

BEING RAPTURED AT CHRIST'S COMING

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

Paul set forth a detailed vindication of his motives and his ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13. Now he opens chapter four with some exhortations for the believers in Thessalonica to practice. In view of the extreme immorality that was prevalent in this pagan culture, Paul takes careful steps to encourage these believers to practice holy living. He also handled the idleness of some believers, another problem that endangered the testimony of this congregation. Due to the over-excitement of some believers regarding the imminent coming of Christ (the rapture), they had quit their jobs and became nonworking busybodies. As a result they also became a burden to the working believers to give them food. Paul exhorted them to return to work and maintain industrious lives.

Then Paul proceeds to give the fullest account in all of Scripture concerning Christ's return for His Church. He details the position which both the living and dead shall enjoy on that day in order that these believers may not be overcome with sorrow concerning their loved ones "who are sleeping in Jesus." If the reality of the coming of Christ is properly understood it should motivate believers to zealous Christian living, hope for the future and comfort for the present.

I. Christian Living in the Light of Christ's Coming – 4:1-12**A. Abounding in Pure Living – 4:1-8**

4:1-2 – "Ought to walk" - Paul had exhorted the believers by the Lord Jesus, when he brought the Gospel to them, how they ought to walk to please God. "Ought" indicates that such a walk is a moral obligation that they must practice in order to please God.

"Abound more and more" – Paul was not exhorting them to begin this kind of walk, but to keep on improving themselves in a pure walk. A person becomes a new creation when he receives Jesus as His Savior (2 Cor 6:17) and some godly changes immediately occur in his life, which please God. However, more changes need to occur to become more like Christ. As he puts off sinful practices and puts on pure practices, he is abounding more and more in a holy walk that pleases God.

4:3 – In dealing with loose sexual living and immorality, Paul begins with the overriding principle of their sanctification, i.e., their progress in holy living.

"Fornication" – This is a general term that covers all forms of sexual immorality. It is clearly God's will that believers abstain from all sexual misconduct.

4:4 – There is some question as to whether these verses are dealing with acquiring a wife in sanctification and honor or with possessing one's own body in sanctification and honor. The latter interpretation relates naturally to v. 3 and is assumed to be the correct one.

4:5 – "Concupiscence" is a passionate lust. In the New Testament it is always a strong desire for something that is forbidden by God. Note the sharp contrast between the attitudes of the Christian and of the heathen ("Gentiles") in Paul's time. Immoral conduct has not changed from Paul's day to the present day. It cannot be emphasized too much that Christians must refuse to let the world set their

standards for living. They are not to love and imitate the immoral lives of movie stars, sports heroes, financial tycoons and rock musicians. A love for these kinds of people and their things will rob a believer of his love for God. No man can love the world and its things and still love God. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to one and despise the other (Mt 6:19-24; 1 Jn 2:15-17).

4:6 – A believer that shows any love for the world and the things of the world, will affect other children of God in an adverse way.

"Avenger – God takes vengeance upon the wrongdoer, even if he or she is a believer.

4:7 – "Uncleanness" has no place in a Christian's life (cf. 2:3). Instead, Christians have been called by God to holiness. God's children are to be holy, because God is holy (1 Pet 1:16; cf. Lev 11:44-45; 19:2).

4:8 – "He therefore that despises" - He that lives an impure life despises God. The Christian has power to live above the world's standards because "God has given him the Holy Spirit" to live a godly life (2 Tim 1:7; Gal 5:22-23). It grieves the Spirit when believers resist His work in their lives and live by the works of the flesh (Eph 4:30-31).

B. Abounding in Brotherly Love – 4:9-10

4:9 – "Brotherly love" - A term reserved for love that grows out of filial relationships and is to be characteristic of all members of the family of God. "Brotherly love" is an emotional love that is based on good feelings of believers with one another.

"Taught of God" – God teaches believers a love is higher than "brotherly love." It is the love He had to save His enemies from hell (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8). This kind of love is produced in the believer when he or she determines to let the Spirit take control of his or her life (Gal 5:22). This love enables a mature believer to love an immature believer that does things that normally would be aggravating (cf. 1 Jn 3:10, 14; Jn 13:35).

4:10 – "You do it to all the brethren" - Paul praises them for their love to all the brethren in Macedonia, but he challenges them to abound in this love. There are no limits for improving our love to other believers. The goal is to love others like God loves us. This is the third time that Paul uses the term, "abound." It also is used in 3:12 and 4:1.

C. Abounding in Honest Work – 4:11-12

4:11 – "Study to be quiet" - Paul exhorts them to eagerly pursue the character of being quiet. This is another example of the kind of paradoxes that Paul was fond of using. The word "study" means to be ambitious for, to strive earnestly for; while "quiet" implies a tranquility of life in contrast to frantic mental excitement.

"To do your own business" – Paul exhorts them to mind their own business. This was to become a real problem in their lives (2 Thess 3:11).

"To work" – Paul exhorts them to get to work. Idleness is sin. Self-support is a moral obligation when one has the power to do so (cf. Col 3:17; Eph 4:28).

4:12 – Two purposes are given for exhorting them to work.

"Walk honestly" – Paul desired them to maintain a proper testimony among the unsaved. This attitude toward those "who are without" (the unsaved) is an important part of the Christian's walk (cf. Col 4:5; 1Tim 3:7). The word "honestly" actually means "becomingly," "gracefully," or "in good form."

"Lack of nothing" – Paul desired the believers to maintain productive work to take care of their own needs and the needs of their families. It also was necessary for all the members to work so they could take care of the needs of the church by their tithes and offerings, so they could have an indigenous church that supported itself. That would be impossible without productive workers in the church.

II. Comfort in the Light of Christ's Coming – 4:13-18

A. Correction Regarding the Rapture – 4:13-14

4:13 – "Them which are asleep" - The church had become very concerned about the state of their loved ones who had died before the Rapture. This concern had grown out of a lack of understanding, i.e. ignorance, and possibly some unbelief due to false prophesyings (4:14; 5:20-22). The return of Christ was misunderstood by the church. They thought His return would be in the immediate future, in their lifetime. They needed to understand that His return could be at any time, the immediate future or the distant future. They also needed to understand that all believers, whether they had died or were alive when Christ returns, would be taken up to Heaven in the Rapture. Sorrow over the death of a Christian loved one certainly was not wrong, but to sorrow "as others who have no hope" was improper and had to be corrected.

4:14 – "Jesus died" - Jesus' death is not referred to as "sleep" because he was truly separated from the Father when He bore the sins of the world (Mt 27:46). His death has made it possible for a Christian's death to be changed to a "sleep."

"Sleep in Jesus" – A believer's body is put to rest in the bosom of the earth, but his spirit is ushered into the presence of God. At that time the believer will be clothed in a heavenly body, made without hands, eternal in the heavens, so that his or her spirit will not be found naked (2 Cor 5:1-3). Believers will live in their heavenly bodies until they receive their resurrected bodies at the Rapture. So the sleep in Jesus is not a sleep for the believers' spirits, but rather a sleep for their bodies.

B. Classification in the Rapture – 4:15-17

4:15 – "By the word of the Lord" - Paul received many messages from the Lord and the word about the Rapture was one of them. The Lord revealed the mystery of the Rapture to him. He wrote to the church in Corinth, "Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we all shall be changed" (1 Cor 15:51) A mystery is a truth in the mind of the Lord that He had not revealed in the past. The mystery of the Rapture is revealed in Paul's letters to the churches in Thessalonica and in Corinth. He goes on to say to the Corinthian church that believers will be "changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet will sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor 15:52). "We" shows that Paul expected to be among the living at the time of the Rapture. That is what all believers should think. Notice, the bodies of the believers that have died will be raised from their graves incorruptible, but the bodies of the believers that are alive at the Rapture will be changed. They will not be resurrected, since they never died, but they will need to be changed

as Paul continues to explain to the Corinthian believers: "for this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor 15:53).

"Prevent" – This is an old English word for "precede." Those that are alive at the Rapture will not go up to meet the Lord in the air before those who "are asleep" (those who died).

4:16 – "The dead in Christ shall rise first" - The ones who died and went to Heaven will return with Christ to receive their resurrection bodies. They will be the first class of believers to be given their new eternal bodies and be gathered together with Christ in the air.

"Shout" – The "shout" given by the Lord as He descends from heaven could he used by Him in any of these three ways: (1) a shout of command as in the military; (2) a shout of summons; or (3) a shout of encouragement as one would urge on a runner in a race.

"The trump of God" – Since Paul refers to the "last trump" in his letter to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 15:52), some Christians believe this refers to the last trumpet in Revelation that occurs near the end of the Tribulation (Rev 11:15-19). This cannot be possible because John did not receive the revelation of the trumpets during the Tribulation, long after Paul had been executed. Paul did not know about the events of the Tribulation that are revealed in Revelation. The trumpet was used in the Old Testament to summon the people to a meeting (Ex 19:13; Lev 25:9), but what was the last trump? A look at Joab's use of the trumpet in warfare seems to be the best answer (1 Sam 18:16; 20). When Joab sounded the trumpet to end a battle, it was the last trumpet, and the soldiers were told to return to their tents. This is true for the Christians as well. When the last trump is sounded, the battle is over for them, and they will go to their home in Heaven.

4:17 – "We" - It was pointed out in Corinthians 15:52 that Paul used "we" in that passage as well. He was expecting to be with the living in the Rapture when Christ returned (cf. Phil 4:5; 1 Cor 16:22; 2 Tim 4:8).

C. Comfort from the Rapture – 4:18

4:18 – "Comfort one another" - This lesson on the rapture, which brings the hope of glory and eternal fellowship with God, should be a source of much comfort to Christians who experience the loss of Christian loved ones through death.