

*1 Thessalonians 4:15-18***PREFACE**

It is ironic that when the day finally arrives when the Messiah fulfills the role imagined and expected by Israel, so few of them will be able to experience or even witness it. In their study of the Scriptures, ancient Israel did not see the Messiah as the Suffering Servant—only as an all-powerful, no-nonsense ruler. Their picture of the Messiah was defined by passages such as Psalm 2:9—

You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
You shall shatter them like earthenware.

—not passages such as Zechariah 9:9, where He is pictured in humility and gentleness.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Because He did not come in power and might the first time, they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. But as we discovered in our study of Christ in the Old Testament, Jesus was and is the only one who fulfilled *every* prophecy of the Messiah. He first had to come as the Suffering Servant, the gentle and sacrificial Lamb of God. *Then* He would return in triumph, as King and Ruler—and Judge. In the passage before us, we see the very beginning moments of His triumphant return. The curtain is just opening on the climactic third and final act. But even now, even in the very first seconds—as Paul writes to the Corinthians, “in the twinkling of an eye”—of this final act, Jesus the Messiah is already fulfilling His role as Judge.

In our last session Paul reassured the Thessalonian church that because Jesus “died and rose again,” those who “have fallen asleep in Jesus”—that is, Christians who died prior to His return—will indeed share in Christ’s coming to take the church home with Him. In this session we flesh out the events of this dramatic moment.

**Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.****v15**

*For this we say to you by/in the/a word of the Lord,*

Although Jesus did speak of the resurrection of His followers (e.g., Matthew 24:31, Luke 14:14), we have no recorded words of His that give the details Paul does in v15. The word translated “by” is the familiar *en*, which can also mean “in the sphere of.” Probably what Paul means here is that he passes along these details under inspiration—**thus the NIV could be misleading with, “According to the Lord’s own word.”** This is not his opinion or conjecture, but the authoritative word of the Lord.

## *Kyrios*

Note the repeated use of *kyrios*, “Lord,” in this passage. In vv13-14 Paul refers to Him as “Jesus.” Though he refers to Him as “Christ” in v16, I find it significant that five times in vv15-18 Paul refers to Him as Lord. Naturally, I wondered, Why?

**kyrios** = from *kuros* (supremacy); **supreme in authority**, i.e. (noun) controller; by implication Mr. (as a respectful title) :- God, Lord, master, Sir.

I could find no commentator who chose to discuss this, so I do not want to assign any dramatic importance to Paul’s repeated use of *kyrios* in these verses. Nevertheless, any time Scripture emphasizes one word over another, or suddenly switches from one term to another, it should cause us to pay attention and look for a reason. Words mean things—especially in God’s word—and He does not waste them.

As the apostle himself would put it, “I say, not the Lord,” (i.e., [this is just my own supposition](#)) that Paul has a reason for his use of *kyrios*. When describing to the church this long-awaited, mind-blowing event he wants to emphasize precisely the *lordship* of Christ. No more the humble, suffering servant; no more the sacrificial lamb—Christ now comes with His full measure of power and majesty. For Jews who knew, or knew of the Messiah during His first time among us, this will be someone dramatically “different.” This will be the Messiah in full-flower, as it were: the reigning King, the ultimate Judge, supreme in authority, *Lord!*

*that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

First Paul states his point in the negative (“will not”): Those who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet Him first; first in line will be those who had previously died “in Jesus”.

## *The Series of Events in the End Times*

Before we proceed we need to take a moment to get our bearings—to back off and look at the forest before we examine each tree. There is a multitude of positions, interpretations of Scripture regarding the end times. In this study we will not take the time to examine each one—it is beyond the scope of this class to debate the merits and errors of the various positions—but it *is* important that we pick one.

Our church’s official position, stated in our *Articles of Faith*, is “pretribulational premillennialism”—or “dispensational premillennialism” (which acknowledges Israel as distinct from the church). [\[see handout\]](#)

Our *Articles of Faith* spells out the details and Scripture references to substantiate this position, but let me break it down to the essentials. In order,

1. Jesus returns to remove His church (but does *not* touch down to earth).
2. This is followed by the seven-year Tribulation.
3. Then Jesus returns to earth (His “second coming”).
4. There follows a one-thousand-year period with Christ reigning and Israel exalted (Christ’s millennial reign).
5. Finally, a new heaven and new earth are established, Satan is defeated, and believers now in eternal state.

## v16

After Paul makes his point in the negative in v15, he then, in greater detail, states his point in the positive in v16.

### Read v16.

*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God,*

### Read Isaiah 42:1-2.

In the very first split second of Christ's return He announces that He is no longer the gentle, humble Messiah of before. He is *Lord*, and now He issues commands that must be obeyed. And His first command is that the graves of the redeemed be emptied.

**Sidebar:** I want to make sure I am understood. This is presented from a *human* perspective. I am not at all suggesting that the essential Son of God has literally changed from one thing to another, that His personality has undergone a transformation. From a human perspective this is a very different Messiah; from the perspective of heaven, how He presents Himself now to humanity is what He has been all long. When, on earth, He was revealing Himself as the suffering Servant, He was also King. In the end times, when He reveals Himself as reigning King and Judge, He remains the gentle, giving Savior.

And speaking of human perspective, let us not force this supernatural event into the earthly rules of physics. God plays by His own rules, and is under no obligation to fit His ways into our understanding.

Some have used this verse to be critical of the position that the rapture will be something that is relatively "secret"—that is, in contrast to when Christ comes back to earth itself for the Millennium, and the whole world will witness Him, during the rapture Christ remains at some lofty place between heaven and earth, and deals only with the redeemed. They posit that with these three audible signals—the Lord's shout, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call—the entire world will know what is going on.

But who among us can say what this will sound like?

a **shout** = *keleusma* = from <G2753> (keleuo); a cry of incitement; a shout of command.

**voice** of the archangel = *phone* = a tone (articulate, bestial or artificial); by implication an address (for any purpose), saying or language :- noise, sound, voice.

the **trumpet** of God = *salpinx* = perhaps from <G4535> (salos) (through the idea of quavering or reverberation); a trumpet :- trump (-et).

Will these sounds be in sequence, one after the other, or all at once? Do you know what the voice of an archangel sounds like? Do you know what the trumpet of God sounds like? How will three heavenly sounds, whether distinct from one another or in unison, sound to earthly, human ears?

The sound of a lightning strike ten-miles distant can be an extended, rolling rumble, almost pleasant to the ears. The sound of a lightning strike outside one's window is a sharp crack of doom.

A number of years ago, during the tenure of Pastor Gary, a brief video was shown during a Sunday morning service. The video was of the congregation in a typical worship service. Suddenly, without warning, there is an ear-splitting crack, and most of the congregation vanishes "in the twinkling of an eye," leaving behind a few poor souls who, quickly realizing what has happened, are reduced to miserable sobs.

Perhaps the cry of command from the Lord will be a warm, inviting melody, with harmony contributed by the head angel, the duet accompanied by God's trumpet. Or it may be the jolting crack of a lightning strike outside one's bedroom window. David Guzik points out another aspect of this.

*David Guzik:* It may be all three descriptions (shout, voice, and trumpet) refer to the same sound, or there may be three distinct sounds. The rapture will not be silent or secret, though the vast majority of people may not understand the sound or its meaning.

As to the sound, the unregenerate may hear something, but will probably not know what it is. Paul, on the road to Damascus, sees and hears something different from his companions.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice [or sound; phone, same as in 1 Thessalonians 4:16] saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice [or sound] but seeing no one. Acts 9:3-7 ESV

Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. Acts 22:9 ESV

And speaking of thunder, something similar occurred when God the Father spoke to Jesus.

"Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." John 12:28-29 ESV

So let us not be dogmatic about the specifics of this event—save that,

*the dead in Christ will rise first.*

The first to answer this heavenly command will be those who have been "asleep in Jesus" (v14). No matter the location of their grave, no matter the physical condition of their remains, these will be the first to join Jesus in the sky.

## w17-18

*Then we who are alive and remain...*

Some try to make v17 the basis for Paul believing that Christ would return in his lifetime (“we who are alive will”), but I side with the position that Paul was just stating the obvious: since he clearly was not yet dead, he would include himself with those still alive. It was not at all uncommon for believers in the first century to think, to hope that Christ would return in their lifetimes. Don’t we today?

*will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,*

Those already dead, no matter the condition of their remains, will be raised—as Paul states in 1 Corinthians—“imperishable”: incorruptible, undecaying, immortal.

### **Keep a finger here and go to 1 Corinthians 15.**

Although the difference between the two may not be clear to us now, the dead—those whose bodies have perished—will receive an imperishable body, while those who are still alive at His coming, will receive “changed,” different bodies. Why? Because, as Paul writes in v50,

**flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.**

The holiness and purity of God cannot permit sin or mortality in His presence. Whether dead or alive at Christ’s coming, our eternity requires an eternal, immortal form.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:52-55.**

### **Keep a finger here and go back to Thessalonians.**

*and so we shall always be with the Lord.*

Christians and unbelievers alike commonly speak of “going to heaven,” as if the *place* of our eternity is what is important. But that’s not true; it is not the place, but the *company*. From the rapture on, we will “always be with the Lord.” What makes heaven paradise is not the environment, the climate, the gold-paved streets or accommodations. What makes heaven paradise is that it is the home of the Lord God and His Christ, our Savior.

### **Back to 1 Corinthians.**

Here is how Paul closes this remarkable prophecy.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:56-57.**

### **Back to Thessalonians.**

To the Thessalonian church Paul concludes with v18:

**Therefore comfort one another with these words.**

Our ultimate victory—over sin, over death, over the corruption of the grave—is through our victorious Lord Jesus Christ. Comfort indeed.

## *End Times from MCC Articles of Faith*

### ARTICLE XIV: THE BLESSED HOPE

We believe that the next great event in the fulfillment of prophecy will be the coming of the Lord in the air to receive to Himself into heaven both His own who are alive and remaining unto His coming, and also all who have fallen asleep in Jesus, and that this event is the blessed hope set before us in the Scripture, and for this we should be constantly looking (John 14:1-3; I Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Titus 2:11-14).

### ARTICLE XV: THE TRIBULATION

We believe a time of great tribulation will be loosed upon the earth following the rapture of the church. It will last for seven years and will serve to purify Israel as a nation and bring judgment upon the Gentiles (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 6:1-19:21).

### ARTICLE XVI: THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

We believe the tribulation period will be climaxed by the personal, visible return of Christ to the earthly scene to defeat His enemies, to abolish Gentile authority, to bind Satan, to judge Israel, and to institute the millennial kingdom, (Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Isaiah 11:9; Ezekiel 20:33-44, 37:21-28; Matthew 24:15-25,46; Revelation 20:1-3).

### ARTICLE XVII: THE MILLENNIAL PERIOD

We believe a literal, earthly millennial period will be established upon the earth following the tribulation period. This 1,000 year period has as its foundation in the great unconditional covenants of the Old Testament – Abrahamic (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17, 15:9-18, 17:1-9), the Palestinian (Deuteronomy 30:1-10), the Davidic (2 Samuel 7:10-16; Psalm 89), and the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Christ will be the king of this millennial or Davidic Kingdom with the nation Israel occupying an exalted position within the kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-10).

### ARTICLE XVIII: THE ETERNAL STATE

We believe Christ will deliver His millennial kingdom up to the Father (I Corinthians 15:24), and thereby will the eternal state begin. All the just will be taken into eternal bliss, but all the unjust will be ushered to their just reward in the everlasting lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). The eternal state will be the fulfillment of God's purpose and plan which has as its goal the glory of God (Ephesians 1:6,12,14; Philippians 1:23).

Session 22

