

1Thessalonians 12-05-11b

We pick up our study in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 17. We who are alive and remain. After the shout of command from the Lord Jesus, the voice of the archangel, which I believe is alerting the people on earth that the 70th week of Daniel is beginning, and the trump of God, which is the blast of command to make sure anybody else who doesn't know what's going on knows something's going on, the dead in Christ will rise first.

This is first in comparison to us who are alive and remain. And in every generation there is an us. If our generation passes away and our young people become the people in their 40s and 50s and 60s and we've scrolled off the map, why then they will be us.

We who are alive and remain. And there is an ongoing sense of presence for those who are currently alive on the earth, looking back on all of those who have preceded in faith in Christ and who have fallen asleep. But as you look at this, both here and in 1 Corinthians 15, and again, I've probably pointed this out enough times, but you do not get any sense that Paul believes the dead in Christ are in conscious bliss with the Lord.

He never suggests that. He never intimates it. He doesn't offer it as a source of comfort.

He says the dead in Christ will rise. And if you think about this logistically, as I have mentioned in times past, it would be somewhat awkward. Imagine yourself as having been a Christian who died a few hundred years ago.

So you're dead, and at the point that you died, your body, your eyes closed in death. You went stiff and cold and stopped breathing. They had a funeral and buried your corpse.

And according to the traditional understanding, your disembodied spirit went up into the realms to be face-to-face with the Lord. And so you're floating around up there in some somewhat nebulously defined state, but you're with the Lord. People take that passage and say, absent from the body, face-to-face with the Lord.

So you're up there, and there are great clouds of disembodied church-age saints with the Lord, waiting until the rapture will take place, when they can get their resurrection body. So then, God the Father says, My son, it is time to collect your bride. Well, 99.8% of His bride is already there.

Because most of church-age believers that have ever lived, according to the traditional understanding, have already come up there and they're all floating around. So it seems to me to be a tiny little mop-up operation, to come down and grab the handful that happen to be alive at the time of the rapture. You've got practically the entire crowd already up in heaven.

But according to Scripture, they've got to rise. So God says, Son, time to go get the bride. The Lord Jesus says, Okay, archangel, trumpeter, let's go.

I'll shout. You say something there, archangel. And trumpeter, you blow the trumpet.

Let's get this thing rolling. And so, oh, by the way, all of you disembodied saints here, you need to go back and get down in the ground. So you all go back down to earth, get down in your graves, and I'll see you in a minute.

And so everybody's got to leave heaven and go back and get in the ground, so that when the Lord Himself descends from heaven with the shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God, now the dead in Christ, who have been with Him for centuries, are going to rise up and go to meet the Lord in the air. Why do they need to go meet Him in the air, if they've been with Him for all of this time? Why do they not return with Him and gather up the few remnants that happen to be alive at the time of the rapture? To me, it does not comport. It does not seem to harmonize with what Scripture says.

Here's what harmonizes, in my mind, with what Scripture says. When you die, you are absent from the body, and face-to-face with the Lord. When does the Bible say we are face-to-face with the Lord? When He descends from heaven with the shout, voice of the archangel, trump of God, dead in Christ, rise to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Now, well, where were you in between? You weren't anywhere. You died, and now, the next thing you hear, if we die tomorrow, if there's a vast attack of some sort, and the ne'er-do-wells fire off some sort of a weapon, and we all get creamed, there's a big mushroom cloud from downtown Dallas, and we all get instantaneously fried. The rapture might be years in the future, but as far as we're concerned, we draw our last breath, our heart beats its last beat, and our eyes close, and we fall asleep, and when we open our eyes, we are hearing the voice of the Lord, we're hearing the voice of the archangel, we're hearing the sound of the trump, and we're rising out of the ground.

What happened in the intervening years? I don't know. I wasn't aware of the passage of that time, because I have just jumped from the time of my death to the time of the rapture. I'm absent from my body.

I am face-to-face with the Lord. We don't have to be anywhere. That's human way of thinking.

God doesn't require everybody to be stored somewhere for all time. He's not bound by time. Where was I before I was born? I wasn't anywhere.

Where will I be after I die? Well, I'm not anywhere. But when the Lord Jesus gives the shout, I, as dead in Christ, will rise, and I'll rise before anybody that's alive on the earth rises. That's what Paul says, comfort one another with these words.

If you're worried about those who have died, and they're before the throne of grace right now, why wouldn't Paul give us those words for comfort? Don't worry about grandma. She's with the

Lord. Don't worry about your father.

Don't worry about your brother. Don't worry about your sister. Don't worry about your mother, your aunt, your uncle, grandma, grandpa, your child died of a disease.

The infant mortality was so sky high for eons and millennia before now. Don't worry. They're with the Lord.

Paul could say comfort. Don't worry about those that have fallen asleep in Jesus. They're with the Lord.

They're in His ever-present grace. They're enjoying the celestial glory of heaven. If that's the truth, why isn't that the comfort? I would suggest because that's not the truth.

That is a misapprehension and a misunderstanding and a misinterpretation of absent from the body, face to face with the Lord. This is the word of comfort. Those who have fallen asleep will not be left behind.

We will not fano those who are asleep. When the Lord comes, they will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them.

Where? In the clouds. People have speculated, are these clouds of saints, clouds of angels, clouds of water vapor? What are they? It appears that this is simply clouds in the sky. When it says, behold, he cometh with clouds at the second coming, that is apparently clouds of saints, clouds of His people.

But here, we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds. This is our point of rendezvous. How far will the dead in Christ get before we start catching up? Twenty feet in the air? Are they just going to be slightly ahead of us, just going to wind by a nose? Are they just going to be a matter of feet ahead of us? No.

Those who are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord Jesus at the rapture are going to see the dead in Christ rise and are going to see them ascend quite a ways. And what is the point at which those who are alive and remain will catch them? It's cloud level. Many hundreds if not thousands of feet in the air.

And the great thing about this is that if we are part of that quote-unquote rapture generation that gets to see the resurrection, this is going to be a vista. I don't know that it's going to be visible to the rest of the earth. We talked about the quote-unquote secret rapture, the notion that people are going to realize that there's a bunch of people missing, but this could be under cover of a natural disaster.

It might be an attack on the United States. There might be global thermonuclear war. There might be interruption of media services, and satellites are down, and GPSs are down, and landlines are

down, and cell phones don't work, and people are disappearing.

You look to the house on this side, you look to the house on that side, the people are gone. You say, well, they must have run away. I don't know where they went.

And it could be explained away. It could be thought to be some other sort of disappearance when in reality those who belong to Christ have, from an earthly standpoint, from an unbeliever standpoint, gone invisible. That transformation takes us to a new dimensional realm, and we can see each other, and we can see the dead in Christ rising, and we can see the Lord in the air.

Everybody else on earth may be otherwise occupied, may not be able to see it at all. It doesn't say what the people on earth can see. Second coming, every eye shall see him.

Second coming, be like the lightning that goes from the east to the west. Second coming, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess. Second coming, there will be a judgment.

Second coming, there will be a cleansing. Second coming, the Lord Jesus will come and plant his feet on the Mount of Olives, and there is going to be a huge earthly impact. Everybody is going to know.

The media coverage is going to be worldwide, instantaneous, everywhere at once. It doesn't say anything like that about the rapture. So, let's say the rapture is next Tuesday, and none of us die in the meantime.

Come Tuesday, all of a sudden, we hear this spine-tingling shout, unlike anything that's ever been a part of our experience, but we instantly know the voice of the Lord Jesus, because we are his people, and we know his voice. The voice that we've heard in our hearts, the voice that we've heard through Scripture, the voice that has been communicated to us through God the Holy Spirit, the voice we've heard in the quiet hours of our meditation, is going to speak, and we will hear it, and we'll know it instantly, if we are faithful, obedient believers. And then, we will experience this transformation.

As it says in 1 Corinthians 15, we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. At the same time that the dead in Christ rise, we will be transformed. In that moment, in that twinkling of an eye, everybody is changed.

But the dead in Christ rise first. You don't want to be changed and still be in your coffin, right? You don't want to be changed and be down in the depths of the sea. What about their molecules and so on? I think the location of the point of your death is where you rise.

If you were drowned in the sea, you rise from the sea. If you died on land, you rise from the land. If you died on a bed of straw in 1426 in Bristol, England, your resurrection body is going to instantly take shape at that spot, and you're going to rise.

I don't necessarily think it's going to be the grave. Although, when Jesus was crucified, it says the graves were opened, and people walked. But what about the people who don't get buried? What about people who get incinerated? What about the believers who were on the space shuttle that incinerated the atmosphere? Where are they going to start from? Well, God will just pick a spot.

Maybe right next to their loved ones in the cemetery. Maybe they'll just all rise together. God can reformulate them wherever they want, because he's not going to use the molecules of this earth.

We're going to be made out of new stuff. We're going to be made out of the stuff that the Lord Jesus Christ has made up. It is a transformation.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall be changed. Not the same. It doesn't matter if you're a believer, and you got killed, and you were eaten by a headhunter, and then he became a believer, and now your molecules are mixed.

All of that stuff is absurd and beside the point. Which bodies are you going to raise? Are we going to be like conjoined twins? You don't have to worry about it. We're not made out of molecule stuff anymore.

That's why we'll be able to survive the earth melting with a fervent heat, and the heavens being rolled up like a scroll, because we won't be made out of this stuff. It's purely a logistical matter as to location. But the dead in Christ will rise, but we will all be changed at the same twinkling of an eye, same instant.

That's why we'll be able to see them, because we will already be changed. But we don't start gaining altitude until they are well ahead of us, and we will catch them, we will join with them in the clouds with the Lord. The Lord will be descending, and He'll reach cloud level.

Those who are dead will be ascending. They'll reach cloud level. We who are alive and remain will start late, but we'll catch them, everybody.

There's going to be this grand meeting in the clouds. We will meet the Lord in the clouds, in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Now, from a spatial point of view, how many people can be in the Lord Jesus' immediate periphery? He's not a dirigible.

He's not a giant entity that stretches for miles, is He? He is an individual. He's human-sized. So if we, quote, meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord, guess what? That position of proximity to the Lord Jesus has already been determined based on what we chose and what we did in this life.

So when we rise and meet the Lord, we're not all going to the immediate three and a half feet away from the Lord Jesus' presence. We will go to our assigned distance because there is going to be a cloud of saints. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't want to be in the nosebleed seats.

I don't want to be fourteen and a half miles away on the edge of the cloud of saints. If the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back for me and I hear His voice, I want to be as close as possible, don't you? Well, it's another thing to think about. It's another thing to remember.

When the chips are down, when we are taxed, when we are tested, one of the things to remember is our level of faithfulness here reflects our desire for the presence of Christ. We're going to want to be as close to Him now as we will then. How valuable is the Lord Jesus in our life today? How near are we to Him today? Well, that is going to be physically reflected, I think, because it says we'll meet the Lord in the air and then what? And so, and in that status, shall we ever be with the Lord.

If we are distant from the Lord Jesus, we're apathetic, we think of Him once a week, right before church, we throw up a prayer before a meal, we largely live to please ourselves, we have earthly desires, earthly goals, earthly pursuits, earthly occupations, we don't lay up any treasure in heaven, we are unfruitful, God can't really prune us and enable us to bear more fruit, we don't abide in the vine, we're a withered branch, we don't lay up any gold, silver, and precious stones. Why would we even imagine that when the Lord Jesus returns and we go to meet Him that we would be anywhere near Him in the air? Why would we be? Why would we be ahead of people who have been faithful, who have invested themselves in their heavenly citizenship, who have laid up for themselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt, and thieves do not break in and steal, who have laid up gold and silver and precious stones, who have by faith and patience qualified themselves for inheritance. Why would we stand in front of them? Why would we block their view? Why would we take their place? We won't, we wouldn't, and we won't.

And as I said, for some of us it may well be a retrograde rapture. Here's the Lord appearing in the sky in the east and we start rising and we're going west, backward, to the edge of the cloud, to the edge of the crowd, where we see a glow and we see the backs of a lot of heads and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Whose fault is that? Who determined that destiny? Who ultimately made that level of distance happen? It's us.

We choose it day by day, day by day, day by day. It's just like class standing. It's just like rank within any group.

It's based on performance over a period of time. So shall we ever be with the Lord. So, thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Therefore comfort one another with these words. Now, it's not a comfort to think that we might be way in the rear, in the gloomy distance. Why does he say comfort one another with these words? What was the problem? Well, you remember back at the beginning, I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep.

Comfort one another with regard to those who have fallen asleep. They will rise first. That's the comfort.

So, you can set your mind at ease about those who have fallen asleep and do what? Concentrate on making sure that you are going to be able to join them. If they were faithful believers, you want to be with them. If you are a faithful believer, they're going to want to be with you.

And you want to be with the Lord. You want to be close. Think about those overcomer promises in Revelation 2 and 3. To Him that overcomes, I will grant to walk with Me in white, Jesus says.

To sit with Me on My throne, Jesus says. Well, of course, in the original letter, there aren't chapter and verse divisions, and so the very next statement here is He says comfort one another with these words, but concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. Does this sound familiar at all? You have no need that I should write to you? How about back in chapter 4, verse 2? You know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 4, verse 9, concerning brotherly love, you have no need that I should write to you. About those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, I do not want you to be ignorant. But, chapter 5, concerning the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.

Why? You yourselves know perfectly. You yourselves have full awareness of what? That the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. Do you remember the point we observed about protos and eschatos in our earlier session tonight? That when you say first, that's first within some particular context.

And when you say eschatos or last, that's last within some particular context, right? These things have to be put in their realm. Where do they apply? How far do they extend? Well, what about this? The day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. Now, what day of the Lord is this? There's the day of the Lord that is the Tribulation.

There's the day of the Lord that is the Millennial Kingdom. By the way, it's real fascinating to do a word study. If you want an interesting devotional for the coming week, every morning or something, just go to Strong's and find eschatos and look at the way it's used in Scripture.

It is the last hour. It is the last day. Well, when Jesus says, I will raise Him up at the last day, well, when is He going to raise Him up? He's actually going to raise Him up on the first day of the Millennial Kingdom.

There's going to be a thousand years of days after the man is raised up, right? Jesus says, I will raise Him up at the last day. What does He mean by last? It's not the last solar day. It's not the last day on earth.

Not the last day of existence. It's the last day before the New Dispensation, before the New Kingdom. It is the last hour.

In the last days, this and that will happen. Really fascinating to see that you can very clearly see when you just track eschatos through. We don't have time to do it in this study.

But when you do that, look at the context. You see that eschatos always has a context. And many times, there's plenty of stuff after the last thing.

So here, the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. Well, in what context is it like a thief in the night? If, for believers, the Lord is going to descend with a shout, the voice of the Archangel in Trump, and we're going to rise and be with the Lord in the air, how thief in the night-ish is that? Another way of asking the question is, for whom is the coming of the Lord like the coming of a thief in the night? What is the thief in the night like? You wake up in the morning, you look around, and stuff is missing. When you weren't looking, your stuff went away.

That's the thief in the night, right? It doesn't say the thief in the night that woke you up and the dog was barking and you got a flashlight and a weapon and went out there and caught the thief running away. If somebody comes like a thief in the night, you wake up after the fact to realize that something irretrievable has happened when you weren't aware. It's an after-the-fact coming to knowledge.

That's what a thief in the night is, right? You know about the thief in the night in the morning, hours later. So, you know perfectly well that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night, but for when they say, this is a thief in the night for they, for them, they, unbelievers, people who don't belong to Christ, are saying peace and safety. Suddenly, destruction comes upon them.

What is this destruction? It is the 70th week of Daniel. It is the Great Tribulation, the last three and a half years of that, in particular. It is the coming of Antichrist.

They're saying peace and safety. He makes a covenant. He seems to be the Messiah, the secular Messiah, the Messiah, the instead of Christ.

And he achieves a false peace and a false promise for a while. And everybody says, at last, we've got peace. At last, the Middle East issue has been solved.

At last, wars and rumors of wars and famines and all this have ended. We've got the guy. He is the Messiah.

And look, we didn't even need the Bible and we didn't need all that Jesus stuff and all that Judeo-Christian. Here's a guy that isn't using any of that and we've got peace and we've got safety. And the Lord Jesus has already come and taken His own to Himself.

He came like a thief in the night. They aren't aware of it. And while they are saying peace and safety, destruction is coming upon them as labor pains upon a pregnant woman.

Pregnant woman cannot tell you, well, you know, based on the size of my tummy and so on, day

after tomorrow at 2.30 in the afternoon, I'm going to start having labor pains. You don't know. It's going to happen when it's going to happen.

And you might be in the middle of doing something you think is really important and all of a sudden, wham, there comes the labor pains. There's no way to prepare for it. There's no way to predict it.

It can happen at the end of your pregnancy. It can happen virtually any time. They shall not escape.

Pregnant woman cannot escape labor pains unless she's comatose. Any conscious pregnant woman in her ninth month is going to have labor pains. You cannot escape.

It's going to happen in the normal course of things. They shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not.

You, brethren, are not in darkness so that the day overtakes you as a thief. The light of the glory of the return of the Lord Jesus at the rapture, this is confirmation to sensible people such as you and I, you and me, that the rapture takes place before the tribulation. We are not of the night.

We are not of the darkness. The day does not overtake us like a thief because the day doesn't come until we're gone. Notice, when a thief comes in the night, there is a concomitant and resultant loss.

He doesn't come like a surprise beneficial guest with chests full of gold in the night. He does not come as a benefactor. He doesn't come as the three wise men in the night.

Does he? It's a thief. There is loss involved. You wake up to realize that there has been an irretrievable loss.

Thief in the night. But we, brethren, you brethren are not in darkness so that this day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day.

You will go up in the rapture whether dead or alive. The Lord Jesus will collect you unto Himself before this day while everybody else after we're gone says peace and safety. They're in thrall with the Antichrist and destruction is going to come upon them swiftly like labor pains.

They will not escape. Nobody escapes in the tribulation. Even the people of God are going to have to flee to the hills and endure hardship.

There's going to be martyrs. There's going to be souls under the altar. There's going to be people who are persecuted and hounded.

It's going to be a rough time. Nobody will escape. We are not of the night nor of darkness.

Therefore, let us not sleep as others do. Now this is a really clever turn of phrase and this is where we're going to pick up next week. But he has just been using sleep repeatedly as a metaphor, as a reference to those who are dead, right? But now he says as an imperative, therefore let us not sleep.

Does he mean let us not die? Well, kind of. Let us not be as fruitless, as useless as a dead branch. Let us not sleep.

Let us not be so unaware of the movement of God's plan and purpose, so unanticipatory, non-expectant, non-interested, non-hopeful, non-heavenly-minded that the rapture would overtake us like a thief. We're unaware as the dead. The dead are unaware of what's going on in history.

Well, brethren, if we are alive and remain, let us not be as asleep as the dead to the timing and to the opportunities and to the things that are part of God's plan. So this is kind of where we're going, beginning here in verse 6. Let us watch and be sober. We've done a couple of specials in years past on watch and pray, watch and be sober, be vigilant.

Gregoreo, great name for a young man, Gregory, watchful, vigilant, alert, ready, not unprepared, good boy scout, always prepared. Well, this is where we'll prick it next time, but these are great words. We are alive.

We have the opportunity to not be asleep, to be aware, to be awake, to be building into our inheritance, to be preparing ourselves for the return of the Lord Jesus, to be anticipating a closeness with Him, a usefulness to Him, a service for Him, a joining together with Him in all of the things He's going to do in God's plan in the future ages. And because we are alive and breathing air, we still have the opportunity to determine our fate, our opportunity, our reward, our service, our reflection of the glory of the Lord Jesus at the point that He returns. And what a great thing it is that we're still here.

The end of our story has not been written. The books have not been closed on our lives. And in whatever time remains to us, we can put the pedal to the metal.

We can maximize. We can press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The past is the past.

Forgetting those things which are behind, we can start today. And however well or poorly we've done, it doesn't matter. We have time remaining to us.

And this ought to be a hopeful set of truths. We can comfort ourselves with these words, not only about those that have gone before, but about our prospects and our opportunities and the provision God has made for us in the days that remain. Well, this is what we'll pick up next week.

We'll close here in a word of prayer. Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Thank You for

this wonderful, exciting, profoundly motivating promise of the return of the Lord Jesus for us.

We are spared the sufferings. We are spared the darkness. We are spared the tribulation of those last days.

We are not of the night or of the darkness. The day will not overtake us as a thief. And we see the promise of the Lord Jesus when He was speaking of Lazarus.

And He said, The one who lives and believes in Me will never die. We thank You for Your faithfulness to us, Your compassion on us, Your love for us, expressed most fully in and through the Lord Jesus. We pray that these things will motivate us, encourage us to live the life to which we have been called, to exploit all of the things that You have given us, and to truly be a credit and reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, both now and at His return.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.