

1 and 2 Thessalonians
The Dead in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

Lesson #8 for August 25, 2012

Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Acts 17:3; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23,51-58; John 5:28,29; Revelation 20:4-6.

1. In this lesson we will discuss the most important and oft-quoted passage from Thessalonians.
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In this lesson we will explore the identity of Michael the Archangel. We will discuss the various events connected with the second coming of Jesus. We will also discover what implications our understanding of these events might have for our day-by-day lives in the 21st century. Had Christians died since Paul left?
3. What happens to a person when s/he dies? There are three common beliefs that need to be understood. 1) The Sadducees, many people today, and many pagans believe(d) that this life is the only life we will ever have. Thus, they believe(d) that when one dies, s/he stays dead a long time. 2) The vast majority of modern Christians have adopted the Platonic Greek understanding of soul and body. Thus, they believe that when a person dies, it is only the body that really dies. The soul escapes from the "prison house" of the body. If the person is righteous, the soul goes to heaven. If the person is wicked and not eligible to go to heaven, the soul goes to hell where it suffers eternal torment in flames, brimstone, etc. The Roman Catholic Church has added a third category—which was convenient to help raise money at times: Those who may not be righteous enough to go to heaven but are not wicked enough to go to hell are sent to purgatory for a temporary period of correction. 3) Others like Seventh-day Adventists and the ancient Hebrews believe that—as Jesus stated in John 11—when a person dies, s/he is asleep in the grave until the resurrection morning. Which view is biblical?
4. Can you explain why each of these groups believes what it does? Can you clearly spell out—based firmly on the teachings of Scripture—why you believe what you believe? Seventh-day Adventists believe that Jesus will return in a second coming at which time the righteous dead will be raised and along with the righteous living will be taken to heaven for a period of 1000 years. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 20:4-6) After the thousand years, there will be a third coming when the New Jerusalem descends to this earth, making this earth the future headquarters of God's kingdom. At that third coming, all of the wicked will be resurrected so that every human being who has ever lived will be alive on this earth at the same time.
5. What many Adventists have not thought carefully through is that the teaching about the millennium and the third coming is not found anywhere in Scripture until we reach the book of Revelation where it was described by John in the 90s A.D. As far as we know, Paul never knew anything about the millennium or the third coming. Even John writing in the 90s A.D. said in John 5:28,29, *GNB*:

²⁸ Do not be surprised at this; the time is coming when all the dead will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out of their graves: those who have done good will rise and live, and those who have done evil will rise and be condemned. (Compare Daniel 12:2; Isaiah 26:19; Matthew 25:46)
6. These verses seem to suggest that the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked will take place at the same time. But, we know from Revelation that there will be 1000 years between the resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the wicked.
7. The Thessalonians clearly had some mistaken ideas about the condition of the dead and what will happen on resurrection morning at the second coming. We do not know exactly what those mistaken ideas included. Notice the following suggestions:

Within the Judaism of Paul's day, a variety of views regarding the end time were prevalent. One of these viewpoints, in some form, crept into the Thessalonian church. Though we're not certain exactly what it was, it seems to have been the idea that though all of God's faithful would share in the "world to come," only those who are alive at the end would be carried up into heaven. Those who died before the end would be resurrected and remain on earth.

In such a belief system, it would be a serious disadvantage to die before the end came. But it would also mean a separation between those taken to heaven and those left on earth. If the Thessalonians Paul was writing to lived until the end, they would truly ascend to heaven at the second coming of Jesus, but they would have to leave their deceased loved ones behind on earth (see *1 Thess. 4:13, 14*).
(*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sunday, August 19)

8. We do not have the mistaken views of the Thessalonians clearly spelled out in any document available to us today. What we do have are Paul's assurances in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In some respects, as for example here, we see that the Bible is kind of like a final examination. However, instead of being given the questions, we are given the answers. From those answers we are expected to figure out what the questions were! He told them: 1) Not to grieve as those who have no hope. This could even imply that they believed the dead would never be resurrected. 2) He promised them that just as Jesus had died and then rose from the dead, Christians have the promise that Jesus will come back and raise His faithful members to life again. 3) There will not be a distinction in the resurrection between those who have died and those who live until the second advent. The dead will be resurrected to rise with the living to join Christ in the air. 4) Paul as well as the believers in Thessalonica apparently believed that these events would take place very soon. What Paul was teaching was independent of their beliefs.
9. What difference does this passage of Scripture make in the way you live each day? Do you live your life in light of the fact that Jesus is coming very soon? What difference would it make in your life if you got a verified message from God that He is coming back in one year?
10. What is the purpose of such prophecies in the Bible? John 13:19 and 14:29 suggest that the purpose of prophecy is not so that we can know in advance exactly what is coming; but rather, that when it does happen, we will recognize that God has told us the truth, and we will have greater trust in Him. It is not for the purpose of setting dates for the second coming!
11. So, how about it? How much difference does believing in the soon return of Jesus Christ make in your day-by-day life? Could you do a scientific experiment to prove the second coming was imminent? If not, why do we believe in such "outrageous" ideas? How many of the Bible's prophecies have failed?
12. How many times do you suppose Paul actually managed to meet with the believers in Thessalonica before he had to leave? In that short period of time, how many of the details that we understand about Scripture and about the teachings of Jesus did he have a chance to discuss with them? None of the New Testament had been written yet!
13. While the mystery religions in Paul's day offered some glimmer of hope for a future life, most of the pagan religions of Paul's day had no such hope. They believed that when one died s/he was just dead for a long time. Note these words in a letter from the 2nd century. (Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:18) What kind of comfort could you offer a mother who had lost a son if you had no idea of a resurrection or an afterlife?
14. 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 Thermuthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do

nothing. Therefore comfort ye one another. Fare ye well.—Quoted in Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. 176.

15. While it may be true that from a human perspective when we die that is the end, from a Christian perspective we have the potential of being resurrected and living forever.
16. How much evidence can you provide from Scripture that the dead are just sleeping? (John 11:11-15; Matthew 27:52; Mark 5:39-43; Luke 8:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6,18,20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:10; 2 Peter 2:3; 3:4)
17. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14 in several different versions. Why do some versions such as the *King James Version*, the *English Standard Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, the *Message Bible*, and the *New Living Translation* suggest that Jesus will “bring with Him” the dead who have died? Other versions like the *Good News Bible* say that He will “take them back.” In modern English wording, these seem to be directly contradictory translations. In the Greek the verb *agō* means to “direct,” “guide,” or “lead” without any specific reference to direction to or from. This leaves it open for the translators to translate it in the way that seems correct to them based on their understanding of the rest of Scripture.
18. We, of course, believe that the dead are asleep in their graves as is strongly supported by such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:20-23,51-58. Just as Jesus died, was asleep in the grave, and rose to life on Sunday morning, the dead in Christ will also be raised from their graves on resurrection morning. Why is this called “a mystery” or “a secret truth”? (1 Corinthians 15:51) Is it because Paul had no way to explain exactly what will happen in “the twinkling of an eye at the last trump” when the dead in Christ will be transformed and raised with new bodies that will last forever? Do we have any way to explain it?
19. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15,16. In these verses we have an interesting situation. There are many sayings of Jesus about the second coming and the resurrection recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and John 14, as some of the examples. But, none of them match this passage in 1 Thessalonians. Were there some other writings spelling out the words of Jesus that Paul had access to but which are no longer available? Or, was this information personally passed on to Paul by some of the apostles who had been with Jesus? Another clear example of this kind of quotation from Jesus is found in Acts 20:35.
20. So, what exactly will happen when Jesus comes back the second time? For one thing, it will be a glorious event. Everyone who is alive will see it, and those who are raised in the special resurrection will also see it. (Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:31; John 5:28,29; Acts 1:9-11) Every being in the rest of the universe is sure to want to be part of that most glorious event.
21. So, who is Michael the Archangel? It is interesting that Michael the Archangel is mentioned—or in some cases only the Archangel is mentioned—at times when God is in direct opposition to the Devil. (Compare Jude 9; Daniel 10:13; 12:1) This is particularly significant when you understand the meaning of the word *Michael* in Hebrew. *Michael* means “the one who is like God” or “who is like God?” Clearly, these verses are based on a great controversy theme.
22. Another interesting point in these two verses is at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4:15. The *King James Version* suggests that the living righteous are somehow going to “prevent” the righteous who have died from coming out of their graves! This, of course, sounds completely crazy. At the time of the second coming, can you imagine one of the 144,000 trying to prevent a former saint from rising from the grave? This can be easily explained by an understanding of the change in the meaning of the word *prevent*. In the days when the *King James Version* was translated, *prevent* meant to “precede,” “to go before,” or “go ahead.” The *King James Version* was not incorrect in its day; the meaning of *prevent* has just changed in the last 400 years!
23. Read Revelation 20:4-6. In these verses we notice the very first mention of reigning with Christ

in heaven for 1000 years—otherwise called the millennium. Apparently, Paul did not know about the millennium.

24. So, at the second coming, every eye will see Jesus coming in the sky. (Revelation 1:7) The righteous dead will be brought back to life, the living righteous will be given immortality, and all of them will join Jesus as He returns to heaven. Those of us who are modern Christians believe in testing everything. (1 Thessalonians 5:21) Can we believe in such an outrageous sequence of events which seems to be completely contrary to any science that we might yet know about? Are there other things mentioned in Scripture that seem to be inconsistent with modern science? (Creation and the flood, for example!)
25. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:17,18. (Compare John 14:1-3; Matthew 24:31; Acts 1:9-11) The righteous dead will be gathered by the angels from all corners of the earth. Jesus will come back in visible form just as He went up to heaven at His ascension. The only direction of travel for the saints is upward. As we noted in Revelation 20, they will reign with Christ for 1000 years. It is only after this millennium that the New Jerusalem will come down to become a permanent part of this earth. (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12).
26. How do you understand these words from Ellen White?

But one after another their loved ones had been taken from them, and with anguish the Thessalonians had looked for the last time upon the faces of their dead, hardly daring to hope to meet them in the future life.

As Paul's epistle was opened and read, great joy and consolation was brought to the church by the words revealing the true state of the dead. Paul showed that those living when Christ should come would not go to meet their Lord in advance of those who had fallen asleep in Jesus.—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 258.2

27. In this lesson it is clearly pointed out that death for God's friends is nothing more than a temporary separation—a temporary sleep.
28. Could you list in order the exact events connected with the second coming of Jesus?
29. Having said all this about the resurrection, we need to remember that death here on this earth is at the same rate it always has been: one per customer. In Paul's day, many children died at a very young age, even many adults died in their 20s and 30s. The average life expectancy was very low. They did not have the advantages of modern medicine that we have.
30. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; and 5:23. In these verses the Greek word *parousia* appears. It is sometimes translated "presence" but really means "coming" or "arrival" of a very important individual. In ancient times, it sometimes referred to the arrival of the Roman emperor himself. These events were accompanied by pomp and circumstance and often resulted in gifts and privileges being bestowed upon those whom the emperor was visiting. Paul used that word to describe the second coming of Jesus.
31. Are you looking forward to the second coming of Jesus? Would you like to live through the time of trouble and see Him appear in the clouds? Or, would you rather be asleep through those troubling times? What is your overall reaction to this passage in 1 Thessalonians 4?

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