

RCC in the Word
Week of September 16
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The paragraph that we are considering this week is one of Paul's most explicit descriptions of the resurrection of the saints and the return of Jesus for His church. (See also the last several verses of 1 Corinthians 15 for further descriptions of our grand exit from this sin-cursed world). I love these words of our brother Paul to the Thessalonians because they not only describe future events, but they go further to show us how we ought to think and live in light of the reality of these events. Here are a few things that we may observe from this text.

First, Paul mentions that there are people who grieve without hope (v13), implying that in our journey to becoming sanctified it is possible to grieve *with* hope. Obviously the grief of which he is speaking is that of earthly bereavement. Those who mourn the loss of loved ones without hope are either not in a right relationship with God or do not have a proper view of eternity, or possibly both. Having to face the sudden passing of both of my parents earlier this year, I can say that apart from the hope of eternal life and the gospel, their deaths would seem like little more than a senseless tragedy and if any God did exist, I would want nothing to do with a God that would not (or could not) prevent something like this from happening. But in light of Christ's gospel and eternity, I can say that a situation like this, hard as it may be, is filled with hope. Hope that God is in control and that He has a purpose in all of this.

Another thing that we notice is the significance and meaning of Christ's resurrection (v14). Many of us have known since childhood that Jesus died and rose from the dead and it's too easy, as we grow older to lose sight of the miracle of the resurrection and to live our lives completely unaffected by it. But we would all do well to spend time pondering Christ's resurrection and come to see it as an amazing victory over death, not just for Christ Himself, but also for His people.

Now there are two ways that we must look at death. First, death is our great enemy, the ultimate consequence of sin, brought into the world by Adam and Eve's disobedience and continued in every generation. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that the last enemy to be destroyed is death (v26). But secondly, for us and for now, death is our only way out of this life and into the next one. A necessary evil in a manner of speaking. Remember the dark river that separated Christian and Faithful from the Celestial City in *Pilgrim's Progress*? They had been traveling through and enjoying the delights of Beulah Land, the outskirts of heaven, which I believe to represent old age when the delights of this world fade and one's longing for heaven is more acute than ever. But here now was this dark river and crossing right through it (and drowning in the process, it is implied), was the only way to the Celestial City. For Christian and Faithful as well as for every believer, it was the final test of their faith. But the point of all of this is that there *is* a resurrection on the other side. May we make much of Christ's resurrection and ours and may we come to view death with godly hope because of it.

A third observation from the text is a timeline of future events (vv15-17a). First, Jesus 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." Next, the dead in Christ will be resurrected, and third, those who are in Christ who have not yet died will be "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." But didn't we just say that

physical death is our only way out of this life and into the next one? Will some of the saints not die? The answers to these two questions are yes and yes. As a general rule, with only two exceptions in the history of human existence (Enoch in Genesis 5:24 and Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11), physical death has been God's way of bringing people from this life to the next one. However, Paul (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) makes it clear that God will not bring all of His people out of this world through physical death before Christ's return and that there will in fact be some still living on the earth at that time who will be removed from this earth without undergoing physical death. Therefore, it is not contradictory to hold both of these facts to be true. We should assume that we will experience physical death at some point in the future, but if our Lord returns before that happens, then that is the Father's business for "no one knows the day or the hour..." (Matthew 24:36).

Our next observation, in brief, is my favorite phrase in this passage--"and so we will **always** be with the Lord" (v17, emphasis mine). That's it! That is the **end** of this earthly life as we have always known it! We will never sin again; indeed our lifelong war with sin is over in an instant!! Our parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 15 expresses it like this--"in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...we shall be changed" (v52). "And so we will always be with the Lord" means that our eternal life on the other side has begun! Reread that last phrase of verse 17 several times, emphasizing a different word each time, and let its glorious truth settle into your heart and encourage you.

And finally, speaking of encouragement, we are given a command to encourage one another regarding these things (v18). We desperately need the encouragement of these realities and we need to be giving it to others. Our days are often long and tiring, our nights short and restless, and the stresses of life right in front of our faces all too easily obstruct our view of eternity. Some of the best encouragements that I've ever received as a Christian when I've been struggling with the hardships of this life have been thoughts and words about eternity. Paul means for us to help one another keep an eternal perspective on the stuff of this life because we as individual Christians so easily lose sight of it. I vividly remember sitting in my grandmother Agnes' living room years ago when her good friend Cleo was over for a visit. Both ladies are now with the Lord. My grandmother was expressing to her friend some kind of discouragement that she was facing. Cleo looked at her thoughtfully and said "Agnes, we're almost there, just hold on, we're almost there." As a young teenager, I knew what she meant by "there" and even though her encouragement was intended for my grandmother, it was a great encouragement for me as well. Let's be about encouraging ourselves from the Scriptures to keep eternity in view and giving this encouragement to others, because there will come a time when we're in need of this encouragement ourselves.

-Written by Eddie Lyrene