

The Coming of the Lord

by Walton Weaver

The return of our Lord Jesus from heaven is a fundamental doctrine of Scripture. The hope of Christians now lies in the faithful fulfillment of His promise to return. "And if I go and prepare a place for you," Jesus said, "I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (Jn. 14:3). As Jesus ascended up into heaven and a cloud received Him out of the sight of His disciples who were present, the angels who were there announced, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Many of the apostles also give other promises of His return from heaven. We wish to consider one such passage from the apostle Paul on this wonderful theme.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The Problem

Christians need to be correctly informed about matters. The church Paul is addressing evidently had some misconceptions concerning the coming of the Lord and this is what prompted him to say what he did at this place. He did not want them "to be ignorant . . . concerning those who have fallen asleep." This term translated "ignorant" is often used by Paul when he wishes to explain some new point (Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8). No doubt Paul had done some teaching on the subject of Christ's return when he was with them, but there were some questions about the resurrection that needed to be answered. The specific question Paul brings up concerns "those who have fallen asleep."

The term "fallen asleep" is used to describe death (cf. 1 Cor. 7:39 and 2 Pet. 3:4 for a similar use of the term, and see Matt. 9:24 and 1 Cor. 15:51). "The object of the metaphor is to suggest that as the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist despite his absence from the region in which those who remain can communicate with him, and that, as sleep is known to be temporary, so the death of the body will be found to be. Sleep has its waking, death will have its resurrection" (Hogg and Vine).

The main reason Paul needed to help these brethren understand these matters was that their misconceptions about the resurrection had led them to "grieve" as those who have no hope. Paul shows that they should not grieve because there is no reason for them to do so. They should have a firm conviction regarding the future of those who had fallen asleep or died, because, he says, "since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (vs. 14, RSV). All who are in Christ believe in Christ's death and resurrection, and this is the ground of their hope in a future resurrection from the dead. Paul makes a more lengthy argument for the resurrection based on the fact of Christ's own resurrection from the dead to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:12ff.). God is not going to leave those who are Christ's in the grave any more than He left His own Son there. When Christ returns He WILL bring them with Him into glory.

Paul is not speaking meaningless words in these verses. They are in fact "the word of the Lord" (vs. 15). It does not matter whether Paul means that which the Lord taught during His ministry or that which Paul had received by revelation in a special way. Either way, what he says here is the Lord's word, it is based on His authority, and it is not a statement based solely upon the authority of Paul.

The Lord's Descent

1. *The Time.* The Lord's coming is simply stated as a matter of fact with no attempt being made to put a date on it. The "when" of His coming is an open-ended question. Jesus Himself had said, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of man is coming" (Matt. 25:13). Later in this letter Paul says that "the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night," but that Christians "are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief" (5:1, 4). He shall return at a time unannounced, so all must be prepared for His coming. No time will be available for making preparation after His coming. His coming will mark "the end" (1 Cor. 15:24-26), so there will be no return of our Lord to this earth to establish an earthly kingdom.

2. *The Manner.* No one will be sent in His place; "for the Lord Himself will descend" (vs. 16). He will return "from heaven" (vs. 16), and in such a manner so as to be visible to all alike. There will be no secret coming of the Lord when He returns from heaven. John says, "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and they also who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him" (Rev. 1:7). He will come with heavenly power (Mk. 13:26), and "in his glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory" (Matt. 25:31).

The Resurrection

The first order of business at Christ's coming will be the resurrection of the dead. In this passage he is speaking only of those who have died in Christ. Those who are dead will be raised before those who are alive at His coming are caught up to be with the Lord in the air (vs. 15). Paul describes the order of these two events in the last statement of

verse 16: "And the dead in Christ will rise first." In other words, they will be raised before those who are yet alive at the Lord's coming will be caught up to be with Him. So when he says that some "will rise first" He is not describing a first and a second resurrection as some suppose. The Bible does not speak of a resurrection of the wicked at one time and a resurrection of the righteous at another time. There is only one coming of the Lord and only one bodily, or literal, resurrection. The one literal resurrection will be that of both the wicked and the righteous in "the hour" the Lord names as the time in which "all who are in their graves will . . . come forth" (Jno. 5:28-29). The signal tokens of His regal power will be: a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God (vs. 16). The shout is a word of command. This will be the voice that will call the dead forth (Jn. 5:28-29). The next two prepositional phrases seem to define two phases of the first one. The Lord's command 1) will be issued through an archangel, and 2) by the means of a trumpet. Whether these things are to be taken in a literal sense is doubtful. But they point to a very definite call by which the dead will be raised.

Comforting Words

The fact of the resurrection and the taking up of those who will be alive at His coming are comforting words. The thought that both will together "meet the Lord in the air," "and thus we shall always be with the Lord," are words that give assurance and comfort to Christians. So Paul gives a direct admonition, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (vs. 18). There were no valid grounds for grief on the part of the Thessalonians regarding those of their loved ones who had died in Christ. "These words" which Paul had written were meant to bring them comfort, and they have brought similar comfort to Christians throughout all the intervening centuries since Paul's time. Ours is a living hope, and all those who die in the Lord die in hope (cf. Rev. 14:13). "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).