

1 Thessalonians 4

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Date: 19 October 2014

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[0 : 01] Turn with me to the second of our readings in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. Verse 14, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, 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. Therefore, encourage one another with these words. And that's what I hope we'll be doing this evening, encouraging one another, obeying the command that God gives to us in those words in this chapter. Encourage one another with these words. And we're to do that by focusing our minds, amongst other things, on the future.

future. The Christian faith has a great future, a guaranteed future, a certain future, a bright future, one that we don't have to work towards. The Christian faith is not about making the world a better place. Although, if the world does become a better place through the influence of Christians in the world, then great. That's a bonus. But the objective of the Christian faith as we look tonight towards the future is a new heaven and a new earth that Jesus promises one day to create. Behold, I saw, says Revelation, a new heaven and a new earth. For the old heaven and the old earth were passed away.

Tonight, I want us to look towards the new heaven and the new earth and particularly our place in rising from the dead. And what's promised here in this chapter, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, the promise that is that that God's people on the day that Jesus returns to the world, as he promised, then the dead in Christ will rise and go forever to meet the Lord in the air and go to be with the Lord. And Paul says, which is a place which is better by far.

Jesus will come again. That is an absolute guarantee. His word is certain that he will, just as he came the first time, just as he died and rose again, he will come again. And the New Testament makes clear certain things about his second coming. It tells us, first of all, that he will come again as he ascended to heaven. You remember shortly after he rose from the dead, he took his disciples to the mountain and there he gave commands to them to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. He promised them that all authority had now been given to him and they were now to be his representatives in the world and that they were to go into the world preaching the gospel and making disciples of every kind of person. And then after he had said that, he literally rose from the world, from the earth and he was enveloped, we read, by a cloud in the air. His disciples gazed into heaven.

I suppose in part, desperately sorry to see him leaving them. But again, in part, knowing that this was, this had to happen. You remember how Acts chapter one tells us that as they gazed into heaven, two men stood by them, angels in white robes, and they said, men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way. Have you ever noticed these words? In the same way as you saw him go into heaven. And so when he comes again, and we don't know when that's going to be, he will come not as a baby, not in the obscurity of the manger in Bethlehem, but he will come this time on the clouds. As he ascended, so he will descend, he will appear the second time to judge the world. In the same way, on the clouds, in great glory.

[5:17] The New Testament also tells us that he will come at a time that we don't expect him. Jesus said in Luke chapter 12 and verse 40, you must also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And in Mark chapter 13 and 32, and as we read in Matthew chapter 24, concerning that day or the hour, no one knows, says Jesus. Not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only my Father, only the Father. And of course, that's an interesting question, isn't it? How the Father knows something, and yet that the Son doesn't know. How is it that if God, if Jesus is God, and if he is all-knowing, if he knows all things, then how is it that he didn't know when his second coming was to be? Well, that's a very interesting question, and one which I guess you may want to discuss amongst yourselves. I think that there are some very interesting answers that can, or suggestions that can be made about the Trinity, and particularly the place that Jesus had, and the limitations that there were to Jesus when he was on in this world. And we can also legitimately ask, well, is it true that the Son still doesn't know when his time, the second coming, will be? Is it still the case? It was the case then, when Jesus was on the, in the world. Is it still the case that Jesus, well, we don't know, of course, these things haven't been told to us. But what has been told is that the Son did not know when. So, what's the point in us trying to work out for ourselves? There are many people who make a business, and who have spent years, and who have made it their business to try and piece together the evidence, or so-called, as to when Jesus will come again. They've tried to piece together passages like the one we read in Matthew chapter 25, and they've tried to take bits and pieces out of Revelation, and tried to weave them all together. And some people have come to the mistaken conclusion that they can calculate when Jesus will come again. Well, that's impossible. I can guarantee you, you're wasting your time if you, if you try that exercise. And I can guarantee you, because Jesus says, no one knows the day or the hour. The whole point of the coming of the Son of Man the second time is at a time when you don't expect Him. He says, He'll come like a thief in the night at the moment when you don't expect Him.

Therefore, He says, what we need to be is ready. We need to live each day as if today was the day. We need to live each day as if it was our last, as if at some point this evening we will be called to heaven and to meet with the Lord. It could be for any one of us. It could be.

We don't really very often give up much thought, do we? Oh yeah, every so often it kind of enters into our minds and then we quickly get distracted by something else. And I'm not saying that we should sit in the one place and wait for death. Of course we shouldn't. We're told to get on with life and to glorify God in the way that we interact with other people and in the world. We're to be His witnesses and that means that we get to get on with the life that God has given to us. We're not to lock ourselves up in a room and wait for His coming, but neither are we to try and second guess when that will be. No one knows the day nor the hour. Thirdly, Jesus will be accompanied by angels.

We saw this morning how important the important place that angels have in the way in which God deals with men and women in the world. They always have had a very special place both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Angels were around at the time of the birth of Jesus. It was angels who were sent to the shepherds in the fields when He was born in Bethlehem to announce His birth and to say glory to God in the highest and earth peace and goodwill towards all those on whom His favor rests. It was the angels that were around at the time of His resurrection to announce to the disciples that He was no longer in the grave, that His body was no longer there and that He had risen from the dead. And now we're told in Matthew 25 when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him. Then He will sit on His glorious throne. Revelation 1 and verse 7 tells us something else.

It tells us that when He comes, every eye will see Him. Now, I suppose if that were to be a natural occurrence, then it would be impossible because something that happens at one location in the world cannot possibly be seen by someone who's at the other side of the world. So it's not a natural occurrence. It's something that God will bring about in His own way by His own power. But He tells us this, that every eye will see Him, every living person in the world, will somehow be able to see Jesus when He comes in His glory with the angels as He left the world when He comes again. And then it tells us that He comes to judge, that His coming will usher two things. First of all, it will usher the end of the world as we know it.

[11:13] The world will pass away, heaven and earth will pass away, says Jesus. But it will also usher that the day of judgment, when all the nations will be gathered in front of Him. Matthew chapter 25 tells us that He will gather everyone and separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

So His coming will be the signaling of the day of judgment. And we will be judged again. There's no time to go into any of these different elements, which would be very interesting to go through, to go into. But when the New Testament tells us that we must be ready, what it means is this, there is only one way to be ready. And that is by believing and trusting in Jesus, by believing in His death as the payment for our sins, by coming to faith in Him, by following Him by faith.

There is no other way of being ready for that day. That's what He asks us to do. That's what He invites us to do. We can't save ourselves. You can't make yourself worthy to be a resident of heaven.

You cannot be right with God by yourself. Only Jesus can do that by coming and opening up our hearts and by transforming us and by drawing us to Himself. Will you pray with me this evening that that will happen to you if you're not there already? Will you pray with me that God will save you and that God will open your heart and give you the eyes to see Jesus and the faith to follow Him?

Ask and you will be and you will receive. But the New Testament, of course, goes on to tell us that He'll come after certain events have been fulfilled. It tells us, for example, that the gospel will be preached to every nation. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that the gospel will be preached to every single man, woman and child. Neither does it mean that every man, woman and child who hears the gospel will necessarily be converted.

Nevertheless, that the gospel we're promised will go into all the world and will reach every tribe and nation. And that's something that I would suggest that we pray for. Not just because it will usher in the coming of the Son of Man once again, but because people need to hear the gospel.

[13:54] And without hearing the gospel, they're lost. Bible tells us that we're dead in trespasses and sins until we hear the gospel. It's the gospel that brings us to life once again in Jesus Christ.

And then Jesus is quite clear in this passage, in this quite mysterious passage in chapter 24. We read it together about how there'll be a time of tribulation, a time of persecution, a time of fearful events that take place in which His people will suffer. Now there was such a time after He left the world. At the beginning of the early church in the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire persecuted the church terribly at various points during its history. And there have been times over the last 2,000 years when Christians have been persecuted. Even today, there are places in the world where you would be in fear of your life if you follow Jesus openly. And no doubt we'll hear about that next week as we listen to Malcolm MacLeod, who works amongst Christians who are persecuted. And it's a solemn thought, isn't it?

One that must never be far away from us. That while we easily come in these doors, and while the biggest obstacle that stands in front of us this evening is the wind and the rain, that there are people in the world who are made to suffer because they love the Jesus that we love for them, coming into a place like this is an impossibility. Gathering with any fellow Christians is a danger to them. And there have been times of tribulation, but there appears to be, if you read the New Testament as I do, that there appears to be perhaps a final time when, if you go on in 2 Thessalonians to read about how the Antichrist will be revealed. This appears to be a time of intense tribulation, intense trouble, and intense opposition to the gospel. And that will also have to happen before Jesus comes once again. But Paul was dealing with not just the general promise of the coming of Jesus, Paul was dealing with a problem that had arisen in the church in Thessalonica at that time. Because the Christians there, they believed that

Jesus was going to come in their lifetime, and that they would never die. Now it's all very well for you and I to look back and say, well, they were wrong. But if you imagine that you are a young Christian, you didn't have your New Testament as we have it. You only had the knowledge that you had, the very limited knowledge that you had, that Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world, that he died on the cross, that he rose again, and that he was coming once again. He had promised to come at a time when you won't expect. Now, I reckon that you and I may very well slip into the notion that, well, he'll come in my lifetime. Of course, they were wrong. Their understanding of that promise wasn't correct.

Two thousand years later, he still hasn't come. That doesn't mean he won't come. We believe that he will come. But the Christians in those days were becoming despondent, because by that time, their fellow Christians were dying. And perhaps some of them concluded that their death was a result of them not being Christians in the first place. How can you die if you're a Christian? Jesus himself said, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will never die. And perhaps they took these words to mean that they would never experience human death in this world.

[18:03] And in this passage, Paul is correcting them by saying that the coming of the Lord is an absolute certainty. The only thing that we don't know is when it is going to happen. And so in order to give them the encouragement that they needed, he described the coming of the Lord by giving them several details. First of all, he tells them how they know that Jesus is coming once again.

And how they know that they too, when he comes again, will rise from the dead. That's the promise. That on the day and at the moment when Jesus comes again the second time, that the dead in Christ will rise. These two events will take place at exactly the same time. Well, the first argument that Paul gives is in verse 14, which is a historical argument. He says, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. So the first argument is a historical first argument. He says, I want you to go back. I want you to think about Jesus and his death and his resurrection. Just as he rose again, so his people will rise again.

In verse 15, he gives a prophetic reason. He says, according to his word. In other words, remember when Jesus was here with us, he promised that not only would he come again, but that the dead in Christ would rise. Now, I'm not sure exactly what Paul meant by this, but my mind goes back to John chapter 5 and verse 28, where Jesus says this, do not marvel at this for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. That's a promise.

An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. Of course, the question there is, again, I'm taking a little one or two second excursion, is what does it mean those who have done good? What does it mean to do good and to do evil? Does that mean that we're saved by doing good? Not initially. We're saved by faith. In the very next chapter, in John chapter 6, someone asks him, what must we do to do the works of God?

And Jesus' answer was this, this is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent. So that's what God requires of every one of us tonight, to believe, to trust, to receive Jesus as our Lord and as our Savior. And then thirdly, there was a theological argument in verse 16. He says this, for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Now when Paul describes someone as being in Christ, he's describing that unique relationship that a Christian has with Jesus.

[21:51] And Paul loves to describe them in these terms. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone. Behold, all things have become new. That is your relationship with Jesus, if you follow him, and mine.

That we are in Jesus. And that means that we have been united to him in his life, and in his death, and in his resurrection. It means that his death has become ours.

It means that his resurrection has become ours. It means that we are joined spiritually with the Lord Jesus Christ. But then Paul goes on, and he tells them three things about the coming of the Lord and their resurrection. He tells them, first of all, that the Lord himself will come in majesty, and in glory, and with his angels with him, and with him those who have already died.

That's what he tells us in verse 14 and verse 15. In majesty, in glory. This will be unmistakable. There'll be no one trying to investigate and interpret this event when it comes.

There'll be nobody sending scientists to take readings, and to try and find out what kind of event this is, what kind of naturally occurring event this is.

[23:18] Because everyone will know what it is. This is God visiting this world for one last time, for that final concluding moment that brings about the end of this world.

And the moment at which every single person will find themselves confronted by God with whom they must, to whom they must give an account for what they have done with their lives.

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that we must give an account of what we have done in the body, whether good or bad. That's God's prerogative.

That's God's promise. He tells us that He is, that we are accountable to Him. Whether we happen to admit that or not, we are accountable to Him.

And He'll bring with Him those who have already died. What does that mean? Well, it means this, that when a person dies, that is the separation of the body and the soul.

[24:28] Now, whatever the soul means, of course, we don't understand what this means. I don't pretend to understand for a moment what a soul is. I can only use that term as much as I'm able to.

But I confess, if you ask me, what is the definition of a soul, I'm not able to give you a definition. I only believe it because the Bible tells me that I am body and soul.

But what happens is that a believer goes straight to be with the Lord. Remember when Jesus spoke to the thief on the cross and the thief said to him, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus said, today, tonight, you will be with me in heaven. Today, right now, you will be with me in heaven. Which means, now we all know what happened to the thief.

The thief died, his body was taken from the cross, and it was probably thrown into a mass grave. So in one sense, that's where the thief ended up.

[25 : 28] But we know that the thief ended up in heaven because God, through Jesus, promised him, today, tonight, you will be with me in paradise. And what that tells us is that the moment a believer dies, that there is a separation that takes place where the body is placed into the grave and where our soul goes to be what we are.

goes to be with the Lord Jesus Christ, which Paul tells us is better by far. I can't find words to describe it better than the old catechism.

The souls of believers are at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory. And their bodies, still being united to Christ, remain in the grave until the resurrection.

resurrection. And here is Paul telling us that those who have been with Jesus, the souls of believers having been with Jesus, all this time, in many cases, now come back to a renewed.

Does this mean that Jesus will bring the souls of believers back to the same old earth? No, it doesn't. The earth will have been destroyed. But he will bring them back to a renewed earth, a transformed earth, a perfected world, a world in which the dwelling of God is with men.

[27 : 03] And then he tells us that there are three sounds. You notice that there are three distinctive sounds in this passage that accompany the coming of Jesus.

First of all, there's a voice of the archangel. Who is the archangel? Well, we can think of Gabriel who announced the birth of Jesus. Whenever God was going to do something great, he sent angels to the birth of Isaac.

He sent angels to Abraham to announce the birth of Isaac. When God is going to do something great like in Isaiah, when Isaiah started his ministry, he saw angels.

He saw angels surrounding the Lord, high and lifted up, his train filling, the train of his robe filling the temple. Then there's the sound of the trumpet.

The trumpet was always an instrument that was used to usher in a royal event. Something important that was going to happen. What is more important? What is more earth-shattering?

[28:08] What is more monumental than the coming of the son of man the second time to judge the world to bring the world to a conclusion there's going to be the sound of the trumpet and then the voice of the lord himself you know what that tells me it tells me that the resurrection of the dead is not something that is left to any other creature jesus will make it his personal business to raise his people from the dead that was his promise in john chapter 5 a time will come when those who are in the tombs will hear the voice of the son of god is his voice they'll hear the first voice that will be heard the first thing that will be heard in the in the new heaven and the new earth will be the sound of the voice of jesus himself who's made it his business that's why he said to his disciples i go to prepare a place for you so if i go i will come again and receive you to myself so that where i am there you may be also he will make it his business to raise you from the dead and then lastly there were three meetings three meetings that paul describes at the coming of jesus there was a reunification of body and soul except this time it's not the body that was buried because very often that body would have been buried thousands of years before it will have disappeared by that time but there will be a new body a reconstituted body made in the image of jesus christ there's a verse that tells us that as we have borne the image of the man of dust so we will bear the image of the man from heaven i confess i don't know exactly what that means but it means something great it tells me that somehow there'll be a resemblance just as you and i we resemble our first parents in the garden of eden even although we all look so different from one another we still have that resemblance to our first parents because we we live in adam and eve where his offspring where their offspring but somehow or other god will when he reconstitutes our body on the day that we rise again we will resemble the man from heaven who's the man from heaven the jesus christ and somehow or other he will make us into his likeness how old will we be i don't know but i don't think we'll be old there's that psalm psalm 110 that talks about the jew of your youth it seems to indicate to me that when god moves when god brings about that final moment in history and when he raises his people and reunites them body and soul that there will be something that that will defy our every expectation no more decay no more illness no more pain no more no more of the restriction that this life and the process of aging brings about in this life we are being renewed says paul day by day in the inward man although our outer body wastes away that's our experience here some of the young ones probably won't know what i'm talking about yet but you will if god spares you and then all of a sudden these words will take on a new meaning for you

and that's the way that god's word works there's a second meeting and that's that this is a great communal event isn't it it's not just going to happen individually it's going to happen as a one event where everyone will rise all those who are in christ all those who are god's people will rise and it's there's no way we're not going to interact with each other this will be a time of fellowship as we've never known before people who have never met each other on this side will not only meet each other on that day but will need no introduction it will be a moment of renewal in which our minds are transformed and perfected once and for all of course our mind will have been perfected a long time before on that moment when we are but again it's it's too big to try and understand what god will do and then of course lastly there's the meeting with jesus himself that paul describes here then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them together with them in the air to meet the lord in the air and so we will always be with the lord that of course is the the greatest meeting of all when with a renewed and perfected body we shall all together join with jesus himself forever knowing that nothing can spoil and nothing can take away from our our peace in this world of course there are so many so many events so much of our own failures that spoil our peace with god they trouble us they send us to bed unable to sleep we long to be more like jesus we long to be more obedient and every day is a day when we have to confess once again that we have failed in so many different ways well that will not be more confession because god will have perfected his people and his purpose and his plan and now will be the culmination of everything that has been longed for and everything towards which god has worked in this world and in heaven itself but not everyone jesus says that there are those who are in the tombs who will hear the voice of the son of god and those who have done evil will rise to the resurrection of the judgment and i have to i cannot just ignore these words this evening i can't ignore the fact that there will be two resurrections one will be the resurrection of those who died who lived and died in jesus and the other one will be the resurrection of those who lived and died outside of jesus for them the resurrection will not be good news it will not be a moment of unbroken bliss and joy it will be that moment of eternal darkness a nightmare that will never end and i can't finish this evening without making reference to it and the only thing i want to say is make sure that doesn't happen to you make sure that on that day

that you are amongst god's people that you're safe that your sins are forgiven and that you're in christ make sure that you're following him that you listen to him and that you accept his invitation to be forgiven and to have everlasting life i've quoted this before i'm going to quote it again because i think it's so it's such a powerful little verse that someone came across on a gravestone once most of you know it on a gravestone once there was this verse and it said this pause my friend as you walk by as you are now so once was i as i am now so you will be prepare my friend to follow me somebody saw those words and decided to add another couple of lines to them and the lines were these to follow you is not my intent until i know which way you went tonight the coming of the lord is a is a message full of joy to those who love and to know jesus we can say even so come lord jesus and i hope it is to everyone here jesus says come to me all you who are weary and burdened and i will give you rest let's pray together our father in heaven we thank you for your promise and for your word that is absolutely secure in the lord jesus christ and we ask that this evening as we reflect on the certainty that lies before us we pray that you will make that certainty ours that you will bring it home to each one of us and that you will bring us home to jesus for we ask in his name amen we'll sing in psalm 32 to close with and that's the sing psalms version it's on page 38 psalm number 32 it's on page 38 of sing psalms and the tune is orlinton we're going to sing eight to the end of the psalm verse eight to the end of the psalm i will instruct you by my word and guide you in my way my counsel i will give to you my eye will keep your path in view and watch you day by day psalm 32 from verse eight to the end of the psalm and we'll stand to sing i will instruct you by my word and guide you in my way my counsel my counsel my counsel i will give to you my eye my eye will keep your path in view and watch you day by day do not be like the whore or mule

which cannot understand they must be heard and kept in check a spit and bridle turn their neck to go where you command the wicked's woe will much increase but though who trust the Lord his calm and mercy will surround your righteousness your joy abound and praise the Lord your God and now may the grace of our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with each one of you both now and always Amen