TO MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Key Verse: 4:17

“After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

In light of the coming of the Lord Jesus what is really important? According to 1 Thessalonians, two things are substantial: one is a practical life of faith to please God through the life of sanctification and holiness while we live in this sex-crazed culture and world. Another is to have the unambiguous hope and vision to meet the Lord. We will meet the Lord in the air. What an expression! What a vision! What a mystery! May we not miss it but keep it in our deep hearts and live accordingly.

**First, the dead in Christ will rise first (14-16).** Verse 13 says, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” In this verse we can think of what the ignorance and grief of the Thessalonians might be. Certainly, they believed the gospel of God, the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection, for the power of the Holy Spirit worked in them with deep conviction (1:5). They also believed in the coming of the Lord Jesus, which was mentioned at the end of each chapter of 1 Thessalonians, 1, 2 and 3. We see they were sensitive to the Lord’s coming. However, they grieved over those who had fallen asleep, those who had passed away. “Sleep” describes the dead body, not the soul (see 2 Cor. 5:1-9; Phil. 1:23). After death the redeemed go consciously into the presence of the Lord, while the unsaved go into conscious punishment (Luke 16:19-31). Why did they grieve? They knew that their souls were saved, being with the Lord in heaven and their bodies in their graves. They would miss the glorious appearing of the Lord, while those who are alive would have such blessedness. Titus 2:13 says, “…we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.” And Colossians 3:4 says, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” The earthly Christians had an imminent view of Christ’s return, and Paul left the impression it could happen in their lifetime. They were living in expectation of that coming, eagerly waiting for Christ. Most probably the Thessalonians believed the bodily resurrection, but they did not know when it would happen. It was a beautiful thing that they did not forget those who had fallen asleep but were concerned about them out of love for them. Yet, it led them to grief caused by their ignorance. Paul’s purpose in writing about meeting the Lord in the air and the Day of the Lord was not primarily theological and eschatological, but pastoral and practical in order to give them hope and comfort.

The Thessalonians were different from the Corinthians, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, not being able to connect the resurrection of Christ Jesus to their own resurrection. So they lived without resurrection faith. Paul rebuked them severely, saying in 1 Corinthians 15, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men…If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow die.’ Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character. Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame” (1 Cor 15:19, 32-34). However, in this passage there is no such rebuking tone of Paul for the Thessalonians, who were an exemplary church for all the believers in Macedonia, though not complete. Paul helped in what was lacking in their faith. In short, they did not know that the dead would rise at the time of the glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus and they would also have the blessedness of meeting this Lord in their resurrected body.

Let’s see how Paul helps them. He says in verse 14, “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Paul believed that God would bring with Jesus those who had fallen asleep in him. The basis of God bringing them with Jesus was Christ’s death and resurrection. Through Christ Jesus’ death and resurrection, their sins were forgiven and so God’s punishment of sin was removed and death had no mastery over them. As Christ’s death and resurrection is the foundation of the kingdom of God, so it is the basis of this glorious event.

Then verse 15 says, “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” Here Paul is talking about preceding, what precedes what. And then Paul continues in verse 16, “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Here is the double emphasis about the order that before those who are alive seeing the glorious appearing of the Lord, the dead in Christ will rise first.

What the Lord Jesus said concerning this while he was on the earth is this: In John 5:24-25 he said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” Here Jesus is talking about the spiritually dead being alive through hearing his voice. And then he continues in 5:28-29, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” As we learned in Revelation 20, believers participate in the first resurrection for glory, and then unbelievers in the second resurrection to be judged before a great white throne (Rev 20:5-6, 11-12). Revelation 20:6 says, “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection.” According to Jesus’ words there is such a vivid event of the dead in a grave hearing the voice of the Son of God coming out. In John chapter 11, the brother of Martha and Mary died and was buried and kept in the grave for four days and there was a bad odor that came from the corpse. Jesus said to the dead, “Lazarus, come out.” At this the dead man came out alive. This event is not only the proof of Jesus’ power over death that he is indeed the resurrection and the life, but also a preview that all the dead in Christ will hear his voice and rise. I am really amazed at what is written in the Bible. So here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote, “The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command like his command, “Lazarus, come out.” Subsequently all the dead in Christ will come out from all over the world, whether died several thousand years ago or recently and even those who were cremated. It will take not a month, a week, or even a day, but a moment. What an event it will be! This is truly unbelievable. Let’s see more.

The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command and the voice of the archangel. According to Jude 9, Michael is introduced as the archangel Michael and in Daniel 10:13, “Michael, one of the chief prices.” And it is written in Daniel 12:1-2, “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” The voice of the archangel could be that of Michael, or that of the other archangel. Anyway, the voice of the archangel seems to be related to the rising of the Old Testament saints.

There are many trumpet calls of God in the Old Testament. Exodus 19 is a good example of a trumpet of assembly, where the trumpet called the people out of the camp to meet with God. It is written in Exodus 19:16 and 17, “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God.” At the time of the Lord’s coming down from heaven, there is going to be a trumpet blast of some kind, a heavenly trumpet blast, calling the people out of this world to meet their Lord. And [Zechariah 9:14](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Zech%209.14), 15 says, “Then the LORD will appear over them; his arrow will flash like lightning. The Sovereign LORD will sound the trumpet; he will march in the storms of the south, and the LORD Almighty will shield them.” In these words there is a trumpet that is kind of a trumpet of deliverance. So this is both a trumpet of deliverance as the people of God are delivered out of the domain of Satan out of this world, and called to assemble with their Lord. The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we read in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” The dead in Christ will rise with the imperishable glorious body and the alive in Christ will changed in an instant also imperishable, immortal and glorious, for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. This will be the time of glorification. Apostle John expressed it this way in 1 John 3:2, “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” What a consistent teaching of the Bible!

**Second, we will meet the Lord in the air (17-18).** The dead in Christ rising in a moment and those who are alive being changed in an instant will be a truly amazing event. Yet, that’s not all. Verse 17 says, “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Wow! What an event! Here the term “caught up” is in Greek a verb, *harpazō*. The meaning is taking it by force. It’s a violent act. It’s an act of seizing something. This word is used in the New Testament several times. For example, Jesus said in Matthew 11:12, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Amplified Bible, “seize it by fore”). It also has the meaning of snatch. Jesus said in John 10:28-29, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” As we studied in Jude, verse 23 says, “save others by snatching them from the fire.” And Revelation 12:5 says,
She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.”

He doesn’t come to earth. He stops in the air. We go up and meet Him in the air. This is not King Jesus coming to a welcoming earth, this is King Jesus snatching His own out of an unwelcoming earth that is totally in the hands of Satan. There is hymn song “When We See Christ.” In that song there is one expression, “Christ will soon appear To catch His bride away” (Sing To the Lord 279). This is a very correct and insightful description. Our Bridegroom comes to catch or snatch us His bride and we will meet the Lord, our Bridegroom. What a glorious and jubilant moment it will be!

This is before his landing on the earth to judge the inhabitants of the earth, which Paul mentions separately in chapter 5 with the term, “the day of the Lord.” Zechariah 14:4 says, “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.” When we meet the Lord in the air, we are taken by Him into heaven where we are with Him. This is what Jesus promised to his disciples in John 14:2-3, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” John expressed it in a very tangible and realistic way. So here the end of verse 17 says, “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Never again will we be separated from Him.

Then what happens after we meet the Lord in the air and are taken to heaven is written in Revelation. We have a wonderful time of celebration, as the Bridegroom welcomes his bride to glory. It is written in Revelation 19:6-9, “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear…Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.” There will the marriage of the Lamb and the marriage supper, which is the expression of the highest joy.

On the earth there will be the time of tribulation. Jesus said to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10, “Since you have kept my command to endure hardships, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” We are looking for Christ who will deliver us from that wrath to come. After the hour of trial and tribulation, the Lord will come to the earth and fight a final war of this world, called Armageddon battle. This is written in Revelation 19:11-16, “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINDS AND LORD OF LORDS.” He will be a victorious and conquering king with his heavenly armies, his bride, and this world will become the kingdom of Christ and he will reign with his people one thousand years. After this there will be the eternal kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem in a new heaven and a new earth. What a full picture!

Then verse 18 says, “Therefore encourage/comfort one another with these words.” Truly this will the greatest encouragement to the believers who live the life of faith in this world.

We thank and praise for the wonderful revelation that the dead in Christ will rise first and we will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. May we keep this glorious hope in our hearts and truly live a life of faith purifying ourselves, as 1 John 3:3 says, “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”