

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: Every other week I attend a pastors' prayer group. One day, a few years ago, two of my colleagues came dressed in suits because they each had a funeral that day, back to back, at the same funeral home. The first was for an elderly woman who had come to Christ as an adult, and whose kids had known her both as a bad mom and getting-better mom. But at this funeral, there would be gratitude for what Jesus had done in her life, and glad hope of a reunion which might have never happened.

The other funeral was for a godly young woman who died of cancer leaving a husband and young children. When I asked him about the funeral later, Steve wrote, "*The sense of the funeral was one of real grief and yet genuine rejoicing over a life consumed with passion for the glory of God. So many of the people in her extended family are committed believers, the funeral was a true and real experience of worship. No one has any doubt but that one instant after Beth passed from this world last Sunday evening, she woke up in more glory and joy than any of us can possibly imagine right now.*" Turn to 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

- B. We Christians, no matter where in the world we live, do not face death like other people. Paul wrote in **1 Thess. 4:13**, "*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*" One of the most encouraging bedrock truths every Christian must know and understand is this: **Jesus is coming back for all who trust in him, whether we live or sleep.** Do you know that there are over 300 vss. in the New Testament about the Second Coming of Christ? But no passage tells us more about the Second Coming in one place than our text today: **1 Thess. 4:13-18...** In this great text I want to show you **two reasons for encouragement.**

I. BE ENCOURAGED BECAUSE NO BELIEVER WILL MISS JESUS' RETURN! (4:13-15)

The Thessalonians apparently thought that Jesus was coming back *very* soon and when some in their church died, they were worried that those folks would miss the party. So Paul assures them that they need not worry. Look at **v.14**...

A. For Christians everything starts with this basic, bedrock conviction: “*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.*” Do you see the connection? The second coming of Jesus and the resurrection of believers follows directly and inevitably from the death and resurrection of Christ.

1. Look closely at something here: V.14 says that Jesus *died* but believers *fall asleep*. Those expressions aren't really synonymous. **Harold J. Ockenga** said, “*Death is the God-forsaken experience of a condemned soul. This is the death of Jesus.*” Jesus *died* in the fullest, most horrible sense of the word—“*the God-forsaken experience of a condemned soul.*” When we put our faith in Christ, God puts *us* in Christ. His death swallows up *our* death. **V.17** speaks of “*the dead in Christ.*” Our condemnation is in him on the cross. And when God raised him from the dead, death's sting was gone for us and sin's sentence upon us was paid. **So when our bodies give out, we do not die, we fall asleep.** **Alexander Maclaren** wrote, “*His death makes our deaths sleep, and His Resurrection makes our sleep calmly certain of a waking.*”
2. And where are these who have fallen asleep? The verse says, “*God will bring **with Jesus** those who have fallen asleep in him.*” Look at **5:10**: “*He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may **live together with him.***” Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross, “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” Paul wrote that he “*would prefer to be away from the body and **at home with the Lord.***” Those who have fallen asleep are living with Christ, as surely as we who are “awake”,

and when Jesus comes, they will come with him. Illus.: Remember that famous statement by **Moody**: “*One day you will hear that D. L. Moody of Northfield, Massachusetts, is dead. Don't you believe it! In that day I will be more alive than I have ever been before.*”

When we Christians die the passage is no more traumatic than falling asleep. The next moment we awaken in Jesus’ presence. Our *bodies*, however, continue to sleep. Believers’ *bodies* are incubating; dormant, like the lily bulbs beneath the frozen ground in our gardens. But the *spirits* of those who have “fallen asleep” are alert and enjoying the company of the Lord at this moment.

3. God will see to it that those who have fallen asleep will not miss out on Jesus’ second coming. In fact, they get first dibs; front of the line! They go first! **V.15...**

So what will “the coming of the Lord” be like? The Bible doesn’t tell us everything we’d like to know but it does tell all we need to be encouraged. **Vv.16-17...**

II. BE ENCOURAGED IN KNOWING WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN JESUS COMES BACK (4:16-17)

- A. “The Lord himself will come down from heaven.” When Jesus ascended into the heavens the angels told the watching disciples in **Acts 1:11**, “*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*” At the signal of the Father, Jesus Christ will rise from his sapphire throne and pass through the arches of glory, past the altar of sacrifice stained by his own blood, past the altar of incense fragrant with the pleading prayers of the saints, past the awesome living creatures who worship him night and day, and, summoning one great archangel to accompany him, he will cross once again the great gulf fixed between heaven and earth, and step through the curtain of the sky. No need for a star to point him out. No need for shepherds or wise men to spread the word. No disguises this time of baby flesh or swaddling clothes. As C. S. Lewis said, “*When the*

author walks on to the stage, the play is over.” This time there will be no mistaking his coming.

1. He will come “with a loud command.” When Jesus stood before the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, he gave a command: “*Lazarus, come out!*” Someone has said that if Jesus had not specified that it was Lazarus who was to come forth, every grave on earth would have split open at his command. Well, perhaps when he returns his command will be, “***Beloved, come out!***”
 2. He will come “with the voice of the archangel.” The archangel is one of those “chief princes” of heaven who has stood guard over God’s people for centuries, who has listened to the plaintive prayers of the saints, “*How long, O Lord?*” and who has been in hand-to-hand combat with Satan. He adds his voice to the command of the Lord like a great Amen, or like a reverberating echo.
 3. He will come “with the trumpet call of God.” Once, God’s trumpet summoned Israel, trembling, to Mt. Sinai to receive his Law. Trumpets summoned Israel to the great feast of forgiveness. Two trumpets of hammered silver called Israel to break camp and set out for the Promised Land. Trumpets were to sound both in times of battle and times of rejoicing. When Solomon dedicated God’s temple 120 priests sounded the ram’s horn trumpets. All those trumpeting prophecies prepare us for this, “*the trumpet call of God.*”
- B. “The dead in Christ will rise first.” Our fellow believers who have been with the Lord will now experience the resurrection of their bodies. They have been with Jesus, but for all the unhindered joys of that state, they have been restless indeed. Though they have been with the Lord, they have not been complete; their *bodies* have lain sleeping till this moment. I do not know how this will work but the imagery here seems like the spirits of the righteous descend into the dressing rooms of the earth where new bodies wait, refashioned by God from the dust and ashes that were left; new bodies, as different from these as the oak from the

acorn, or the flower from the seed. And now, clothed in everlasting bodies, they explode forth, rising swiftly to Jesus as crowds to their champion, clothed in the Christlike bodies they have been waiting for.

What makes these bodies so glorious is not that we become superheroes—X-ray vision, superhuman strength, able to leap tall buildings. Those things may be true, I don't know, but they pale in significance to the fact that these bodies will be sin-free and sick-free, that these are bodies fit for eternal living; **minds** unhindered by the lies and lunacy of this world, **hands** that will only and ever serve the Lord, **eyes** which can bear the bright sights of heaven; **ears** that can bear the hymns of saints and angels, **tongues** that will speak only blessing, and **hearts** clean enough and big enough and loving enough to embrace the glory of God.

- C. **V.17:** “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds...” The Latin word for “caught up” is *rapto*, meaning “to seize, to carry off,” and it is why we call this experience ‘the rapture,’—the *seizing*. Elsewhere we’re told that this will all happen in *“the twinkling of an eye.”* **Part of the reason this rapture is so wonderful is what is left behind:** all that drags us down here; all that weighs us, the heavy gravity that draws tears from our eyes and force bodies to bend beneath the weight of sin and sorrow. We will be *caught up* and away from crippling memories and sorrows, from habits that have hobbled us, and weaknesses that have hindered us. All thrown off, like sandbags from under a fast-rising hot air balloon.

And we shall be together “with them in the clouds.” What a reunion! Jesus tells us in **Matt. 24:31** that *“his angels will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”* **God’s people have never all been together.**

- The great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before have watched us run our courses from their place in glory, but we have never all been together.

- We have read one another's stories and looked at pictures, but we have never all been together.
 - We have all confessed one Lord, one faith, one baptism and eaten at the same table but we have never all been together.
 - We have sung the same songs, prayed the same prayers, read the same Scripture, but we have never all been together.
 - Each in our own time and place and way, we have seen that "*Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever,*" but we have never all been together.
 - We have sensed deep within that we are part of one great church across ages and miles and languages. And finally, on that great day, **we will all be together when we meet the Lord in the air.**
- D. And look where we meet: "in the clouds... in the air." The Bible says that this has been the domain of the enemy— "*the Prince of the power of the air,*" he is called. He who has tormented us, and lied to us, and accused us will be cast down and we will meet in triumph where he once reigned and it will be the Lord's domain, the place of our reunion!
- E. We shall "meet **the Lord** in the air. And so we will be **with him forever.**" We can imagine, perhaps, at least a shadow of what a reunion with our loved ones will be like, but I do not think our minds can conceive nor our hearts grasp what it will be like to meet the Lord in the air. He to whom we've prayed and sung, the beloved Lord who has always been near but never seen. Our image of him has always been earth-bound—sandals and robe, the Son of Man, cross-fixed, or standing alone beside the gaping grave. **But in that moment we shall see him in his glory, and we shall contribute to that glory, more than all the angels of heaven, for we are those whom he has redeemed.**
- And the faith we have so carefully cultivated and guarded will no longer be necessary. **Faith—being certain of things *unseen*—will be pointless, for we will see him.**

We rise to meet the Lord as he comes to meet us. On the night before Jesus was crucified he told his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled... I am going to prepare a place for you. And 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.” Jn14:1-3 Jesus is our Bridegroom and no bridegroom ever gave more to win his bride and no bridegroom has ever waited longer no with such happy anticipation as Jesus waits to be united with the people he loves so passionately. No one in all that excited airborne assembly of the saints and angels who meet the Lord will be *more* thrilled than Jesus himself.

Conclusion:

What does it mean to Christians to believe in the second coming of Christ? V.18 says, “*Therefore, encourage each other with these words.*” A few verses later in **5:8-11** he says, “*Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.*” Then Paul says it again: “***Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.***”

This is a doctrine that While we wait for new bodies we protect our faith with ancient armor—faith in Christ and love for others guarding our hearts and this impenetrable “*hope of salvation as a helmet.*” Here is why we persevere in our faith. Here is why we choose righteousness. Here is why we bow to the Lord Jesus Christ now. Here is the bedrock of our encouragement and the motivation to build one another up in Christ. **Jesus is coming back for us!**

Philip Yancey writes, “*I know a woman whose grandmother lies buried under 150-year-old live oak trees in the cemetery of an Episcopal church in rural Louisiana. In accordance with the grandmother’s instructions, only one word is carved on the tombstone: ‘Waiting.’*” [#3398]

We do not grieve as those with no hope.

Take heart...

We do not fear for brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in Christ.

Take heart...

We who remain will surely not miss the day of his coming!

Take heart...

We *will* hear his loud command, the archangel's shout, and the trumpet call of God!

Take heart...

The dead in Christ will rise with glorious resurrection bodies.

Take heart...

We who are still alive will be caught up to meet them and we shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye.

Take heart...

We will meet *the Lord* in the air!

Take heart...

We will never again be apart from him or one another...ever!

Take heart!