

1 Thessalonians 4:15–18

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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 Parenthesis — and What It Answers

Verses 15 through 18 form a parenthesis within the larger section that runs from chapter 4 verse 13 through chapter 5 verse 11. Verses 13 and 14 introduced the problem: brethren had died while the saints were waiting for the Son from heaven, and there was grief and fear that those departed would miss the kingdom. Verse 14 closes with the assurance that God will bring those who sleep through Jesus with Him. But this raises a question: how? Verses 15 through 18 answer that — by a prior rapture. And then chapter 5 verse 1 picks up directly from the end of verse 14, taking up the day of the Lord which is introduced by the Lord coming with His saints in glory.

The rapture of the saints is not part of the times and the seasons. The apostle says in chapter 5 verse 1: *of the times and the seasons, ye have no need that I write unto you*. Since he was at pains in these verses to bring something new and necessary to them, and then says that concerning the times and seasons they need

no instruction, the conclusion follows that verses 15 through 18 do not fall within the times and seasons at all. The rapture belongs outside the prophetic epochs and their character — it is prior to the day of the Lord, prior to the manifested power of God being put forth in the earth in judgment.

We Which Are Alive and Remain

The apostle writes in the first person plural: *we which are alive and remain*. He does not say *they* — those who will happen to be alive in some distant future. He says *we*, associating himself with those who would still be living at the Lord's coming. This was not careless writing. It reflects the any-moment expectation in which the Thessalonians had been set from the first three weeks of apostolic ministry, and in which the apostle himself lived. He could place himself among those who might be alive when the Lord came. That is the only posture consistent with what he had taught them.

The word *prevent* in verse 15 is old English for *precede* — to go before. Darby renders it *anticipate*. The living will not anticipate or go ahead of those who are asleep. The answer then arrives in verse 16: *the dead in Christ shall rise first*. Verse 15 introduces the subject and verse 16 gives the resolution — with all of the glorious detail of how this will happen filling the space in between.

The Lord Himself — The Personal Touch

Verse 16 says: *the Lord himself shall descend from heaven*. The word *himself* could have been omitted and the sentence would still read perfectly well. But *himself* is there, and it brings something personal and touching into the statement. He will come personally. Not by a delegate, not by some exercise of power at a distance, but the Lord Himself. And since our hearts are set on Himself — not on a programme, not on a dispensational chart, not on a system of prophetic events — this word *himself* goes straight to the affection.

It is also worth noting the change of terms in the passage. In verse 15, it is *the coming of the Lord* — the personal name, touching the affections. In verse 16, it is *the dead in Christ* — and Christ is the collective term, speaking of the body formed by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The Lord has to do with the individual; Christ has to do with the collective. The dead in Christ are not some of the members of the body, but all — every member of the body will be brought home, for they are *his*, and at his coming, they that are his shall be raised (1 Corinthians 15:23).

The Assembling Shout — The Voice of the Archangel — The Trump of God

Three things accompany the Lord's descent: a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God. The word rendered *shout* is used only once in the New Testament — and it was a military word, carrying the authority of command and the necessity of an obedient response. Darby renders it the *assembling shout* — which is apt, because what this shout calls forth is an assembling. Not a legal compulsion from without, but a call on the ground of grace, from the one whose voice the sheep know and follow. The Song of Solomon gives the sentiment in chapter 2 verse 10: *Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

The voice of the archangel connects with a remarkable thread in Scripture. The one place in Scripture where the archangel is named speaking to someone is in Jude verse 9, and the occasion was a dispute about a dead body. Here the occasion is again about dead bodies — the dead in Christ raised. And if there is any created being who will recognise the archangel's voice at the rapture from having heard it before, it is the one who was the adversary in that former dispute. He heard it then. He will hear it again. The Lord rebuked him then. The Lord has defeated him at the cross since. He will have no ground to dispute about the bodies of those for whom Christ shed His blood.

As to the trump of God — the objection that this must be the seventh trump of Revelation, and therefore the rapture must occur after the tribulation, does not hold. There is a trump sounded after the Lord appears, to gather Israel as the prophets describe; that trump comes later than the seventh. The seventh is not the last. Moreover, the trump in 1 Corinthians 15 draws on a well-known military practice of the Roman legions, in which three trumpet calls were sounded — the first to break camp, the second to fall into rank, the third to begin the march. The last trump was the signal that the march had begun. Paul uses that as an illustration, not as a numbered entry in the sequence of Revelation.

Caught Up Together — Rapture

The word *rapture* does not appear in Scripture, just as the word *Trinity* does not appear. But as those who deny the Trinity are precisely those who object to the word, so those who object to the word *rapture* are generally those who object to the truth it expresses. The word was in use before Darby had light on the subject — Kelly established that in response to attacks on it. The concept is here, plainly: *caught up together* — taken up, removed from this world, body soul and spirit, to be with the Lord.

The word *together* is beautiful. It is a word that characterises Christianity in several ways — the gathering together to His name, the coming together in the assembly, the gathering together unto Him at His coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1). Here we will be caught up *together* — the living and the formerly dead, every member of the body of Christ, none missing, all together at last before Him in the Father's house that is already prepared and waiting.

This togetherness is of an entirely different character from the togetherness of compromise that the ecumenical movement promotes. Many dear children of God are entangled in associations that require the setting aside of truth. When the Lord comes, those ties will be severed — and all His own will be caught up

together, on entirely different ground: the ground of union with Him by the Spirit of God.

The Lord in the Air — The Father's House

They shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The question of acoustics and the laws of physics have nothing to do with this — it is a divine operation, carried out by the power of the one who called Lazarus from the tomb. When He said *Lazarus, come forth*, the dead man heard and came — not because dead men have functioning ears, but because the Lord put forth His power to cause him to hear and respond. The Lord can cause the dead to hear and cause others not to hear. These things are entirely in His hand and entirely beyond the present natural order, which is itself going to be dissolved.

Absent from the body is present with the Lord. The Father's house that the Lord spoke of in John 14 was ready the instant He entered it as victorious man — risen, glorified, entering the Father's presence as the firstborn from the dead. He does not need time to prepare it; it was prepared in His person going in as man. The holy city of Revelation 21 is the bride, the Lamb's wife — it speaks of the assembled glory of the redeemed, not of architectural construction. And as to nearness in the Father's house, the pattern of Revelation 4 and 5 is of circles — all points of a circle are equidistant from the centre. Every saint will dwell in the nearness of the Father's heart. *So shall we ever be with the Lord.*

That is the note on which the passage ends. Not a catalogue of details, not a prophetic timetable, but the one thing that matters: *so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*

— Study ends —