

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

- The Christian's hope for today -

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Introduction

- ❖ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is often studied and quoted in relation to the “Rapture” and fitted into the scheme of what will happen in the “end times”, the eschatology.
 - In Christian eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) the rapture refers to the belief that either before, or simultaneously with, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to earth, believers who have died will be raised and believers who are still alive and remain shall be caught up together with them (the resurrected dead believers) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.
 - This is based on various interpretations of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and on some other biblical passages, such as those from II Thessalonians, the Gospel of Matthew, I Corinthians and the Book of Revelation.
 - The other, older use of the term "Rapture" is simply as a synonym for the final resurrection generally, without a belief that a group of people is left behind on earth for an extended Tribulation period¹ after the events of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. This distinction is important as some types of Christianity never refer to "the Rapture" in religious education, but might use the older and more general sense of the word "rapture" in referring to what happens during the final resurrection.²
 - Many things still remain unclear.
- ❖ The study of the Rapture tends to focus on events **in the future** while Paul is focusing on the Christian hope **for today** in contrast with the grieving of people who do not have hope. A sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 **should concentrate on the Christian hope.**

¹ Tribulation: a period of severe oppression and persecution.

² Rapture. (n.d.). Retrieved March 01, 2016, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapture>

- The **Christian hope** is a major theme in this letter:
 - “We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, **and your endurance inspired by hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3).
 - “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13).
 - “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and **the hope of salvation as a helmet**” (1 Thess 5:8).
 - Both in 1:3 and in 5:8 Paul uses “faith”, “hope” and “love”, as he does in 1 Corinthians 13:13.
- ❖ This sermon outline provides a study of the text using highlighted colours and a visualisation of the argument.

Literary Context

- ❖ A short summary of the letter:
 - 1:1 Addressee and greeting
 - 1:2-10 Thanksgiving
 - 2:1-16 Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica
 - 2:17-3:13 Paul wants to visit Thessalonica. He has received a report of the visit of Timothy
 - 4:1-5:22 Instructions and teaching:
 - 4:1-12 Live a holy life
 - 4:13-5:11 The Christian hope and the Day of the Lord
 - 5:12-23 Final instructions
 - 5:23-28 Final words of blessing and greeting

Historical Context and Background

- ❖ Thessalonica, nowadays Saloniki, is a city in the northern part of Greece and it was the capital of the Roman province Macedonia.
- ❖ Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica (around A.D. 49), some years before he wrote this letter (Ac 17:1-3):
 - “When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.** ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said. Some of the Jews

were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”

- His reasoning centred upon:
 - Jesus as the Messiah who suffered (and died) and rose from the dead. This is important in relation to the problem which he addresses in 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

❖ Although Paul did not write about burial practices in the Greek world, it is worthwhile to mention some aspects.

- Greek cities had a necropolis, where the citizens buried the remains (inhumation or cremation) of their deceased relatives. The necropolis was situated just outside the city walls and on the way to it one had to pass all the (magnificent) monuments erected in remembrance of the dead.
- A **necropolis** ("city of the dead") was an extensive and elaborate burial place of an ancient city. It was found outside the city proper and often consisted of a number of cemeteries used at different times over a period of several centuries. In Greece and Rome, necropolises often lined the roads leading in and out of town.³
- The Greek attitude towards the dead is best summed up in these words of Achilles (an ancient Greek hero): "I'd rather be a day-labourer on earth working for a man of little property, than lord of all the hosts of the dead."⁴
 - According to one of the Greek philosophers (Epicurus), death is the end of both body and soul and should therefore not be feared.
- Consolation in the Greek-Roman world was regularly associated with the expression of sympathy with an exhortation to comfort those afflicted by grief. A eulogy (a speech of praise) of the deceased was also frequently delivered.
 - It included the following thoughts: all are born mortal; death brings release from the miseries of life; time heals all griefs; future ills should be prepared for; the deceased was only 'lent' - be grateful for having possessed him.⁵
 - In the Roman world of Paul, the speech of praise offered an opportunity to display the family's status, to connect the deceased's merits with his or her ancestors, and to reinforce collective values.⁶

³ Necropolis. (n.d.). Retrieved March 01, 2016, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necropolis>

⁴ *Od.* 11.489-91. Death, attitude to. In: Hornblower, S. (2003, p. 433-434)

⁵ Consolation. In: Hornblower, S. (2003, p. 378)

⁶ *Laudatio funebris*. In: Hornblower, S. (2003, p. 822)

- In the second century A.D. Irene, who lived in Egypt, wrote a letter to comfort her friends, who had lost their son. She concluded her letter with the following words: “But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another. Farewell.”⁷

Form and structure

- ❖ While reading this passage, it is instructive to have a look at the use of:
 - the personal pronouns “we” and “you”. These are highlighted below;
 - the use of the name “Jesus” and his titles “Christ” and “Lord”. These are coloured below;
 - and the use of “who are still alive and are left”.
 - See the chart on the next page:



Image1. By ex Novo. A small part of the necropolis "city of the dead" outside the city gates of Hierapolis (Col 4:13).

⁷ Hendriksen, W. (1979, p. 111). The letter of Irene is found in: Deissmann, A. (1927). *Light from the ancient East; the New Testament illustrated by recently discovered texts of the Graeco-Roman world*. New York: George H. Doran.

Introduction to the subject:	13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.
Paul and the Thessalonians share this faith:	14 We ⁸ believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we ⁹ believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.
New information, which Paul had not shared previously:	15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord , will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.
Elaboration:	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. 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.
Encouragement:	18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.
Explanation of the marked words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ We = Paul, Silas and Timothy, the authors of this letter (1 Th 1:1). ❖ You and each other = the (first) recipients of this letter, the Thessalonians. ❖ We = used inclusively: Paul, Silas and Timothy (we) + the Thessalonians (you). ❖ We = used inclusively: we who are still alive + and those who died through Christ. ❖ Jesus = used in verse 14, two times. ❖ Lord = used in verse 15-17, five times. ❖ Christ = used in verse 16. ❖ who are still alive and are left = used twice (see explanation).

⁸ It is also possible to read **we**. (See explanation of the marked words)

⁹ It is also possible to read **we**. (See explanation of the marked words)

Exposition

Verse 13

- ❖ **“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed.”** = we would like you to know.
- ❖ **“about those who sleep in death,”**
 - Who fall asleep = “κοιμάω” 2. **to be dead, sleep.** Those who have already died (1 Th 4:14), those who died in communion with Christ (1 Cor 15:18).¹⁰
 - A few members of the church have died recently. What happened to them?
- ❖ **“or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”** This probably refers to a serious uncertainty concerning the fate of the deceased:
 - What will happen to the dead, when Christ returns? Will they be LEFT BEHIND?
 - What will happen to *me*, if I die before Christ returns? Will I be LEFT BEHIND?
 - Some quotes illustrate what it is like when there is no hope:
 - “While there's life there's hope, and only the dead have none.”¹¹
 - “If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” This remark of Paul summarizes quite well what to do when there is no hope (1 Cor 15:32).
 - The hope of a Christian is one of the main themes in this letter: 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8. See introduction.

Verse 14

- ❖ **“If we believe”**¹²: when we read “for we believe”, the sentence becomes a lecture rather than a dialogue. By translating *if*, the audience (Thessalonians) is drawn into the argument... Their response would be something such as: “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again? You are questioning our belief? Of course we believe that! You mean that the dead in Christ will not miss out on the ‘rapture’?”
- ❖ **“that Jesus died and rose again”** is the most central statement of the Christian faith. A parallel problem is found in 1 Corinthians 15: 12-19:

¹⁰ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 551)

¹¹ Theocritus (fl. c. 270 BC). He was a Greek poet of the 3rd century BC.

¹² Wallace, D. (1996, p. 694)

- “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?
If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. (...) For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. **Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.** If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”
- ❖ **“and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus”** = God is acting! He will raise the dead. He is the ultimate source of life and Jesus has the keys of life and death (Rev. 1:17-18).
- ❖ **“those who have fallen asleep in him.”** The ESV translates: **“through Jesus”** instead of **“in him,”** which is preferred. **“Through Jesus”** indicates that he was the acting agent when these Christians died. They fell asleep through him.¹³ This is a very comforting thought!
 - A clear example is found in the death of Stephen: “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59–60).
 - Paul wrote to the Philippians: “For to me, **to live is Christ and to die is gain.** (....) **I desire to depart and be with Christ,** which is better by far” (Phil 1:21-23).

Verse 15-17

- ❖ In verse 14 Paul uses the name Jesus two times, but in these verses he uses the titles Christ (1) and Lord (5). Elsewhere in this letter, most of the time he uses combinations of the name Jesus and his titles as in 1 Thessalonians 1:1: “Lord Jesus Christ”.
 - By using “Lord” without adding the name “Jesus” or “Christ” he is directing all attention to the one who is given all authority over the living and the dead, the ruler.
- ❖ **“According to the Lord’s own word.”** These words are not found in the gospels. Perhaps Paul is referring to an oral tradition or to a special revelation. Paul assures the readers that they can dismiss their fears. He refers to the authority of the Lord himself. What he is telling the Thessalonians is in accordance with the words of Jesus.
- ❖ **“we who are still alive, who are left** till the coming of the Lord”
 - who are left = **“περιλείπομαι”** *remain, be left behind.*
 - Paul uses the expression **we who are still alive, who are left** twice. The Thessalonians are worried about the fate of the already deceased. Will they be left behind? Paul reverses this thought. It is not the deceased who will be left because they are with Christ, but we, the living, are left till the coming the Lord. See the diagram on the next page.

¹³ Wallace, D. (1996, p. 434)

Thessalonians

Paul

What happens to the deceased?

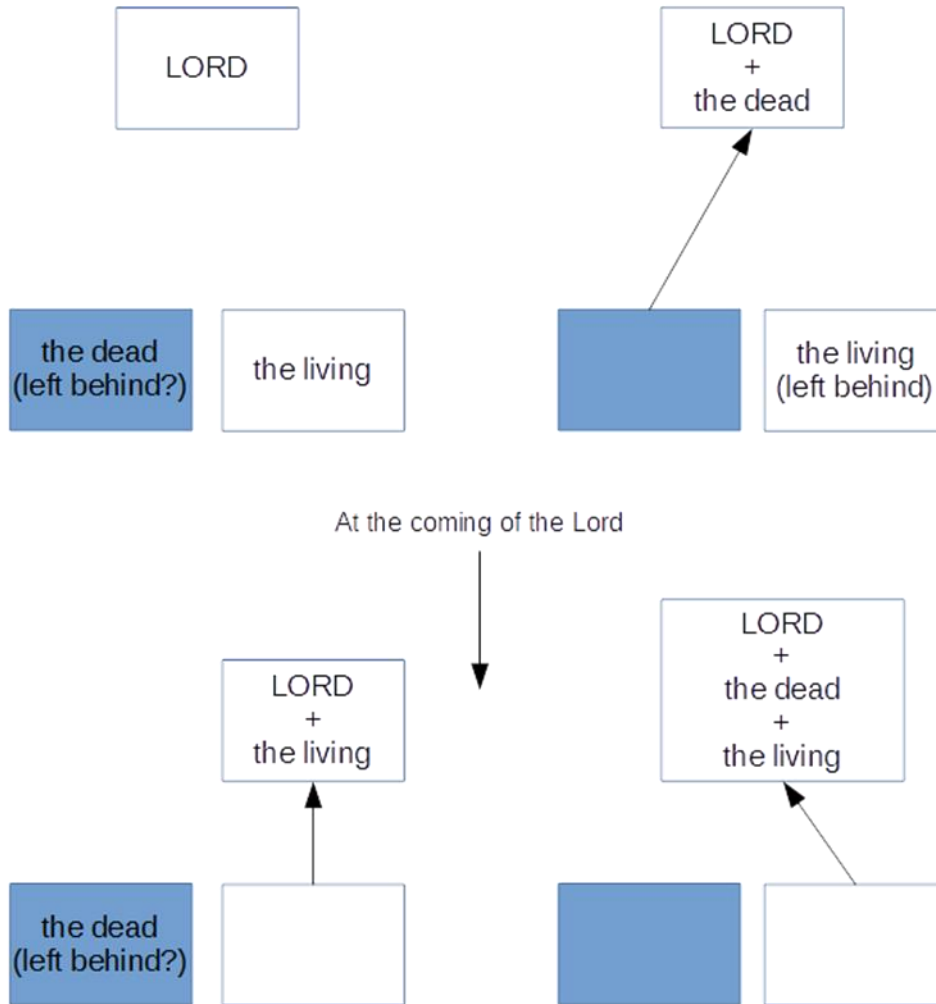


Image 2. Explanation. At the left, the problem of the Thessalonians has been mapped. Their main concern was: will the already deceased be left behind when our Lord comes back? At the right side, the teaching of Paul makes clear that the already deceased will precede the living, which were left behind.

- Therefore, we **will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.**
- ❖ **“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven.”** This event will be announced as a victorious moment. When? We do not know. He will come as a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2).
 - with a loud command,
with the voice of the archangel and
with the trumpet call of God,
 - “loud command” = “**κέλευσμα**” *signal, (cry of) command = when the command is given*¹⁴; *call, summons*¹⁵ issued by God.
 - voice = “**φωνή**” 1. an auditory effect, *sound, tone, noise...* 2.c. that which the voice gives expression to: *call, cry, outcry, loud or solemn declaration.*¹⁶
 - Trumpet call of God = “**σάλπιγξ θεοῦ**” 2. *at the call of the trumpet blown by God’s command.*¹⁷
- ❖ **“and the dead in Christ will rise first.”** The dead will be brought back and receive a new body.
 - Compare 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 57: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, **the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.** (...) He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- ❖ **“After that, we (...) will be caught up.”** After the dead have received a new body, all will be caught up.
 - Caught up = “**ἄρπάζω**” ‘snatch, seize’, **take suddenly** and vehemently, or take away in the sense of (...) 2. to grab or seize suddenly so as to remove or gain control, snatch/take away; b. in such a way that no resistance is offered.¹⁸
 - The verb indicates the suddenness of the action, not the direction. All will be taken up into the glory of God and of Christ.
 - In the clouds = “**νεφέλη.**” Often the clouds are depicted as “convenient vehicles for transportation through space but clouds are a regular feature of biblical theophanies

¹⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 524)

¹⁵ Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., & McKenzie, R. (1996, p. 936)

¹⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 1072)

¹⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 1068)

¹⁸ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 130)

(the appearances of God or the revelations of God's glory); the divine glory is veiled in clouds, shines forth from them and retreats into them."¹⁹

- Phil 1:23
- ❖ **“to meet the Lord in the air.”** This will be a solemn and festive meeting. He is the Lord and he will submit all things to his heavenly Father (1 Cor 15:21-28). To meet the Lord **in the air** doesn't mean **in the sky**. But much remains unclear.
 - meeting = **“ἀπάντησις,”** *the action of going out to meet* an arrival, especially as a mark of honour.²⁰
 - air = **“ἀήρ”** 1. the atmosphere immediately above the earth's surface, air.²¹
- ❖ **“And so we will be with the Lord forever”** and share in his glory (Rom 8:18) and have an everlasting life.

Verse 18

- ❖ **“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”** As people who have hope! This was Paul's purpose: encouragement instead of disillusion, hopelessness, doubt.
 - Encourage = **“παρακαλέω”** 2. to urge strongly, *appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage.*²²
 - Based on this encouragement and hope Paul continued to write in 5:6-10:
 - “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, **putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.** For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.”

Application

- ❖ The belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death is the foundation of the Christian faith and hope. When a relative or friend, a member of the church has died, it is sometimes difficult for those who attend the funeral service to imagine what has happened at the moment of death and what will happen to his body in the future.

¹⁹ Bruce, F. (1982, p. 102)

²⁰ Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., & McKenzie, R. (1996, p. 178)

²¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 23)

²² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 765)

- If somebody dies in Christ, he or she is in safe hands, the hands of God, who is a God of the living:
 - In reply to the Sadducees, Jesus said: “Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? **He is not the God of the dead, but of the living**” (Mk 12:26-27).
 - “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.” (Rev 14:13).
- ❖ Christians are people who live in hope of the realization of the Kingdom of God, the restoration of the creation, a new creation. Christians are members of a new community determined by the reality of the future. Because of this hope Christians can rejoice in suffering, persecution and the adversities of life (Rom 8:18-39).²³ Hope is, therefore, an essential characteristic of the Christian life. **The Christian hope is rooted in the character of God, and especially in the resurrection of Christ from the dead.** A future eschatological intervention which will put an end to all earthly distress.
 - The Bible emphasizes the strategic role of hope in the human personality. Faith seems to answer the human need for spiritual meaning, love relates to the needs of humans to relate to self and others (Mt 22:33-27), and hope reflects the motivational needs of humans to find meaning and purpose in the (nearby) future.²⁴
 - The main aspect of the Christian hope is the gift of the Holy Spirit: “you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance** until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:13-14).
 - The Christian hope makes it possible to deny oneself (Mt 16:24) and even take up his or her cross.
 - “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).
- ❖ Paul wrote about people who have no hope. What about the hope of today’s people?
 - What hope does people with a Hinduist background have? Or Muslims, Animists, Buddhists, Atheists?
- ❖ Ignorance about major aspects of the Christian faith makes Christians vulnerable to doubts and uncertainties. Therefore, it is important to address these questions in preaching and teaching.

²³ Everts, J. *Hope*. In: Hawthorne, G. (1993, p. 415-417).

²⁴ Beck. J. *Hope*. In: Benner, D. (1999, p. 578-579).

- But do not speculate about events in the future and take the following words of Paul to heart: “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. (...) For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:9-12).

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