

# THE COMING AGAIN OF THE LORD JESUS (1 THESS. 4. 13-18).

## PART 2.

This is the second (and concluding) part of an article which focuses on the comfort which God provides for those of His people who experience the sorrow that follows the home-call of loved ones.

### SCRIPTURE

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, which have no hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen 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 that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up 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.

1 Thessalonians 4. 13-18 (*The Revised Version*)

### BACKGROUND

As we saw in Part 1, it is apparent that, 'the Thessalonian believers fully expected that the Lord would come again during their lifetime and that they never envisaged that any of their number would die before then. But clearly that is just what had happened, and the remaining saints feared that, somehow, they – the Christians who had died – would therefore be disadvantaged'.

We concluded Part 1 by noting that (according to the latter part of verse 15), 'those believers who are alive when the Lord comes will neither forestall nor enjoy any precedence over those who have fallen asleep'.

We pick up the threads where the apostle explains why those who 'are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep'.<sup>1</sup>

### EXPOSITION

#### Verse 16.

#### **The Lord Himself.**

The word, 'Himself', stands in the position of emphasis in the Greek text, stressing to us that the Lord Jesus will not commit or delegate this task to any other. That is, the apostle stresses, 'the Lord Himself' and no agent, deputy or intermediary will come in person. It will be 'His own august personal presence'.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, at His Second Advent, when He comes 'in the clouds with great power and glory'<sup>3</sup> to reign, He will be 'revealed from heaven with His mighty angels'.<sup>4</sup> But, when He comes first to catch up His people 'in the clouds',<sup>5</sup> no mention is made of any angels.<sup>6</sup>

Yes, 'an angel of the Lord' may have 'descended from heaven', to remove the great stone from the entrance to our Lord's sepulchre following His resurrection.<sup>7</sup> But it will be no angel who 'shall descend from heaven' to remove the Lord's completed church from the earth.

Yes, the coming of the Lord Jesus will be accompanied by an archangel's 'voice'. But, in accordance with His precious promise to 'come again, and receive you to myself',<sup>8</sup> it will be no archangel substitute who will descend to receive His people.

#### **Shall descend from heaven.**

This is not the first time, of course, that our Lord is said to 'descend from heaven'. With reference to His incarnation, He spoke of Himself six times as having 'come down (the same Greek word<sup>9</sup> here rendered 'descend') from heaven'.<sup>10</sup>

Then, He had descended to bring salvation to a guilty world.<sup>11</sup> But, one wonderful day, He ‘shall descend’ to bring all those whom He has saved home to Himself for ever.

One dark day, men had unsuccessfully challenged Him to ‘*come down* (again, the same Greek word here rendered ‘descend’) *from the cross*’.<sup>12</sup> But, one wonderful day, the one who then refused to ‘descend’ *from His cross*, ‘shall descend *from heaven*’.

### Select quotations

‘*No advance warning*, no heads-up, and no notice given’.<sup>13</sup>

‘The long-awaited *Jesus will descend—this time not as a babe*’.<sup>14</sup>

### ‘With a shout’.

And so, the age of grace, which *commenced* with ‘*a sound from heaven*’,<sup>15</sup> will *conclude* with ‘*a shout*’, when the Lord Himself shall descend ‘*from heaven*’.

Prior to His Second Advent, also, the Lord ‘*shall give a shout*’: ‘The Lord shall roar from on high, and utter His voice from His holy habitation ... *He shall give a shout*, as they that tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth’.<sup>16</sup>

But that ‘shout’ will spell *judgment* for the Lord’s foes, who have assembled themselves for ‘battle’<sup>17</sup> *against Him*, whereas the ‘shout’ here spells *blessing* for His people, who (‘in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye’<sup>18</sup>) will be ‘gathered together *to Him*’.<sup>19</sup>

Psalms 47 associates a ‘shout’ and a trumpet blast with the opposite divine movement: ‘Shout to God with loud songs of joy! The Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet ... *God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet*’.<sup>20</sup>

Jim Flanigan comments, ‘His kingly rights are universal and, while the Psalm calls upon all people to confess this now, the full acknowledgement of it must wait until that day when Messiah will return in power and glory as King of Kings and Lord of Lords ... It is *as if God had come down to intervene and deliver His people, and now, having delivered them, He has ascended His throne, returning to His palace in glory*’.<sup>21</sup>

But, if in Psalm 47, the Lord is said to *ascend* ‘*with a shout*’ and ‘*with the sound of a trumpet*’, here, in 1 Thessalonians 4, on a separate occasion, He is said to ‘*descend* ... *with a shout*’ and ‘*with the trumpet*’.

The word translated ‘shout’ occurs only once elsewhere in the entire Greek Bible—in the Book of Proverbs, which reads, ‘The locusts have no king, and yet march orderly at one *command*’.<sup>22</sup> But, interestingly, *outside* of scripture, the word was used of a command given (i) by a master of a ship to his rowers, (ii) by a huntsman to his dogs, (iii) by a chariot-driver to his steeds, and (iv) by a commander to his troops.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, the word ‘denotes *a shout of command*’.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘shout’ is *not actually said* to be that of the Lord, simply that it sounds when the Lord descends. But I see no reason to doubt that it is *His shout*—and I have my eye especially on His own words: ‘the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves *shall hear His voice* and come forth ...’.<sup>25</sup>

As I understand it, *both the sleeping and the living saints* will respond immediately to the Lord’s great ‘wake-up call’. This in full accord with our Lord’s own words to Martha prior to the raising of her brother: ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, *though he die, yet shall he live* (as we have it here, ‘the dead in Christ will rise first’); and *whoever lives and believes in me shall never die*’ (as we have it here, ‘we that are alive, that are left, shall ... be caught up’).<sup>26</sup>

### Select quotations

‘Christ’s cry of command is directed *to the dead*, whom He calls to the resurrection by means of the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God’.<sup>27</sup>

‘It would seem that the (‘shout’) of which St Paul speaks is the summons to all, *both living and dead*, to meet their Lord’.<sup>28</sup>

### **'With the voice of an archangel'.**

We do not find the title, 'archangel', anywhere in the Old Testament and it is found only once again in the New Testament—of 'Michael the archangel'.<sup>29</sup>

We read elsewhere of Michael engaging in conflict on several occasions<sup>30</sup> and of 'Michael and his angels' waging war successfully against 'the dragon and his angels'.<sup>31</sup> It may be that such a military role and character<sup>32</sup> is especially consistent with the references to the 'shout of command' and to 'the trump of God'.

Scripture does not tell us, in so many words, that there are others who occupy the exalted rank of 'archangel' over the heavenly host but the description of Michael elsewhere as 'one of the chief<sup>33</sup> princes'<sup>34</sup> suggests there may well be.

In any case, the emphasis in our verse is on the nature and character of the voice, rather than on either (i) the identity of the speaker or (ii) what is said.

#### **Select quotations**

'There is no article in the original before either word, so that the quality of the voice, its majesty and authority, is intended'.<sup>35</sup>

'The Greek has no definite article, and the phrase may simply mean "with a voice such as an archangel uses".'<sup>36</sup>

### **'And with the trump of God'.**

'The trump of God' is unquestionably one and the same as 'the last trump' of 1 Corinthians 15: 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump ... the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible'.<sup>37</sup> Note the following comments on 'the last trump':

'It is possible that Paul is referring to the well-known Roman war trumpet, as he certainly did ... when he spoke of the need for a clear trumpet call if men are to be summoned to battle.'<sup>38</sup>

'I have read that the Roman army employed three distinct trumpet calls to get their troops moving. At the first trumpet, the soldiers would dismantle their tents; at the second, they would assemble in proper order; and at the third, the last trumpet, they would move out and march off. It was then a case of "forward".<sup>39</sup> Paul might, therefore, be saying that this will be the signal for all Christians to "move out".'

But, whether this is so or not, the sound of the combined 'shout', 'voice of an archangel' and 'trump of God' will certainly be sufficient both to raise the dead and to transform the living.

#### **Select quotations**

'This is the military trumpet ... by which the Lord of Hosts musters and marshals His array ... "As a Commander rouses his sleeping soldiers, so the Lord calls up His dead, and bids them shake off the fetters of the grave and rise anew to waking life" (Hofmann).'<sup>40</sup>

'In the Roman army nothing happened without sounding the trumpet'.<sup>41</sup>

'A trumpet call was used for a variety of purposes in the ancient orient but "was not much used as a musical instrument; its main task was to give signals".<sup>42</sup>

It could herald a great event or issue a warning to the people (1 Sam. 13. 3; Jer. 4. 5). It was often used in military settings (Josh. 6. 4–5; Judg. 6. 34; Neh. 4. 19–20; cf. 1 Cor. 14. 8). It signalled the Hebrews' encounter with Yahweh at Sinai (Exod. 19. 16,19) and was used as part of the pageantry at religious festivals (Num. 10. 10; Lev. 23. 24; 25. 8; Psa. 81. 3; cf. Matt. 6. 2). Finally, both Jewish and Christian images of God's arrival at the end to gather his people, execute judgment, and establish his kingdom include the announcement of his arrival with the trumpet (Isa. 27. 13; Zech. 9. 14; Ezra 6. 23; Rev. 8. 2–12; 9. 1, 13; 11. 15).

'Used in conjunction, the voice of the archangel and the shout of command and the trumpet depict a grand fanfare. No one will be able to miss the event'.<sup>43</sup>

'It seems that God's programme for the church down here will be terminated by the sounding of a last trumpet, 1 Cor. 15. 52, much as will be His programme for Israel, Rev. 11. 15, when the Lord God Almighty takes His great power and reigns, an event signalled by an angel sounding the last of the seven trumpets, Rev. 8. 2'.<sup>44</sup>

### Select quotations (continued)

'It is ... likely that Paul has in mind the silver trumpets of redemption described in Num. 10. 2–10. They were made of the silver half-shekels of redemption (Exod. 30. 12–13). There were six occasions on which they were used: for gathering the people, for guidance in their journeys, in war, in worship (over their offerings), at the jubilee, and at their set feasts.

'In their journeys through the wilderness, the last trump was the signal to pack up and march. They were on their way to the promised land. The last trump is a beautiful symbol of the Rapture'.<sup>45</sup>

"The archangel's voice" and a blast of "God's trumpet" add further decibels to the shout, which will awake and rally to renewed life "those who've fallen asleep".<sup>46</sup>

### 'And the dead in Christ shall rise first'.

We missed Jesus' *first* coming but we shall not miss His *second* coming—and neither will any who, by then, will 'have fallen asleep in Christ'.<sup>47</sup>

Far from suffering a disadvantage by being left behind at 'the coming of the Lord', they shall be raised *even before* the living saints are changed.

Yet, when our Lord descends from heaven, 'everything is going to be over mighty fast'.<sup>48</sup> There will indeed be an order, a sequence ... but there will be *no perceptible interval!* Now God's longsuffering waits<sup>49</sup> (as it did once 'in the days of Noah'<sup>50</sup>) but, *when God's clock strikes, things will really move!*<sup>51</sup>

One 18<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew scholar and theologian quotes as follows from ancient Jewish writings:

(i) 'our Rabbis say ... the fathers loved to be buried in the land of Israel, because *the dead in the land of Israel...* "rise first" in the days of the Messiah', and

(ii) 'all that *die in the land of Israel!* "shall *rise first!*", because the holy blessed God shall awake them, and raise them'.<sup>52</sup>

But you and I know better!

For, according to 'the word of the Lord', it is not '*the dead in the land of Israel!*' but '*the dead in Christ!*' who will 'rise first'. And their resurrection will be courtesy of Him who made a pathway through the grave.<sup>53</sup>

However, the apostle's explanation why those who 'are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep' embraces not only (i) a *revelation* ('the word of the Lord'), (ii) a *return* (that of 'the Lord Himself'), and (iii) a *resurrection* ('the dead in Christ shall rise first') but, also, (iv) a *rapture* ('be caught up') and (v) a *reunion* ('together with them').<sup>54</sup> Which brings us to verse 17.

### Select quotations

'The Thessalonians feared that only the living would share in the glory and joy of *the Return.* They are assured that *the living will not even be the first to share in it; it is the dead in Christ who will have that advantage!*'<sup>55</sup>

'The results of the descent of the Lord are stated: first, the resurrection of the dead saints, which removes their disadvantage by putting them on a level with the living; and, then, the rapture of both the risen dead and the survivors, presumably in changed, transformed, redeemed bodies ... to meet the Lord in the air'.<sup>56</sup>

### Verse 17.

'Then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up'.<sup>57</sup>

I suppose that it could be said that 'then' the *church militant* joins the *church triumphant* to become the *church glorified*.

The English expression 'caught up' translates a word<sup>58</sup> which means properly 'to take something forcefully'<sup>59</sup> and which is used here in the sense 'to catch up or away'.<sup>60</sup>

It is the same word as is used to describe both the ascension of the Lord Jesus<sup>61</sup> and the transportation of the apostle Paul into the third heaven.<sup>62</sup>

Following his explanation, 'together with them be caught up', Paul adds his exhortation, 'therefore comfort one another'. For what a soul-stirring prospect that reunion is!

But even more soul-stirring is the momentous statement which the apostle makes in verse 10 of the next chapter—namely, that, whether (at 'the coming of the Lord') we are then 'awake' (those alive) or whether we are then 'asleep' (in death, that is), we shall 'live (enter into life in all its fullness) together with Him'.

Small wonder that Paul adds there, too, in verse 11, 'therefore comfort ('encourage') one another'.

### Select quotations

'He stresses that they will be together, and mentions it before saying that they will be caught up'.<sup>63</sup>

"'Caught" in the original implies a sudden, irresistible force—seized, snatched up! In Matt. 11. 12, it is rendered, "The violent take it by force".<sup>64</sup>

'The word translated "caught up" ("snatched away") 'was often used by non-Christian writers to speak of life or the living being "snatched away" by death ... Plutarch, for example, a close contemporary of the apostle, used [the word] and its compounds to refer to those who die an early death such that they are "snatched away" from "the advantages of life, such as marriage, education, manhood, citizenship, and public office" ...

'Funerary inscriptions speak of how Fate has "snatched away" the living' ... Augustus, in his important funerary inscription, *Res gestae*, refers to the early death of his two adopted sons, Gaius and Lucius: "My sons, who as youths, were snatched from me by Fortune" ...

'Paul, therefore, may be cleverly inverting a common use of [the word] in referring to death: rather than the expected picture of death or fate "snatching away" to hades those who are living, the living "will be snatched up" so that they do not face the last enemy, death'.<sup>65</sup>

'Both simultaneously are lifted up in one band to meet the Lord'.<sup>66</sup>

'We shall be caught up with them at the same time that they shall be caught up, "together" (*ἄμα*) ... marking, as usual, connection in point of time'.<sup>67</sup>

'Though they pass out of sight and out of reach, it is not for ever'.<sup>68</sup>

'The return of the Lord, by itself, is not the salve Paul applied. Rather, the reunion of the dead with the living and their shared glory in the presence of the Lord is crucial'.<sup>69</sup>

### 'In the clouds'.

The clouds will form 'the element with which they will be surrounded, and in which they will be borne up to meet their coming Lord'.<sup>70</sup>

Both the raised dead saints and the changed living saints will ascend 'in the clouds', possibly<sup>71</sup> in a similar manner (i) as our Lord Himself was taken up to heaven in 'a cloud'<sup>72</sup> and (ii) as God's two witnesses in the period prior to the Great Tribulation<sup>73</sup> will go up to heaven 'in a cloud'.<sup>74</sup>

### 'To meet the Lord'.

Both the dead in Christ and those still alive will be wafted up together to 'a meeting<sup>75</sup> of the Lord' (literal translation).

In the Gospels, we read of several occasions when individuals or groups were privileged to 'meet the Lord' when He was in the world:

(i) 'When Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit'.<sup>76</sup>

(ii) 'All the city came out to meet Jesus'.<sup>77</sup>

(iii) 'When they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met Him'.<sup>78</sup>

(iv) 'As He entered into a certain village, there met Him ten men that were lepers'.<sup>79</sup>

(v) 'When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met Him'.<sup>80</sup>

(vi) 'They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"'.<sup>81</sup>

But there is no reason for us to envy them, for the soul-thrilling prospect awaits every one of us that, at His coming, we shall meet Him!

And what a wonderful adventure that will be, and I guess the more so for those who are alive when He comes—for those who will see Him for the very first time, unlike 'the dead in Christ', who will previously have been 'with' Him.<sup>82</sup>

Then, at 'the coming of the Lord', we shall all be 'gathered together to Him'.<sup>83</sup> It would be true to say, therefore, that, just as we 'gather to Him' now,<sup>84</sup> so we will 'gather to Him' then.<sup>85</sup>

### **'In the air'.**

Given that Paul speaks elsewhere of the devil as 'the prince ('ruler') of the power ('authority') of the air',<sup>86</sup> I do not think it fanciful to describe the chosen place of our rendezvous as 'enemy territory'. For, clearly, in some sense, 'the air' is the sphere from which Satan conducts his present operations.

And the very fact that it is there ('in the air') that 'the church, which is His body'<sup>87</sup> will first 'meet' the returning Lord serves to underscore the mighty victory which He once wrought over 'the prince ('ruler') of this world'.<sup>88</sup>

### **Select quotations**

'It is from "the air" that the world is at present ruled by demon powers ... But now exactly in the region of [Satan's] power, at the very headquarters of the conquered foe, there takes place the meeting of the Conqueror and His victorious hosts.

The triumph cannot be greater; a more glorious festival of victory cannot be. Christ has conquered completely. His church had overcome absolutely. Therefore, the crowning of the persecuted takes place at the headquarters of their defeated Persecutor'.<sup>89</sup>

'There may be significance in the meeting place being "in the air." In the first century the air was often thought of as the abode of demons (Satan is described as "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2. 2). That the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on the demons' home ground so to speak, shows His complete mastery over them'.<sup>90</sup>

### **'And so shall we ever be with the Lord'.**

Beyond any doubt, this constitutes the believer's ultimate blessing and fruition of his brightest hope.<sup>91</sup>

There is, I note, nothing *in this passage itself* to indicate where the Lord and His 'loved ones all, complete'<sup>92</sup> will go after their 'meeting ... in the air'. Yet we can rest assured that (as evidenced by His own words, spoken long before, 'I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also'<sup>93</sup>) the Lord will then return (accompanied by all His saints) to His Father's house in heaven.<sup>94</sup>

Nor, for that matter, is anything said about any change being made to the bodies, either of the dead in Christ or of living believers, at His coming.

But change there most certainly will be!

(i) 'We wait eagerly for ... the redemption of our bodies'.<sup>95</sup>

(ii) 'Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed'.<sup>96</sup>

(iii) 'We await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform ('fashion anew') our body of humiliation to be like His body of glory, according to the working of the power whereby he is able even to subject all things to Himself'.<sup>97</sup>

For our Lord's coming will mean, not only (a) the fulfilment of His promise and (b) the enjoyment of His presence but also (c) the exertion of His power, a power that enables Him both to raise the bodies of the dead<sup>98</sup> and transform the bodies of the living.<sup>99</sup>

But, of such details, Paul says nothing here, because his concern has been simply to prove how groundless was the anxiety of the Thessalonians about those who had died.

### Select quotations

'There is no possibility that those who have died in Christ will ever be separated from Christ. They died 'through' Him (v. 14); they sleep 'in' Him (v. 16); they will rise 'with' Him; and they will come 'with' Him too (v. 14). Christ and his people belong to each other inseparably and indissolubly ...

'The momentary encounter will lead to an everlasting fellowship. Thus, the descending Lord and the ascending saints ... will be united'.<sup>100</sup>

'What happens after believers meet the Lord in the air? ... Considering Paul's purpose of comforting believers regarding the eternal state of the dead in Christ, verse 17 provides an appropriate conclusion to the narrative.

'But for those interested in end-time events this conclusion seems abrupt and leaves much unsaid ... Other events associated with the end, such as a period of tribulation, the judging of humanity, or a millennial reign, are not mentioned'.<sup>101</sup>

'Their being caught up into the air is against the idea that the Lord is coming down to the earth. They have been raised for life in heaven (2 Cor. 5. 1), and He has come down from heaven to fetch them'.<sup>102</sup>

'It is into the air that all the saints are caught up into the company of the Lord and from the air that God will lead them on with Jesus to heaven where the fellowship with Christ begun in the air will continue forever'.<sup>103</sup>

'"Thus we will always be with the Lord" suggests that both dead and living Christians will return to heaven with the Lord'.<sup>104</sup>

'Of the final abode of His glorified saints nothing is said here; for the Apostle closes, as soon as he fulfilled his purpose of satisfying his Thessalonian readers that the dead will participate in Christ's coming'.<sup>105</sup>

'There is absolutely nothing in it for curiosity, though everything that is necessary for comfort'.<sup>106</sup>

'The natural consequence of this blissful meeting with the Lord is that there will be no subsequent parting'.<sup>107</sup>

'Everything leads up to this, and after this has been said there is nothing to add. Nothing could more adequately indicate the Christian's bliss'.<sup>108</sup>

### Verse 18.

**'Wherefore comfort'<sup>109</sup> one another with these words'.**

We can confidently say, therefore, that 'the coming of the Lord' is not only:

- (i) a living hope;<sup>110</sup>
- (ii) a blessed hope;<sup>111</sup>
- (iii) a good hope;<sup>112</sup>
- (iv) a firm hope;<sup>113</sup>
- (v) a glorious hope;<sup>114</sup>
- (vi) a purifying hope;<sup>115</sup> and
- (vii) a motivating hope;<sup>116</sup>

but also:

- (viii) a comforting hope.

It has been well said that, 'In connection with Christ's coming there is a sound to hear, a sight to see, a miracle to feel, a meeting to enjoy, and a comfort to experience'.<sup>117</sup>

I note that the apostle does not exhort individual believers to comfort themselves with that which he had said, but, rather, he exhorts the saints to minister comfort to each other with that which he had said.

And Paul's exhortation (based, as it is, on solid grounds for comfort and hope) stands in marked contrast to what is written in one of the most pathetic papyrus letters that has come down to us from the following century.

That letter was written by a well-to-do lady named Irene, who wrote to extend her sympathy to bereaved friends.

Extracts from that letter read:

'Irene to Taonnophris and Philo good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas [one of her own immediate family] ... And all things whatsoever were fitting, I have done ... *But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another.* Fare well'.<sup>118</sup>

As the scholar who translated this letter points out, it is clear that Irene 'experiences the difficulty of those whose business it is to console and who have no consolation to offer ... Who could help feeling for the helplessness of this woman ...?'<sup>119</sup>

But, in splendid contrast—and not limited to Irene's bare, '*Therefore comfort one another*'—the apostle concludes, '*Therefore comfort one another with these words*'.

And what tremendous consolation 'these words' convey.

### Select quotations

'The pagans in Paul's time had no way to comfort each other in the face of death because they had no hope'.<sup>120</sup>

'The gospel provides the comfort of Christian hope. The hope expands our world beyond the moment of mourning by placing it in the context of eternity. The moment of loss is seen in the context of certain future reunion and eternal togetherness in the presence of the Lord.

'The loss remains a reality, but it is a temporary reality. The grief is real, but it is no longer grief without hope. The harsh reality of separation is joined by the joyous promise of reunion as the fact of death is transformed by the promise of life eternal'.<sup>121</sup>

'A funerary inscription from second-or-third-century Thessalonica refers to the tomb as "the place to sleep until the resurrection".<sup>122</sup>

I close with the words of another:

'It is because God has been pleased to reveal this part of His purpose that the Thessalonians (and we) may comfort one another.

'It is not on Paul's guesses or our own that our strength rests.  
It is on what God has revealed'.<sup>123</sup>

**'Amen, come, Lord Jesus'**.<sup>124</sup>



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Having reassured the Thessalonians that their departed loved ones will not miss out on the Rapture, Paul gave a step-by-step description of that event', John MacArthur Jr, '*1 & 2 Thessalonians*', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16-17.
- <sup>2</sup> C. J. Ellicott, '*St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*', page 65.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark 13. 26.
- <sup>4</sup> 2 Thess. 1. 7.
- <sup>5</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> 'When He comes to the earth to establish His Kingdom, He will send His angels to the four corners of the earth to gather the elect, who will be both Israelites and Gentiles who enter the Kingdom. However, there is no angel ministry connected with the rapture of the church', J. Vernon McGee, '*First and Second Thessalonians*', page 80.
- <sup>7</sup> Matt. 28. 2. Compare, also, how 'the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily form as a dove upon Him', Luke 3. 22.
- <sup>8</sup> John 14. 3.
- <sup>9</sup> The Greek verb 'καταβαίνω'.
- <sup>10</sup> John 3. 13; 6. 33, 38, 50, 51, 58; cf. John 6. 42.
- <sup>11</sup> See, especially, John 6. 33, 50, 51, 58.
- <sup>12</sup> Matt. 27. 40, 42.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Howell, '*1 & 2 Thessalonians (Christ-centred Exposition)*', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>14</sup> D. Michael Martin, '*1, 2 Thessalonians (New American Commentary)*', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>15</sup> Acts 2. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Jer. 25. 30. 'The chapter clearly looks on from the past dealings of God with Jerusalem, its neighbours, and its Chaldean foes, to the universal judgment of the habitable earth at the end of the age', William Kelly, '*Notes on Jeremiah*', comment on Chapter 25.
- 'The progression of description of judgment from local nations to all the kingdoms of the world has the impact of recognizing God's sovereignty with respect to not only place but also time, prophesying as it were even unto the end times, the "great day of God", when kings of the whole world will be gathered to Har-Magedon (Armageddon) for His judgment (Rev. 16. 14- 16)', I. L. Jensen, '*Jeremiah: Prophet of Judgment*', page 75.
- <sup>17</sup> Rev. 16. 14.
- <sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 52.
- <sup>19</sup> 2 Thess. 2. 1.
- <sup>20</sup> Psa. 47. 5. A shout and a trumpet-blast are linked together also in Josh. 6. 5 and Judg. 7. 20-22.
- <sup>21</sup> J. M. Flanigan, '*Psalms (What the Bible Teaches)*', pages 213–214.
- <sup>22</sup> Prov. 30 (chapter 25, LXX). 27 (Brenton's translation: although the verse is not in the printed Bagster edition).
- <sup>23</sup> References to its use: (i) by a master of a ship as an encouragement to his rowers (Aeschylus and Euripides), (ii) by a huntsman to his dogs (Xenophon), by a chariot-driver to his steeds (Phaedrus), and (iii) by a commander to his troops (Thucydides) are given, for example, by John Eadie, '*Commentary on Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*', page 161, C. J. Ellicott, *ibid.*, page 65, and H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, '*A Greek-English Lexicon*', page 936.
- <sup>24</sup> Lothar Schmid, '*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*', volume III, page 657.
- <sup>25</sup> John 5. 28.
- <sup>26</sup> John 11. 25-26.
- <sup>27</sup> C. A. Wanamaker, '*The Epistles to the Thessalonians (New International Greek Testament Commentary)*', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>28</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, '*Notes on Epistles of St. Paul*', page 68.
- <sup>29</sup> Jude 9.
- Michael seems to be the heavenly champion and guardian of the people of Israel: 'there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, *your prince*', Dan 10. 21; 'at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince who stands for the children of *your people*', Dan 12. 1.
- <sup>30</sup> Dan 10. 13, 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Rev. 12. 7.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Dan 10. 13, 21; 12. 1.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Of the most eminent', '*Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*', comment on Dan 10. 13.
- <sup>34</sup> Dan 10. 13.
- <sup>35</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, '*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*', page 142.
- <sup>36</sup> E. J. Bicknell, '*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians (Westminster Commentary)*', page 46.
- <sup>37</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 52.
- <sup>38</sup> 1 Cor. 14. 8.
- <sup>39</sup> 'The Roman army used three trumpet calls in breaking camp. First the trumpet blew loud and continuous for a few moments, which meant, "Strike your tents, pack your baggage, secure the animals". The second trumpet was to assemble the companies, battalions, in formation and await the last trumpet. The last trumpet was simply "March". The argument would run thus: Paul was among Roman soldiers at different times . . . and had no doubt often heard the Three Trumpets sounding', H. W. Hodge, Introduction to '*The Ineffable Glory*', by E. M. Bounds.
- <sup>40</sup> George Findlay, '*The Epistles to the Thessalonians (Cambridge Bible)*', page 105.
- <sup>41</sup> G. L. Greene, '*The Letters to the Thessalonians: Pillar New Testament Commentary*', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16.

<sup>42</sup> A quotation from, G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume VII, page 73.

<sup>43</sup> D. Michael Martin, *op. cit.*, on 1 Thess. 4. 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Studies in First Corinthians*, Precious Seed Publications, page 259.

<sup>45</sup> T. E. Wilson, *1 Thessalonians (What the Bible Teaches)*, page 48.

<sup>46</sup> R. H. Gundry, *Commentary on First and Second Thessalonians*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 16.

<sup>47</sup> The language of 1 Cor. 15. 18.

<sup>48</sup> 'In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye', 1 Cor. 15. 52.

<sup>49</sup> 2 Pet. 3. 9, 15.

<sup>50</sup> 1 Pet. 3. 20.

<sup>51</sup> *Studies in First Corinthians*, Precious Seed Publications, page 260.

<sup>52</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (published 1811), Volume III, pages 241-242.

<sup>53</sup> Rom. 8. 11; 1 Cor. 6. 14; 2 Cor. 4. 14.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 16-17 have often been outlined as the four 'R's'; namely, (i) The Return; (ii) The Resurrection; (iii) The Rapture; (iv) The Reunion. See, for example, J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pages 102-105, and C. C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians: Everyman's Bible Commentary*, headings of 1 Thess. 4. 16-18.

<sup>55</sup> A. Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, page 74.

<sup>56</sup> J. E. Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians (The International Critical Commentary)*, 1912, page 175.

<sup>57</sup> With (i) 'you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God', 1 Thess. 4. 1 and (ii) 1 Thess. 4. 16-17, compare Enoch, who (i) walked so as to please God, Gen. 5. 22, 24 with Heb. 11. 5, and (ii) was then snatched away out of this world, Gen. 5. 24 and Heb. 11. 5 ('that he should not see death').

<sup>58</sup> The Greek word, *ἄρπάζω*.

The Latin Vulgate translation renders this particular word by a form of the Latin word *'rapturo'*, from which (as most will guess) we get our English word *'rapture'*. Many believers, therefore, use the word, 'rapture', as shorthand to describe the coming of the Lord Jesus for His church. I have no problem with this. The fact that, as far as most English translations of the Bible are concerned, the word 'rapture' does not occur is of no concern to me, any more than the fact that neither do words such as 'Trinity', 'sovereign' or 'mission'.

<sup>59</sup> The word implies the use of a sudden force to snatch something or someone away, as was true, for example, of:

(a) the action of the evil one in our Lord's parable of the Sower and His Seed, when he *'snatches away'* the 'word of the kingdom' which is not understood, Matt. 13. 19,

(b) the action of the wolf, which *'seizes'* the sheep and scatters them, John 10. 12 (contrast verses 28-29), and

(c) the action of the Spirit of the Lord, who *'caught away'* Philip the evangelist from the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza, Acts 8. 39.

Compare also the use of the word with the direct meaning, 'to take by force', Matt. 11. 12; John 6. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Werner Foerster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume I, page 472.

<sup>61</sup> Rev. 12. 5.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 2, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians: The New London Commentary*, pages 144-145.

<sup>64</sup> George Findlay, *ibid.*, page 106.

<sup>65</sup> J. A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>66</sup> John Eadie, *ibid.*, page 169.

<sup>67</sup> C. J. Ellicott, *ibid.*, page 66.

<sup>68</sup> James Denney, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pages 181-182.

<sup>69</sup> D. Michael Martin, *ibid.*, introduction to 1 Thess. 4. 13-18.

<sup>70</sup> C. J. Ellicott, *ibid.*, page 67.

<sup>71</sup> Alternatively, it *may* be that the 'cloud' which enveloped the Lord Jesus was 'the shekinah glory of God' (as per David Gooding, *Acts: True to the Faith*, page 51); 'One should probably think here of a cloud of glory associated both with the Lord ... and with the Son of man', Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Volume 1, page 727. But contrast, 'In 1 Thess. 4.17, the "clouds" referred to in connection with the rapture of the saints are probably the *natural* ones ... So at the Ascension, Acts 1. 9', W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, article Cloud 2.

<sup>72</sup> Acts 1. 9-10.

<sup>73</sup> See Rev. 7. 14 for the description, 'the Great Tribulation'.

<sup>74</sup> Rev. 11. 12. Compare how 'Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven', 2 Kings 2. 11.

<sup>75</sup> I am aware that not a few commentators and Bible students understand the apostle's use of the word 'meet' (*ἀπάντησις*) to allude to the way in which, when a visiting dignitary paid an official visit to a city, he would be met by a representative group of citizens who would then escort him back to the city.

Personally, I am not convinced that the apostle had such occasions in mind, and would certainly challenge the claim that the word itself conveys the idea that the 'visiting dignitary' was to be escorted on his way.

I note that F. F. Bruce, who was well aware of the 'official visit' use of the word in non-biblical sources, comments that 'But there is nothing in the word *ἀπάντησις* or in this context [of 1 Thess. 4. 17] which demands this interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with His people) continues His journey to earth or returns to heaven', F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians (Word Biblical Commentary)*, page 103.)

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I note also that George Milligan (of 'Moulton and Milligan' fame and no mean scholar) wrote, 'The thought is that the "raptured" saints will be carried up into "air", as the interspace between heaven and earth, where they will meet the descending Lord, and then either escort Him down to the earth ... or, *more probably* in keeping with the general context, *accompany Him back to heaven*', George Milligan, 'St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians', page 61 (emphasis mine).

As we know well, the Lord Jesus promised, 'In my Father's house are many abiding-places ... if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also', John 14. 2-3. Surely, that is sufficient.

Separately, the Greek word 'ἀπάντησις' occurs in only three (possibly four) passages in the *New Testament* (Matt. 25. 1-6; Acts 28. 15; 1 Thess. 4. 17, and, possibly, Mark 14. 13) and (with five inflections) 49 times in the *Greek Old Testament*. The latter uses the word throughout in its normal, non-technical, sense: see, for example, Gen. 49. 1; 1 Kings 15. 12; 16. 4; 2 Kings 6. 20; 1 Chron. 14. 8; Jer. 28. 31; 34. 3 (Septuagint references in each case).

I endorse the comments of :

(i) John MacArthur Jr: 'Some argue that the word "meet" suggests meeting a dignitary, king, or famous person and escorting him back to his city. They then argue that after the meeting described in this passage, believers will return to earth with Christ. But such an analogy is arbitrary and assumes a technical meaning for "meet" not required by either the word or the context ... that explanation renders the Rapture pointless; why should believers meet Christ in the air and immediately return to earth? Why should they not just meet Him when He gets here?' John MacArthur Jr, *ibid.*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

(ii) Robert L. Thomas: 'Usage of the noun in the Greek Old Testament as well as differing features of the present context (e.g., Christians' being snatched away rather than advancing on their own to meet the visitor) is sufficient to remove this passage from the technical Hellenistic sense of the word. A meeting in the air is pointless unless the saints continue on to heaven with the Lord who has come out to meet them', R. L. Thomas, '1 Thessalonians (Expositor's Bible Commentary)', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

For those interested, a useful summary of the issues can be found in M. R. Cosby's article ("Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of 'apanthisis' in 1 Thessalonians 4. 17") on pages 15-34 of *The Bulletin for Biblical Research 4* for 1994.

<sup>76</sup> Mark 5. 2; cf. Matt. 8. 28; Luke 8. 27.

<sup>77</sup> Matt. 8. 34.

<sup>78</sup> Luke 9. 37.

<sup>79</sup> Luke 17. 12.

<sup>80</sup> John 11. 20.

<sup>81</sup> John 12. 13.

<sup>82</sup> 2 Cor. 5. 8; Phil. 1. 23.

<sup>83</sup> 2 Thess. 2. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Matt. 18. 20.

<sup>85</sup> In the language of the King James Version and the Jubilee Bible of Genesis 49 verse 10, 'Unto Him shall the gathering of the people be'; cf. 'the people shall be gathered unto Him' (Geneva Bible).

<sup>86</sup> Eph. 2. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Eph. 1. 22-23.

<sup>88</sup> John 12. 31; 16. 11.

<sup>89</sup> Eric Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified*, page 106.

<sup>90</sup> Leon Morris, *ibid.*, page 146.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. 'Christ Jesus our hope', 1 Tim. 1. 1.

<sup>92</sup> J. N. Darby, *The Hope of Day*, Spiritual Songs, page 44.

<sup>93</sup> John 14. 2-3.

<sup>94</sup> And not, as suggested by some, that He then continues His descent from heaven' to the earth; see note 75 above.

<sup>95</sup> Rom. 8. 23.

<sup>96</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 51-52; for further detail, see 1 Cor. 15. 35-49.

<sup>97</sup> Phil. 3. 20-21.

<sup>98</sup> 1 Cor. 6. 14.

<sup>99</sup> Phil. 3. 21.

<sup>100</sup> John Stott, *op. cit.*, pages 102 and 105.

<sup>101</sup> D. Michael Martin, *ibid.*, comments on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>102</sup> A. Plummer, *ibid.*, page 77.

<sup>103</sup> J. E. Frame, *ibid.*, page 176.

<sup>104</sup> C. A. Wanamaker, *ibid.*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>105</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *ibid.*, page 69.

<sup>106</sup> James Denney, *ibid.*, page 180.

<sup>107</sup> A. Plummer, *ibid.*, page 77.

<sup>108</sup> Leon Morris, *ibid.*, page 146.

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<sup>109</sup> 'The verb is the same one that is used at a number of points in this letter to mean "exhort" (1 Thess. 2. 12; 3. 2, 7; 4. 1, 10; 5. 11, 14) but here it means "to console" or "to comfort"', G. L. Greene, *ibid.*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 18. 'Comfort' clearly stands in contrast over against 'sorrow', v. 13.

<sup>110</sup> 1 Pet. 1. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Titus 2. 13.

<sup>112</sup> 2 Thess. 2. 17.

<sup>113</sup> Heb. 6. 19. 'Seneca [Rome's leading intellectual figure, tutor of Nero, and contemporary of Paul] called hope the definition of "an uncertain good", E. Hoffman, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Volume 2, page 239. But the hope set before us functions as 'anchor of the soul, both secure and firm' (Heb. 6. 19, Darby's translation) to prevent us from 'drifting away' (Heb. 2. 1).

<sup>114</sup> Col. 1. 27.

<sup>115</sup> 1 John 3. 3.

<sup>116</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 58.

<sup>117</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>118</sup> The full text of the letter reads, 'Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermouthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another. Fare well. 28 October'. (The Papyrus number P.CtYBR inv. 32 is also known as P.Oxy [Oxyrhynchus] 115.)

The English translation comes from Adolf Diessmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, page 176.

<sup>119</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *op. cit.*, page 177.

<sup>120</sup> James H. Grant Jr., '1-2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation', comment on 1 Thess. 4. 18.

<sup>121</sup> D. Michael Martin, *ibid.*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 18.

<sup>122</sup> N. Eubank, *First and Second Thessalonians*, comment on 1 Thess. 4. 13.

<sup>123</sup> Leon Morris, *ibid.*, page 148.

<sup>124</sup> Rev. 22. 20.

'In the final chapter of Scripture, Jesus ... exclaims that He is not just coming, but coming "quickly" [Rev 22. 7, 12, 20]. This little adverb moves His return from inevitable to imminent, from someday to any day', Greg Morse, 'He Comes Quickly'; accessed at ... <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/he-comes-quickly>.)

'Behold, I am coming "en taxi" says the exalted Jesus. This Greek phrase (from which we get the English word "taxi", which literally means "quick"), when modifying a verb, is adverbial in character. While it can sometimes be translated "soon", if the context supports such a reading, its basic meaning is "with speed" or "quickly" or "with dispatch".

'It tells how He will come, not when He will come ... Jesus Himself said even He didn't know when the Son of man would be coming [Mark 13. 32]. That should have put an end to theological weather forecasting that involves date setting', Ben Witherington III, 'Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not - Part Eleven'; accessed at ... <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2014/10/20/jesus-is-lord-caesar-is-not-part-eleven/>.)