

Questions about Heaven?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

Imagine for a moment what it must have been like to be a Christian right after Jesus' ascension into heaven. It was during this time much of the New Testament was written by Apostle Paul who was teaching and guiding the group called "The Way" into the truth concerning the Lord. As the mere babes in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1) strived to take in the meat of the Gospel message they had many questions the least of which related to the transformation of their bodies upon Christ's return. Let me give you a hypothetical but Scripturally based account of some of the likely thoughts new believers would have been wrestling with as they tried to make sense of their promised transformation.

As I look up into the sky, I cannot help but reminisce of the events of the last few years. I remember when I first heard about a man in the desert crying out the words of Isaiah "prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (40:3). I could have



easily dismissed this man's message as that of a raving lunatic, after all he did live in a desert, dressed in camel's hair and leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4); and yet I found myself drawn to his message. I thought to myself that maybe the rumor of his being filled with the Spirit of God was true (Luke 1:15) and if so, he might be Isaiah's predicted forerunner of the Messiah! While I must admit that I liked him calling the Pharisees and Sadducees "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7), it was his promise that One would soon arrive that would baptize with the Holy Spirit

that really got my attention (Mark 1:8). It still takes my breath away when I remember the moment that John said, "look the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) and I turned and saw Jesus! When John said he was "not worthy to carry His sandals" (Matthew 3:11) he was not exaggerating for while I saw judgement in Jesus' eyes what I saw most profound was grace, love, and acceptance. When I heard Jesus preach "repent, for the kingdom of God has come near" (Matthew 4:17) my heart overwhelmingly said "YES" and my life was forever changed.

After having heard that Peter, Andrew, James, and John had quit their lucrative fishing business to "fish men" I and others too decided to follow Jesus as well. O how I enjoyed watching Him perform all those miracles! I was there when He fed the 5,000 (Matthew 14:15-21) and 4,000 (Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-39), casted demons into a heard of pigs (Matthew 8:28-

33), healed the invalid at Bethesda (John 5:1-15), healed the woman with the flow of blood (Matthew 9:20-22) and for countless others! I also remember Jesus taking us up on a mountainside and once we sat down, He preached about how to be blessed, how to be salt and light of this world, how not to hate but love one another, how to pray, give to the needy, fast,



store treasures in heaven and so much more (Matthew 5-7)! While, like the 12 disciples, I did not fully know what His teachings meant later in His ministry He promised to send one He called the Spirit of truth to help me understand and obey His commands (John 16:12-15). When I heard that Peter called Jesus “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15) for a moment I believed it might be possible that I am not just following an amazing prophet but Isaiah’s foretold Messiah! While I stood afar and watched the governor’s soldiers flog, mock, and strip the clothes of

Jesus only to put a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns on His head and then take Him to the dreaded place called Golgotha (Matthew 27:27-33) to be crucified, my heart broke for how could one cursed on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23) be the Messiah who was to free my people from Roman bondage? Despite my sorrow it was short lived for just three days later I got news that Jesus’ tomb was empty, and He had appeared to Mary Magdalene and the apostles (John 20)! So, now as I stand here looking up into the sky, though I have the Spirit of Truth to guide me, I am still filled with so many unanswered questions concerning death, Christ’s return and when and how will I get my promised new body like His.

While the above story is not based on the thoughts and feelings of any disciple, I think it fairly represents some of the thoughts and feeling they must have had when looking up into the sky waiting for Christ’s return. The remainder of this sermon is going to address some of the questions about death that Paul was trying to state to the church in Thessalonica so that we too might better understand our hope in the Lord, Jesus Christ!

Question 1: Should we grieve for a believer that dies and if so, is there a “right” and a “wrong” way to do so?

Since ignorance of truth causes not only anxiety¹ but worldly thinking, Paul told the Thessalonians that they should only grieve in a manner that reflected their hope in the Lord. It is ok to grieve upon the departure of a loved one, for even Christ Himself wept when Lazarus died

¹ Tim Shenton, [*Opening up 1 Thessalonians*](#), Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 88.



(John 11:35),² but in doing so one must maintain an attitude of hope!³ Instead of taking on a worldly attitude of helplessness and utter despair in the face of death,⁴ Paul tells believers to remember that Jesus died and rose again and that someday God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Him (verse 14). Christ being the “first fruits of those fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 5:20)⁵ and the fact that believers have His Spirit in their hearts as a deposit guaranteeing their internal inheritance with the Lord (2

Corinthians 1:22) are sufficient reasons to rejoice in all circumstances, either in life spreading the Gospel or physical death and being with the Lord (Philippians 1:23-24).

Question 2: What happens the moment our bodies physically die and what does Paul mean by “sleep” in this passage?



Paul does not use the term “sleep” as a politically correct term to soften the reality of the body having died, but instead assigns deep theological meaning to this term. For Apostle Paul those who belong to Jesus are fundamentally not dead but merely asleep.⁶ Jesus endured the full horror of the death that is the wages of sin and in doing so transformed for believer’s death into merely being asleep.⁷ King Solomon states that

² Anthony T. Evans, [“The Uniqueness of Christ in His Return,”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 1997), 1 Th 4:13–18.

³ Michael Holmes, [1 and 2 Thessalonians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 148.

⁴ Leon Morris, [1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 13, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 87.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, [1 and 2 Thessalonians](#), vol. 45, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1982), 97.

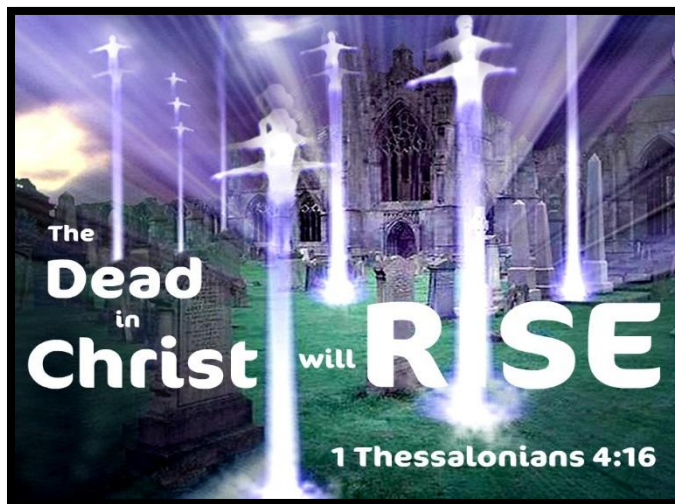
⁶ Anthony T. Evans, [“The Uniqueness of Christ in His Return,”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 1997), 1 Th 4:13–18.

⁷ Leon Morris, [1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 13, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 88.

while our bodies return to the dust of the earth our spirits are eternal (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Upon physical death the non-believer is considered dead because they are separate from God but for a believer once they breathe their last breath they transition to a better mode of existence, life in the presence of the Lord (Philippians 1:21-23). Therefore, Paul told the church at Rome that “neither death nor life will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39). When Paul states in verse 16 “the dead in Christ will raise first” he is not referring to the person raising but merely our former physical bodies being raised and transformed into spiritual ones that can exist in heaven (1 Corinthians 15:50). So, if you are a believer be rest assured above all you will not be attending your funeral!⁸

Question 3: Will the believers that have physically died miss out on the return of the Lord?

After Jesus told the disciples He had to leave He told them to “not let their hearts be troubled” for He was going to prepare a place for them and upon completion would one day “come back and take them to be with Him” (John 14:1-4). Since it had already been about one-



half century since Christ’s ascension many believers of Paul’s day became concerned that their loved ones who had died had missed out on the glorious Parousia. To keep the Thessalonians from being ignorant of these events and therefore grieve improperly, Paul reassured them that “those who are still alive at the coming of the Lord will certainly not proceed those who have fallen asleep” (verse 15) for on the day of the Lord’s return “He will descend from heaven, announced by the archangel and trumpet, and the dead in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:18; Revelation

14:13) will raise first; and only then, Paul goes on to say (1 Corinthians 15:23), will those still alive be caught up together with them.”⁹ Although the transformation of the bodies of the dead will proceed that of the living, the rapture “will happen with such suddenness and swiftness, within a twinkling of an eye, that neither will miss out on this glorious event.”¹⁰

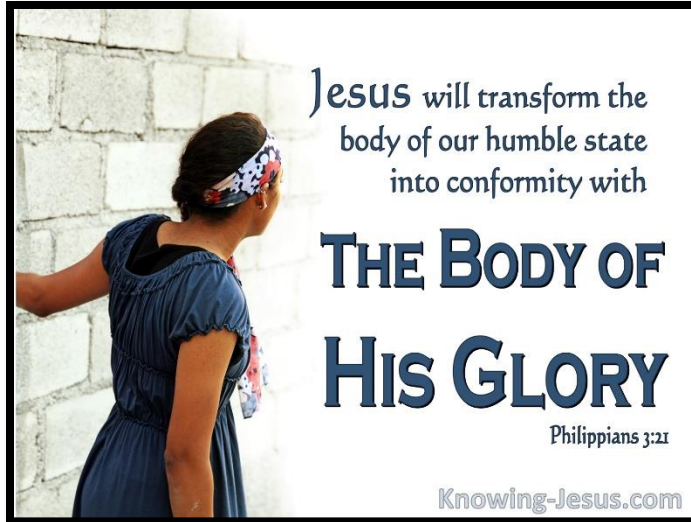
⁸ Anthony T. Evans, [“The Uniqueness of Christ in His Return,”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 1997), 1 Th 4:13–18.

⁹ Michael Holmes, [1 and 2 Thessalonians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 150.

¹⁰ Tim Shenton, [Opening up 1 Thessalonians](#), Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 91.

Question 4: What will our new bodies be like when the Lord returns?

While Paul's primary focus in this passage was to inform the Thessalonians that both those already physically dead and those alive will experience the Parousia together, let's look to other passages of Scripture to find out what our new bodies will be like. To the church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 15) Paul said that our new bodies will be substantially different than that of our old ones.



Since the perishable cannot inherit the kingdom of God (verse 50), the body that was sown perishable, in dishonor, in weakness, mortal and natural will be raised imperishable, in glory, in power, immortal and as a spiritual body (verse 42). We get a further hint of what our new bodies will be like from Paul's letter to the church of Philippi in which he says that when Christ transforms our lowly bodies they will be conformed to His glorious body (3:21). Based on Jesus' resurrection appearances we learn that Christ's resurrected body was real, visible,

capable of being handled, recognizable and yet at the same time was able to pass through solid objects, appear and disappear. Since every tribe and nation, kindred and tongue will be seen in heaven (Revelation 7:9)¹¹ and the fact that Christ was identifiable by those who saw Him in His resurrected body, it is likely that our new bodies will appear in some ways like our old ones and therefore be recognizable by our friends, family, and acquaintances. And lastly, Revelation 21 states our new resurrection bodies will not be able to die, mourn or feel pain (verse 4) but most important of all they will remain sinless (verse 27)¹² and in the presence of the Lord forever!

Question 5: Where does the person's spirit go after the body has died?

The answer to this question depends on whether you are a believer. While Paul does not say where an unbeliever goes upon death in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, we are told the destination of both unbelievers and believers. Let me quickly summarize the story:

The rich man dressed in fine purple and lived in luxury while the beggar named Lazarus was covered with sores and longed to eat from the rich man's table. When the beggar died the angels carried him to Abraham's side but when the rich man died, he went to Hades and was in constant torment. When he cried up to "Father

¹¹ Anthony T. Evans, "[The Uniqueness of Christ in His Return](#)," in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 1997), 1 Th 4:13–18.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, "[For Ever with the Lord](#)," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 23 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 523.

Abraham” for pity and a measly drop of water from his finger he was denied for not only did he get what he deserved but a great chasm was in place that made it impossible for either the beggar or rich man to leave their eternal home.

Taken from Luke 16:19-31

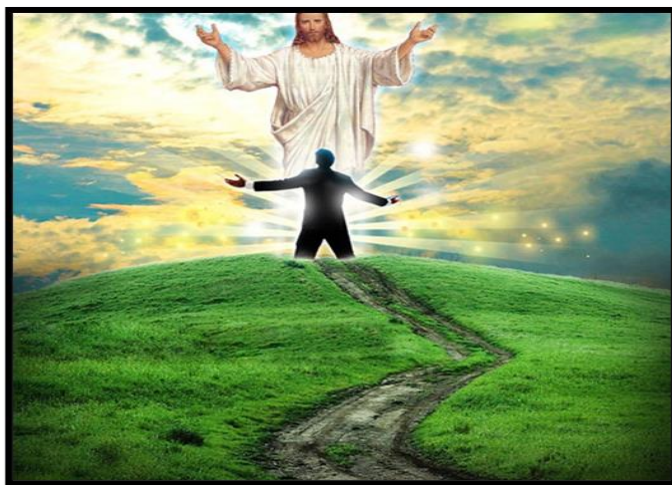


From this story we learn from Jesus that the destination of unbelievers is Hades where they will forever be in torment. They are not in a purgatory state for the “great chasm” between them and God cannot be breached. The believer goes to Abraham’s side at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). That is GREAT news for we will be with the Lord forever! “The believer’s hope and joy are complete when he/she goes home to be with the Savior. There is no greater blessing than to be with our Redeemer, to see

Him as He is in glory, to live with Him forever, to enjoy Him eternally, to love Him perfectly.¹³ When Paul stays, we will meet the Lord in the air and be with Him forever this unshakeable truth is meant to encourage Christians to live now considering their glorious inheritance in the Lord.

Conclusion

Imagine what the disciples of Jesus must have felt like upon His ascension. They staired up into the heaven waiting with bated breath for Christ to return and yet when He had not, they could not help but be filled the with so many unanswered questions! Would fellow believers that



had died waiting for Jesus to return miss out on the Parousia? Do people exist after death and if so in what form and where are they? Paul tells us we are to rejoice for at the Parousia the dead will raise first to receive their new bodies and in a twinkling of an eye those alive in Christ will also receive their spiritual bodies. We are not to be like the world and grieve without hope when a loved one dies but instead grieve with both sadness of being separate from a fellow believer but at the same time rejoicing that either upon one’s own death or at

¹³ Tim Shenton, [*Opening up 1 Thessalonians*](#), Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 92.

the Parousia both will be reunited in friendship and love of God in heaven forever! While one waits for this glorious day take great solace in knowing that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. While the body is returning to the dust of the earth praise be to God that the person's spirit is with Him in paradise. Above all let us rejoice that our resurrected bodies will be raised imperishable, in glory, in power, immortal, real, visible, capable of being handled, recognizable by our friends and family, and sinless for nothing impure will exist into heaven. So, until that glorious day may we God's children continue to bow our knees and live our lives forever rejoicing in our eternal destination, in the presence of our Lord!