

1 Thess 4:13-18 Learning About Dying (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we're going to turn back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 13 to 18.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, and by those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

With 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.

As you know, we've spent both services today looking at this passage, and the reason for that is because it is speaking of such a crucial and important issue in our lives.

[1 : 12] These verses are talking about dying. And this morning we thought about the reality of dying in terms of this life, in terms of approaching death, and in terms of bereavement.

And Paul tells us that he doesn't want us to be uninformed, he wants us to think and talk and prepare for the fact that our lives will come to an end. And when we do face the experience of loss, he says that as Christians, yes we grieve, but we do not grieve without hope.

And that's the amazing thing about the Gospel, it gives us hope, hope even in the face of death for all who trust in Jesus. And because of that good news, because of that amazing news, we can encourage one another with these words, with all that God promises us in the Gospel.

So that was what we looked at this morning. Tonight we're going to return to this passage and we are going to focus more on what it teaches us about after we die.

We are thinking about eternity, we are thinking about what lies beyond this life.

[2 : 27] And on that subject, the Bible has an awful lot to teach us and for that reason we'll only scratch the surface tonight and there may be more questions that arise if so please ask or put it in the question box.

It would be good to look at this subject more. But even in these few verses that we have, we are given some amazing teaching and that's what I want us to explore together for a wee while tonight. We're going to do it in two parts. First part we're going to just look at some general points and then we're going to come to some more specific details that this passage gives to us.

So first of all, general points. These verses are reminding us of the fact that there are two key future events for the Christian.

There is the end of your life and there is the end of the world. These verses are reminding us of the fact that as Christians our lives come to an end.

[3 : 33] We are still in a body that is outwardly perishing and Paul describes that process in the language of falling asleep, the fact that our lives here will come to an end.

Paul is pointing us towards the end of our lives. But at the same time in these verses he is pointing us to the end of time, to that last day when Jesus will return and there will be a resurrection of the dead.

And that's what we refer to as the second coming of Jesus. The first coming of Jesus was at Bethlehem. The second coming is when he will return at the end of time.

It's also known as the Parousia, that's the Greek word for coming. And so often if you read a theological book it will talk about the Parousia and that's basically that means the second coming of Jesus.

And so for the Christian these two events lie ahead and they are amazing events but they are distinct and different. And these differences are brought out for us in the Catechism, shorter Catechism which I've got to question 37 and question 38 for us here and we can read them together.

[4 : 54] Question 37, this is talking about the end of life for the Christian. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? Answer, the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory and their bodies being still united to Christ do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

That's end of life. Question 38 is the end of time. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection, at the last day?

At the resurrection believers being raised up in glory shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

And the key points that are being highlighted here are the fact that at death our souls and our bodies are separated. That's exactly what death is, separation of body and soul.

Under our death the Christian soul immediately passes into glory but our bodies wait and rest in the ground for the last day and the resurrection.

[6 : 11] And then at the last day our souls are reunited with our resurrected bodies and we enter the new creation in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

And from these points we can identify three stages in the experience of the believer. Fit them on the screen here. Stage one is life on earth as a Christian body and soul united together.

Stage two is life in heaven with our soul living in heaven but our bodies waiting for the resurrection.

And that stage two is often known as the intermediate state and we spoke a wee bit about this at the prayer meeting the other night whereby there's an intermediate stage because our soul is in glory but our body isn't, our body is still in the ground.

Now we know a little about that state, we don't know everything and we have to always remember that there is a bit of mystery in terms of the interface between time and eternity.

[7 : 22] But it seems to be the case that scripture is indicating that there is this second stage where our souls enter glory but our bodies wait in the ground and that's what question 37 of the Catholicism is telling us.

So that's stage one life on earth and stage two life in heaven stage three life in the new creation and that is the goal of the gospel that is God's plan.

A new heaven and a new earth whereby our bodies have been raised body and soul reunited they've been transformed and glorified in this glorious wondrous new heavens and new earth that God is preparing for his people.

These are the three stages that lie in the experience of every Christian. At the moment nobody is at stage three because that's a future event and that is in fact the end point of all history.

Right now all believers are either at stage one or stage two we are either still living on earth or our souls have gone to be with Christ and our bodies are waiting for the resurrection and almost every believer will experience stage one and stage two.

[8 : 47] But of course some people will go straight from stage one to stage three. They are the people who will still be alive when Jesus returns.

And we can put these three stages back into Paul's passage in verses 16 and 17. 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.

That's those who are at stage two those who have died they will rise first then we who are alive who are left that's those who are still at stage one 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 and that of course is stage three.

This means that right now the church of Jesus Christ exists in two realms. You have the membership of the church that is alive today on earth and then you have the membership of the church whose souls are in heaven with Jesus right now and whose bodies await the resurrection. It's all one church one body one family just different stages and it is all moving towards this great goal of the last day.

[10 : 16] Now all of this is reminding us of a key New Testament doctrine it's reminding us of the reality of our union with Christ as Christians we are united to Jesus Christ by faith and that union with Christ is really what lies at the very heart of being a Christian that's really what it means to be a

Christian to be someone who is united to Christ in his death and in his resurrection and for all eternity.

You if you are a believer or if you become one you are united to Jesus Christ and that union is so strong that not even death can break it.

If you think about it death breaks every other union that we know of it breaks the bond of marriage it breaks the union of family it breaks the fellowship of friends it breaks the harmony of a community it even breaks the bond of body and soul but it cannot it is absolutely powerless when it comes to breaking your union with Christ.

As Christians we die united to Christ and we stay united to him and that of course also means that as Christians we remain united to each other and our union with Christ means that both realms of the church are connected.

You might think hang on a minute Thomas what are you saying we've got the church here on earth in stage one you've got the church in glory in stage two you think they are very separate surely aren't they no they're not they are united they are connected in fact they are so connected that every single time a sinner repents and joins the church on earth the church in heaven rejoices.

[12 : 30] That means that heaven rejoiced when you were converted think of all the saints of old you know people love to talk of the people who were here in years gone by think of the great Christians of the Reformation all of whom have long since been taken into glory do you know that they were rejoicing on the day that you came to faith they were rejoicing at your conversion and it also means that when you if we enter stage two ourselves if we pass from this world before Jesus comes we will rejoice when we see people come to faith so by God's grace you will rejoice in heaven when you see your grandchildren and your great grandchildren and your great great grandchildren and the generations that are coming after you coming to faith in Jesus Christ and that's a great reminder to keep on praying for people keep on praying for people because you might not rejoice in this life at their conversion but by God's grace you will rejoice in heaven sometimes it might take years for someone to come to faith despite being prayed for every single day you may not rejoice in your life here but but you may very well rejoice as part of the church in glory so keep praying for conversions keep keep keep keep keep praying for conversions and never lose heart as Christians we live and we die united to Christ and we are simply moving on this progressive journey of of wonder and splendour and glory and just all round amazingness that is going to culminate in the second coming of Jesus Christ it's just a path to to glorification and and what

God has for us is just beyond anything that we can describe that's what dying will bring for you if you're trusting in Jesus and that's why we can say with Paul oh death where is your sting oh death where is your victory so at this general level we are being reminded that that as Christians there is this glorious hope awaiting for us in the future there is much much to look forward to but what exactly is that going to involve well that's going to bring us on to some of the more specific points that Paul is teaching us in these verses now we have to remember that at one level there is much that we don't know about our future remember Paul says in Corinthian first Corinthians 13 for now we see an emitter dimly but then face to face now I know in part then shall I know fully even as I have been fully known so we don't know everything and and that's something that we must always bear in mind but the Bible does tell us some things the Bible gives us glimpses glimpses into what lies ahead and some of these are revealed to us in 1st Thessalonians 4 and we can identify these tonight and to do so we're going to ask and ask five very very simple questions and we'll just work through them one by one so question one is this what will happen well the answer to that is very simple the Lord Jesus is going to come back 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 that word coming is the word perusia that we were talking about a moment ago it's a very basic point very simple point but an absolutely vital one the whole Christian church is living in anticipation of that moment that great day when Jesus returns and that is a truth that we must never ever ever forget we worship an incarnate savior we worship a crucified savior we worship a risen savior we worship an exalted savior and we read we worship a returning savior Jesus is coming back and all of this is reminding us of the fact that the whole of history is bound up with God's plan of salvation we often tend to think of of Christianity as kind of a we part of the universe you think of the universe and all the massive history that that involves you think back to to when it all began you think of all that's going on in all the billions of galaxies throughout all the universe you think of all that lies ahead in whatever the future may hold and we think to ourselves well

Christianity is just a we part of that no it's not God's plan of salvation in the gospel is at the very centre of history and everything is revolving around what God is going to do in order to save his people in the western world we tend to think that Christianity is becoming pretty irrelevant and people think that it's outdated and they scorn it and they mock it and they push it to one side and they see it as a pretty tiny and fairly insignificant thing but the truth is every second that these clocks take by every minute that passes every hour every day every month every year the world is moving towards this great climax when Jesus will return never ever forget that it is Jesus

Christ who is at the centre of history he is the originator of the universe and his return is the destiny of the universe everything revolves around Jesus he is first and last he is alpha and omega and whenever I think of these things I say to myself my view of Jesus needs to become a lot bigger my view of Jesus needs to become a lot bigger because everything revolves around him and so as Christians we look back and we look back rejoicing the fact that Jesus came you think back to the events of Bethlehem and they're absolutely amazing we rejoice in that but as Christians we don't just look back we look forward and we marvel at the fact that Jesus is coming question two how is that going to happen well that's a really interesting question isn't it Jesus is returning how what's it going to be like how's he going to come well verse 16 describes it for us 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 we can pick out some keywords to help us understand what is being described here the first keyword is that the Lord will descend the second coming is described as a descending a coming down and if you think about it that makes perfect sense because where is Jesus now where is he well think of the journey that Jesus took Jesus died and then he rose and was ascended and is now exalted at the right hand of the father he is highly exalted as king of kings and Lord of Lords he is above everything and therefore the only direction that Jesus can go in is down and as he returns he is descending from where he currently is at the right hand of the father coming down as he returns and here Paul is echoing the words and what's described to us in Acts chapter 1 where we find the ascension described to us look at what it says when Jesus had said these things as they were looking on he was lifted up and so it's an upward movement and a cloud took him out of their sight and while they were gazing into heaven as he went behold two men stood by them and white robes and 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 you saw him go into heaven and so in some ways the second coming is like a it's a return from the ascension Jesus coming back Jesus descending the next thing that we are told is that he will descend with a cry of command with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God now that language is highlighting two key things at least but we can highlight two the first is this the second coming will be a demonstration of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus these phrases cry of command voice of an archangel sound of the trumpet of God they're all speaking of one who has absolute authority and to me this speaks of military language it's the image of a supreme commander

and that authority is so great that at the sound of his voice and at the blast of this trumpet even the graves will open and the dead will rise at his command and so his sovereignty is demonstrated the second thing that these highlighters is the fact that the second coming will be unmistakable sometimes you get people who will try to present themselves as a Christ or a Messiah or something or other and they maybe get a small following in some part of the world and sometimes like a cult or something will fall around these people one of the reasons we know why each one of these is a heretic is because the return of Jesus will be unmistakable every knee will bow every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and here's where we see that it's amazing to compare the first coming and the second coming of Jesus the first coming of Jesus was in absolute humility it was in obscurity a cave or stable or something in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere it was in weakness as he was laid in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths and it was all done out of obedience to his father's will on a journey that would culminate as a suffering servant the second coming is so different it is a demonstration of absolute majesty power glory and unmistakable dominion and sovereignty and that's highlighted by the very interesting word that Paul mentions in verse 17 the word clouds because in scripture the cloud the image the word cloud is often used to portray an image of the glory and presence of God you think back to Exodus 19 you have the cloud on the top of Mount Sinai where God is present you think of the holy of holies and the tabernacle and the temple it was the cloud that came you think of the transfiguration where you get this glimpse of Jesus's glorified body and appearance all of these things you have the cloud and again at the

second coming we will see the cloud of God's presence Jesus himself says this immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of man and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of man coming on on what on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call see trumpet same language as Paul uses and they will gather his elect from the forewinds from one end of heaven to the other how is

Jesus going to come he's going to come in absolute sovereignty and in spectacular glory question three why will this happen well there's many things that we could say here and in all this description of the splendor and majesty and power it's easy to assume that Jesus is coming is all about demonstrating his dominion his sovereignty and his glory because at long last on that day people will see that he is king and he will be recognized and respected as he should be as the one who reigns over all and and so in many ways that's to the second coming of Jesus is in order to show that he is king but if you look at these verses you'll discover that there's something else there's another reason why the second coming is going to happen and if we look at it we'll see that that that the spectacular splendor and power is not the main emphasis in these verses and always when you're reading a passage always ask the question what's the main thing being emphasized here the main point is not that Jesus is coming to show his power the main point is that Jesus is coming to gather his people to himself in other words Jesus is coming back for you 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 there's some key words here I want to highlight as well the phrase caught up that's a really interesting word it basically means to seize and it conveys the idea of Jesus coming and taking us for himself and it's not it's not just a very it's not just a gentle gathering in it is he firmly decisively securely takes hold of us and gathers us in and in a way if you if you imagine we were talking about military language imagine you were on a military mission imagine your children were held hostage imagine you were going to go and rescue them if you walked into that house where they were being held you wouldn't you wouldn't just slowly take them out you would grab them and make sure that they were safe and bring them with you so that nothing will ever harm them and that's the kind of language that's being used here Jesus will come and firmly securely and decisively take hold of us and gather us in this is sometimes described as a rapture and I don't want to get too sidetracked talking about that because people have all sorts of views in regard to that rapture some some good some strange and that's maybe something we can explore more another day the point is the idea of Jesus coming to to take us to take his people to hold us to secure us because we are his so we are caught up then the next word absolutely brilliant word together and here we see the glorious collective nature of our salvation as Christians always remember that God's purpose is not to save individuals as individuals this is where we need to get [30 : 11] out of the absolutely individualistic thinking of our current age God is not calling us in order to save us as individuals so there's just us and him his goal is to bring us as individuals into the collective people of God so that we are together as his body his people his family and that togetherness is at the absolute heart of the second coming it's at the heart of all of God's plan and that togetherness is summed up by the beautiful phrase at the end of the verse we will always be with the Lord and that is one of the most astounding phrases that God has given us in scripture we will always be with the Lord and and within that there's three words I want to just pick on I could I could there's so much I'm missing out and I apologize for that but there's three things to just pick out first we will be with the Lord with him not not connected at a distance not somehow associated but with the Lord and remember that Jesus is great desire for you if we were to ask one question what does Jesus want for you tonight the answer is father I desire that they also whom you have given me might be with me where I am that's what Jesus really wants so as people say oh what does what does the Lord want for me does he want me to be a doctor does he want me to be a lawyer does he want me to go to mission field does he want me to do this or do that that's important questions but these are all secondary to the one great desire that Jesus has he just wants you with him with him with him just think about that with Jesus in his company in the company of Jesus able to hear his voice able to learn from him able to to share fellowship with him under the care of Jesus with him so that he can shepherd us protect us provide for us and make sure that we're okay with him enjoying his presence just you know yourselves with people you love it's just brilliant to be with them just to be together is so good and that's what Jesus wants with you that you just be with him and as we are with him we will know the fullness really know the fullness of his love and so you've

got this amazing word with and then you go back to words and you find a word that is even more amazing the word always there will never be a moment when we are not with him never a moment never a threat or a possibility or a or even the slightest scare that you might be separated from him always with him at all times we are enjoying his care his love his company his fellowship his shepherding for all eternity it never ends it never ends it goes on on on on on we are with him in a new creation that is not subject to decay that is not cursed and to which there will be no end God's plan

for you is in the realm of always so we'll be with the Lord we will always be with the Lord and it is we who will be with him every single believer and and I hope that is all of us here tonight and and if you're yet to put your faith in Jesus then just do it because God's plan is that we will be with him a collective people who have all been washed in the blood of the lamb and together we are worshiping serving enjoying and loving our Savior and never ever forget that Christianity is never about me it is always about us we are a family together so what will happen when we die we will always be with the Lord and for this reason at the heart of the second coming we have this unprecedented power splendor authority and glory of Jesus as he comes to gather his people in whom he loves so dearly and whom he wants to be with forever and alongside that glory we see the incredible gentleness of Jesus because if we look at one of the Bible's other descriptions of the new heavens and the new earth we find something amazing Revelation 21 is describing the same thing verses 1 to 3 then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them that's exactly the same as what we've just been saying dwelling together always with the Lord he will dwell with them they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God it is absolutely spectacular and the visions of Revelation are just astounding in their glory splendor majesty and wonder and that's what verse 1 to 3 is describing but do you know that the next verse tells you something amazing so let me ask a question what is the first thing that Jesus is going to do to his people when he brings them into glory what's the first thing that Jesus is going to do to you he will wipe away every tear from your eyes and that is reminding us of something absolutely amazing it's reminding us of the fact that you don't arrive in heaven as somebody who is all sorted somebody who's finally put themselves right and got themselves into a good condition so that you're ready for the Lord you arrive in heaven with tears in your eyes tears of pain that's a lifetime of battling through this world abroad tears of regrets because every one of us has regrets every one of us makes mistakes and for every one of us there's things in life that don't turn out the way we want them to tears of disappointments for things have just gone wrong tears of loss and we arrive we arrive with our tears and Jesus

will wipe them all away and from that moment there will be no more mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away and if you think that you are not good enough to be a Christian then in the name of God please listen to what these verses are saying to you we do not come to God as those who have got everything right we come as those who need our tears wiped away in the second coming we see glory and we see gentleness and that's a reminder that as Christians we should not be afraid of the second coming often we are aren't we we sometimes think ahead we think what will that be like because it's unknown to us we think what will that be like and we can fear these things because they seem almost so overwhelming and often we fear the unknown but the point is it should not be unknown because the Bible is revealing to us what it's going to be like and the overwhelming message is that if you are trusting in Jesus the second coming will be just amazing because God in his son is going to take you to himself and wipe away your tears and assure you that you will be with him forever the last two questions are very short question for who is this for well as we read through these verses you will notice

I'm sure that Paul is describing believers he describes either those who are still alive or those who have died but in this passage Paul is only referring to believers he doesn't mention unbelievers at all and that's exactly the point because the people who push Jesus away and the people who say I don't want to know then they're ruling themselves out of this and they're not going to be part of it and people who reject who push Jesus away are basically saying I want to be left out and ultimately that is what will happen to them unless they come to faith and come to trust in Jesus they will be left outside and the Bible describes the fact that people will be left outside and the term that is used to

describe that place of outer darkness is hell and that's exactly what hell is it's outside all of this outside at all and I hope hope hope that you know that God does not want you to go there and all the time and again tonight he is calling you out of that darkness and into his marvellous light it's for everyone who believes and so please just believe put your faith in Jesus Christ and again that's a simple thing it's not a complicated thing it's a simple thing you're simply saying to Jesus please save me it doesn't need to be a flash of lightning or anything like that just Lord save me and I will follow you it's as simple as that this is for all who will put their faith in Jesus the last question when will all this happen well that's the one question we do not have an answer to Jesus himself said concerning that day or that hour no one knows not even the angels in heaven nor the sun but only the father Paul it was the same thing he says concerning times and seasons brother if you don't need to have anything written to you for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night so whenever you see on the internet somebody who says the end of time is coming whenever and you know not to believe them because no one knows except the father we know the what we know the how we know the why we know the who but we do not know the when and that is why you and I have

got to make sure make absolutely sure that we are ready now and in order to be ready all you have to do is put your trust in Jesus and Satan Lord I know you are coming back please save me let's pray God our Father we thank you for your plan of salvation a plan that that that yes we look back on and see your amazing work across the ages of history but it is also a plan in which we look forward to that day when Jesus will return and we pray oh God that you would just make us all ready for that day that every one of us would have a trust in you looking to you leaning on you and we pray Lord that that that you would just just enable us all by your spirit to just have that simple childlike faith which is is what you ask for that we would acknowledge that you are Lord and that we depend on you for salvation so please have mercy on us Lord and we just thank you for your plans and your promises and we look forward to that day when Jesus returns. Amen.