of this world! And when that final day happens, no one will miss it. Everyone will know that the King of God’s Kingdom has come. For those who are not of God’s Kingdom, then it will be a day of great dread and sadness, but for those who are part of God’s Kingdom, then it will be a day of great rejoicing.

Do Not Grieve Without Hope

Yes, it is frustrating that we do not have all the answers about what will happen when we die. In this way, we are like the Old Testament Prophets who looked forward to the day of salvation that was to come in Jesus’ death and resurrection, but they didn’t have all the details that we now have. They had to place their faith and hope in God that what little they knew would come true and it did in Jesus.¹ We have to be like those Old Testament Prophets when it comes to what happens after we die. We know enough to be able to say that God will not leave us behind and that if we trust in Jesus then he will bring us to be with him in his Kingdom. Exactly what that looks like is not really important, but knowing that Jesus has us in his hands means that we can have great hope in the face of every sort of trouble we will face in this lifetime. So, when you think about your death, or the death of someone who trusted in Jesus, do not grieve as if you have no hope. Trust in Jesus. Know that you will be with him in spirit after you die and look forward to the day when he will raise your resurrection body knowing that you will be with God for eternity.

¹ 1 Peter 1:10-12