

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 32, Number 20

May 17, 2015



Caught Up Together

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. 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: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, KJV 1900)

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. In today's modern Christian culture, one often hears that people who are dead at the Lord's return will be at a disadvantage. In our study passage, Paul makes the mirror opposite point.

Our English language is ever changing, the nature of an active language. We think of "Prevent" as in some way interfering with something. Historically, this word referred to doing something in advance of another (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), the meaning of the Greek word translated "prevent" in this lesson. Paul's point is not that those who happen to be alive will in some way interfere with the resurrection of those who died prior to the Lord's return. He rather comforts us with the point that, alive or dead, when the Lord returns, all of God's children shall experience the miracle of glorious resurrection and transformation into eternity with the Lord together. No group of the Lord's beloved children shall then have any advantage over another or get first in line. There shall be none of the Lord's children "Left behind," not one.

The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. Secondly, Paul goes to great length to describe the universal awareness of the event. The Lord's return knows nothing of secrecy. Consider all the words that Paul uses in this sentence to emphasize the prominence of the event; "with a shout," "the voice of the archangel," and "the trump of God." If God shouts, can anyone doubt that all will hear? When the archangel speaks, we have no reason to think that he shall mumble or whisper. And when God's "trump," His trumpet, blows, we cannot realistically imagine a whispered sound.

Jesus described this event in similar terms.

...the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth. (John 5:28)

When the Lord "speaks" on that day, He shall not whisper! Even the dead shall hear. Many years ago I preached at a church that frequently sang the hymn "Will He Send His Angel for me?" The answer to that question is no. He will not send His angel for you; He shall personally come for you!

...the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.

The only distinction between those who are alive at the Lord's return and those who died before His return is a minuscule moment. The dead arise first, and, as they arise, those who are alive shall be instantly changed, glorified, before both are caught up together. Once the Lord's beloved children leave the surface of the earth we shall all be together, "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air." "caught up" suggests that the power that raises and transports us into the Lord's presence is His, not ours. We also sense an immediacy in the action. We shall not experience a prolonged transition. Again, this point is affirmed by other passages.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:52)

Folks who respectfully study the literary structure and content of Scripture use a term, the "Perspicuity of Scripture." In simple terms, they refer to the clarity of Scripture. What God deems important for His people to know He reveals clearly and frequently in Scripture. Obviously, the Lord views the promise of His victorious return as a central truth for the comfort of His people. I observe related to this doctrine of the Lord's return a point that I occasionally make regarding our interpretational method for the Book of Revelation. When reading Revelation, far too many well-

meaning believers look for the most complex, symbolic interpretation possible. Complexity describes their view far more than "Revelation." God's intent in the book, as in all Scripture is "Revelation," the reason that we see that title to the Book. John's original audience was seven first century churches who faced intense trials and persecution. The first three chapters should be read as setting the stage for the remainder of the Book. If our interpretation of Revelation cannot be seen as immediately transparent to comfort and to encourage a first century struggling church or individual believer who hardly had the time or the mindset to work out a rocket science complex interpretation of the letter, we need to abandon our interpretation. Look for a simple, repetitive and comforting message that a first century church or individual believer would have immediately understood in the reading. Underscore John's words in the opening verses of Revelation. His intent is to reveal Jesus Christ, not depart from every other inspired book in the Bible and give the most complex, convoluted, and mystical message to be found in all sixty-six books contained in our Bible. When someone starts explaining his view of Revelation with "This represents..." as he looks at every detail of John's visions, he immediately loses me. What about this kind of interpretation in any way relates to revealing Jesus to a persecuted believer? The simple message of Revelation is "God wins!" Period!

Our view of Scripture's revelation regarding the Lord's return should be as straightforward as the above view of Revelation. Our interpretation of Second Coming Scriptures should never become so complicated or difficult to understand as to dull the comfort to every burdened saint who meditates on its truth.

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. There is no reason to think that Paul believed that he would be alive at the Second Coming. Whether or not he would be alive, some saint who reads these words shall be alive, so the message as Scripture reveals it should be timeless, as comforting and as applicable to us as to the first century church in Thessalonica.

...and so shall we ever be with the Lord. The duration of our time with the Lord knows no bounds. "ever" isn't limited to a very long time as we measure time, or even a thousand years. It effectively describes our state from that point forward through eternity. Ponder the state that we shall experience based on Paul's words.

1. If we died prior to His return, He shall bring the "us" that was with Him from death till His return, our soul and/or spirit.
2. If we are dead when He returns, He shall raise our previously dead bodies to reunite body, soul, and spirit for ever to be with Him and to praise Him.

3. If we are alive when He returns, He changes us from mortal to immortal, from corruptible to glory.
4. Dead or alive at His return, all of His beloved children are changed and "...caught up together...in the clouds.
5. This is not a fantasy ride on clouds for eternity. Specifically, we "...meet the Lord in the air. It is our meeting the Lord in the air that sanctifies this moment, not puffy clouds. I suggest that far more likely than puffy clouds of humidity, the clouds of which Paul writes are clouds of glory, similar to the cloud of glory in which Jesus disappeared out of the disciples' sight. (Acts 1:9)
6. "...ever be with the Lord." The state to which we are raised is not a temporary one. It is permanent. There is nothing temporary in "ever."

Wherefore comfort one another with these words. Paul starts this theme in Verse 13, addressing members of the Thessalonian congregation who had lost loved ones to death. Whether a child of grace is a young child or a seasoned senior citizen saint, the Lord's intent for this doctrine is to comfort our hearts when we, as the Thessalonians in Verse 13, must deal with the death of those whom we love, or, for that matter, with the potential of our own death.

It is commonplace for Christians to hold a memorial or funeral service that focuses primarily on the gospel and its teachings that give us potential comfort in the season of our loss. I've spoken at many such services over the years. As I grow older and have time to ponder, I increasingly realize that our only comfort rests, not in a the accomplishments of the deceased, but on our belief in the truth of Paul's words in our study passage and similar passages that support this teaching. And the only way the preacher can help grieving families when they've lost a loved-one is to remind them of these truths. I have no objection to brief recollections of the person who died or remembrances of his/her godly life. However, the basic reality of the matter requires that we look beyond what anyone has done to the loving grace of God for our comfort. At times, my wife has nudged me to say more about the person who died than I often say in such a message. I emphasize the Lord and His resurrection far more than the life the person lived for good reason. Paul reminds us that our comfort rests in what God shall do on that day, not on what we did in our lives.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor