

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

## **A Future to Die For**

(1 Thessalonians 4:11-18)

Study #8

### Introduction: The view from a hearse...<sup>1</sup>

Comedian and sometimes philosopher Woody Allen responded to a question about death with this: *“It’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”*

Another time, when he was being interviewed by the magazine, **Rolling Stone**, Allen was asked, *“After you die, is it your dream to live on in the hearts of your fans?”* He replied, *“Actually, I would like to live on in my apartment.”*

Woody Allen’s comments illustrate one common way to deal with death - avoid the topic, dismiss it with light humor, retreat from it in fear.

By contrast, consider the story of the Canadian ocean liner, *The Empress of Ireland*. In 1914, she sank off the coast of Quebec, Canada on the St. Lawrence River when she collided with another ship (the *Storstad*) on a voyage to England.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase, “the view from a hearse” was the original title to a book written by Joe Bayly, author of a dozen books and editorialist for Eternity magazine. He was persuaded by his editor to change the title to “The Last Thing We Talk About” as “view from a hearse” was deemed too morbid. Bayly reportedly always preferred the original title.

Nearly 1,000 lives were lost in this tragedy. On board *The Empress of Ireland* were 130 Salvation Army officers. Of those 130, only 21 lived - and of those 109 who drowned, not one was wearing a life preserver!

Many of the survivors told how the Salvation Army officers, seeing that there were not enough lifejackets to go around, took off their own and strapped them onto others, saying, *“I know Jesus. I can die better than you.”*

Woody Allen and those heroes on *The Empress of Ireland* illustrate two radically different approaches to death. And today, as we turn back to consider Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, we’ll hear him speak about the one unavoidable experience - death - every one of us must face.

We’ll see that it is possible to both live courageously AND to face death nobly IF we are confident and secure about what follows.

The topic of death was of great concern to the Thessalonian Christians. In fact, it is of great concern to all of us.

In the Bible, God deals with all of the major issues of life - frontally and without stuttering. Among these major issues is, of course, **death** and what lies beyond.

On the one hand, Scripture treats death as the most natural of events, recording the deaths of hundreds of people from Genesis to Revelation.

On the other hand, death is treated as a gross abnormality, something that was NOT a part of God’s original good plan, a horrible result of sin, the ultimate obscenity.

In the passage in front of us today, Paul deals with those who have died **“in the Lord.”**

He wants to clear up some misunderstandings the Thessalonians seem to have had about death, about the afterlife, about things to come.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> When Paul insists that the Thessalonians should not be ignorant of some important matters - or when he insists the same about you and me - we shouldn’t

## Confidence about Our “Sleeping” Family (v. 13)<sup>3</sup>

### We Can KNOW (v. 13a)

*[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren<sup>4</sup>, about those who are asleep*

*Paul wants Christians to KNOW*

When Paul and Timothy and Silas had come to Thessalonica on the Second Missionary Journey, Paul had only spent a few weeks - maybe a few months - with them. Because of persecution, he had been forced to leave prematurely, before he had taught them Christian truth as thoroughly as he would have wished.

Now, I’m confident that Paul did tell them something of what lies beyond the grave. But, he either hadn’t covered some important material or they had not quite “caught” what he had taught. Having heard that they had questions about future things, he decided to go over some of that important stuff, again.<sup>5</sup>

*Dead Christians are “asleep”*

You may have heard the story about the little girl whose father walked with her to a cemetery off to the side of an old Southern church. In hushed tones, he told her that here men were buried who had died in the service.

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be offended. There is no shame in being ignorant. In fact, we’re in Paul’s debt for making clear to us something that we are ignorant about!

<sup>3</sup> Some have been of the opinion that there is no connection between this new topic and what has proceeded in 1 Thessalonians. However, it must be borne in mind that part of his exhortation in the previous passage, “*work with your own hands*” probably arose because of a misunderstanding relative to the coming of the Lord. They thought Jesus was coming immediately (different from imminently) and so stopped working!

<sup>4</sup> “*We don’t want you to be ignorant, brethren*” - a phrase Paul used more than once to introduce an important topic - Romans 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8

<sup>5</sup> It is possible to misread this phrase (especially in the King James version of Romans 1:13), “*Now, I would not have you IGNORANT BRETHREN!*” - but that is not the spirit of Paul’s words here at all!

She asked her father, “*Really? The 9:30 or 11:00 service?*”

Of course, when Paul refers to Christians who have fallen “*asleep*” he is not talking about those who doze during Dave’s messages. Instead, “sleep” is a euphemism for death. And a euphemism is a nice way of saying something hard, a way of sugar-coating a difficult message.

There are numerous euphemisms for death - “gone on to his reward” “passed away” “passed on” “be gathered to one’s fathers” - these are all euphemisms for death. “Sleep” is one of the best known death euphemisms.

But we do have to be sure that we don’t press the euphemism too far.

Paul doesn’t mean that the soul goes to sleep at death. He only means what we mean today when we use the euphemism: That when someone dies, there is the appearance of sleep.

The reality is that the dead person is NOT sleeping.

- On the physical side, it is *more* than sleep. The body functions cease completely.
- On the spiritual side, it is *less* than sleep. The immaterial part of the person who has died is alive and kicking.<sup>6</sup>

“Sleep” - as applied to believers who have died - doesn’t mean that the soul is unconscious. For the Christian, death means an immediate, conscious entrance into the presence of Jesus!

Well, some of the believers in Thessalonica had died. That sad reality was raising questions in the minds of some of those who were alive and remaining...

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<sup>6</sup> We know this because he said in Philippians 1:23 that for him to “*depart and be with Christ*” was far better than to live in communion with Him here on earth.

## Grief Need Not Overwhelm Us (v. 13b)

*[13b]...so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.*

They were grief-stricken at the loss of their Christian friends. Grief is a perfectly normal, natural, and legitimate reaction to the death of a loved one.

We shouldn't think, in reading these words, that Paul is urging us Christians to NOT grieve the loss of someone near and dear to us. He is saying that there is no reason to grieve **as those do who have no hope!**

In the unbelieving world, hopelessness in the presence of death reigns. In the centuries before Christ and in the era of the apostle Paul, some, like the philosopher, Plato, did hold to a belief in life after death.

But not even Plato's views gave hope of a pleasant experience after death. He only envisioned, at best, a boring, monotonous existence; at worst, a tortured one.<sup>7</sup>

More common, though, was the thought that after life here is over, it's over. An inscription from a first century grave is typical of the expectations of that day (and, frankly, of our own age): *"I was not; I came; I am not; I care not."*

I understand. I understand because at a much earlier point in my own life, death held a particular terror for me.

Before I came to know the Lord, I well remember grappling with eternity and my place in it. I came to the conclusion that following this life was - nothing.

Now Jesus has taken away the dread terror of death I once knew, but when Paul mentions those who have no hope, I well remember what it is to have no hope.

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<sup>7</sup> Even among the Jews of the first century, there were some who denied life after death. There were the politically correct Sadducees, with whom Jesus tangled more than once on this very issue. (The Pharisees did believe in resurrection.)

*"The rest"* (that is, those who don't know Christ) are inconsolable in their grief when someone they love dies.

Paul says, though, that when we Christians are properly informed, we need not be overwhelmed by grief concerning the death of members of our family in Christ.

Of course, we will grieve our loss. But we do not grieve FOR those who have died.<sup>8</sup> That is because those who have died in Jesus are more alive now than they ever were on earth.

Listen to Paul's ringing cry of confidence in LIFE after life!

## Dead or Alive - Up, Up, And Away! (vv. 14-17)

### Those Who Have Fallen Asleep in Jesus (v. 14)

*[14] For if<sup>9</sup> we believe that Jesus died and rose again<sup>10</sup>, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.*

*The foundation for resurrection: The Gospel!*

The sure foundation for a Christian hope beyond the grave is the resurrection of Jesus - plain and simple.

If Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead, then our Christian hope for a life after death in Heaven with God is nothing but silly nonsense.

But, our Savior's death on the cross brought the death of death (i.e. - condemnation) for all who trust Him.

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<sup>8</sup> And that's not because we retreat to a stoicism that protects us from deep feeling or because we are callously indifferent.

<sup>9</sup> This is a first class conditional statement, where "if" = "since." The sense is that, "Given that Jesus died and rose again (and we believe that, don't we!?), we can also be confident that God will..."

<sup>10</sup> Only here and in verse 16 does Paul use "*ανιστασθαι*" (the word that describes Jesus' resurrection) of human resurrection from the dead. As a rule, and in other passages, he prefers to use "*ενεργει*"

And when He rose from the dead, He robbed physical death of its sting<sup>11</sup> and transformed it into nothing more dangerous than a nap for those who know Him.

Christian confidence in personal resurrection is not the result of philosophical speculation and it is not based on religious myth. Rather, our belief in LIFE after death rests on a sure historical foundation.

Jesus rose from the dead. Since you believe in Jesus, you will, too.

Look closely and you'll see something tender about the way Paul refers to the believer's death here - "***Those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***" The phrase brings to mind a loving parent putting a child to sleep for his or her afternoon nap.

When we lie down to sleep, we wake up. Paul says here that there will come a time when the dead bodies of Christians will have an awakening.

And there is a promise associated with this awakening. The promise is that God will bring the dead-but-fully-awake believer "***with Him.***"

*God's promise concerning "sleeping" believers*

Now I'll be the first to admit that it is tough to pin down with precision what Paul is saying here. Sincere Christians have come to different understandings of these words and of much of our passage. Interpretation, understanding, and setting a chronology are all a challenge.

I have my own thoughts. And I'll let you know what I think Paul is telling us shortly.

But for right now, leave thoughts of chronology behind and notice what Paul clearly affirms - that the believer who has died will be "***with Him.***"

The most PROMINENT reality of our experience after this life is over is that we will be with Him who has loved us best.

Now, that is not the ONLY reality of our LIFE after life. As Randy Alcorn has shown so clearly in his wonderful book, Heaven,<sup>12</sup> there will be much more that is true about our experience on the other side.

We will be with our loved ones. We will be given Kingdom authority to rule and reign. We will have adventures. We will explore the "new heavens and the new earth." We will enjoy the full range of emotions, untainted by sin. We will have perfect bodies and perfect minds. We will know and we will learn and eat and drink and work and sleep - throughout all eternity.

But, above and beyond all of that, we will be with Him.<sup>13</sup>

And our passage tells us even more. Skip on down to verse sixteen and we find Paul telling us of an experience that we Christians have to look forward to.

#### **A Description of the Lord's Descent for His People (v. 16)**

***[16] For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.***

Being God, of course, Jesus is "omnipresent."<sup>14</sup> That attribute is what allows Him to be with each one of us, His people, simultaneously.

But, we also know from various places in the New Testament that He is located, now, in a special sense, at the right hand of God in Heaven (Acts 7; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:120).

At some point in the future (we don't know when; only God knows), Jesus will leave that place called Heaven and will descend toward the earth. And when He descends, it will be a noisy affair.

<sup>12</sup> Tyndale Press, published by Eternal Perspectives Ministry, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The theory of "soul-sleep" is inconsistent with 5:10 which says that "***whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.***" At death, the believer's "***earthly house***" (2 Cor. 5:1) is dissolved and returns to the dust, but his self-conscious personality departs to be "***at home with the Lord.***" (2 Cor. 5:8)

<sup>14</sup> The word means "ever present everywhere."

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:50ff.

He will personally “shout”<sup>15</sup> - and the effect of His shout will be to awaken the bodies of His people! We have seen Jesus give that shout before.

Standing before the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, who had recently died, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come forth!**” - and Lazarus came forth!

In the future, Jesus will shout to His people - dead and alive - “**Christian, come forth!**” and, like Lazarus, Christians will obey!

Accompanying Jesus’ shout will be “**the voice of the archangel.**”

The only named archangel in Scripture is **Michael**, a powerful being mentioned in Daniel’s prophecy, and the New Testament books of Jude and Revelation. He is described as a prince among the angels. Michael will shout.

And then, to make sure no one misses the event, a trumpet will sound.<sup>16</sup>

As Jesus descends from Heaven, He will shout, the archangel will add his voice and the trumpet will sound.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In the Greek world the “shout” was the cry the rowmaster would give to his rowers to convince them to bend their backs to the oars. It was the way a military officer would urge his soldiers into the battle. It was the way a hunter would alert his hounds or a charioteer his horses.

<sup>16</sup> In 1 Cor. 15:52, the trumpet is referred to as a distinguishing sign of Christ’s approach (from Joel 2:1). Historically, trumpets have been used for wake-up calls. In the Old Testament, Jewish trumpets were used to declare war, to announce special times and seasons, and to gather the people for a journey. When God gave the Law to Israel (Exodus 20), the event was preceded by a trumpet blast. In Paul’s day, Roman trumpets were used to announce the arrival of a great person. Even in today’s military, the bugle’s notes call the troops to action.

<sup>17</sup> Paul doesn’t tell us how much of this noise will be discernible to the watching/listening world. It is inconceivable to me that these wake-up calls won’t be heard - although they might not be understood. When Paul, as the pre-Christian Saul of Tarsus, was traveling on the road to Damascus, he understood the words of Jesus, “**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**” - but those who traveled with him heard the sound of a voice, but did not hear articulate words. When God spoke to Jesus from heaven during Passion Week, all those present heard a **sound** but it was differently interpreted by various groups (John 12:28-30).

Whatever is being discussed is not a silent - or a secret - event! And Paul tells us that the **descent** of our Lord, with all the accompanying sounds, guarantees His people’s **ascent!**

What is this event? When will it happen? Questions and more questions. We find some answers in our passage. First, the “when” question.

### Some Specifics about Chronology

*Paul’s personal hope (and immanency)*

It’s hard to read this passage and NOT get the idea that Paul believed he might personally experience the event he is writing about.

The Thessalonians were concerned for the fate of their deceased Christian friends and Paul says, “**WE who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.**”

He honestly believed that the Lord might descend and come for him before he died. He couldn’t guarantee that he would be around when it happened. But he couldn’t guarantee that he wouldn’t be, either.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, this event he is writing about, which still hasn’t happened as of Sunday morning, January 6, 2008, could have happened in AD 50.

And, if it could have happened while Paul was living, and it still hasn’t happened, then there is no reason to think that it couldn’t happen while we are living!

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<sup>18</sup> We might note that there is a pretty broad consensus among those who study these things that while Paul was expecting Jesus to come back during his lifetime, that confidence was replaced as he grew older by a willingness to admit that it might not happen. Here in 1 Thessalonians (one of his first letters) he expressed great confidence. By the time he wrote 2 Corinthians (chapter 5 especially) we find him entertaining the possibility that he might die first. And by the time we come to 2 Timothy (his final letter) he is resigned to the idea that he will almost certainly die before the Lord returns.

In fact, it has been the understanding of the church for two thousand years that these end times events we read about in 1 Thessalonians could occur at any time.

In Philippians 4:5 Paul said, ***“The Lord is near”*** - and we believe that this is an age-long promise of the way things are, the constant state of affairs for planet earth.

Jesus is standing at the door of history, ready to burst on the scene at any moment.

The fact that it hasn't happened after two thousand years of promise only means that it is getting closer and closer. The event might occur today, maybe before I close in prayer at the conclusion of this worship service.

To communicate the idea that this event could happen at any moment, we use the word “imminent.”

The event that Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is imminent. Nothing stands in the way of it happening. Nothing must happen first. It could happen **now**.

So what is the event we are considering? It is an event we identify as “the Rapture.”<sup>19</sup>

### *The “Rapture” of the saints*

When we look at the word we translate ***“caught up”*** in verse 17, we get a good idea of what we mean by “the Rapture.”

At times, the word suggests a forcible or sudden seizure, as in a kidnapping.<sup>20</sup> When we are “caught up” at the Rapture it will be by God's power, and nothing will stand in the way of Him taking us home.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek word is “*ἁρπαζῶ*” but was translated in the Latin Vulgate by *raptō*, hence our English word “rapture.”

<sup>20</sup> Or, as in John 6:15 where the crowds were trying to force Jesus to become King.

<sup>21</sup> Will Satan and his armies seek to keep us from leaving the earth? Hopefully what is implied is NOT that some believers will be so attached to this earth that they will need to be dragged away to heaven kicking and screaming, as Lot needed to be convinced to leave Sodom and Gomorrah.

At other times, the word pictures a quick departure, as in Acts, chapter 8 (v. 39), where Philip the evangelist was “whisked away” after he had led the African diplomat to Christ. Our catching away will be instantaneous.<sup>22</sup>

Here is how Paul describes our own being ***“caught up”***:  
***[17] Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.***

The Bible teaches that there will be a whole generation of Christians who will not experience physical death. They will be caught up to meet Jesus in the air.<sup>23</sup>

If this event were to happen today, millions of Christians worldwide would simply vanish - in the twinkling of an eye.

The Thessalonians knew about the Rapture. They understood that they would meet Jesus ***“in the clouds.”***

But they were concerned about what was going to happen to their fellow Christians who had already died when the Rapture happened.

Will they share in this wonderful experience? Paul says they will. Jesus will raise them, too!

But how? How does God overcome the problem of decay and even deterioration? Doesn't physics argue against the dead taking part in the Rapture or in any physical resurrection?

Not at all!

Think about Lazarus, the man Jesus brought back to life after he had been dead for several days.

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<sup>22</sup> Then there are places where the word refers to a husband claiming his bride for his own. At the Rapture, Jesus is coming to claim the church, His own bride. And in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, Paul uses this same word to refer to his own brief trip to Paradise to hear inexpressible words and to see visions of glory. At the “Rapture” Jesus will take us to a new place, as He promised He would do in John 14

<sup>23</sup> That literal clouds are meant here seems clear from Acts 1:9, where literal clouds were associated with Christ's ascension.

What did Mary say when Jesus commanded that the stone be rolled away from the tomb? [*John 11:39*] “**Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.**”

She knew that the process of decomposition would have already set in. But, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead there were no tell-tale signs of deterioration. Lazarus didn’t live the remainder of his life in a state of four days worth of decomposition!

No, in bringing Lazarus back to life, God *reversed* the decaying process and restored Lazarus’ body whole.<sup>24</sup>

In the ancient world, life after death was thought to be impossible because of the fact of bodily decay. But, when God raises the dead, He doesn’t just put the elements of the body back together.

What is in view is not reconstruction, but resurrection.<sup>25</sup>

God is able to give glorified bodies to Christians who have been “sleeping” for days or for millennia! He did it for Jesus and He’ll do it for us.

When Jesus appeared after His death and resurrection, His body was glorified AND physical. He built a campfire, cooked and ate fish, walked on roads, and was recognizable to those who had known Him in life.

His resurrection body was an actual body, and so will ours be. And this is why we can talk about the place we will spend eternity - the New Heavens and the New Earth - as a place. It will be a real, physical place.

Our bodies will be real and physical as will be the world we will inhabit.

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<sup>24</sup> And remember, Lazarus’ body was not a resurrected body, just his old worn out physical body put back into service for a few more years.

<sup>25</sup> Paul argued for the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:35f and pointed out that the resurrection of the human body is like the growing of a plant from a seed. The flower is not the identical seed that was planted, yet there is continuity from seed to plant. The dead body is the seed that is planted in the ground; the resurrection body is the “flower” that comes from that seed.

Not only will the “sleeping” saints participate in this Rapture event. Paul tells us that they will get a head start!

*Who goes first?*

**[15] For this we say to you by the word of the Lord,<sup>26</sup> that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep...[16] and the dead in Christ shall rise first”**

Paul seems to be correcting thinking that would say that Christians who managed to live until the coming of the Lord would get to Heaven before Christians who died prior to the coming of the Lord. Not so. “**The dead in Christ will rise first.**”<sup>27</sup>

Again, when will this happen? Who knows? We don’t know. Could be any time now. Jesus tells us that He Himself didn’t even know. (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32) But, from this passage, we are reminded of two truths that whet our appetites for the future.

### **Two Key Relational Truths about the Rapture (v. 17b)**

**[17] Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,<sup>28</sup> and so we shall always be with the Lord.**

*The great reunion*

There is a social aspect to the Rapture and to God’s plans for our future. We “**shall be caught up TOGETHER WITH THEM.**” Death is the great separator. Jesus is the great Reconciler.

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<sup>26</sup> It is not clear if Paul means by this that what he is writing is something Jesus said, but which is not recorded in the Gospels (An example of this would be found in Acts 20:35, where Jesus is quoted as saying, “**It is more blessed to give than to receive**”) or if he just wanted to remind us that he is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In any case, what we have here is a sure word!

<sup>27</sup> I don’t picture there being much of a time lag, but clearly the resurrected bodies of the dead will precede the living Christians to meet Jesus in the air.

<sup>28</sup> The “air” was thought to be the abode of evil spirits. The fact that the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on the demons’ home turf, shows something of His complete mastery over them.

The Bible does not reveal all of the details of this reunion, but it does emphasize that you and I will reunite with our deceased brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ever wonder if you will know in Heaven people that you have known on earth? Wonder if we will maintain our identity there?

According to Paul, the answer to those wonderings is a resounding **“YES!”**<sup>29</sup>

If we are alive when the Rapture occurs, or if we have been dead for some time, we will finally all be together. You will see all of your brothers and sisters in Jesus you have loved and longed for. Relationships begun here will continue there. It is God’s plan for you to enjoy eternity with your brothers and sisters.

But, the bottom line of the importance of the Rapture is found at the end of verse 17.

*The bottom line: We will be with the Lord*

***“and so we shall always be with the Lord.”***

We have walked with Christ by faith on this earth, but in the air we shall see Him as He is. We learn so much about Jesus from Scripture - but then we will see Him face to face.<sup>30</sup>

As wonderful as reunion with brothers and sisters will be, that is not the point. The ultimate joy for us in Heaven will be to be in the presence of Christ, who gave Himself for us.

The entire content and worth of heaven, the entire blessing of life eternal, is embraced in the one thought of being united with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

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<sup>29</sup> On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John recognized Moses and Elijah - having obviously never seen them before. That has led some to wonder if we will know all the redeemed when we get to Heaven, even those we have never met! I suppose even if we don’t it won’t matter, because we will have all eternity to get acquainted.

<sup>30</sup> See 1 John 3:1-2 where we discover that when we see Him we will be like Him. Seeing Jesus will have a transforming effect on us.

And we come to the end of 1 Thessalonians four to find a final word about the purpose for which Paul gave this teaching about end-times events, a purpose we would do well to remember.

### **The POINT - Comfort/Encouragement (v. 18)**

*[18] Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

God did not give us truth about the future so that we would be able to fill in the spaces on a prophecy chart. And He didn’t tell us what was to come to foster fights about end-times chronology.

While I have given my interpretation of what Paul means by what he says here, you understand that there are other ways to approach this passage.

Bible students have come to dramatically different conclusions about what Paul is talking about as they have studied 1 Thessalonians 4.<sup>31</sup>

It is just not all that easy to come to firm convictions about some of the details of Bible prophecy.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 gives us the best description we have in the New Testament of the Rapture - and I’ll have to admit that it is not a very detailed picture!<sup>32</sup>

What the Bible says clearly is wonderful, but much of what is written doesn’t get terribly detailed and we don’t know as much about much of it as we would like to know.

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<sup>31</sup> And the same thing will hold for chapter 5, which we will study next week!

<sup>32</sup> John F. Walvoord, who, while living, was one of the most respected proponents of the pre-tribulation rapture position (which is the position that I hold and have brought to this passage) wrote, “The fact is that neither post-tribulationism nor pre-tribulationism is an explicit teaching of Scripture. The Bible does not in so many words state either.” Likewise, George Ladd, who holds a very different position (post-tribulationism) says, “With the exception of one passage, [I] will grant that the Scripture nowhere explicitly states that the church will go through the great tribulation. Nor does the Word explicitly place the Rapture at the end of the Tribulation.” One of my commentaries states, “These letters (Thessalonians) do not explicitly state the chronological relationship of the Rapture to the great tribulation and to the return of Christ to earth.

But, rather than fill us in on all the details, God's Word has given us enough information to provide us with **comfort** concerning the future.

### **Conclusion:**

That's right. The purpose of Paul's teaching today has been to come alongside of you, to strengthen you, to encourage and comfort and reassure you.

God has so wired us that we don't live right until we have reckoned with death.

For a variety of reasons, one of my favorite American authors is Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway nearly died on the Italian front during World War I. Severely wounded by an explosion, doctors dug 237 metal fragments out of his body.

This near death experience marked him. He believed that no one could face life realistically who had not looked death square in the face.

Sadly, God was agonizingly absent from Hemingway's thinking. Yet Scripture agrees with Ernest Hemingway. The Christian who is best equipped to lead an outrageously God-centered life is the Christian who has embraced the reality of a God-centered eternity.

The Greek philosopher, Seneca, once wrote, "*Only Christians and idiots are not afraid to die*" - and he was right! Death gives us nothing to fear. Because Jesus died, we only sleep. Because Jesus lived, we live forever!