



# *Promised*

The promised return of Christ gives believers hope when grieving.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

A significant difference exists between a period and a comma. A period represents the ending of a subject matter or a particular event. A comma represents a temporary or slight pause and then a continuation of the subject or event. Paul was concerned about how the Thessalonian believers understood the death of loved ones. We need to see their passing as a comma and not the end. We are able to do this because of the hope we have in the promised return of Christ.

**How would you describe the spirit of the last funeral you attended?  
Did most treat the death as a period or a comma?**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

While Paul gave the Thessalonians instructions about day-to-day living in this world, he knew that the true hope of the gospel has nothing to do with this life. Therefore, he reminded them that Jesus would come back one day (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Apparently, either some were teaching false doctrine regarding the second coming, or the Thessalonians simply had not understood the teachings concerning the resurrection and the timing of the second coming that Paul had given while he was with them. It is likely that Paul was combating the false teaching that those who died would not be resurrected or would have to wait until after those living were taken up.

Paul knew that without the truth of the future resurrection of all believers, followers of Jesus had no hope beyond this world. When death came to their friends and family members, they would have no reason to expect comfort in the midst of their grief. But they could take great comfort in knowing that Jesus was coming back. One day they would be meeting the Messiah in the air. But for now, their day-to-day lives needed to reflect that confidence.

**Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Create an ordered list of the events outlined in this passage. How does the order of the events serve as a source of encouragement?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## HOPE (1 THESS. 4:13-14)

<sup>13</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

**VERSE 13**

Paul, Timothy, and Silas wanted the Thessalonian believers to be informed about the return of Christ. A false teaching concerning those who had died would be devastating to members of the congregation who lost loved ones.

The word **uninformed** in the original language shows that the believers lacked knowledge. This does not mean that Paul was dealing with a group of ignorant people. Instead, it shows that they simply did not know the truth. The language used here shows that Paul and his coworkers felt compassion for those who were grief stricken, and they sought to offer assurance and hope to the church.

The second half of verse 13 shows Paul’s motivation for addressing this matter. He did not want the Christians in Thessalonians to **grieve** over the passing of their loved ones as if there was **no hope**. The false teachers had created turmoil within the church by teaching that those who had recently passed away would miss out on the resurrection, and therefore believers would not be reunited with their loved ones. This was not true, and the missionaries were actively combating the false teaching with the truth of God.

It is vital to understand what this passage is teaching and what it is not teaching. We clearly see here that we are not to grieve like those who are without hope. This passage, however, does not say believers should not grieve. When we have to say goodbye to a loved one who has a relationship with Jesus, it is perfectly normal and natural to feel grief. But we are to grieve with the hope of being able to see that loved one again.

**How can inaccurate teachings about the return of Christ cause despair?**

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**VERSE 14**

Paul provided a basis for the believers’ hope in grief by pointing to the resurrection of Jesus. Verse 14 is a statement of belief—not a question of faith. The Greek word translated **if** can also mean *since*. Since the recipients believed in the resurrection of Christ, certain

conclusions could be reached concerning their loved ones who had passed away.

A key word in this verse is the word **believe**. To believe is not simply mental assent to information given. Instead, it is a definitive conclusion based on personal experience. We can walk up to a bridge and say we believe it will hold us, yet never walk across. If, however, we walk up to the same bridge and walk over it, our mental assent has reached a different level. We demonstrate our belief through our words and actions.

The church at Thessalonica had not simply believed in hearsay passed down from one generation to the next. Instead, they had personally experienced the power of Jesus in the midst of difficult circumstances, and they had found His grace to be sufficient. Paul was leading them back to this point and pushing them in their faith journey. He wanted them to see that Christ had defeated death, and thus He would not abandon their loved ones to an eternal death. Because Christ has defeated death, believers need not grieve as those without hope.

**What does it look like to grieve with hope?**

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**KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things***

According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. (See Luke 21:27-28; Jude 14.)

**RETURN** (1 THESS. 4:15-16)

**<sup>15</sup> For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.**

## VERSE 15

Throughout his Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul emphasized that his teachings were not his own. They had a divine origin. He had spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5) and had delivered a message approved by God (1 Thess. 2:4). What's more, the Thessalonians had received the gospel as coming directly from the Lord (1 Thess. 2:13). They knew their faith was rooted in something deeper than Paul's personal opinions or persuasive rhetoric.

Paul outlined the sequence of events at Christ's return. The first thing he addressed was the destiny of those **who are still alive** when Christ comes back. They will **not precede** those who **have fallen asleep**. Paul used the word asleep as a euphemism for death. This is significant, since sleep is not final but temporary. Jesus likewise spoke of death as sleep. (See Mark 5:39; John 11:11-14.) The phrase translated **certainly not** represents a strong negative, emphasizing the impossibility of a situation. The Thessalonians could know without a doubt that the dead in Christ will participate in the second coming, and the living would have no advantage.

It is worth noting that Paul used the first-person **we** to describe the living. This could mean that he expected to be alive when Christ returned. This is possible, though Paul understood the timing of both his own death and Christ's return rested in God's hands. As long as he was alive, though, he would assume the second coming of Jesus was imminent. He also was content with the fact that he might die before Jesus returned, knowing that His relationship with Christ was secure.

***Christ resides in glory and is sitting at the right hand of the Father in power.***

## VERSE 16

Paul left no doubt—he emphatically stated that Jesus is coming back. The apostle explained how it will happen. **The Lord himself will descend from heaven**. This phrase is important in that it shows Jesus's present location. Christ resides in glory and is sitting at the right hand of the Father in power (Eph. 1:20-23). The church at Thessalonica needed to hear this, and the church today needs to hear this as well. Christ reigns! Because of this, nothing catches Him by surprise, and



nothing takes place without His knowledge. The church has hope for the future because Christ resides in heaven right now.

The next piece of hopeful information is that all will know when Christ returns. When Jesus returns, no one will have to wonder if it happened or not. We are all going to know. Paul noted that three loud sounds will accompany Christ's return. First, He will come with **a shout**. The Greek word here is a military term relating to a loud command. The next two noises mentioned—**the archangel's voice** and **the trumpet of God**—are closely associated with the shout. It is possible that the terms are synonymous, and that the voice and trumpet serve to explain the shout. However, the Greek wording also allows for three separate events taking place at roughly the same time. Whatever the case, this will not be a secret event.

## ***When Jesus returns, no one will have to wonder if it happened or not.***

Paul revealed when He returns, those who have fallen asleep **in Christ** will be raised **first**, and those who are alive will then join Him. As the apostle noted in verse 15, believers who are living at the time will not have an advantage.

**What does the inclusion of those believers who have died and those who are living at Christ's return tell us about His power and glory?**

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### **REUNION (1 THESS. 4:17-18)**

<sup>17</sup> **Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.** <sup>18</sup> **Therefore encourage one another with these words.**

#### **VERSE 17**

We find hope in this verse in that Christ is coming back for His entire church. Paul stated that we who are **still alive** will be **caught up** with Christ **in the clouds**. Paul was making a statement of fact. Furthermore, the verse is written to indicate that all who are truly

in Christ will participate in this experience. The apostle did not distinguish between rich and poor, powerful and weak, white collar and blue collar. He simply stated that those who are in Christ will ***be caught up together with them in the clouds.***

In the Old Testament, clouds often signified the presence and glory of God (Ex. 19:16). Jesus Himself associated His return with clouds (Mark 13:26), just as He ascended into a cloud when going back to the Father (Acts 1:9).

Note also that Paul said those who are alive when Christ returns would ***meet the Lord.*** In first-century secular literature, such wording would refer to welcoming a dignitary. A delegation would meet the official outside the town and escort him into the city. Here, believers will have a face-to-face encounter with Jesus ***in the air.***

The reunion that Paul described is permanent and without end: ***we will always be with the Lord.*** Believers in the church at Thessalonica were grieving over the passing of their loved ones. We too feel the same grief when our loved ones pass away. We long to reconnect and see them. If we are in Christ and our loved ones died in Christ, then the reconnection will take place, and according to God's Word it will be without end.

**What word or phrase used by Paul in this part of his letter gives you the greatest hope? Explain.**

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## **VERSE 18**

Paul concluded this section of teaching with a command. He called on the church members to ***encourage one another with these words.*** This command was written as a present-tense action. This means that Paul expected the Thessalonian believers to live this out immediately and continually.

We need to understand the meaning of the word *encourage* in order to effectively live out this command. To *encourage* in the original language means to come alongside another—to develop a bond or partnership with another.

The passing of a close loved one, whether a spouse, parent, or child, changes us. Others grieve with us in the moment, but they return to their normal lives in a few days. The one who remains, however, is faced with a new normal. It is this grieving person who needs encouragement. It is this grieving person who needs an encourager to walk with them and uphold them when the pain seems unbearable. Paul did not call the church at Thessalonica to be there merely in the moment, but rather to engage in an extended partnership with the grieving.

**Why is it important to continue to walk with people as they process their grief? What are the dangers of not doing so?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Study other passages to get a deeper understanding of Christ's return.*

Review the passages below and discover what each reveals about Jesus's return. Compare and contrast them with what Paul shared in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Ask God to give you a fuller understanding of these events.

- Mark 13:1-37
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-54
- 2 Corinthians 5:1-10
- Revelation 19–22



# APPLY THE TEXT

- The return of Jesus gives believers hope when grieving the death of another believer.
- Jesus will return in His full glory gathering all believers through the ages for eternity.
- The certainty of Christ’s return should encourage believers when grieving.

**Reflect on the hope that comes through faith in Jesus. If you have not trusted Jesus, review the information on the inside front cover and discuss doing so with your leader. If you have trusted Jesus, take some time to thank Him for the hope of eternity.**

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**Who do you know who is not a believer in Jesus? Commit to pray daily that they will come into a relationship with Him.**

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**Share with each other times when you experienced the death of a loved one who was a believer. What specific and tangible actions can your group take this month to encourage each other?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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