

WHAT'S AFTER ATX

EXEGETICAL NOTES:

RELATIONSHIPS IN HEAVEN

A. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

CONTEXT

Unlike some of Paul's other epistles, this letter is one that has hardly any corrections or rebukes. From the beginning of the letter, Paul praises the Thessalonians for their love, deeds, and witness that is seen everywhere, even in the midst of suffering (1:6). They took God at his word (2:13), they encourage others by their lifestyle (3:7), and they were taught by God that they should love one another (4:9). Sometimes the only exhortation Paul can give them is to keep doing more of what they are already doing (4:1, 10).

This overflowing love in the church at Thessalonica is the reason for Paul's teaching in our passage; they were genuinely concerned about believers who had died. Taking into consideration the content of both epistles (especially 2 Thess. 2:2), it seems that some false teachers had spread the notion that the resurrection had already happened. Obviously, this would be problematic to the Thessalonians if that were true and if there were still believers that hadn't been resurrected. No doubt this would bring fears that they would never see their loved ones again.

B. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

INFORMED GRIEF

Paul begins by expressing his concern that the Thessalonians be properly informed, not with a kind of superiority, but genuine concern. He does not want them to mourn when there is no reason for them to, nor to grieve



like unbelievers. Unbelievers have no hope: for them there is only this life and death is the end. It is final, and death means never seeing loved ones again.

But Paul wants the Thessalonians to have hope that they will indeed see their loved ones again one day. This desire may be borne out of the previous context where Paul exhorts them to live a quiet and respectful life before outsiders. These believers have a golden opportunity to be an example to unbelievers in how they grieve for those who have passed away.

Pagan unbelievers did not have hope in death. For example, one Greek writer, Catullus wrote, “The sun can set and rise again / But once our brief light sets / There is one unending night to be slept through.”¹ Death was eternal sleep from which you never woke.

Paul seems to use the same euphemism of sleeping to describe death but flips it on its head. Whereas the pagan thought you never woke from death, a dead end. Paul speaks of it as a minor interruption that is merely a door to a perfect relationship with God and other believers.

It’s important also to point out that Paul is not telling the believers not to grieve. Grieving is never discouraged in Scripture. Even Jesus grieved when his friend, Lazarus, died (John 11:33-36). Paul’s point then is not whether they grieve (of course they will), but rather the manner of their grieving. They should grieve with hope.

FAITHFUL GRIEF

This manner of grieving with hope is rooted in a confession that Paul shares with the believers—“*we* believe that Jesus died and rose again.” This is the cornerstone of Paul’s fellowship with the Thessalonians, and the cornerstone of their hope that they will see their loved ones again. They should have grief that is faithful (or full of faith).

Elsewhere, Paul teaches that Jesus is the firstfruit from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20-23), in that Jesus was the first to experience the fruits of his sacrificial death, resurrection. But the fruit of his death also benefits those who put their faith in him, and they inherit eternal life and will receive a resurrected, glorified body. Paul seems to be drawing off of that same teaching here.

If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then, “we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Paul’s understanding of what God would do in the future was rooted in what God had already done in the past. If he raised Jesus, he will raise us. If we are fully convinced that Jesus died for us, then we can be just as confident that we will see our loved ones again.

1. Quoted in Michael W. Holmes, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 148.

C. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16

THE ADVANTAGE OF THE DEAD

Paul formally declares to the Thessalonians what will happen in the resurrection. He uses a formula (“we declare to you by a word from the Lord”) akin to “thus says the Lord,” a phrase that carries the authority of God.

Paul gives the believers brief rundown of what will happen when Jesus returns. Paul is not treating this exhaustively, but only touching on the most important truths that undergird his point.

Paul declares to them that, when Jesus returns, we will not precede those who have died. We won’t be “translated” (as some call it) into glorified bodies first. Rather, those who have died get a head start. This of course meant that the Thessalonians could rest easy. If the dead would rise first, then the Thessalonians weren’t in glorified bodies, and they would still see their loved ones.

THE ORDER OF THE RESURRECTION

Paul then gives them a peek into what the Lord’s return will be like. The Lord will first descend from his place in heaven with a cry of command to gather his people. This will be accompanied by with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. There is a lot of speculation about these, but my intention is not to focus on eschatology. Suffice it to say that they are commonly associated with the Lord’s return throughout Scripture.

Then the first thing that happens is that the dead will be resurrected. According to Paul then, those who are dead in Christ have the privilege of being raised first. The Thessalonians had it backward—the dead weren’t going to be left behind, rather they would be raised before them.

D. 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18

A GLORIOUS REUNION AND UNION

Only after the dead are raised will we be caught up with them in the air. Again, there is much speculation about the verb “caught up,” but let’s not also get caught up in the debate. The main thing you need to know is that it is instantaneous (see also 1 Cor. 15:52).

Even then, Paul’s point is not to detail how things will happen. There’s no timeline of events, no complex charts. He isn’t even comforting them by pointing them to streets of gold or pearly gates. His concern isn’t so much how it will happen or what we’ll do, Only the firm assurance of where we’ll be: with each other and with the Lord.



The point of the text is to comfort those who are grieving. Gene L. Green communicates this powerfully: “This is not the stuff of speculative prophecy or best-sellers on the end times. The text is located at the funeral home, the memorial service, and the graveside. It is placed in the hands of each believer to comfort others in their time of greatest sorrow.”²

A COMFORTING TRUTH

Theology and doctrine often have a bad rap for being boring or pointless, however Paul masterfully weaves together the truth about Christ death, resurrection and return in a way that is genuinely comforting. Good theology does more than simply inform.

Paul knows he has taken a weight of concern off the believers’ minds, so he tells them not to keep it to themselves but to comfort each other with what he just told them. Comforting someone is more than just knowing about something comforting, but also telling them about it and reminding them about it. That would give anyone strength, even in hardship.

CONCLUSION

The truth that God will raise the dead and that we will all be together with the Lord is a truth that is hopefully comforting to all of us. The two things that always drive us away from relationships are sin and death, and we are all universally affected by both.

Stretching all the way back to the garden of Eden, man’s history has been one torn relationships and bitter death (Gen. 3:12, 4:8). But in Christ, God restores relationship and takes away the sting of death. We are not only given eternal life, but God brings us into a relationship with him, and through his Spirit supplies us love for one another.

This love for each other is seen in the Thessalonians. Their love for each other was stronger than death, and if it looked like that on this side of the resurrection, how beautiful will it be on the other side? If we will be with each other and Jesus forever, that means never again having a broken relationship because of sin or death.

The believers were afraid that lonely death was the end, but Paul’s point is that for believers, a loving relational life is the eternal beginning. If that is so then Paul is right that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest is love (1 Cor. 13:13). We may outgrow the need for faith and hope when they become sight, but we will never outgrow love.

2. Gene L. Green, *The Letter to the Thessalonians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 229.