

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JESUS RETURNS?

There is no greater passage in the New Testament that states so clearly what will happen when the Lord returns for his church, than 1Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The Bible teaches that those who have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior, - at death - go immediately into the presence of the Lord. They are “away from their earthly body” and “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). As the Apostle Paul languished in a Roman jail, he expressed a desire to depart (from his earthly body) and to be with Christ in heaven. In his mind, dying would be “gain” because it would usher him into the personal presence of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:21-23).

Jesus made the same promise to the thief on the cross: “*Today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). This means the Christian leaves his earthly body at death and goes into Paradise (Heaven) to live with Jesus.

Meanwhile the body is buried, cremated or dissolved awaiting the day of resurrection. Our text says that “*God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him*” (v. 14). Sleep is just a beautiful synonym for death. The word dead and sleep refer to the body dying, not the soul.

Believers, whose body has died are themselves living with Christ in Heaven, in a spirit form (Hebrews 12:23). Since our earthly body dies, it means there will be a literal resurrection of the bodies of those who died believing in Christ. That resurrection will be no less literal and no less physical than Jesus’ own resurrection. Resurrection is the making of a new body that can live with Christ in heaven.

What Happens When Jesus Returns?

In this passage Paul lists **seven things** that will happen when Jesus returns.

1. There is a Sudden Descent - 16

“*For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven.*” The emphasis in the Greek is very strong. It is the ‘*Lord himself*’ who will descend. Not a substitute or a stand-in. Not a look-a-like or an angel. Not a guest host or an Old Testament saint. Not a figment of our imagination or some ghostly religious figure. But the Lord himself will return. He will bodily and personally return to the sky.

This is the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, he who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, who healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached good news to those in captivity. He was betrayed, tried, denied, condemned, scourged, crucified, and buried in a borrowed tomb. On the third day he arose and 40 days later ascended into heaven where he has been for over 2000 years.

This same Jesus, the Lord himself, shall descend from heaven. The one who saved us, the object of our prayers, the hope of every dying saint, the one whose message we preach. He is coming again!

The Lord Jesus is returning to take his beloved church to Heaven. All true believers will be summoned from all parts of the world and together leave the earth and meet the Lord in the clouds of the sky. What a day that will be!

Note: People confuse this first coming with the return of Christ to earth. This is not his return to the earth—that coming takes place seven years later—but this is his coming to the clouds of the air to catch up his church. The two comings are separated by the seven year tribulation time —taught by Jesus in Matthew 24.

2. There is a Loud Shout - 16

“*with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God.*” There is a loud shout for all believers to hear. We do not know who will shout or what it will be, but it will be a shout with the Lord’s authority, the voice of majesty, and the trumpet call of victory. In the old days whenever the king was coming to a village, the town crier ran

ahead and shouted, “The king is coming! The king is coming!” In some similar way the King of Kings will make his entrance known to his church.

3. There is a Great Resurrection - 16

“*And the dead in Christ will rise first.*” This is a statement of priority. Evidently some in Thessalonica were worried that when Jesus returned he would rapture the living but leave the dead Christians in their graves. Paul says, “Don’t worry about it. The dead in Christ rise first.” Note two little words in our text. It is the dead ‘*in Christ*’ who are raised. *In Christ* means ‘belonging to Christ.’ It is only Paul who uses the words ‘*in Christ*’ which refers to Church age believers only. This is a resurrection of the Church believers. The unsaved dead will be raised at the Great White Throne judgment a 1000 years later.

It will be a literal resurrection from the dead. How? We simply do not know. But the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise from the dead all who follow him. This includes those who die at sea, whose bodies are cremated, those who die on the battlefield, and those who die a lingering death from cancer. They will be raised indestructible with brand-new bodies, clothed with immortality, healed, restored, put in their right minds, raised to live forever, raised to die no more. Let the people of God rejoice. The grave will not have the final victory, because the dead in Christ rise first.

4. There is a Glorious Rapture - 17

“*Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds.*” Do you see the phrase “caught up?” It’s the Greek word *harpazo*, which means to seize or snatch, to swoop down and take away. It’s a word that always implies a change of location. In this case it means that living believers will be literally lifted off the earth.

How will it happen? This was a secret message given to Paul that the living will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). How fast is that? It's faster than it takes to blink your eyes. Take some iron filings and sprinkle them in a pile of sawdust, then pass a magnet over the pile. What happens? The force of the magnet pulls the iron filings from the pile. Like a magnet attracts iron filings, even so the Lord knows those who are his and he will literally lift them off the earth to meet him in the air.

5. There is a Happy Meeting - 17

"To meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." Notice three key words.

- We will **meet** the Lord.
- We will be **with** the Lord.
- We will be with the Lord **forever**.

The glory of heaven is Jesus. Wherever he is, that's where heaven is. That's the happy meeting for all of us. We will see Jesus, face to face, and be with him.

6. There is a Heavenly Home Going - 17

"We shall be caught up together in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord." The Lord does not proceed to the earth. He calls his own up to meet him in the air and takes them to heaven. This is the promised hope of all who are *in Christ* and members of his family called the *Body of Christ*. They are delivered from the Great Tribulation time (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Seven years later the Lord will return to the city of Jerusalem to reign on earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

7. There is a Grand Reunion - 17

Notice what Paul says in verse 17, *"We shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air."* Then he says, *"So shall we ever be with the Lord."*

This is the ultimate family reunion. All of God's children who make up the Church the Body of Christ, are going home. They come from every land

and nation and tongue and kindred and will be together at last with Jesus. This is what Christians have always believed. We lay our loved ones to rest in hope that they will be raised immortal when Jesus returns. Death is not the end for the Christian. It is only the glorious beginning.

There are two imperatives that stand out.

First, pray that your family goes to heaven with you. Do whatever it takes. Write a letter, make a phone call, talk to them face to face, and don't ever stop praying for them. How wonderful to go to heaven with the people you love the most by your side.

Second, let us comfort each other with these words of Scripture. Our hope is in the Lord. Paul said we do sorrow, but not as those who have no hope. They die and we die. They are buried and we are buried. Side by side in cemeteries around the world are the bodies of Christians, near the unsaved. What makes the difference? The only thing that stands between us and unbelievers is the Word of God. We have the Word of God, that Jesus died and rose again. If God raised Jesus, he will also raise (with new bodies) those who trust in him. God has promised it and if we reject the Word of God, we have nowhere else to go.

Hold fast to the promises of God. Will we see our loved ones again? For those who know Jesus the answer from God's Word is yes!

For More Information contact:

PMA PO Box 2300, Port Orchard, WA 98366
www.prisonmission.org

"PMA provides Bible Correspondence courses in English and Spanish at no cost to inmates"

PRISON MISSION
So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.
- John 8:36
ASSOCIATION

What Happens When Christ Returns?

I Thessalonians 4: 16-18



Bible
CORRESPONDENCE
FELLOWSHIP

PMA PO Box 2300, Port Orchard, WA 98366
www.prisonmission.org

"PMA provides Bible Correspondence courses in English and Spanish at no cost to inmates"