

1Thessalonians 4:13-18 We will be with the Lord forever! Saints Triumphant 11/19/17

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By God's grace, Jesus Christ is leading you to eternal glory with all believers. Amen.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul gives encouragement to believers who grieved for those who died.

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Use them to prepare us for the glory that awaits us in heaven.

Dear Christians who look forward to the Lord's appearing,

Last Friday at our school chapel this question was asked: Why do bad things happen to good people? The Bible gives us an answer in Genesis. God told Adam that if he sinned he would experience hardships in life until he died. "Bad things" have been happening ever since Adam sinned. God is not the source of these evils. In the book of Job we read that the devil brought disease, disaster, and death to Job and to people in this world. But, we also see in Job that God limits evil. So, the question can be changed: Why does God allow the devil to do bad things against good people? In Job's case, his faith was tested and ultimately God blessed him more than ever. The Bible also states that God's plans are not like our short-sighted plans. And we have God's promise that He is working for the eternal good of all believers, turning even "bad" events in our lives into good, like when His Son died on a cross for us! Paul reassured the Thessalonians of this truth, especially in regard to death. The believers did not understand what happened to believers after they died. They had a false notion that their dead friends and relatives would miss out on the glory of eternal life. But, Paul assured them that no believer would be forgotten or left behind on the Last Day. With that same assurance in Christ we say:

We will be with the Lord forever!

We'll divide Paul's words into three parts. **The first is "We will live."** This section of Paul's letter answered specifically what would happen to believers on Judgment Day. He was not describing what will happen to unbelievers. There are other verses, like our Gospel lesson from Matthew 25, that describe the Lord's sudden coming for believers and unbelievers. Those with oil in their lamps, who have faith in Jesus, will be saved and have eternal life. Those without faith will be shut out from the presence of the loving God.

Why are we so privileged to be with the Lord? It is not that we've earned that status. It is not that we were born into a "saved" family. We were born with a sinful rebellious nature that wanted nothing to do with God. The true question for all of us is not: "why do bad things happen to us?" but: "Why do good things happen to us?" We deserve to have pain instead of pleasure, sickness instead of health, death instead of life, and hell instead of heaven!

Yet, by God's grace through His Son, Jesus Christ, God had a plan that we would have never considered. He sent His Son to become a sinless human being. Then He had His Son suffer all the pain we deserve for our sins. He had Jesus die the death we deserve. He had Jesus suffer the torments of hell while on the cross so that we do not have to suffer them. Paul wrote, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" (2 Corinthians 5:21) We're certain that Christ won eternal life for us because God raised Him from death and honored Him in heaven. And where He has gone, we will follow—our souls first when we die and our bodies to follow in the resurrection.

This is why Paul wrote, "*We do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 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.*" (vs. 13-14) To our physical senses, death is not like sleep. In death, the body has no functions. We cannot wake a dead person or get a response. We are helpless to stop death from claiming its victims whether they are age 100 or age 10.

But, we have one who has all power over death. Adding **the second part to the phrase Paul wrote**, we will be **“with the Lord.”** God’s Son was always the Lord of all. And Jesus’ human nature shared in that attribute. But, it was only at His resurrection that Jesus fully used the authority as Lord. He showed His lordship over death by rising from the dead. And, despite the power of the devil, sin, and evil in this world, Jesus is now ruling over all things in heaven and on earth. He is hidden from our sight now, but He is our Lord. Throughout history powerful rulers and nations have risen and fallen by His will. They have not always acted in accordance with His will, but in the end our Lord accomplished everything needed to save His people (us)! Already during Jesus’ time of humility on earth, He showed His power to save. He raised Lazarus from death with a word and raised a young girl whom He referred to as only “sleeping.” She was dead, but that didn’t stop our Lord from using His power to bring her back to life and restore her to her family! We also belong to the Lord in life and in death.

If Jesus restored people to life during His humble ministry, how much more He will use His power on the Last Day of this world! Paul wrote, *“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. 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.”* (v. 16-17) On the day that Jesus ascended to heaven, an angel promised the disciples that He would appear again *“the same way that they had seen Him go into heaven.”* (Acts 1:11) The difference with His 2nd coming is that *“every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him. And the peoples of the earth (unbelievers) will mourn because of Him.”* (Revelation 1:7) Christ’s enemies will have terror in their hearts. But, we who believe will be filled with joy that Jesus kept His promise to take us to heaven.

What a powerful description of the last day! Jesus will give a loud shout. John 1 tells us that the Son of God spoke in the beginning and the universe was formed. So, here we learn that by His word He will end it! His shout will be a signal for angel armies to proceed as the end comes. Then, the voice of the archangel, Michael, the one in charge of heaven’s angel army, will send out the angels into the world to gather all God’s people. All the dead will be affected by Jesus’ voice. Unbelievers will rise to eternal shame and suffering. Believers who died will rise to join Christ in victory. (John 5:27-28) Living believers on that last day will also be transformed to have bodies without imperfections or weaknesses caused by sin. Everything on earth will be made new as we watch Jesus re-create it from the air when we are *with the Lord*.

The third part of Paul’s phrase is the word “forever.” (v.17) Now, we live in the limits of time; so how can we comprehend eternity? As a child, I thought that being in heaven meant I would be constantly sitting in a church setting in a service that lasted forever. I wasn’t looking forward to that! Eternity has more to offer. It more like the experience we have when we see the greatest victory instead of defeat. It’s like a doctor first tells us that we have a terrible disease and will die and then reverses the decision with further tests to say that we have nothing wrong! What a relief and joy! That is how every moment will be in heaven with perfect happiness and health in a perfect world with our perfect God and without evil and death. There will be no boredom in heaven as we marvel about the great things Christ has done! On the other hand, those who reject Jesus, who do not repent of their sin, and who die in unbelief will have eternal death. They will suffer in bitterness and in darkness that will never end.

This stark contrast should make all of us more amazed that *we will be with the Lord forever*. We are not “good” people deserving a blessing from God. We deserve eternal punishment; to be separated from the Lord forever. But, Jesus gave His life and was raised from death to assure us that He has prepared an eternal home for us. In the future we may be like the Thessalonians, mourning the loss of someone who has died or we may need to comfort another Christian who is sad. Take Paul’s words to heart: *We shall be with the Lord forever!* “Encourage each other with these words.” (v.18) Amen.