

Walking On Sunshine

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

13 And now dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died. 15 We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet Him ahead of those who have died. 16 For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up on the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 18 So, encourage each other with these words.

One of the worst things about the Covid-19 pandemic was that a significant number of patients hospitalized with the disease died without loved ones present. It wasn't that family and friends didn't want to be there, but that many hospitals kept visitors away — including family members and spouses — to fight the spread of the virus. Even Pastors and Priests had no choice but to just pray with the dying over the phone. One doctor called the isolation “the medical version of solitary confinement.” In some cases, medical personnel kept a vigil with the dying, but that, of course, is not the same as having people in attendance who have been important in the dying person's life.

Sad as that is, we have no way of knowing what the experience of dying alone is like for the one going through it, although some pastors, chaplains and hospice workers say being alone at that time may matter less to the one dying than to those left behind. Former hospice chaplain Kerry Egan says that in a sense, we all die alone, even if we are surrounded by people we love. Often, as we die, our bodies are breaking down and our minds are elsewhere. The conscious experience of death is, by nature, solitary. As Egan puts it, “Many people are not responsive at the end. Their bodies are busy doing something else.”

That may be true, but it's not much comfort to the surviving loved ones. The forced absence during their family member's last moments can feel like a lack of closure, or even a betrayal on their part. The survivors may be racked with guilt, even though their absence at the dying person's bedside was not their fault. Psychologists suggest that their feelings may be further complicated by a fear that they, too, will one day die alone. And it may go deeper, with the survivors feeling that they have lost the departed forever.

If you are ever with a loved one while they are dying, on the phone with them, facetime with them, or sitting in the room with them, there are 5 things you should seriously consider making clear to them. Dr. Dieane E. Meier suggests families use your last minutes with a loved one to communicate five thoughts, even if they

cannot be present. Thank you! ... I forgive you! Please forgive me! ...I love you!

...and Goodbye —John Leland, “At 89, She Fears Dying Alone More Than the Coronavirus Itself,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/nyregion/dying-alone-coronavirus.html>. Retrieved June 5, 2020.

Some of this helps us understand today’s reading from 1 Thessalonians. This passage from Paul is often read as a blow-by-blow description of how Jesus’ return will take place — first this will happen and then that, etc. — as if God had given the apostle an advance copy of that day’s order of events. But to read it that way misses Paul’s real concern, which he states in the first verse of the passage: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” [NOTE 1]

After Jesus’ ascension, angels had told those who witnessed the event that he would return (Acts 1:11), and most of his then disciples assumed that meant Jesus was coming back *soon*. But as decades passed and some believing brothers and sisters died, the surviving believers worried that the deceased would be excluded from the benefits of their Lord’s return. Some may even have had survivor’s guilt about that, as well as the worry that they, too, would die before Christ came back and be likewise excluded from eternity with Jesus.

But as Paul here writes, they shouldn’t “grieve as others do who have no hope.” He wants all who are followers of Jesus to know that God’s provision for deceased believers in the *future* is an assurance of God’s care for all believers in the *present*. Thus, resurrection hope — the confident expectation that what God has promised for the future will come to pass — enables us who follow Jesus to have a different attitude about death than those who don’t follow him. We’ll still grieve when a loved one dies, and we’ll still feel gutted when a loved one must die alone, but we are not without hope, for them or for ourselves. [NOTE 2]

To further this point, Paul reminds his readers “that Jesus died and rose again,” and thus they can count on the fact that when Jesus returns, “God will bring with him those who have died.” In other words, as God had done for Jesus, so he will do for those who die in Christ.

Paul is writing out of pastoral concern for his readers. He wants them to remain confident that both they and their friends and loved ones who had been “in Christ” (v. 16) when they died would be reunited with Jesus when he returned. [NOTE 3]

Hope, as commonly used in everyday parlance, means a wish, and is rooted in human desire. Biblical hope, by contrast, is rooted in God’s love for us, which is quite different. Biblical hope presents us with a view of life beyond the end of this one. While we can’t see that ourselves, we trust that God can, and thus we base our hope on that eternal perspective. That view enables us to count on the kingdom of God eventually coming in all its fullness, and our having a place in it. Hope says to us, “This is how you will understand it when this life is over and the new one has begun.” This view is of supreme importance to a life of faith because without it, we have nothing to look forward to beyond whatever we ourselves can make of this life before it ends.

Marguerite Higgins was a news correspondent during the Korean conflict. One bitter winter's day, she began interviewing a muddy Marine who had just returned from a lost battle. As he opened a tin can of C-rations and began eating, Higgins said to the young man, "If I could give you anything in the world you wanted, what would you ask for?"

The Marine thought for a moment and then said, "Give me tomorrow."

That's precisely the promise Paul offers in this passage: "since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."

It's not possible for us today to know how literally Paul intended the details he gives of Christ's return to be taken. At a minimum, Paul likely meant the rendezvous in the sky as an image to help his readers conceptualize Jesus returning and bringing the now-resurrected dead in Christ with him. Paul almost certainly had in mind the entry (in the original language of Greek *parousia*) of a victorious king into a city, coupled with some Jewish apocalyptic motifs, including "clouds," which Paul identifies as the place where Jesus' living followers and the dead in Christ come together to meet their Lord.

[NOTE 4] Paul did not designate clouds as the rendezvous location simply because they are phenomenon of the sky, but rather because clouds had long been used in Hebrew Scriptures to signify the presence of God, as in these examples:

Exodus: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after'" (19:9).

Psalms: "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (97:2).

Ezekiel: "Then the glory of the Lord rose up ...; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord" (10:4).

Nahum: "The Lord is slow to anger but great in power ... and the clouds are the dust of his feet" (1:3).

-The book of Daniel also pictures the *Messiah* coming in a cloud: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (7:13, NIV), a verse that Jesus himself quotes twice in the gospel of Matthew (24:30, 26:64).

In the New Testament, a cloud serves to signify the presence of God at the transfiguration, where God speaks out of a "bright cloud" to call Jesus the "Beloved" and to tell the disciples to listen to him (Matthew 17:5). At Jesus' ascension, it was a cloud that took Jesus "out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Thus, when Paul tells his readers that they will meet Christ in the *clouds*, he is saying that they will be in the presence of God the Father as well.

I want to be clear this morning that when I look to interpret Scripture I would always rather err on the side of being literal than the side of taking things as just poetry or allegory or metaphor. There are some that see most of Revelation, for instance, as all allegory and metaphor. I disagree. Therefore I am positive that if God wanted the

ascension to go exactly as Paul indicates here in 1 Thessalonians 4, He certainly could and it might happen exactly this way. But, it is also likely that Paul meant this, meaning his purpose was, to assure the Thessalonian Christians that Jesus will come back again and those who die before Jesus comes back again will be taken up to heaven with Him. All of us who die, in Christ, will be assured of eternal life in heaven with Jesus.

That said, if Paul were writing to us today about our grief over our dead, he'd probably look for some other image besides clouds to denote the presence of God. We have adopted "clouds" as shorthand for troubles and worries, so much so that we sometimes speak of looking for silver linings behind the darkest clouds — some kind of compensation for having to exist under clouds of trouble.

So today, if Paul wanted to keep his up-in-the-sky image but make it convey the same assurance and hope it did for the first-century Thessalonians, he might try to reorient our thinking about clouds the way the 18th-century poet William Cowper did in his hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," with its stanza:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head. ...i.e. pointing
our that rain comes from clouds that waters the earth and brings forth life.

Or, Paul might choose some other sky-related phenomenon instead of clouds — maybe "sunshine," which is a modern metaphor for release from or absence of troubles. And surely an end-of-time meeting with Jesus for those who are *in Christ* would be a release from and absence of troubles. So to borrow the title of a pop song, when Christ comes, we'll be "walking on sunshine"!

With that in mind, here's how "*The Message*" paraphrases our passage: "And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus."

"And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence — we have the Master's word on it — that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise — they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the *sky* to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on *sunshine*! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words." [NOTE 5]

—Stan Purdum and Carl Wilton contributed to this material. (The whole sermon from Homiletics Online)

Now let me mess with your head even a little more. This passage is, of course, the basis for predictions of "the Rapture" — that belief that, when the Lord returns, faithful believers will be snatched off to heaven, while others will be "left behind." Far from being a classic Christian doctrine, the Rapture interpretation is no more than a few centuries old, and did not gain wide popularity until the 20th century.

The key verse in this regard is verse 17: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.” But a question looms over that interpretation. What’s the Lord doing in the air in the first place? Has the Lord descended from heaven to convey the elect into the heavenly places like a cosmic tour guide? There’s no indication in the text of such a purpose. Now listen to what the commentator says: It’s more likely, based on the context, that the Lord meets the faithful in the air because he’s on his way *down*, not up. He’s returning to earth to redeem it. He’s going to reign on Earth!

[NOTE 6] So what are you going to do about it? Are you encouraged? Do you feel reassured? What can you do about it? You could memorize the passage of Scripture in the Message version: And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don’t want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.

“And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence — we have the Master’s word on it — that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they’ll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God’s trumpet blast! He’ll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise — they’ll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the *sky* to meet the Master. Oh, we’ll be walking on *sunshine*! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. “So reassure one another with these words.” Or how about just memorizing Note 5? “At the trumpet blast, Christ will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise, they will go first and then the rest of us who are still alive on earth will be caught up with them to meet the master and we’ll be walking on Sunshine! Not bad, huh? Any other ideas? What can we do about this? (take answers, summarize and close in prayer) Let’s Pray ...AMEN

“Sermon Notes for “Walking on Sunshine”

based on 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Given at Doster Community Church on September 20, 2026

- I. The main purpose of chapter 4 is: “We don’t want you to be uninformed about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (Not here is a blow by blow of what happens when Jesus comes back again?)
- II. Resurrection hope is the confident expectation that what God has promised for the future WILL come to pass and it enables us who follow to have a sure a certain hope.
- III. ALL who have died in Christ, will be reunited with Jesus when He returns.
- IV. It is not possible for us today to know exactly how literally Paul intended the details he gives of Christ’s return to be taken. Minimally Paul meant the rendezvous in the sky to help us conceptualize Jesus returning and bring the now-resurrected dead in Christ with Him.
- V. Reassure one another with these words, “At the trumpet blast, Christ will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise, they’ll go first and then the rest of us who are still alive will be caught up with them to meet the master and we’ll be walking on sunshine!”
- VI. What are you going to do about it? Memorize the above paragraph? Read 1 Thessalonians a couple times? Write something down!

We know that marriages, families, communities, nations often come together and discover their true strength when some apocalypse — some new revelation of the fault lines in our lives — has occurred. Hospital chaplains see this all the time. For some reason we human beings seem to learn best how to love when we’re a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of our self-sufficiency and goodness and safety are shattered. Apocalypse is meant to bring us to our senses, allowing us a sobering, and usually painful, glimpse of what is possible in the new life we build from the ashes of the old. —Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, 1999), 31.