

“The Dead in Christ Shall Rise First”

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"The dead in Christ shall rise first" - Sun and clouds with 1 Thessalonians 4:16 - 123RF photo - Used under license

"14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.

15 For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 NASB)

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I recently received a question from a reader. I will paraphrase the reader's question. "Those who are dead in Christ or those who are 'asleep' will rise first. How then will someone who is with him rise from sleep?" (Ref. 1, comments section).

This lesson responds to the reader's question. This lesson explains:

1. As believers in Christ, we will always be with him, whether we die in Christ before he returns, or whether we are still alive when he returns.
2. The biblical metaphor for "asleep" refers to the death of our physical body, but not to our soul and spirit which go immediately to be with Jesus.
3. Our immaterial nature -- our soul and spirit -- will come with Jesus when he returns (assuming we have died before he returns), and at that time he will resurrect our bodies.

The title of this lesson, "The Dead Shall Rise First," is chosen from the King James Version for 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The rest of the Bible quotations below are taken from the New American Standard Bible 2020 edition, unless noted otherwise (Ref. 2).

Consider. When Jesus returns, will you be with him? Why? Why not?

Background - Why Paul wrote this passage

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest of mankind do, who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

1 Thessalonians 4:13 explains why the Apostle Paul wrote this section, 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. Verse 13 instructs the Thessalonians not to grieve (mistakenly) over those Christians who had already died versus those Christians who would be alive when Christ returns. Many of them thought that Christ would return soon, in their lifetime (Ref. 3). Likewise, some of them were mistakenly concerned that those Christians who had already died would miss out on the hope of seeing Christ return (Ref. 3). Paul's writing taught them, and teaches us, that both the dead in Christ and those who

remain alive when Jesus returns will share equally in the glorious resurrection life and will be with Jesus together.

1. When Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through him.

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus."

(1 Thessalonians 4:14)

Let's look first at the meaning of "fallen asleep."

a. "Asleep" is a biblical metaphor for "dead."

"Asleep" has both a literal and a figurative meaning in the Bible. The Greek word for "asleep" literally means physical rest or slumber (Ref. 4). In Luke 22:45-46 Jesus found his disciples literally asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. The same Greek word for "asleep" figuratively means "dead" (Ref. 4). 1 Corinthians 15:20 tells us, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." Likewise, the three verses, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14, and 15, use the word "asleep" in the figurative sense for those who have died "through Jesus" (v. 14).

b. "Asleep" as a biblical metaphor for "dead" refers to our body only, not to our soul and spirit which live on.

When the Bible uses the metaphor, "asleep," for death, it refers to death of our physical body only. According to the Bible, when our body dies, our soul and spirit leave our body (Genesis 35:16-18, Acts 7:54-60, Ref. 5). The Bible refers to our immaterial nature sometimes as "soul" only (Genesis 35:18, Mark 8:36), sometimes as "spirit" only (Ecclesiastes 12:7, John 19:30), and sometimes as "soul and spirit" together (1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, Ref. 5).

Consider the example of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:40-42, 49-56). Luke 8:49 tells us that Jairus' daughter died. Note that her physical body had died, but not her spirit. In Luke 8:52, Jesus said that "she has not died, but is asleep." Then, in Luke 8:54, Jesus took her by the hand and said, "Child, arise!" Luke 8:55 NKJV tells us, "Then her spirit returned, and

she arose immediately."

Consider the example of Stephen the martyr (Acts 7:54-60). Right before Stephen died from stoning, he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59). Then, "Having said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60).

c. As believers in Christ, when our body dies ("falls asleep" in the Greek figurative sense), our soul and spirit go immediately to be with Jesus.

For the believer in Christ, there is no time when our soul and spirit will not be with him -- even when our physical body dies. Jesus said to the penitent, physically dying, thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus said to Martha, "The one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). The Apostle Paul expected that as a consequence of his death he would immediately "depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better" (verse 23 in Philippians 1:21-23).

d. When Jesus returns, he will bring with him the souls and spirits of believers who have "fallen sleep" (died) through him.

When Jesus returns, God will bring with him the souls and spirits of believers in Christ -- people who have died "through" Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:14, Ref. 5). Examples of believers who have died through Jesus include the penitent thief (Luke 23:42-43), Stephen (Acts 7:59-60), and the Apostle Paul (Philippians 1:21-23). The promise also applies to you and me and to all of us who put our faith and trust in Jesus during our lifetime and whose bodies physically die before Jesus returns (John 11:25-26).

2. We who remain alive at the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

"For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep." (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

When Paul wrote the phrase, "by the word of the Lord," in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, he was saying that his message is a direct revelation

from God (Ref. 6). Paul is saying that in no way those who have died in Christ are at a disadvantage compared to those who are still alive when Jesus returns. This statement gave the Thessalonians hope about their friends and loved ones who had already died (Ref. 6). This statement also gives us -- believers in Christ -- hope. Both the dead in Christ and those who are alive and living in Christ when he returns are equally secure and will share in resurrection glory (Ref. 7 - Topical Lexicon).

3. The dead in Christ shall rise first.

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first." (1 Thessalonians 4:16 KJV)

a. The words, "dead in Christ" refer to the bodies (but not the soul and spirit) of believers in Christ who have died.

The words, "dead in Christ," in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 refer to the bodies of believers who have already died before Christ returns. For those believers who have died, their souls and spirits will have already gone to be with Jesus upon their death (Luke 23:43, Acts 7:59-60, Ref. 5). They -- their souls and spirits -- will come with Jesus when he returns (1 Thessalonians 4:14, Ref. 5).

b. The dead in Christ shall rise first.

"The dead in Christ shall rise first." (1 Thessalonians 4:16 KJV)

The raising of the "dead in Christ" is contrasted only with what rapidly follows -- the changing [*divine transformation*] of those believers who are still alive when Jesus returns (1 Thessalonians 4:17, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, Ref. 7). The description in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 of the raising of the dead in Christ does not apply to the separate, future resurrection of the unrighteous to judgment (Revelation 20:11-15, Ref. 5). Note that in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 the One who will do the raising of believer's bodies is Jesus himself. Jesus said, "Everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

4. Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord.

"Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

Immediately following the raising of the bodies of the dead in Christ, the scripture says that those (believers) who remain alive will be "caught up" with them to meet the Lord in the air." Then, "we will always be with the Lord." That is an important, and comforting phrase. The Greek word for "caught up" means *seized -- suddenly and irresistibly* (Ref. 8). Believers are "caught up," not merely invited (Ref. 8). Take comfort that as believers, we will always be with Jesus.

When believers who are still alive when Christ returns are "caught up," they will be "changed." 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 52 describe this change:

"Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

The Greek word for "changed" means *divinely transformed* (Ref. 9 - Topical Lexicon.) Their (possibly, "our" if we are still alive) bodies will be changed instantly ("in the twinkling of an eye") into "a glorified [*and immortal*] state suited for eternal fellowship together with Christ" (Ref. 9).

Apply. If you are a believer in Christ, rejoice that you have his gift of eternal life and that you will be with him forever. Know that he has a glorious future planned for you with him. If you do not yet know Christ (John 17:3), tell him you are sorry for your sins (1 John 1:9), and ask him to come into your heart (Revelation 3:20). He will save you (Ephesians 2:8), and he will give you the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23).

Related Lessons

"Where Does Your Soul Go When You Die?"

"What Is Eternal Life?" - John 17:3

References

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