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5 MINUTE LESSONS ON THE KINGDOM OF GOD

What Happens to Their Deceased Loved Ones on That Day?

1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest letters written by the Apostle Paul. It was penned from Corinth not long after Paul left Thessalonica on his second missionary tour (Acts 16-17), perhaps A.D. 52.

This letter was written to encourage and establish a young church in the basic truths of the gospel, to inspire it to progress in the power of holy living, and to instruct it in the matter of the coming of the Lord for His own and the relation of this event to the events of the day of the Lord. (Unger's Bible Handbook page 701)

Today we will be dealing with the events of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

¹³And 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. ¹⁴For 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.

¹⁵We 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. ¹⁶For 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 Christians who have died will rise from their graves. ¹⁷Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸So encourage each other with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NLT)

Several of my high school friends have recently passed away. Roy, from whom I bought his '56 Chevy is gone. Phil, who raced his '57 Ford before school is also gone. Merlene, who worked as a grocery clerk was found in her house after not coming to work for several days. Tommie Jean, who was popular with the boys is no longer here. Arty, who worked on our farm, went to turn on the water faucet, laid down on the ground and was no more.

The Thessalonian Christians had a question for the Apostle Paul. They were concerned about their Christian friends that had recently died and thus would be absent when Jesus returned. Clearly Paul believed that he and the Thessalonian Christians would be alive when the Lord returned. Paul said,

“¹³But 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.

¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 KJV)

It is interesting that the word “cemetery” comes from the Greek word “koimeterion” which means a sleeping place. The dead body “sleeps” in the tomb until God raises it up. This thought is also taught in the Old Testament in Daniel 12:2,

“Many sleeping in the ground will wake up. Some will wake up to live forever, but others will wake up to be ashamed and disgraced forever.”
(Daniel 12:2 God’s Word Translation)

How will God raise the bodies of people who were buried hundreds of years ago? What about the bodies of those Christians who were burned to death and those whose ashes were thrown to the wind, and Christians who perished at sea? The God who created the universe out of nothing with a word is fully able to reassemble the decayed bodies of all His saints in a moment of time (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35-58).

After the bodies of dead Christians have been raised, those who are still alive and have been left behind momentarily will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Again Paul, by using the word we (“we who are still alive and are left”; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15), put himself in the living group; he thought that Christ would probably return in his lifetime, or at least he allowed for its possibility. Only a moment will separate the resurrection of the dead and the translation of the living (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). (Bible Knowledge Commentary, page 704)

Paul wrote this passage to assure the Thessalonians that the believers in Jesus who had died would share fully in the glories of Christ. This is the great hope of believers, to see the Lord and be united with Him forever. It is that which every believer in this Age should anticipate. It is a blessed hope (Titus 2:13) with respect to the dead in Christ as well as for the living!

“¹³Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;

¹⁴Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people [a people belonging only to Him], zealous of good works.” (Titus 2:13-14 KJV)

Questions

Reflect, think about and discuss these Scriptures or questions.

1 Will animals go to heaven?

2 Read Luke 16:30-31 (New Living Translation).

³⁰The rich man replied, “No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.”

³¹But Abraham said, “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t listen even if someone rises from the dead.””

- Luke 16:30-31 (New Living Translation)

3 Read 2 Corinthians 5:8 (New Living Translation).

“Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord.”

- 2 Corinthians 5:8 (New Living Translation)

4 Read Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 (New Living Translation).

⁵The living at least know they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, nor are they remembered. ⁶Whatever they did in their lifetime—loving, hating, envying—is all long gone. They no longer play a part in anything here on earth.” - Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 (New Living Translation)

5 Read 1 Corinthians 15:53 (KJV).

“For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” - 1 Corinthians 15:53 (KJV)

6 Read 2 Timothy 1:10 (Good News Translation).

“but now it has been revealed to us through the coming of our Savior, Christ Jesus. He has ended the power of death and through the gospel has revealed immortal life.” - 2 Timothy 1:10 (Good News Translation)

We want to hear from you!

We would love to hear your feedback on these lessons and how you use them in your own study or in discipling others. If you have any thoughts, stories, testimonies, comments, or questions we would love to hear them!

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Answer Key

Reflect, think about and discuss these Scriptures or questions.

1 Will animals go to heaven?

The Apostle John in heaven says, *“And I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in mid heaven, saying with a loud voice, ‘Woe, woe, woe, to those who dwell on the earth...’”* (Revelation 8:13 NASB). It may be figurative language, but when the serpent spoke to Eve (Genesis 3:4) and when the donkey spoke to Balaam (Numbers 22:28), the stories are recorded in historical narrative, not in apocalyptic literature. In Revelation 5:13 it says, *“Then I heard all creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea saying: ‘To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.’”* Animals are giving praise to God and to the Lamb.

“¹⁸I also thought about the human condition—how God proves to people that they are like animals. ¹⁹For people and animals share the same fate—both breathe and both must die. So people have no real advantage over the animals. How meaningless! ²⁰Both go to the same place—they came from dust and they return to dust. ²¹For who can prove that the human spirit goes up and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth?” (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 New Living Translation)

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