

Death and Christian Grief

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4

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But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. (4:13)

The study of the end times is the consuming passion of many in the church today. Sensational best-selling authors argue that current events fulfill their often dubious interpretations of biblical prophecy. Some claim to have figured out the secret that even Jesus in His Incarnation did not know—the time of the Second Coming (cf. Matt. 24:36). Tragically, some people get so caught up in the study of eschatology that they neglect the basic principles of spiritual growth and evangelism that the Second Coming is designed to motivate.

Of all the end-time events, the Rapture of the church seems to generate the most interest and discussion. The young church at Thessalonica also had questions about that event, so Paul addressed their concerns in this passage. But unlike most modern-day treatises on the subject, Paul's concern was not just doctrinal, but pastoral. His intent was not to give a detailed description of the Rapture, but to comfort the Thessalonians. The intent of the other two passages in the New Testament that discuss the Rapture (John 14:1–3; 1 Cor. 15:51–58) is also to provide comfort and encouragement for believers, not to fuel their prophetic speculations.

When Paul penned this epistle, the Thessalonians had been in Christ only for a few months. The apostle had taught them about end-time events, such as Christ's return to gather believers to Himself (e.g., 1:9–10; 2:19; 3:13). They also knew about the Day of the Lord (5:1–3), a time of coming judgment on the ungodly. But some issues about the details of their gathering to Christ troubled them. First, they seem to have been afraid that they had missed the Rapture, since the persecution they were suffering (3:3–4) caused some to fear they were in the Day of the Lord, which they obviously had not expected to experience (2 Thess. 2:1–2). Furthering that misconception were some false teachers, about whom Paul warned in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, “[Do] not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.” But the persecution they were experiencing was not that associated with the Tribulation or the Day of the Lord. It was merely the persecution that all believers can expect (2 Tim. 3:12) and that Paul had warned the Thessalonians about (3:3–4).

The Thessalonians' fears that they were in the Day of the Lord and thus had missed the Rapture imply that the Rapture precedes the Tribulation. If the Thessalonians knew that the Rapture came at the end of the Tribulation, persecution would not have caused them to fear they had missed it. Instead, that persecution would have been a cause for joy, not concern. If the Day of the Lord had arrived, and the Rapture was after the Tribulation, then that blessed event would have been drawing near.

But of gravest concern to the Thessalonians were those of their number who had died. Would they receive their resurrection bodies at the Rapture, or would they have to wait until after the Tribulation? Would they miss the Rapture altogether? Would they therefore be second-class citizens in heaven? Were their deaths chastisement for their sins (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30)? They loved each other so deeply (cf. 4:9–10) that those thoughts greatly disturbed them. Their concern for those who had died shows that the Thessalonians believed the return of Christ was imminent and could happen in their lifetime. Otherwise, there would have been no reason for their concern. The Thessalonians' fear that their fellow believers who had died might miss the Rapture also implies that they believed in a pretribulational Rapture. If the Rapture precedes the Tribulation, they might have wondered when believers who died would receive their resurrection bodies. But there would have been no such confusion if the Rapture follows the Tribulation; all believers would then receive their resurrection bodies at the same time. Further, if they had been taught that they would go through the Tribulation, they would not have grieved for those who died, but rather would have been glad to see them spared from that horrible time.

Paul wrote this section of his epistle to alleviate the Thessalonians' grief and confusion. He was concerned that they **not ... be uninformed ... about those who are asleep** and thus **grieve as do the rest who have no hope**. Since their grief was based on ignorance, Paul comforted them by giving them knowledge.

The phrase **we do not want you to be uninformed** or its equivalent frequently introduces a new topic in Paul's epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:12; Col. 2:1). The conjunction but and the affectionate term **brethren** (cf. (vv. 1, 10; 1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25) emphasize the change in subject and call attention to the new topic's importance. In this case, Paul introduced not only a new subject but also new revelation he had received "by the word of the Lord" (v. 15).

Since it was their primary concern, Paul first addressed the question of **those who are asleep**. While *koimao* (**asleep**) can be used of normal sleep (Matt. 28:13; Luke 22:45; Acts 12:6), it more often refers to believers who have died (vv. 13–15; Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 2 Peter 3:4). In verse 14 **those who are asleep** are identified as “the dead in Christ.” The present tense participle *koimomenon* (v. 13) refers to those who are continually falling **asleep** as a regular course of life in the church. They had grown increasingly concerned as their fellow believers continued to die.

It is important to remember that in the New Testament “sleep” applies only to the body, never to the soul. “Soul sleep,” the false teaching that the souls of the dead are in a state of unconscious existence in the afterlife, is foreign to Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul wrote that he “prefer[red] rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord,” while in Philippians 1:23 he expressed his “desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better.” Those statements teach that believers go consciously into the Lord’s presence at death, for how could unconsciousness be “very much better” than conscious communion with Jesus Christ in this life? Jesus promised the repentant thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise [heaven; cf. 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7]” (Luke 23:43). Moses’ and Elijah’s souls were not asleep, since they appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), nor are those of the Tribulation martyrs in Revelation 6:9–11, who will be awake and able to speak to God. After death the redeemed go consciously into the presence of the Lord, while the unsaved go into conscious punishment (Luke 16:19–31).

Paul related this information to the Thessalonians so that they would **not grieve**. There is a normal sorrow that accompanies the death of a loved one, caused by the pain of separation and loneliness. Jesus grieved over the death of Lazarus (John 11:33, 35), and Paul exhorted the Romans to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). However, the apostle did not have that kind of grief in mind here, but grief like **the rest who have no hope**. In Ephesians 2:12 Paul described unbelievers as “having no hope and without God in the world.” There is an awful, terrifying, hopeless finality for unbelievers when a loved one dies, a sorrow unmitigated by any hope of reunion. Commenting on the hopeless despair of unbelievers in the ancient world, William Barclay writes,

In the face of death the pagan world stood in despair. They met it with grim resignation and bleak hopelessness. Aeschylus wrote, “Once a man dies there is no resurrection.” Theocritus wrote, “There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.” Catullus wrote, “When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep.” On their tombstones grim epitaphs were carved. “I was not; I became; I am not; I care not.” (The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, rev. ed. [Louisville: Westminster, 1975], 203)

Even those pagans who believed in life after death did not have that hope confirmed by the Holy Spirit; they merely clung to it without affirmation from God. But Christians do not experience the hopeless grief of nonbelievers, for whom death marks the permanent severing of relationships. Unlike them, Christians never say a final farewell to each other; there will be a “gathering together [of all believers] to Him” (2 Thess. 2:1). Partings in this life are only temporary.

The Thessalonians’ ignorance about the Rapture caused them to grieve. It was to give them hope and to comfort them that Paul discussed that momentous event, giving a fourfold description of it: its pillars, participants, plan, and profit.

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