

Encourage Each Other in Hope—1 Thess. 4:13-18

Background: Paul mentions in 1 Thess. 4:13 that people grieve over loved ones who die because they “have no hope.” Therefore it is helpful to know what people in the ancient world believed about death and the possibility of an afterlife. As you might imagine, there were many views. For example, Epicureans and many intellectuals believed that humans did not survive death; as an ancient inscription states, “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.” Most others believed that death led to a sort of shadowy and cheerless existence in the underworld. A few seem to have believed in a vague idea of a reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. Of course, almost all who believed in an afterlife believed in immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body. It appears that only Christians (and some Jews) believed that God was going to raise the bodies of the righteous from the dead for a new blissful existence in a renewed creation.

Text: Many are familiar with this text because it is often read at funerals to comfort those who have lost loved ones. The central message that Paul wants his Thessalonian readers to understand is that they should not mourn when a brother or sister in Christ dies (which would include parents and children and other family members.) Probably he does not mean that there should be no grieving at all, but that they should not grieve as people did who had no belief in a life with God after death.

We are not quite sure why the Thessalonians needed to be told this information—surely Paul had told them about the future resurrection of Christians. Some think therefore that these Christians expected Jesus back very soon and had not considered that some would die before He returned. They thought that their loved ones were going to miss out on spending eternity with God. Others think that the real issue in this passage has to do with the timing of the resurrection of believers. That is, maybe the Thessalonians believed in the coming resurrection of believers but did not know that it would occur at the time that Jesus reappeared. Maybe they thought that those who had died would fail to witness the second coming of Jesus. That would explain why Paul stresses that “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep,” and that those who are still alive “will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” He appears to be saying that those who have died will even have precedence at Jesus’ coming. In any event, Paul makes it clear that grieving is for those without hope, not those who look forward to God’s glorious future.

In verse 13 Paul seems to be using the common euphemism of “sleep” for death. Although he may have in mind that Christians are simply sleeping rather than being truly dead, he gives us no indication that this is his thought. He also makes no mention of any intermediate state between death and the coming resurrection of Christians, as he appears to do in Philippians 1:23. There he seems to suggest that he would be with Christ after death but before he received his resurrection body. (This does not mean that he does not believe in such a state, just that he does not mention it here.) Therefore the question of the current state of those who have died in Christ may be best left to the discussion of other passages.

But what does Paul mean when he writes in verse 17 that Christians will “be caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air?” Is this an allusion to the popular idea of the rapture, in which Christians are rescued from the terrible events on earth at the time Jesus returns to take his followers to heaven? Probably not. In the ancient world, it was common for the king or emperor to visit a city or town with great fanfare. When he would arrive, the leaders and others would meet him outside the city and escort him in a parade-like event back into their city. There are several ancient texts that describe this kind of event, using the term used here (*parousia*, the “coming” or “arrival” of the dignitary). Paul’s Thessalonian readers would not have missed the significance of this language. Apparently, Paul is suggesting that when Jesus returns, those who belong to him will meet him in the air in order to escort him back to earth. Of course, it is possible that Paul meant that Jesus would meet his followers in the air, after which he would escort them back to heaven with Him. But most scholars in recent years think that the New Testament envisions Jesus returning to a redeemed and renewed earth (or perhaps a new cosmos in which heaven and earth have been brought together), an idea supported by such passages as Rom. 8:19-23, 2 Pet. 3:13, and Rev. 21:1-4.

Discussion Questions

1. On what does Paul base his firm belief in the future resurrection of Christians? Why is that still important today? (See verses 14-15)
2. Is it appropriate for Christians to cry and grieve when they lose their Christian family members and friends? (See John 11:35.) When might it become inappropriate?
3. How does the hope of resurrection and the coming of Jesus change a person's view of life? What experiences or stories can you share that illustrate this truth?
4. It is inevitable that a passage such as this raises almost as many questions as it answers. (For example, when will Jesus return? What happens to a person between death and resurrection? What will a body raised from the dead look like? How can Jesus appear in the clouds over Nashville and over Sydney, Australia, at the same time?) Many of these questions are simply unanswerable. Does it matter? What is clear and sure in Paul's teaching about Jesus' return and the resurrection?
5. The idea of Jesus returning to a renewed earth is a novel idea for many, and it is even threatening to many. How does it strike you? It is not something that is certain, and it is not something that Christians should divide over. But it does provide an alternative to the very otherworldly view of heaven that many of us have received from our songs and hymns. What difference, if any, would it make in our view of eternal life?