1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*

The Structure of the Passage

It would have been well if chapter 5 had opened at verse 13 of chapter 4, because there is a section here that connects directly with the subjects of chapter 5 through verse 11. Verses 13 and 14 address the problem the Thessalonians had concerning brethren who had died before the Lord's return — would they miss the kingdom on account of it? Verses 15 through 18 form a parenthesis, introducing the solution to that problem. Then chapter 5, verse 2 picks up where verse 14 leaves off, at the subject of the day of the Lord. The comfort of verse 18 and the encouragement of chapter 5, verse 11 form the two bookends of this extended section: *comfort one another with these words,* and *comfort yourselves together and edify one another.*

Ignorance, Willfulness, and the Remedy

The apostle says: *I would not have you to be ignorant.* There is no assurance in ignorance. When you do not know something, you do not know whether it is good or bad — there is nothing to rest on. But ignorance can be taught, and that is precisely what the apostle is doing here. There is a remedy for ignorance, and he is bringing it forward.

There is a different kind of ignorance — willful ignorance — that resists the remedy. 2 Peter 3 describes those who ask, where is the promise of His coming? and adds: *for this they willingly are ignorant of.* That was in connection with the Lord's coming also. Their ignorance was not waiting to be taught; it was maintained by the will, and it hardened what was beneath it. The Thessalonians were not in that case. They had the problem and they had the honest difficulty, but they were not about to abandon the hope. They were willing to live with their difficulty until it was resolved. That is always the right posture toward scripture — to hold our difficulties without forcing a false resolution, and to wait upon God to remove them.

Sleep in Jesus — The Body, Not the Soul

It is important to understand that the word *asleep* in Scripture is never applied to the soul. When the apostle speaks of those who have fallen asleep, he is speaking of the body lying in death. The Lord's own words in John 11 make this plain. He said, *Our friend Lazarus sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep.* The disciples thought He meant ordinary rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly: *Lazarus is dead.* So sleep, in the Lord's own usage, referred to the body, not to the soul's state.

The use of the word *sleep* for the believer's death is more than a euphemism. A euphemism substitutes a softer word for an uncomfortable one, but conveys the same meaning. Here there is substance to the word, because it is applied where

the precious blood of Christ has been applied. The wages of sin is death — that is the word for those under judgment. But the believer, whose sins are entirely removed by the blood of Christ, is not spoken of as dead in that sense, but as asleep. Death is not swallowing him; he is passing through what, in the light of the resurrection and the coming of the Lord, is more like a sleep than a death.

Darby renders the end of verse 14: *those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.* That is a precious thought — it is through Jesus that the believer passes through this experience. Moses's soul was not asleep when he appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration. Absent from the body is present with the Lord. The soul is with Christ, which is far better. But the body sleeps, waiting for the resurrection morning.

Solving the Problem — A Prior Rapture

The Thessalonians had been taught to wait for the Son of God from heaven — as we read in chapter 1, verse 10. But without having been given the precise order of events, some of their brethren had died in the meantime. Their difficulty was: would those who had died miss the coming of the Lord, and thereby miss the kingdom? The answer the apostle brings is the revelation of a prior rapture.

God will bring with the Lord those who have fallen asleep through Jesus — that is, when He comes in glory, His own will be with Him. How? Because before His appearing in glory, the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. The dead in Christ shall rise first, and the living shall be caught up together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. The sleeping saints will not miss out — they will be raised and caught up before the Lord appears in glory. When He comes with them, they will really be coming out of heaven with Him, because He has already come for them.

The word *prevent* in verse 15 means *precede.* Those who are alive will not go before those who are asleep — the sleeping saints have priority: the dead in

Christ shall rise first. The Thessalonians' concern that the departed had missed out is answered: they have not missed out. They go first.

By the Word of the Lord — A Revelation to Paul

Verse 15 opens with a significant phrase: *for this we say unto you by the word of the Lord.* This was not teaching that Paul derived from Matthew 24, which concerns the Lord's coming in judgment at the end of the tribulation period. It was a direct revelation — one of several given to the apostle Paul concerning the distinctive things of Christianity. He received a revelation about the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23), about the one body, about the change that comes to believers' bodies at the rapture (1 Corinthians 15), and here about the order of events at that coming. These are the things that characterise Christianity and were entrusted to this apostle to unfold.

The Blessed Hope and the Glorious Appearing

Titus 2:13 joins two things together with great beauty: *looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.* There is one second coming of the Lord, but it has two phases or aspects. The blessed hope is the coming of the Lord for His saints — the rapture. The glorious appearing is the coming of the Lord with His saints — the display of His glory to set up the kingdom. Between the two, the great tribulation will run its course.

The distinction is clear in 2 Thessalonians 2, where the Antichrist is to be destroyed by *the appearing of his coming.* That compound phrase — the appearing of his coming — shows that the word *coming* can apply to either phase, but the word *appearing* always refers to the manifestation in glory. By specifying the appearing of his coming, the Spirit of God shows that it is that particular aspect of the one coming that destroys the lawless one. Three words — appearing, manifestation, and revelation — consistently refer to the Lord's

coming at the end of the tribulation. When the word *coming* alone is used, context determines which phase.

The natural mind might expect the appearing of glory to come first — the great procession, the display, the fanfare. When a great man comes to a city, the outward show comes first and the man himself is found within it. But the coming of the Lord reverses this. Himself comes first, quietly, for His own. The display of glory comes second. And since our hearts are set on Himself, that first part is especially touching to the heart's affection.

The Doctrine and the Practice

Knowing what we know has profound practical implications. The flesh might reason: if the Lord is coming shortly, why continue at my employment? Why make provision for family or fulfil ordinary obligations? But the apostle, in the very same breath as this doctrine of the coming, had already said in chapter 4, verse 11: do your own business, work with your hands. The Lord expects to find His people occupied when He comes. Not the neglect of responsibilities, but faithful discharge of them, is the implication of the blessed hope.

The purpose of this passage is comfort. It does not rest there, but that is where it begins. *Wherefore comfort one another with these words.* What a loss there is when a believer has a willful ignorance about the Lord's coming — for these are precisely the words that comfort and edify the saints of God. Ignorance is not bliss here. It is sorrow without hope. The remedy is the truth: God has told us what will happen, and not one of His own will be left behind.

— Study ends —