

Knowledge beyond Experience

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Many passages of Scripture give wisdom about things that we experience in everyday life – things that are observable and verifiable. For example, Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” You have probably experienced how a gentle answer has brought calmness to a volatile situation. You have probably observed how harsh words only make things worse. The truth of this Scripture is very much observable and verifiable in everyday life.

Other passages of Scripture, however, explain things that are beyond our experience – things that have no correspondence to our everyday experience. This week and next we are going to examine a couple such passages of Scripture. In 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 Paul describes the complex of events that surround the personal, visible return of Jesus Christ. He describes things that go beyond anything we’ve ever experienced in this life. In other words, Paul is communicating things that have been revealed to him by God.

Even though Paul’s discussion about the return of Christ is “knowledge beyond our experience,” what he communicates is wholly consistent with our experience. There’s nothing irrational or inconsistent with our experience in this life. In some ways it is only an intensification of what we experience in this life. The care, the faithfulness, the refining, and the fellowship of Jesus that we experience in this life will be intensified at His return.

With that in mind, turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. We’ll see that Paul has a very practice reason for communicating *Vital knowledge about the events surrounding Christ’s Return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)*

Apparently the Thessalonians were somewhat confused about what happens to believers who had died before the return of Christ. We don’t know whether they thought that those who weren’t alive at the return of Christ would miss it altogether or whether they thought that they would be at some disadvantage. Whatever the specific confusion, Paul writes this in verse 13:

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

“Those who are asleep” is a euphemism for “those who have died.” The death of King David (1 Kings 2:10), was expressed this way: “Then David slept with his fathers . . .” By referring to death as “sleep,” Paul is emphasizing that those who have died are inactive in this world, not that they are unconscious. Some have taught the concept of “soul sleep” – the idea that those who have died are in a state of suspended animation until the resurrection.

To the contrary, Scripture teaches that when the believer dies, s/he goes directly into the presence of Jesus. Jesus told the thief on the cross, “Today you will be *with Me* in paradise.” Paul wrote in Philippians 1, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” because dying means “departing and being with Christ” (Philippians 1:21, 23). When the believer dies, s/he dwells in the presence of Christ (in a disembodied state of being – see 2 Corinthians 5). As we’ll see, the believer doesn’t get a resurrection body until the return of Christ.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that he wants them to be informed about believers who have died “so

that you will not grieve as do the rest [i.e., unbelievers] who have no hope.” Believers still grieve when a loved one dies. Death is still an enemy that Christ will ultimately conquer (1 Corinthians 15:26). Death brings about separation; you can no longer express love to that person, no longer receive love from that person, and no longer enjoy that person. And so we grieve: we cry/mourn; some experience a type of sadness that literally takes their breath away (they can hardly breathe). There is no reason for believers to “put on a happy face” when a loved one dies; we grieve.

But we grieve in light of deeper realities. Paul wrote this passage so that we “will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.” The Thessalonians lived among people who didn’t anticipate anything beyond the grave; they believed that death meant ceasing to exist. There was no hope beyond the grave. Remember that “hope” is not a wish, but a confident expectation of something. As believers we grieve in the context of hope. Verse 14 expresses the content of our hope:

14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees the resurrection of those who have “fallen asleep in Jesus”; what happened to Christ happens to those who are “in Christ.” Since the Thessalonians believed that Jesus had died and rose again, they could be confident that those who had “fallen asleep in Jesus” would also be resurrected. Paul expresses this in an interesting way: “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” Paul will explain what this means in verses 16 and 17. Notice that those who are “in Christ” will be “with Christ” when He returns.

In verse 15 Paul discusses the resurrection of believers – both those who are alive and those who have died – at the coming of the Lord. Notice that Paul (like many believers in every generation) thought that he would be among those alive when Christ returns.

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

In case the Thessalonians thought otherwise, Paul assures them that believers who have died are at no disadvantage; as a matter of fact, they have the advantage of being raised first – before those “who are alive” at the coming of the Lord.

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.

A shout/command reflects Jesus’ authority over heaven and earth. The archangel is the highest-ranking angel in all of heaven. Trumpets are often associated with dramatic events of God. Paul is describing an overwhelming sensory experience. Jesus Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, accompanied by the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. Whereas His first coming was in humility and obscurity, His second coming will be in power. Whereas almost nobody noticed His first coming, nobody will be able to ignore His second coming. Jesus said that as the lightning flashes across the sky from east to west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be; nobody will miss it.

And when He descends, the dead in Christ will rise first. Believers who have already died will be resurrected first. They instantaneously receive a glorious, incorruptible, immortal body, a body uniquely suited to the presence of God. They will receive bodies that are just like Jesus' resurrected body (Philippians 3:20). Believers who have died are resurrected first . . .

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.

Those who are alive will be “caught up” together with the “dead in Christ” who have just been resurrected. The term “caught up” means “to seize or snatch”; we get the term *rapture* from the Latin translation of this term. This is the primary Scripture that teaches the rapture of the church. The entire Church – all believers who have ever lived – will be together “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Again, Paul is obviously describing something that transcends human experience. He is describing an experience that should fill us with wonder and delight. This is the moment when our deepest hopes will be realized.

Paul's last comment is “and so we shall always be with the Lord.” For Paul, this was the greatest blessing associated with the return of Christ – being with the Lord. Remember that Paul wrote in Philippians 1 that dying was great gain because it meant “departing and being with Christ.” Jesus Christ was the center of his thinking and speaking and acting here on earth; therefore, having unhindered fellowship with Jesus at His coming was Paul's greatest joy. He set his hope completely on the grace to be brought to him at the coming of the Lord Jesus (1 Peter 1:13) because being “with the Lord” was his greatest delight here on earth.

Our greatest blessing at the return of Christ is that “we shall always be with the Lord.” We will finally see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). And we will never be separated from His strong, kind, healing presence. This is consistent with Jesus' promise after His resurrection when He told His disciples, “I am with you always – even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

When we read/study doctrines in Scripture – especially ones like the return of Christ that describe things that extend far beyond our experience – it's important to pay attention to the context and notice how the author applies that doctrine himself. Here Paul tells us exactly what we're supposed to do with this teaching about the return of Christ:

18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Sometimes the “return of Christ” is a source of endless speculation and wrangling. But Paul says that it should be a source of comfort. The New International Version reads, “Therefore *encourage* each other with these words.” The verb can be translated either “comfort” or “encourage”; the difference is one of emphasis. Paul will use the same term in 5:11 at the end of the next paragraph (which we'll consider next week); there too he wants the Thessalonians to “encourage one another” with the things he's been teaching about the return of Christ. In our time remaining I want to talk about three ways that *Our knowledge of Christ's return provides comfort/encouragement*:

We grieve the death of believers in light of their union with Christ (both now and at His return). As we mentioned earlier, death is still an enemy; we grieve the death of everybody we

love. But if that person is a believer, we grieve in light of the fact that the person is presently experiencing enhanced fellowship with Jesus. The believer who has died is already experiencing an intimacy of fellowship with Christ that we can scarcely fathom. And we grieve in light of the fact that s/he will be resurrected at the return of Christ.

I've performed funerals where this hope was missing. We remembered the person's life and grieved that the person was no longer with us. But there was no assurance that the person was experiencing the bliss of heaven.

I've performed other funerals that were celebrations. There were plenty of tears over the fact that the person is no longer here to be loved and enjoyed. But that grief was tempered by the joy of knowing s/he is with Christ. I was able to declare that the person is in a better place; that's not just a cliché when the person is enjoying Jesus face to face.

If you have loved ones who believed in Jesus in this life, be comforted by the knowledge of what they are experiencing now and what they will experience at the return of Christ.

We will be reunited with other believers who have died. In verse 17 we read:

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.

This verse speaks of the reunion that will take place among all believers at the return of Christ. The knowledge of this reunion can bring us great comfort between now and then; our separation is only temporary. Sometimes people wonder, "Will I recognize people in heaven in their resurrected bodies? Will people recognize me?" The fear is that we'll all become faceless, indistinguishable androids in the afterlife.

We have every indication that each person will retain his/her own identity throughout eternity. As a matter of fact, you will be more fully yourself than you are now. In our current condition the "unholy trinity" (as it's sometimes called) of the world, the flesh, and the devil keep us from being everything we were created to be. Even after becoming a new creature in Christ we experience only a fraction of our salvation in this life. But in our resurrected state we will experience it all.

Relationships will be different than here on earth. Jesus, for example, mentioned in an off-the-cuff remark that there won't be marriage in heaven. Couples acknowledge this at weddings by vowing to be faithful "until we are parted by death." Marriage is a covenant for this life. There won't be marriage in heaven. (That may bring you great disappointment or great relief.) But we can rest assured that our relationships in heaven will be better than anything we've experienced here. Good relationships among believers will be even better; unhealthy relationships among believers will be healed. Everyone will be friends in heaven. Everyone will be family.

I had a professor at Trinity who liked movie analogies. He called our resurrection state "Back to the Future." In the future God will restore what He created in the beginning – and then some. We can look forward to satisfying relationships that only deepen and get better throughout eternity.

We will “always be with the Lord.” This was the greatest source of comfort for Paul – face-to-face fellowship with Jesus Himself. Heaven is defined by the presence of God, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Heaven is the most God-centered existence imaginable.

For this truth about the return of Christ to bring us comfort, we have to see the continuity between our love of being “with the Lord” here in this life and the hope of “being with the Lord always” when He returns.

This is where we need to be honest with ourselves: if we don’t love being with the Lord here and now, it’s hard to get excited about “being with the Lord always” when Christ returns. My simple challenge is for each of us to fall more deeply in love with Jesus here and now. This obviously isn’t the type of thing you can manufacture. This is something God has to do in your life.

But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this love of being with Jesus has been implanted in your heart. If it has been covered up or crowded out or neglected, simply ask God rekindle it within you. I believe God loves to answer the prayer, “Heavenly Father, please rekindle within me the desire to enjoy fellowship with Jesus. And as I love His presence here on earth, teach me to fix my hope completely upon the grace Jesus will bring when He returns – especially the grace of His presence.” Even though the whole idea of being “caught up with Him in the air” goes far beyond our experience, it is wholly consistent with our experience of Jesus in this world.

Conclusion. I’ve known a number of people who genuinely long for the return of Christ. One of those people is Arvilla Hunter. Some of you know Arvilla; she is a member of this church. She has had an incredibly difficult life. Due to a variety of circumstances she has had to move numerous times over the past decade. The past several years she has lived at St. Joseph’s Retirement Village – which she loves. Arvilla “gets it” when it comes to the return of Christ. When she says, “I can’t wait for Jesus to return,” you actually believe her.

Not too long ago she told me, “You know what I love about heaven?” “No, what do you love about heaven, Arvilla?” “You never have to move.” “And I’ll get to see Daddy [Arvilla’s husband who died years ago].” She understands that at the return of Christ everything she loves about Jesus in this life will be intensified and experienced forever and ever.