“Our Sure and Glorious Comfort”
Part 2
1 Thessalonians 4:16–18
“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

—1 Thessalonians 4:16–18
THE “COMING” OF CHRIST IN FOUR STAGES

STAGE 1: The descent of Christ (4:16a).

STAGE 2: The resurrection of the dead in Christ (4:16b).

STAGE 3: The rapture of all believers to Christ (4:17a).

STAGE 4: The future of all believers with Christ (4:17b).
**REVIEW: CHARACTERISTICS OF STAGE 1:**
The descent of Christ (4:16a)

- **SUPERNATURAL**
  - This is not a *natural* event, but a personal manifestation *Christ Himself*.

- **SPECTACULAR**
  - This is not a *mundane* event, but one *dramatic* to the senses.

- **SUDDEN**
  - This is not a *gradual* event, but one that has all the hallmarks of *surprise*. 
STAGE 2: The resurrection of the dead in Christ.

“and the dead in Christ will rise first” (v. 16b).

- “the dead” – Paul stops using euphemistic language (“those who are/have fallen asleep,” vv. 13, 14, 15).
- His language here is literal: “the dead.”
- But he limits those in view to a particular kind of dead.
“and the dead in Christ will rise first” (v. 16b).

• These are not just any “dead”; they are the dead “in Christ.”

• The phrase “limits the scope of the dead to those who experienced physical death while in spiritual union with Christ” (Hiebert, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 214).

• It is a mistake to associate this resurrection with other resurrections described elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Dan 12:1–2; Rev 20:1–10).
Who are those “in Christ”?

Church-age believers

The beginning of the era “in Christ” (Pentecost, Acts 2)

The resurrection of the “the dead in Christ”
“and the dead in Christ \textit{will rise} \textit{first}” (v. 16b).

- \textit{will rise} – “to come back to life from the dead”; stated as a sure fact.
- \textit{first} – already emphasized in v. 15, the “dead in Christ” receive priority in the events of the coming of Christ.
**Characteristics of Stage 2:**
The Resurrection of the Dead in Christ (4:16b)

- **Selective**
  - This is not a *universal* event, but one affecting *church-age believers*.

- **Systematic**
  - This is not a *chaotic* event, but an *intentional* and *orderly* one.

- **Stunning**
  - This is not an *ordinary* event, but a *miraculous* one.
STAGE 3: The rapture of all believers to Christ.

“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17a).

• “Then” – introduces the next step in the sequence.

• “we who are alive and remain” – repeated from v. 15.

• The emphatic “we” indicates Paul’s personal identification with this category of believers and thus his belief this event could happen at any moment.
“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17a).

- “will be caught up” – ἁρπάζειν (harpazein)
  1) “to make of with someone’s property by attacking or seizing, steal, carry off.”
  2) “to grab or seize suddenly so as to remove or gain control, snatch/take away.”
• **Matthew 13:19** – “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.”

• **Acts 8:39** – “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.”
2 Corinthians 12:2-4 – “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”
“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17a).

- “will be caught up” – ἁρπάζειν (harpazein)

- The Latin translation of this Greek verb is rapere (“to seize”), from which the English “rapture” is derived.

- To say that “rapture” is not in the Bible (because it is a Latin term) means that “justification” isn’t either.
“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17a).

- “together with them” – living saints will join the newly resurrected saints in a grand reunion centered on Christ.

- “in the clouds” – the place of the reunion, obscured from view on the earth (see Acts 1:9).
“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

—1 Corinthians 15:51–52
“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17a).

- “to meet the Lord” – literally, “for the meeting of the Lord”—the purpose of the rapture.
- Some argue that this verb describes going out to meet a dignitary and then accompanying him back into a city.
- This “out-and-back” idea would suggest a return to earth with Christ.
“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

—John 14:2–3
“A better metaphor is that of the bride and the bridegroom. In this view 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff pictures a bridegroom coming to retrieve his bride (in fulfillment of His promise—John 14:3). This is a bride who has been made ready for her reception at the groom’s home (cf. Eph. 5:26–27). Once the groom meets the bride, He takes the bride to His Father’s house (cf. John 14:2–3) where the wedding feast will complete the formal union of the marriage (cf. Rev. 19:7–9).”

—Kevin Zuber, “Paul and the Rapture,” 160
“Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”

—1 Thessalonians 3:11–13
CHARACTERISTICS OF STAGE 3:
The rapture of all believers to Christ (4:17a)

- **Seizing**: This is not a *predicted* or *provoked* event, but a *sovereign* and *surprising* one.

- **Sweeping**: This is not a *partial* event, but one uniting *the entire Church/body of Christ*.

- **Separating**: This is not an *earth-bound* event, but one which involves a decisive *departure*.
STAGE 4: The life of all believers with Christ.

“and so we shall always be with the Lord” (v. 17b).

- “And so” – introduces the conclusion to this event.
- “we shall always be” – final, permanent existence.
- “with the Lord” – the realization of Christian hope; being “in Christ” (spiritual union) now becomes being “with Christ” (physical presence).
“The entire content and worth of heaven, the entire blessedness of life eternal, is for Paul embraced in the one thought of being united with Jesus, his Savior and Lord.”

—Bornemann, cited in Findlay, *Thessalonians*, 103
Characteristics of Stage 4:
The future of all believers with Christ (4:17b)

Steadfast
- This is not a *temporary* outcome, but a *permanent* one.

Satisfying
- This is not a *disappointing* outcome, but an *ultimately satisfying* one.

Singular
- This is not an *ambiguous* outcome, but one focused *singularly on Christ*.
When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
And there proclaim: my God, how great Thou art!
“Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

—1 Thessalonians 4:16–18
“The comfort to be experienced lies in the very words the writers have given them. These very words contain not only the antidote to their sorrow, but proclaim a message of encouragement and hope. There is solid comfort in these words for believers when they stand beside the grave of loved ones. Their rich comfort stands in striking contrast to the insufficiency of the comfort that the pagan world had to offer in such an hour.”

—Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 217