

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

### 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Do you ever wonder what people are saying about you? Perhaps you know. Perhaps you don't know. When Paul wrote to the young Christians at Thessalonica he told them what people were saying about them. We can read it in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10. 'They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.'

The risen Jesus had changed their lives and that change affected three areas: the past, the present and the future. In the past they had lived in a way that made God angry. They had worshipped idols, false gods. But now they had turned away from idols. Jesus had brought forgiveness and a new start. Jesus had transformed the past.

Jesus had transformed the present. They were now serving the living and true God. There was a humility and an integrity in their living that came from their new relationship with God, not a false god but the true God, not a lifeless idol but the living God.

And Jesus had transformed their future. They were no longer living under the threat of God's anger. They were looking forward to the return of Christ, to his coming from heaven.

We can know that same transformation in our lives through the power of the risen Jesus and that's something worth talking about. Jesus transforms the past and takes away the guilt of sin. Jesus transforms the present and gives us new purpose. Jesus transforms the future bringing hope where there was only fear.

The young Christians in Thessalonica were so eager to welcome Jesus back and enjoy the blessings of the second coming that it had created a problem for them. Some of them had died. Would they miss out on the blessings of the second coming? Paul answers their question in this letter.

His words in chapter 4 address three potential problems: ignorance, grief and unbelief.

First of all he says, 'We do not want you to be ignorant.' There are some things that God has not revealed. We do not know exactly when Jesus will return. We are just told to be ready. But we are told in no uncertain terms that he *will* return. And although we don't know when it will happen we are told how it will happen.

But first Paul has something to say about Christians who have died. He describes them as those who have fallen asleep. Death is not a pleasant subject. When people spoke about death they tried to soften the blow by calling it sleep. For many people it was – and for many people it still is – a sleep from which there is no waking up. Their grief is very great because they have no hope.

But Jesus has shown us something different. He died for our sins on the cross and on the third day came to life again. So, Paul says, '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.' For Christians 'falling asleep' is a very appropriate way of thinking about death because it's a sleep from which we will wake up and find ourselves with Jesus.

Elsewhere Paul said, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain' (Philippians 1:21). To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Paul talks about falling asleep 'in Jesus'. We are accustomed to falling asleep in bed. If you fall asleep in bed you wake up in bed. When it comes to dying, if you fall asleep in Jesus you will wake up in Jesus.

Our English word 'cemetery' comes from a Greek word. The interesting thing is that the Greek word didn't mean a cemetery. It meant a dormitory. Another interesting thing is

that although the New Testament speaks about dying as falling asleep it never speaks that way about Jesus. Christians fall asleep but Christ died. There is no way of softening the reality of the death of Jesus. He 'died' in order that we might 'sleep' and then 'awake'.

We don't want you to be ignorant, Paul says. We don't want you to grieve like those who have no hope. We want you to believe: to believe in Jesus, and to believe that those who have already died are safe in his care.

But will they miss out on the blessings of the second coming? The answer is in verses 14 and 15. 'God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in [Jesus]. 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.' Christians who have died will not be at any disadvantage when Jesus returns. They won't miss out in any way.

When Paul talks about the coming of the Lord in verse 15 he uses the word *parousia*. There are three other places in this letter where the second coming of Jesus is described as a *parousia* (2:19; 3:13; 5:23). Paul's choice of this word is deliberate. You wouldn't use it to describe a neighbour popping in for a cup of sugar or a member of your family coming to stay. It had a specialised meaning.

A *parousia* was an official visit, a state visit, the equivalent for us of royalty visiting. It was a rare occasion with much pomp and ceremony. It usually involved some significant change in status for the city or province being visited. The word *parousia* was also used of the manifestation of a god in some display of power.

In the Roman world these two ideas were sometimes combined. There is an inscription commemorating the visit of the emperor Hadrian to Greece in the second century AD. It reads, 'in the year 69 of the first *parousia* of the god Hadrian in Greece'.

The second coming of Jesus will be a *parousia*, and in verses 16 and 17 Paul gives us a description of it. It's not a detailed programme of events but an outline programme, the eight major features of that great occasion.

**1. The Lord himself will come.** It will not be a representative but the Lord himself. Earlier Paul wrote that the Thessalonian Christians were waiting for God's Son from heaven, that God would bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him, but now he uses the most significant title of all when he speaks about Jesus as the Lord.

The subjects of the emperor were expected to acclaim him as divine. 'Caesar is Lord.' But Christians could not make that acclamation. They knew that Jesus is Lord, that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess. They refused to bow the knee to Caesar and they were willing to pay for their refusal with their lives.

If you glance at verses 15 to 17 you will see that Jesus is referred to five times as 'the Lord'. Paul wants to leave us in no doubt about the authority and importance of the one whose coming he is describing.

**2. He will come down from heaven.** His coming will be visible. At this time of advent we remember Christ's first coming, in obscurity, in humility, as a baby! But when he comes again it will be in glory, from heaven, 'on the clouds,' as verse 17 tells us.

**3. He will come with a loud command.** This word was used of a military command. Jesus will come not to offer advice or enter into negotiations but to do battle with evil and put right what is wrong.

**4. He will come with the voice of the archangel.** When Jesus was arrested he said, 'Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than

twelve legions of angels?' (Matthew 26:53.) The army of angels which held back during his days on earth will exert its full force on his return.

**5. He will come with the trumpet call of God.** There will be a call to battle, not from a human general, not even just from an archangel, but from God himself. In a battle, when the army is scattered over a large area, you don't give instructions with a mouth organ or a penny whistle. You need an instrument with a clear note that will carry, a trumpet call. There will be no mistaking the trumpet call of God

**6. The dead in Christ will rise first.** There will be a resurrection from the dead and this will take place first. This was the issue that was troubling the Christians at Thessalonica. Those who had died already would not miss out. There's no softening of the language this time, no euphemisms, no mention of sleep – the dead in Christ. But they will rise, and they will rise first.

**7. Those who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.** There will be an amazing reunion. Paul includes himself among those who would be still alive and left here on earth. That is not a mistake in Scripture but a signal of how we are to think: not cynically but expectantly.

Those who are still alive will be 'caught up,' snatched away. This isn't a gentle image. It sometimes implies violent action. It will be sudden and immediate. Those who are alive on earth and those who have risen from death will together be caught up to meet the Lord. At a *parousia* a delegation of civic officials would have the privilege of going out to meet the visiting dignitary and escorting him back into the city.

**8. We will be with the Lord forever.** The word Paul uses is 'always'. We will be with the Lord always. This is not just a promise for the future but an assurance for the present. However our present experience of Christ will be far outshone by our fellowship with him in the future.

Verse 18 brings the 'therefore' of this message. 'Therefore encourage each other with these words.' It would be equally correct to translate this, 'Comfort each other with these words.' The prospect of the second coming is both a comfort concerning those who have gone and an encouragement to those who remain.