

FIRST THESSALONIANS FOUR, SIXTEEN AND SEVENTEEN

Intro: Anyone who reads Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians can hardly miss the emphasis on the coming of the Lord which you find in every chapter:

- 1) Ch. 1:3 ("hope"), 9, 10.
- 2) Ch. 2:19, 20.
- 3) Ch. 3:12, 13.
- 4) Ch. 4:13-18--the most extended passage.
- 5) Ch. 5:23.

A reading of these passages shows:

- 1) How the Apostle Paul lived in this expectation.
- 2) That it clearly was an incentive for him to show his concern for the spiritual lives of the Thessalonian church.

As Paul writes we can see the things which were most important to him for a ministry that will prepare the people of God for the coming of the Lord. It must include:

- 1) The ministry of the Word (1:5, 6). After they had received the Word and had been transformed, they passed the Word on to others. See vv. 7, 8 of ch. 1.
- 2) Prayer (1:2, 3; 2:13; 3:9-13; 5:17, 23, 24).

This has never been changed. Perhaps the dearth of Bible teaching has caused the Church to turn away from the hope of the Lord as it had gripped the hearts of men in the early Church.

Quite obviously the believers of Thessalonica were concerned about those who had died before the Lord returned. This had not been revealed as Paul was to speak of it later in his first letter to the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 15:51-58). There he calls it a mystery, meaning that it was not revealed any place in the OT.

Even what our Lord said in John 14:1-3, while it stated the particulars, did not give details such as we have here. They knew that this was their "hope" (1:3), and that they were waiting for God's Son from heaven (1:10), but they needed more details.

Notice the authority which Paul claims for what He is about to write: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord." He could not have known it any other way. THIS HAD TO BE A SPECIAL REVELATION FROM God!

They were concerned about those who would die before the Lord returned. Notice that they were expecting Him to come at any time. As time went on, the hope did not die out--a proof that it is true. But it did make the living wonder if those who had died would be lacking in any way because of death. Instead of

being behind, Paul quickly shows that they will be ahead.

There are five things which Paul mentions, in the order in which they will take place, but do not expect to time any of them! The most accurate timing device of man will not be able to keep up with this.

PLEASE NOTE ALSO THAT, EVEN IN THAT DAY, PAUL DID NOT INDICATE THAT ANYTHING WOULD HAVE TO TAKE PLACE BEFORE WE COULD EXPECT ALL OF THIS TO TAKE PLACE. IT CAN HAPPEN AT ANY TIME.

Let us note the order.

I. First, about the Lord (1 Th. 4:16a).

The word, "himself," is emphatic. We can expect that, when the time comes for the Church to be translated to heaven, the Lord Himself will come for us. He is not going to send someone else to get us.

The Father will send the Son in answer to His own prayer in John 17:24.

But at the same time the Lord descends, three other things will happen simultaneously:

- (1) "With a shout."
- (2) "With the voice of the archangel."
- (3) "With the trump of God."

The shout means a command.

Perhaps the best illustration of this is found in John 11:43, "And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth."

See also John ⁵4:28, 29.

The voice of the archangel. This would seem to be Michael according to Jude 9, Dan.10:13, 21; 12:1.

What is the significance here since it would seem that Michael always is concerned with Israel?

Could it be that since our Lord had a human forerunner who referred to himself as a voice when the Lord came the first time that He will have an angelic forerunner, preparing the way of the Lord when He comes for His Church. And, since this is to be followed by a time of Great Tribulation, could it be that this is also an angelic announcement from heaven such as was given the Lord when He was born of the virgin 2,000 years ago?

We cannot be dogmatic on this, but the evidence seems to indicate that this may be the case.

The trump of God. If you will read the first few verses of Num. 10, you will find the uses of the trumpet in Israel. The passage indicates that there was at least one occasion when only one trumpet was used--as seems to be the case here. You find it in Num. 10:4,

"And if they blow but with one trumpet, then the princes, who are heads of the thousands of Israel, shall gather themselves unto thee."

Cf. 2 Thess. 2:1.

Possibly also included is the idea, not only that the Church is being gathered, but that this is an appeal for the earth to turn to Him, i.e., those who will be heading into the Great Tribulation. (Just how much the earth will know of the Rapture of the Church, we do not know.)

All of the above comes first.

II. Secondly, about the dead in Christ" (1 Th. 4:16b).

The phrase, "in Christ," seems to point clearly to those who are in the Church--as compared with OT saints.

In 1 Cor. 15:52 Paul writes, "The dead shall be raised incorruptible."

Think what this will mean: THE DEAD IN CHRIST WHO HAVE DIED OVER THE LAST 2,000 YEARS WILL SUDDENLY BE BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE WITH BODIES THAT WILL NEVER DIE AGAIN. Cf. Phil. 3:20, 21.

So, instead of losing anything, those who have died will have a place of honor.

III. Thirdly, those who are living when the Lord returns (1 Th. 4:17a).

In 1 Cor. 15:52 Paul says that "we shall be changed," and he goes on to show that our bodies will be immortal. BUT THIS IS NOT PAUL'S CONCERN IN 1 THESSALONIANS. Here he is concerned about our future relationship with those who have preceded us into the presence of the Lord. "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds" (lit.).

What a reunion that will be! You have a glimpse of it with the account of the transfiguration. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS HISTORY THE CHURCH WILL BE TOGETHER! No one will be

missing. All of our loved ones will be there! And you and I will be there!

BUT THAT WHICH WILL MAKE IT EVEN MORE WONDERFUL IS THAT WHICH COMES NEXT!

IV. FOURTHLY, ABOUT THE LORD AGAIN (1 Thess. 4:16--middle).
"To meet the Lord in the air."

Vine says that the word "meet" "invariably . . . suggests that those who go out to meet him intend to return to their starting place with the person met" (1 Thess., p. 146).

He is coming to get us. Cf. John 14:1-3; John 17:24.
Heaven will mean being with Him.

If the disciples wanted to be with the Lord here on earth, if many who were healed by the Lord wanted to follow Him, if Peter and James and John did not want to come down from the mount of transfiguration, THEN WHAT WILL BE OUR FEELING WHEN WE SEE HIM?

This leads quickly to the last point.

V. Fifthly, about the time after that (1 Thess. 4:17b). "And so shall WE ever be WITH THE LORD."

Concl: There are many things which can be said about the Rapture of the Church, but it is clear that Paul is concerned here about whom we are going to be with when the Lord does come. To be with each other with no more separations will be wonderful; TO BE WITH THE LORD WILL BE THE MOST WONDERFUL OF ALL!

Do you suppose that the Apostle Paul would be disappointed with us if he were to visit Central Bible Church? Would he find us living in the daily expectation of the Lord's return, as he did, and as many in the early Church did?

Or, what is even more important, HAS IT EVER OCCURRED TO YOU THAT THE LORD KNOWS JUST HOW MUCH YOU HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR HIM? HE KNOWS HOW MUCH I HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR HIM.

Some day, one of these years, possibly yet in 1970, or very possibly in 1971, "the Lord himself shall descend . . ." Will you be looking for Him? Will you be ready?

Even though the world may say that we are just looking for a way out, history has proven that there is only one hope for the world, AND THAT HOPE IS JESUS CHRIST!.