

First Presbyterian Church
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, “Up in the Clouds?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/12/2017

Okay, friends. Buckle up, because we’re doing some Bible study today.
Are you ready? You’re getting some content here, not just
funny stories about me peeing my pants in the middle
of a karate class as a kid.

Because things will get a bit content heavy later on, I will say two things:

- 1) This will not be an extra long sermon.
- 2) I will start off with a song:

I learned that song in high school and sang it in worship services in my college years. It’s by Larry Norman in 1975, entitled, “I wish we’d all been ready...”

A man and wife asleep in bed,
She hears a noise and turns her head, he's gone,
I wish we'd all be ready,
Two men walking up a hill,
One disappears and one's left standing still,
I wish we'd all been ready,
There's no time to change your mind,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.

Isn’t that nice? Ah...nothing like projecting a future filled with despondent nostalgia for those days when we could have prepared ourselves for the rapture.

The song is all about the future, imagining what would be left after believers are taken away to be with Jesus. It’s likely the source of the title for the Left Behind series of books that has dominated the American religious conscience regarding such things.

However, the song and the books were popular at least in part because of the implications they have for our present way of life.

Our sense of what lies ahead always impacts how we live and what we do.

We know that winter is coming in a couple of months, so we had a Harvest Sale with gifts and goodies and people are stocking up on wood for their fireplaces and thinking about winterizing their homes.

If you're going on a trip, you pack your bags based on what your destination is.

SAME THING WITH ESCHATOLOGY

Looking at the ultimate purpose of salvation. What is God saving us for?

Why should we pursue life with Christ? Many people will answer "so that we will go to heaven." Well, that's what eschatology is about.

Essentially, we're asking the question, "Where is God going with all of this?" Will we end up in a heaven that looks like the movies? Will we be up in the clouds? The clearer an answer we have, the better we will be able to live in line with God's ultimate intentions along the way.

We're going to look at what Paul says in 1 Thess. 4 about all this. But oftentimes people *start* with this passage, and then go looking for other passages to corroborate what they see happening here.

I'm going to do something a bit different. I'm going to do an overview of what the Bible has to say about the nature of God's salvation. *Then* we will come back to 1 Thess. 4 and see how things fit.

The Old Testament consistently describes God's past, present, and future salvation interest in terms of the created order.

In Genesis, Adam and Eve are given a garden to cultivate.

Sin's impact extends beyond humanity to the functioning of the entire created order.

Abraham and Sarah are promised a land for their descendants to possess.

The salvation of Israel from slavery in Egypt resulted in entering and living in that promised land.

There is no concept in the Hebrew imagination of being taken away to some other place or dimension as the result of God's saving activity.

There is forgiveness. There are hints at resurrection. Isaiah 65 describes total renewal for both heaven and earth. But there is no concept of God's people being removed from earth as a goal of saving faith.

So what about the New Testament? What is the goal of salvation as described there?

I've been greatly helped by Richard Middleton through his book, "New Heavens, New Earth." Middle describes five texts that outline the scope of God's saving purposes.

Acts 3:17-21: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything."

We learn from Peter's sermon to the early church that the final goal of salvation is the *restoration of everything*. All that has been undone will be restored to its intended order by God.

Eph. 1:9-10 "[God] made known to us the mystery of his will ... to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

This is part of a much longer and fairly involved sentence that Paul uses to describe God's salvation in and through Jesus Christ. Paul says that at the critical apex moment in history, all things in heaven and on earth will be united under Christ. Middleton suggest that "Since 'the heavens and the earth' is how the first verse of Genesis describes the cosmos that God created in the beginning, Ephesians 1 effectively proclaims that eschatological salvation will be as wide as creation."

Col. 1:19-20 "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

In a similar way to Ephesians, Paul's letter to the Colossian church emphasizes a comprehensive scope for salvation, and the blood of Jesus has an impact not only on human beings who have faith in him, but also on "all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven."

Rom. 8:19-23, “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”

This is a unique passage because it describes in very moving terms the agony of creation under the effects of sin. But just as humanity finds freedom from bondage (in the Exodus model) so the entire created order will be freed from its bondage. Ultimate salvation is viewed as arriving in the earth itself, not only in the people who live on the earth.

2 Peter 3:10-13, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

Well, here we get something that sounds much more like our Thessalonians passage, but with even more fire and destruction. Sounds like the world is finally going to get it in the end and be burnt to a crisp! And some older translations do say that the world will burn.

But the best ancient texts say instead that the earth will be laid bare, or disclosed. This is a mysterious kind of phrase, but the emphasis seems to be that there is a purifying fire in both heaven and on earth, and the true nature of the world is revealed. When this fire subsides we do not see a destroyed earth, but rather (very much in keeping with everything else we’ve learned) a new heaven and a new earth in right relationship.

The Chart!

Now to 1 Thess. 4

The first thing to make note of is Paul’s purpose.

It’s human nature to bring our own concerns with us whenever we read something—whether it’s a newspaper, a blog post, an letter, or a text message.

But we have a bit extra in the personal expectations side when we read the Bible.

To a large extent, that is unavoidable. But we should try to be aware of our purposes and our questions, and also seek out the purposes and questions of the original authors. When our questions and their purposes are not on the same topic, we shouldn't press things too far.

In this case, Paul and his friends are not writing to provide a detailed program for what will happen in the future when Jesus returns. That's not their purpose.

Their purpose is, according to v. 13, to comfort the congregation with regard to their friends and families who have already died.

We can imagine there was some anxiety in the congregation along the lines of this: "We have been told that Jesus is coming back, and my daughter had great faith in him, but last year she became very ill and died. Will Jesus remember her when he returns?"

Paul and his friends tell such a person that they don't want them to lose hope for those who have died, because just as Jesus died and rose again, so those who have faith in Jesus will both die and rise again.

That's what this passage is mainly about.

It's focus is on comforting those who are still alive. So if we interpret and apply the passage so as to create anxiety that you might be left behind ... do you think we might be missing the point?

In v. 15, the main concern is addressed. They write "According to the Lord's word" (the Lord here is Jesus, as always in Paul's writing) "we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep."

The point here is that there is no disadvantage for those who have faith, but die before Jesus returns – in fact, they will be raised to new life *before* anything else happens.

Middleton notes that in ancient times, cemeteries commonly lined the main road outside the city gates. So the image here in the Thessalonians minds is of people being raised up all along the roadside (but not in a scary, zombie, kind of way).

This is important, because of what Paul says next:

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God... After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. *And so we will be with the Lord forever.*”

Now, with all the background work we’ve done, you know that God

- A) Created the world as good, and humanity is bound up in that goodness
- B) Sin has created separation between God and all of creation, including (but not limited to) humanity.
- C) God’s plan of salvation is comprehensive for all of creation: a new heaven and a new earth.

Doesn’t this passage contradict all of that, and say that we spend eternity in the clouds with Jesus?

No, it doesn’t.

First of all, the authors are careful not to say *where* believers spend eternity with Jesus, but merely that they will spend eternity with Jesus. The location is unspecified.

Secondly, there are some unusual terms being used here that we don’t pick up on.

One term is translated as “come” in vs. 16. “For the Lord himself will come.”

Middleton notes that the particular word used here “often refers to an official divine or imperial visit—the ‘coming’ of a god or a king to a city.” The use of this word makes people imagine a particular kind of arrival that they would have been familiar with as Roman citizens.

The other term is translated as “meet” in v. 17. Gene Green suggests “This was almost a technical term that described the custom of sending a delegation outside the city to receive a dignitary who was on the way to town.” The expectation for this kind of royal arrival and a party that was sent out to meet them was that they would return to the city with the king.

Finally, there is the word, “air.” This is not the word typically used to refer to God’s dwelling place in heaven. Instead, it refers to the lower atmosphere, the air that we breathe. It is this realm that Paul (in other letters) describes as the arena of Satan’s influence and control.

Putting these insights together we discover a counter-intuitive understanding of these verses:

The authors seem to suggest that when Jesus comes with loud announcement, it will be like a king coming down the main road. And so (naturally) all those buried along the road will be raised and lifted up to be with him. Not only that, but when those in the city go out to greet Jesus, they too will be caught up with this grand procession. All of this symbolizes that God's kingship has overthrown the usurping power of Satan "in the air."

The natural progression of this scene would be to go *back into the city*. And so, it would not be surprising at all for this to be understood very much in line with the other passages we have read: That when salvation is fully realized, Jesus will come back to earth to make all things new.

The final line in our passage? "Encourage one another with these words."

That seems to be the point – that we can have confidence in and be encouraged by God's goodness and sovereignty when it comes to the future. The place we tend here on earth is very much a part of God's ultimate plan.