

# *Christ, Our Hope*

*Paul's View of Jesus' Identity and  
Work in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

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For Dr. Ann Jervis  
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### *Context of Passage*

This pericope finds itself sandwiched between two pericopae where Paul praises the Thessalonians with regards to their *brotherly love* (4:9–12) and knowledge of the advent of the *day of the Lord* (5:1–2). Paul affirms that they were proficient in both of these areas saying that he did not even need to mention them (4:9, 5:1) Our pericope concerns knowledge which Paul thought he *did* need to mention, knowledge of which he supposed the Thessalonians were ignorant (4:13), or perhaps less familiar with. In any case, it is clear that Paul wants to ensure the assembly grasps the matter he is about to unravel (Gaventa, 62).<sup>1</sup> Our passage is comprised of fresh instruction, which sets it apart for the rest of the letter. In this letter, Paul takes special care to affirm the Thessalonians' knowledge and praxis of his teaching. It is in effect a word of encouragement and fortification of what the Thessalonian assembly already knows and practices (1:3, 1:6–9, 2:1–2, 2:5, 2:11, 2:13, 3:3–4, 4:2, 4:9, 5:1–2). Chapter 4:13–18 is thus significant as it stands out as potentially new instruction.

This pericope is also related to the rest of the letter in how it completes a recurring idea which Paul has only alluded to up until this point. The awaited *parousia* (presence, presence of one coming)<sup>2</sup> of Jesus is a salient theme of the letter, and it is not until 4:13 that Paul gets into its specifics. Prior to 4:13, it is only mentioned in a cursory manner (1:10, 2:19, 3:13). Given what Paul says in 5:1–2, it is likely that the Thessalonians knew of some sort of impending event, but that they did not know much about the specifics of what it might entail. This ignorance of the specifics of the *parousia* is shown by their worry for those of their friends who were in Christ, yet had passed away before His return. Thus Paul's hints to the *parousia* would have

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1998), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, trans., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 490.

simultaneously appealed to a familiar notion and yet peaked the interest and curiosity of the audience given the mystery surrounding it. In this way, Paul's allusions to the *parousia* in 1:10, 2:19, and 3:13 build anticipation for the revelation of its specifics in 4:13–18. The plateau of 4:13–18 alleviates the fears of the Thessalonians concerning among them who had *fallen asleep*.

### *Observations and Comment*

Verse 13 introduces Paul's intent for his words in 4:13–18. He wishes to inform the Thessalonians regarding something of which they were ignorant *so that* they would not grieve needlessly. Their grief was occasioned by their ignorance concerning the fate of their friends who had *fallen asleep* before the coming of Christ. This concern stemmed from their "love of the brethren" (4:9), and Paul seeks to comfort his children in the faith. He affirms that the assembly has no reason to grieve, as do "the rest", namely, the Gentiles who do not know God (4:5).<sup>3</sup> Paul's insistence that "the rest" do not have hope conversely informs the Thessalonians that they *do* have hope.

Verse 14 forms the core of the pericope since it explains the reason for Christian hope and it lays the foundation for verses 15–18. In verse 14, Paul claims that the reason for the Thessalonians' hope is somehow rooted in their belief in (confidence in, persuasion of) the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> This hope speaks to the character and work of Christ and it forms the core of what Paul is communicating in this passage. It thereby necessitates a careful study of what exactly Paul means by, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:14, NASB). Paul here presents a dense set of claims that merit unpacking.

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<sup>3</sup> James Everett Frame. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 164–165.

<sup>4</sup> Thayer, trans., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti*, 511.

Firstly, Paul asserts the basic Christian belief of the Thessalonian church - that they believe that Jesus died and rose again. The *εἰ γὰρ* makes the belief of verse 14 a necessary precondition for the second premise; “even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” Since the Thessalonian assembly is part of the “we” that does believe that Jesus died and rose, then the second premise naturally applies to them. In its essence, this second premise states that God will do for those who have fallen asleep *through* (*διὰ*) Jesus that same thing He did for Jesus. This understanding is gleaned from the meaning of *οὕτως καὶ*. To translate “in the same manner” may be more helpful in the English than “even so”, since it captures the comparative nature of the two clauses of verse 14. As we are in Christ, our lot is tied to His. This is of utmost significance as it communicates that Jesus’ death and resurrection extend far beyond the historical event and apply to all who are in Christ.<sup>5</sup> The character of Christ’s work is thus inclusive; that those who believe in Him are incorporated into His death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

Paul uses this claim of paramount significance, which applies to all in Christ, to show the Thessalonian church that they need not grieve. In verse 13, Paul speaks of those who are “asleep”; and in verse 14, he makes a subtle shift, asserting that they “have fallen asleep in Jesus.” This clarification of the terms of their sleep makes all the difference. They are not merely asleep, but they have fallen asleep in Jesus and are thus bound to His fate. I think Paul made this inconspicuous transition in order to focus on Jesus’ supreme work, while at the same time dealing with their fears in a way that did not make too much of them. Here, Paul is making

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<sup>5</sup> Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 64

much of Jesus and dealing with the Thessalonians' concern in light of God's preeminent work through Christ.

Verses 15–18 deal with the manner in which the *parousia* of Jesus will happen. This section is only relevant to the audience so long as they have grasped v14. Having done so, the audience knows that what Paul says in 15–18 applies to them by virtue of the fact that they believe in His death and rising. This section shows how verse 14 will play out.

Paul introduces his next phrase with, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord” (4:15). The meaning of Paul's words here is not clear to the contemporary reader. Some think “by the word of the Lord” indicates that the rest of verse 15 is a saying of Jesus not recorded in the gospels,<sup>7</sup> and some hold it to mean that Paul was speaking from his apostolic authority. Gaventa insightfully concludes that Paul's appeal to the word of the Lord indicates that the Thessalonian Christians thought of themselves as continually instructed by the risen Lord Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Paul proceeds to assert that there will be no preference given to those who remain alive until the *parousia*. Not only are the “sleepers” not at a disadvantage, but those who are “awake” are not privileged.

In verse 16 Paul paints a majestic portrait of the resurrected Christ: “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.” Here Paul makes it clear that their hope is an emphatically glorious hope. The predicate construction, αὐτός ὁ κύριος, emphasizes that the Lord Jesus *Himself* will descend,<sup>9</sup> necessarily bringing His presence with Him (παρουσια). Paul

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<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians* (Inter-Varsity, 1991), 100.

<sup>8</sup> Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Best, Ernest, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 196.

is describing what he calls the day of the Lord (5:1), the day when the implications of verse 14 are enacted. The appeal to the sense of hearing makes the *parousia* seem all the more near and tangible. The “archangel” emphasizes the *cosmic* nature of the work of Christ on the day of the Lord, a work which was irreversibly set in motion by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The “trumpet of God” highlights the *victory* of God in Christ. Amidst this glorious scene, the dead, or the sleepers, in Christ will rise first. Given Paul’s insistence on the equality of those dead in Christ and those alive in Christ, the “first” rising of the dead does not denote preference given to them, but rather a logic order to how the rising will occur. This order sets the scene for a beautiful image in the following verse.

In verse 17 Paul tells of what will happen to those who remain alive at the coming of Christ. That Paul tells of the dead rising first gives the impression that those who are still alive will, at first, watch as the dead rise. They will behold the rising of those in Christ who came before them. Then they “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.” Paul is communicating the sheer power of the Lord Jesus at His coming. He is wanting his audience to be swept away in thought and spirit by the glory of Christ returned in His majesty. In this power, those who remain will be swept up into the air with the rest and be with the Lord. Paul informs us that our final resting place will “always be with the Lord.” This eternal abiding in His *parousia* is then the end goal of our being bound to Christ in his death and rising. Christ’s *parousia* is then the hope that Paul is disclosing to the Thessalonian church since it is the outcome of what is revealed in verse 14. This shows that Paul knew the presence of Christ to be utterly blissful. It also reveals the fullness of what Paul had been speaking about in 1:10, 2:19, and 3:13.

This is verified by the last sentence of the pericope where Paul instructs the Thessalonians to use the words found in 4:13–17 to comfort one another. The very words have the power to comfort because Paul knows the power of words. The gospel is after all a message that brings the Word. Paul’s goal throughout the entire letter was to comfort the Thessalonians, and this pericope is the pinnacle of his efforts to fortify them.

### *Contribution to Christology*

The terminology Paul uses in this pericope suggests that he is wanting to highlight that Jesus had earthly work *and* heavenly work as God’s Messiah. In verse 14, Paul refers to Jesus on human terms as Ἰησοῦς, without applying His heavenly titles. In verses 15–17, where Paul is speaking of the coming of Jesus on the day of the Lord, he refers to Him as either κυρίος or Χριστός, ascribing to Jesus His kingly and authoritative titles. In this way Paul emphasizes Jesus’ identity as having transitioned into the heavenly spheres where he rules in authority though He once dwelt as a man on earth. Paul’s use of the image of Christ descending (καταβήσεται) in verse 16 brings to mind Christ’s first *katabasis* in human flesh, but in His second coming He will descend as the risen Lord in majesty and splendor, enacting the authority given to Him as Messiah. Paul dazzles his audience with this vision of the royal Messiah<sup>10</sup> who is the agent sent by God to perform the snatching up of those in Christ, dead or alive. Paul makes it clear that it is Jesus *Himself* who will do it, and He will do it with authority (4:16). Not only is Jesus the enactor of the raising of the dead, but He is also the goal. Paul ends the Messianic elocution with, “and so we shall always be with the Lord” (14:17), accentuating the

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<sup>10</sup> Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 66.

fact that the point of their being raised is *so that* they might be in the presence of Jesus the risen and exalted Lord. The Christ is, in and of Himself, the object of Paul's desire and hope.

### *Preaching and Teaching*

This passage can be used in the same way as it was originally intended by Paul, that is, to comfort and instill hope in a group that may have lost sight of the hope we have in Christ. The perspective of eternity is often helpful in the midst of every day life in the body, and to be reminded of the future unadulterated presence of Christ brings hope. I would probably also tie in that the Spirit is a deposit of the things to come.... Gaventa suggests this as an effective passage for those enduring grief, especially the death of a loved one, since it "places the story of those who have died within the context of what God is doing in the world," rather than offering unhelpful platitudes to the mourning (67–68).



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