

THE LORD'S RETURN AND THE RESURRECTION

1 THESSALONIANS 04: 13–05:03

Introduction

This passage begins a new subject, a subject that intrigues people and offers the most glorious hope to man and his world. The subject is the return of Jesus Christ to earth and the resurrection of the dead. It is a subject that men must study and heed, for the return of the Lord will not only bring blessings to believers, it will launch the most terrifying judgment upon unbelievers.

- I. The concern: Will believers be resurrected when Christ returns? (v. 13).
- II. The fact: departed believers will return with Christ (vv. 14-15).
- III. The events of the Lord's return (vv. 16-18).
- IV. The time of the Lord's return and of the Day of the Lord (ch. 5:1-3).

I. *1 Thessalonians 04:13 Resurrection of Believers*

The concern of the believers at Thessalonica involved dead believers. Would their loved ones who had died share in the resurrection when Christ returned to earth? Remember: the church at Thessalonica had just been founded; it was brand new. It was also being bitterly persecuted and was under savage attack. Some of the believers were dying; perhaps some were even being martyred and Christ had not yet returned. They were eagerly looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ. Would believers be resurrected when Christ returned? The Thessalonian believers knew the gospel just as we know it: the gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ is returning to earth to receive believers unto Himself. When He returns to earth, we know...

- that living believers will be lifted up to meet Christ in the air.
- that all the glory, majesty, dominion and power of God will be displayed in the heavens in the most spectacular scene imaginable.
- that the most glorious union and fellowship among living believers will take place around Christ.
- that believers who are lifted up will experience the most wonderful transformation and be given bodies that are perfected forever.
- that the world of unbelievers who are left here on earth will witness the most spectacular event ever seen by man.

But what about our loved ones who have already died? What will happen to them? Will they have a part in the spectacular return of Jesus Christ to earth? Will they have the privilege of sharing in the majestic display of God's power and in the glorious reunion of

living believers with Christ? And how about their bodies? We know that our bodies — the bodies of believers who are living when Christ returns — will be transformed. They will never lie in the ground and decay and deteriorate. But what about the bodies of our loved ones who have already decayed and in some cases are scattered over the world due to war, disease, accident and having been maimed? Are they going to share in the glorious resurrection and transformation when Christ returns?

All kinds of concerns about the resurrection arose in the minds of the Thessalonian believers just as they do in the minds of believers in every generation. The Thessalonians were *concerned* over their loved ones who had died. They were asking questions about the resurrection and the Lord's return out of concern. Unfortunately, this is not the case with many persons: they want to know about the end time out of curiosity, not out of concern. The very fact that Christ is returning should arouse the most urgent concern in us just as it did with the Thessalonian believers. Paul says two striking things to those who are concerned over the resurrection of dead believers when Christ returns.

1. Do not be ignorant about the resurrection. Study and grasp what God teaches and be comforted and challenged in the glorious hope He gives.
2. Do not grieve excessively over loved ones who die before Christ returns. We are bound to experience some sorrow and grief, but we are not to suffer grief like unbelievers who have no hope. They have reason to suffer the most terrible sorrow and grief, but not us. We have hope. William Barclay shows just how hopeless the world of unbelievers is by quoting several ancient writers:

“Once a man dies there is no resurrection “ (Aeschylus).

“There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope” (Theocritus).

“When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep “ (Catullus)

“I was not; I became; I am not; I care not” (an ancient tombstone).

“Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I was as sorry and wept over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things whatsoever were fitting, I did.... But nevertheless against such things one can do nothing. Therefore, comfort one another” (an ancient letter). (William Barclay. The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, p. 235f.)

There is absolutely no hope for the unbelievers of the world. But there is glorious hope for the believer. Therefore, we are not to grieve excessively at the death of loved ones. There is no need, for they shall arise to meet the great God and our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the glorious message of Christ's followers.

II. *1 Thessalonians 04:14–15 Resurrection of Believers*

The fact is forcefully declared — departed believers will return with Christ. There are three proofs of this great fact given.

1. Proof one: departed believers are with Christ; they are living with Him face to face.
 - a. Note the words “in Him” — God will bring departed believers *with Jesus* when He returns. They are *with Him* now. This is exactly what Scripture teaches.

Luke 23:43 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

2 Cor 5:6-8 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Phil 1:23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

The point is this: departed believers are with the Lord, living face to face with Him. We do not have to wonder where they are. When they died, they went immediately to be with the Lord in paradise or heaven, and they will never be separated from the Lord. Therefore, when He returns to earth, He will bring all departed believers with Him.

- b. The words “asleep in him” — it is those who *sleep in Jesus* that God will bring with Him when He returns to earth. The word “asleep” is not teaching that death is a semi-conscious state, an existence somewhat like a deep sleep. As has already been shown, the believer immediately goes to be with Christ when he departs from this world. “Asleep” is simply a soft word used by believers to describe their departure from this world. It is a picture of resting from the trials and sufferings of this world. The person who believes in Jesus Christ while on this earth simply “sleeps [rests] with Jesus” throughout eternity. It is these persons — all the believers who sleep or rest in Jesus — whom God will bring with Him when He returns to earth. (See *Sleep*, Jn. 11:13.)

John 8:51 “I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

John 11:26 “And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

- c. Jesus Christ is identified as God. It is God — God in the person of Jesus Christ — who will return to earth and bring departed believers with Him. Christ has the power of God because He is God. As God, Jesus Christ...
 - had the power to come to earth as a man.
 - had the power to die and arise from the dead.
 - had the power to ascend back into heaven.
 - has the power to transfer a departed believer into heaven with Him.

- has the power to return to earth.
 - has the power to bring all departed believers back to earth with Him.
2. Proof two: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ proves that departed believers will return to earth with God. Jesus Christ came to earth to die and bear the punishment of sin for man and to arise from the dead. Therefore, if we believe in Jesus Christ...
- we never have to die because He has already died for us.
 - we shall arise from the dead even as He arose.

How? By believing that Jesus Christ did die and arise from the dead for us. If we believe in Jesus Christ, then when we depart this world, we go to be with him; and when He returns, we will return with Him.

The point is striking: the fact that Jesus Christ died and arose is the proof that departed believers are living with Him and will return with Him when He comes back to earth. Our hope — the glorious hope of the believer — is based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no greater basis in all the world, for Jesus Christ really did die and arise from the dead. There is no question about it, not for the genuine believer, for God has given us the witness of His Spirit. Therefore, after we have departed from this earth, we will return with Christ when He comes back to earth.

John 6:40 *“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”*

1 Cor 15:3-4 *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*

2 Cor 4:14 *Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.*

3. Proof three: the Word of the Lord proves that departed believers will return to earth with God. Their bodies will actually be raised from the dead before we are caught up. This is a strong point. Paul emphatically states that this revelation has come from the Lord. Therefore, believers should want no greater assurance. What is the revelation? We who are alive when the Lord returns shall not be caught up first. The bodies of all departed believers will be resurrected first. Again, how do we know this? How do we know that this is a fact, a real event that will actually take place? By the Word of the Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ, God Himself, declared it.

1 Th 2:13 *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*

2 Tim 3:16 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

JOHN 11:13 SLEEP, DEATH

*Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. **John 11:13***

Death is sometimes spoken of as sleep when referring to believers. (Lk. 8:50; Mt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:18, 20, 51; 1 Th. 4:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:4.)

=> Jesus said that Jairus' daughter was asleep.

=> When Stephen was martyred, he is said to have fallen asleep (Acts 7:60).

=> Some of the five hundred witnesses to Jesus' ascension are said to have "fallen asleep".

=> Believers already in heaven are said to be asleep in Jesus (1 Th. 4:13).

Death is called "sleep" in order to picture the idea that the believer is...

- resting in the presence and comfort of God.
- resting from the labour of his service on earth.
- resting and refreshing himself for a greater service for God.

Many within the world picture death as annihilation, as ceasing to exist. Scripture says it is not. Believers continue to exist, resting in the life and comfort of God. The body lays down and, so to speak, sleeps; but not the soul of man.

***2 Cor 5:8** We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (see Phil. 1:23) □*

III. *1 Thessalonians 04:16–18 Return of Jesus Christ and Resurrection of Believers*

The events of the Lord's return and of the resurrection are clearly spelled out in these verses.

1. First, the *Lord Himself* will come down from heaven. The very first event will be the appearance of the Lord God Himself. The supreme Majesty of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rent the skies and miraculously appear in all the spectacular glory, pomp and power of heaven itself. When He appears, three spectacular events will occur.
 - a. The Lord God Himself will appear "with a loud command" (*en keleusmati*). The word means a military command. The commander-in-chief of the universe will shout louder than any voice has ever shouted — shout even as He did when He was upon earth: "[Believers] come out" (Jn. 11:43).
 - b. The voice of the archangel will cry out. What will He cry? His shout will probably be the rallying cry for all the armies of the heavenly angels to join in the praise of the glorious event. Christ taught that the heavenly angels would be with Him when He returned to earth (Mt. 24:31; 25:31; 2 Th. 1:7).

- c. The trumpet of God shall sound. The trumpet has always been for the purpose of arousing attention and warning. The whole universe — both earth and heaven, believers, unbelievers and angels — will be aroused; and all unbelievers will be warned. The Lord God Himself is now appearing and the events of the end time are now being launched upon earth.
2. Second, the dead in Christ will rise first. Why will dead believers be the first to be caught up to meet the Lord? Because of the Lord's great love and care. The first expression of love and care will be shown to those dear saints who have passed through the shadow of death. It is the very nature of Christ to show tenderness and love to those who suffer the most; therefore, they who have suffered the awful fate of death will be the first to meet the Lord in the air. Now, note several facts.
 - a. Only departed believers will arise; no unbeliever will be resurrected, not at this point. Only those who are "dead in Christ" — who died believing in Jesus Christ — will be resurrected when the Lord rents the skies.
 - b. It will be the bodies of the departed believers that are resurrected. The believers themselves, that is, their spirits, are already with the Lord. Their bodies are being raised and transformed to live forever with God. The shout of the Lord to "*come out*" will call together all the atoms of a person's body, no matter where the various parts of a person's body may lie. The atoms of a person's body will be transformed to structure an eternal and perfect body.
 - c. The bodies of the departed believers will arise first — arise before we who are alive are caught up.
3. Third, we who are alive will be caught up right after the dead have risen. There will be a glorious transformation of our bodies just as there will be of those whose bodies have decayed in the earth. The change will be as Scripture declares: the infusion of a totally new nature.

1 Cor 15:53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

- a. The nature of the believer's present body is corruptible and mortal; the nature of his new body will be imperishable and immortal.
 - => The "perishable" and "mortal" nature means that men are earthly; that they age, deteriorate, die, decay and decompose. Every person, no matter who he is, is earthly and will return to the earth unless Jesus returns while the person is living on the earth.
 - => The "imperishable" and "immortal" nature means that believers will be made heavenly, that they will be transformed and given a *perfect nature* that will never age, deteriorate, die, decay or decompose. They will be completely free from defilement and depravity. They will be given a body that is perfect, a body that is diametrically

opposed to their present body, a body that is perfected forever to live with God in the new heavens and earth. (See *Resurrected Body of Jesus Christ*, Jn. 21:1; 1 Cor. 15:42-44.)

- b. Note the word “must” in 1 Cor. 15:53. It shows the absolute necessity for the change of man’s body. If man is to live with God, his body must be changed. It is essential, a must, an absolute necessity if man is to live forever.

Luke 20:36 “*And they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.*”

John 8:51 “*I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*”

John 11:26 “*And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*”

Rom 2:7 *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.*

1 Cor 15:53 *For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*

2 Cor 5:1 *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

1 Th 4:17 *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

2 Tim 1:10 *But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

4. Fourth, the great union of the living with the dead will take place. Note the emphatic declaration: we “will be caught up *together* with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” We will be reunited with all our loved ones, and even more wonderful, all believers — our loved ones and those whom we have never known — shall all be united together with our wonderful Lord. We shall all be there together rejoicing in the presence of Him who has saved us and transformed us into perfect and eternal beings. What a day of reunion and rejoicing that will be!
5. The experience of living face to face with the Lord begins. We will be caught up and “so we will we be with the Lord forever.” As wonderful as the reunion of believers will be, the most wonderful event will be seeing our Lord face to face for the very first time. What will our first thoughts be? Our first reaction? Everything will take place in the blinking of an eye. Suddenly...
- we will be standing in midair and transformed into perfect men and women.
 - we will be standing in the clouds in the midst of teeming millions.
 - we will be transformed in the midst of the spectacular glory and majesty, dominion and power of the Lord God Himself.

Is there any question what our first thoughts and response will be? The great reunion with family and believers will not be the occupation of our thoughts. Christ will be! The Lord God Himself in all His majestic glory and sovereignty will consume our attention and praise. We will be lifting up His name in the most perfect hymn of praise and adoration ever arranged. Jesus Christ Himself will be the total focus of our attention.

6. The present exhortation: encourage each other with these words. God does not reveal the events of the end time to satisfy curiosity. He tells us about the glorious events so that we can prepare and encourage each other. There is no need for discouragement on this earth; no need for extreme sorrow and grief; no need for hopelessness; and no need for ignorance. The Lord Himself has given us the most wonderful hope — the hope of living forever face to face with Him — of worshipping and serving Him forever in a new heavens and earth.

Luke 20:36 *“And they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.”*

John 8:51 *“I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”*

John 11:26 *“And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

2 Cor 5:1 *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

2 Tim 1:10 *But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Rev 21:4 *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

IV. Thessalonians 05:01–03 Return of Jesus Christ, Day of the Lord, Resurrection of Believers

The time of the Lord's return and the day of the Lord. Paul wants to make it perfectly clear that he does not know when the Lord is returning to earth, nor does anyone else. Note five points.

1. When is the Lord returning? This is a fact that should not have to be discussed. Paul had already taught the believers that no one knows when the Lord is returning to earth; only God knows. Therefore, there is absolutely no need to discuss “times and the dates.” This is strong, but a strong statement is needed with those who set dates. Note the meaning of “times” and “dates.”
=> “Times” (chronon) means chronological time, the events that follow one another and roll in and away from one another. Paul had already covered the times, the order of events that were to happen in the end time.

=> “Dates” (kairon) means the particular time and the nature of the events that are to take place. Paul had already covered the critical events and discussed what would be happening in the events.

Thought 1. Note a crucial point: times and dates are periods of time that cover many years for men — years that can extend into decades and centuries. This is exactly what Paul is saying: “the times” of the end time extend over a long chronological time; but “the dates,” the very nature and happening of critical periods, can be looked at and observed. When dealing with end time events, we must always keep this fact in mind.

Thought 2. Once a believer has studied the times and dates of the end time, that is, the great spectacular periods of coming events and the particular happenings of the events, he knows that only God could know when He is returning. There are just too many intricate details, ramifications, and weaving of events in the happenings of history for any man to know when the fullness of time is to arrive. Only God could know when the intricate details of events have been fulfilled. Only God could know when He is to return.

2. When is the Lord returning? When “the day of the Lord” is ready to come upon the earth. This is exactly what Paul is saying. And when is “the day of the Lord”? No man knows. It is coming as a thief in the night — suddenly and unexpectedly. Believers are to be looking for the Lord’s return, but unbelievers will be caught completely off guard. To say that unbelievers will be surprised is an understatement. They will be shocked and stand in stark terror at the appearance of Christ and at the judgments that will begin to fall upon earth.

Note: “the day of the Lord” refers to the Lord’s dealings with unbelievers. John Walvoord puts it in simple and striking words:

“The Day of the Lord is a period of time in which God will deal with wicked men directly and dramatically in fearful judgment. Today a man may be a blasphemer of God, an atheist, can denounce God and teach bad doctrine. Seemingly God does nothing about it. But the day designated in Scripture as ‘the day of the Lord’ is coming when God will punish human sin, and He will deal in wrath and in judgment with a Christ-rejecting world. One thing we are sure of, that God in His own way will bring every soul into judgment” (The Thessalonian Epistles, p. 76).

That day, the day when God will bring every soul into judgment, is what the Bible calls “the day of the Lord.” When is Christ returning? When the earth has reached such a depraved condition that it is hopelessly lost forever and ripe for the judgments of “the day of the Lord.”

Isa 13:9-11 *See, the day of the Lord is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger — to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be*

darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

Zep 1:14-16 *“The great day of the Lord is near — near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.”*

Mal 4:1 *“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”*

Jude 1:14-16 *Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.*

3. The day of the Lord will come when the world of unbelievers feel a great sense of security — when they are saying, “peace and safety.” Some leaders throughout the world or some world organization will cooperate and be able to achieve some semblance of peace and security throughout the world. People will be revelling in the security and living it up even as they did in the days of Noah.

Luke 17:26-30 *“Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.”*

4. The day of the Lord will be a day of catastrophic destruction. When the world is crying out for peace and safety, a terrible destruction will be lying right over the horizon. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the great and terrible day of the Lord will fall upon the world and the unbelievers of the world. Note the phrase “destruction will come on them suddenly”: it will be totally unexpected. It will be just like the birth pains that suddenly strike a woman who is with child. The pain, suffering, and destruction will be relentless.

Isa 13:6-8 *Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man's heart will melt. Terror*

will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame.

Joel 1:15 *Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.*

Joel 2:30-31 *I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*

Zep 1:14-18 *“The great day of the Lord is near - near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.”*

5. The day of the Lord will be a day of no escape. “They will not escape” (ou me ekphugosin). This is a double negative in the Greek: they will not, by no means, escape. Judgment and destruction are an absolute surety; they will not, in no wise, escape. All human beings who have not truly trusted Jesus Christ will face the terrible day of the lord.

Mat 23:33 *“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”*

Rom 2:3 *So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?*

1 Th 5:3 *While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

Heb 2:3 *How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*

Heb 12:25 *See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?*

Jer 11:11 *Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them.*

Amos 5:18-19 *Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.*

Amos 9:2 *Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. ■*