

## Introduction

In 1997 we began planting our first church, and I wanted to put together a foundations class for new members. I was looking at Hebrews 6, where God gives us six foundational or elementary truths. These are foundational truths for our lives, not necessarily things for a new member class. As I began studying these truths, I realized several things. First, I had never been taught these foundational truths in any church that we had been a part of. I had never been taught these in a Bible study that I had been a part of. Second, I had never personally studied these truths and I did not have a firm grasp on all six of these truths. I had been taught a few bits and pieces of these, but never all of them. Before I could teach others these elementary truths, I needed to have a good grasp on them myself, so I began studying them. My study eventually turned into a book, which I have used to teach these principles. Third, I was not nearly as mature as I thought I was. I had been an ordained pastor for eleven years and a Christian for twenty-three years, and I did not know these elementary truths, which are necessary to understand so that we can press on to maturity.

What are these six foundational truths? They are 1) repentance from dead works, 2) faith toward God, 3) baptisms, 4) laying on of hands, 5) resurrection of the dead, and 6) eternal judgment.

(Heb 6:1–2) “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, {2} of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.”

When Paul, Silas, and Timothy wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, it was very intentional. They made it very clear why they wrote this particular section. The Thessalonians were new believers, probably just a few months old in the Lord when they wrote it. They did not have any mature believers in the congregation; they were all babes in Christ. They had lots of questions, and one of the questions that they had was about what happens when we die. That is a great question, and it is one the most common questions that I have been asked, particularly from older people. I have not had too many children, teenagers, or young adults ask me that, but I have been asked that many times by older adults.

The Thessalonians had questions about what happens to us when we die. Paul, Silas, and Timothy were only in Thessalonica for a few weeks, and were forced to leave. They wanted to go back, but were hindered on more than one occasion. Because they wanted to strengthen them in their faith and check on them, they sent Timothy. When this letter was written, Timothy had already come back from Thessalonica, and briefed Paul and Silas on how they were doing, and their questions about what happens to us when we die. They also had questions and some confusion about the coming of the Lord. In our passage today, they stated the purpose of writing, the basis of the resurrection of the dead, the sign of Jesus’s return, and the Order of His coming. This is a wonderful and concise passage that not only helped the young Thessalonians, but also all of us today.

## What Happens to Those Who Are Asleep

1. Purpose of writing
2. Basis of the Resurrection
3. Sign of His coming
4. Order of the Resurrection

(1 Th 4:13–18) “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. {14} For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. {15} For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. {16} 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. {17} 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. {18} Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

### 1. Purpose of writing:

The primary purpose for including this in the letter was to inform them of what happens to those who are asleep. They wrote, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren.” This starts a new section of the letter to the Thessalonians. Paul often used this word, uninformed in his writings, and in particular when transitioning. Of the twenty-two times that the Greek word, agnoee (Strong’s G50) is used, sixteen are in Paul’s letters. Paul was a teacher at heart, and teachers want to give people understanding about things. These were new believers that needed to be given understanding about lots of different areas.

(1 Th 4:13) “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.”

Why did this question come up? What prompted the instructions about this particular area? It is highly likely that in the time that Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Thessalonica until Timothy’s visit, someone in the church had died. A death in the church family certainly would have prompted questions about what happens to believers when they die? The church in Thessalonica had both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews, if they were well versed in the Old Testament scriptures, would have a better understanding than the Gentiles, but many people are not knowledgeable about the scriptures. There was a common belief among the Greeks that our souls are not eternal, and when someone dies, they are gone forever; there was no longer any hope for them. There were some who believed in the resurrection of the dead, but that it would be long after those who were alive that were resurrected, and it would be in an inferior condition. These new believers needed some instruction so that they would not be ignorant or uninformed.

The new believers in Thessalonica are not alone in their ignorance about this or many other doctrines. In a recent survey, only six to nine percent of people claiming to be Christians had a biblical worldview. Most believers today are ignorant about what happens to a believer at death. Of senior pastors, only sixty-two percent had a biblical worldview.

They did not write this letter so that the Thessalonians could have head knowledge; they wrote so that this information could be applied in a practical way. The first application was to stop the grieving as those with no hope. Those without hope grieved because they believed their loved ones were forever gone, and they would never see them again. Therefore they expressed excessive grief over them. They hired men to play mournful songs on the trumpet or another instrument. They beat their breasts, and uttered loud shrieks. They rent their garments. They tore out their hair. They cast dust on their heads, and even sat down in ashes. Paul, Silas, and Timothy offered instructions to the Thessalonians so that they would not grieve over those who were asleep like those who had no hope.

There is a distinction made between believers and unbelievers. The word sleep is the first indication and distinction, and the second indication is the phrase, as do the rest who have no hope.

The word for sleep is *koimao* (Strong's G2837). It is used eighteen times and is translated as sleep in seventeen of the verses and dead in the other verse. The root word is *keimai* (Strong's G2749), which means to put to sleep. We get the word cemetery from this Greek word. The early Christians understood that there was a resurrection of our bodies when Christ returns. Our soul and spirit are in heaven, but our bodies are at rest or sleeping until Christ returns and people receive their resurrected bodies. A cemetery was a place of rest or where bodies were sleeping until they get resurrected.

When Lazarus died, Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep. The disciples did not understand that Jesus meant that he had died; they thought he was just sleeping. Then, Jesus made it clear to them, and said plainly, "Lazarus is dead." Jesus was going to awaken him out of sleep, or bring him back to life.

(Jn 11:11–15) "This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." {12} The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." {13} Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. {14} So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, {15} and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."

When Stephen was stoned to death, He called out to Jesus, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" After saying this, he fell asleep." Lazarus and Stephen died, and it was referred to as falling asleep. A cemetery was where they put those that had gone asleep. Their spirits are with the Lord, but their bodies are at rest or asleep.

(Ac 7:59–60) "They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" {60} Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep."

The second application was for them not to grieve, as those who have no hope. When a believer dies, his soul and spirit goes to be with the Lord, and his body is at rest until the resurrection of the dead. The souls of the unbeliever goes to Hades, the place of the dead, and they remain there until their resurrection. There is a resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous. The resurrection of the righteous is a glorious resurrection, but the resurrection of the unrighteous is not pleasant.

(1 Th 4:13) "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

In John 5:28-29, Jesus spoke about these two resurrections. He said, "for an hour we are coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." Those who have believed in Christ have eternal life, and do not come into judgment, but have passed out of death into life. That is the hope of the believer, and unbelievers do not have this hope. Therefore, the unbelievers grieve at death, but Christians do not grieve like them.

(Jn 5:28–29) “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, {29} and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment.”

(Jn 5:24) “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

There is no purgatory for believers. When a believer dies, his soul and spirit go immediately to heaven, and they are with the Lord. The soul of the unbeliever is in the place of the dead, Hades, and they await the judgment day when they will be resurrected to judgment. Christians have passed out of judgment and are with the Lord. That is why Paul told the Philippians that it was better for him to die, for that was gain. He said, “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is much better...” Believers will be with Christ, and Christ is not in a fictional place called Purgatory, or in Hades, the place of the dead.

(Php 1:21–24) “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. {22} But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. {23} But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better; {24} yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.”

Christ is with the Father. In Mark 16, after the Lord had spoken to the apostles, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. Where is Jesus? He is in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. When a believer dies, he goes to be with Jesus, which means that a believer is also in heaven.

(Mk 16:19) “So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.”

In Ephesians 1, Paul wrote that when Christ was raised from the dead, He was seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places. In Romans 8, Paul wrote that Christ died and was raised, and is now at the right hand of God, and is interceding for us.

(Eph 1:20) “which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*,”

(Ro 8:34) “who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

This does not mean that Christians do not mourn or grieve over the loss of a loved one. There is grieving and mourning, but it is different. We know that a believer is with the Lord, and in a better place. We celebrate their life and rejoice that they are in a better place. We take comfort that they are with Jesus, and one day their bodies will be resurrected. We still grieve over the loss of a loved one, but it is not the same as those that have no hope.

The third application is an exhortation to comfort one another with this knowledge. It is noteworthy that this letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. We know that Silas was a prophet, and prophets love to exhort. This letter gives understanding about what happens to believers that have died, and it ends with an exhortation, to comfort one another. I believe that Silas probably contributed this exhortation in this letter. We need knowledge and understanding of what happens to a believer when he dies. With that knowledge, we should not grieve as those with no hope. More than that, we should comfort others with these words. The Christian life is not just

about our own lives; it is seeking the best for others. When others have suffered a loss, we should comfort them. Someone in the church has died, and Paul, Silas, and Timothy are exhorting the body to comfort one another.

(1 Th 4:18) “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

## 2. Basis of the Resurrection

After sharing the purpose of writing this section, they shared the basis of the resurrection of the dead. They were giving them an understanding of the resurrection. The basis of our resurrection is that Jesus died and rose again. Just as he died and rose again, we will die and rise again.

(1 Th 4:14) “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”

When I was in high school and taking geometry, we learned at the importance of basis. We learned that in an equilateral triangle, all the sides have the same length. Therefore, if you know the length of one side, you know the length of the other two sides. The same is true about a square. If you know the length of one side, you know the length of the other three sides. Since we know that Christ was raised from the dead, we also know that those of us who are in Christ will also be resurrected.

Paul spoke of this in Romans 6, saying, “For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.” If we know that Christ was resurrected, we then know that we will be resurrected from the dead. That is the basis of our resurrection.

(Ro 6:5) “For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection,”

Scholars believe that someone may have troubled the spirits of the Thessalonians, telling them that those who have died will miss the resurrection. They base this speculation on why Paul, Silas, and Timothy are addressing the issue with them. They wanted the Thessalonians to know that as Christ was resurrected from the dead, those who are in Christ will also be resurrected. Those who have already fallen asleep in Jesus will be brought back with Jesus. Those in Christ who died have not missed out on anything. They are with Christ, albeit without their resurrected body, and He will bring them back with Him when He comes.

(1 Th 4:14) “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”

## 3. Sign of His coming

What will be the sign of His coming? They wrote that the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God. When the shout of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet occur, Christ will descend.

(1 Th 4:16) “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.”

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had obviously taught the Thessalonians about the resurrection in their brief time together. However, they were no different than us, and we don't always grasp everything the first time we hear it. In this letter, they spoke of Christ's return several times. In chapter two, they told the Thessalonians that they were their hope, joy, and crown of exultation in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming. It was just a brief mention that He was coming.

(1 Th 2:19) "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?"

In chapter three, in their prayer for the Thessalonians, they prayed that God would establish their hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. They knew Christ was coming, and He would be bringing with Him all His saints.

(1 Th 3:13) "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."

In chapter five, they wrote a closing prayer, that the God of peace Himself would sanctify them completely, and that their spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. They repeatedly wrote about the coming of the Lord. Today, we don't talk about the coming of the Lord as frequently. In particular, this would not typically be a topic taught to brand new believers and a new church plant. I believe the expectancy is not as much as it was then. They believed He could come at any day, and they lived with that expectancy. It has been two thousand years, and we are for sure closer to His coming than they were, but we do not have as much expectancy. We also do not have the same prayer as Paul, that our hearts would be without blame in holiness, and that we would be blameless at His coming. We can learn much from this letter to the Thessalonians. Jesus is coming back, and He will come with a shout of the archangel and a blast of the trumpet, and He will be bringing with Him those that belong to Him.

(1 Th 5:23) "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

#### **4. Order of the Resurrection**

There is going to be a resurrection of the dead. The resurrection was guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ. Therefore, believers are not to grieve as unbelievers, who have no hope. The coming of Christ will be announced with a shout from the archangel and a trumpet blast. When Christ comes, what will be the order of His coming? That is the next question that Paul, Silas, and Timothy address.

They make it clear that the instructions they are going to give are by the word of the Lord. Those who are alive and remain will not precede or go before those who have fallen asleep. The KJV says "that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." That does not mean to stop, as we use the word is used today. At that time, prevent meant to come before. The believers that are alive when Christ comes are not going to go before those that are asleep. Christ is going to bring them with Him. The dead in Christ will rise first. Then, those who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

(1 Th 4:15–17) “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. {16} 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. {17} 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.”

A parallel passage that addresses the order of the resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul wrote that “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. The resurrection of believers is the second fruits, the second in order. Paul wrote, “but each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s as His coming. The Greek word for order is *tagma* (Strong’s G5001), and it comes from *tasso* (Strong’s G5021), which means an orderly arrangement, or a series or succession. Because Jesus is the first fruits, He is at the top of this list or arrangement. There are three parts to the resurrection of believers. There is the resurrection of Christ, and that has already taken place. When He returns, those that are asleep will be brought with Him and resurrected. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, they wrote “and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Then, the believers who are still alive when He comes will be caught up in the skies with them, and they will be resurrected.

(1 Co 15:20–23) “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. {21} For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. {22} For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. {23} But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming,”

(1 Th 4:16) “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.”

There is another group of believers to be resurrected from the dead, and we find that in Revelation 20:5. “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. Those that received Christ after His appearing and during the thousand-year reign will be resurrected when the thousand years is complete. Those that were resurrected before the thousand years are referred to as the first resurrection, and they will be priest of God and of Christ and will reign with Him during this thousand-year period.

(Rev 20:5-6) “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. {6} Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”

So, there are three groups of believers that are resurrected. The first group is those who are dead in Christ when He comes. The second group of believers to be resurrected from the dead are those who are alive when Christ comes, and they will be caught up with Christ and those who were dead in Christ. The third group are those that are resurrected at the end of the thousand-year period. That is the order of the resurrection of the believers.

## Conclusion and Applications

Paul, Silas, and Timothy wrote this letter because the Thessalonians were grieving over those who had died. They had only been away for a few months, and during that time, some of the Thessalonian believers had died. We do not know if they died from persecution, illness, or old

age, but they were now asleep, and the Thessalonians were heavy-hearted about it. They wrote this letter to give them an understanding of the resurrection of believers. With this knowledge, they were not to grieve as those who had no hope. Second, they were to comfort one another with this understanding. There are many believers who lack understanding about this today, so the teaching is very relevant in our generation. People want to know and need to know about the coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead.

People need to know the sign of His coming. His coming is going to be announced by a loud shout of the archangel, and a blast of the trumpet. We need to be alert for these sounds. The early church lived with an expectation that He could return at any time, and many believed that it would be in their lives. It is two thousand years later, and we are certainly closer to His return, but many today do not live with that same anticipation of His return. The last verse of the Bible says, “‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” That should be the hope and cry of all believers.

(Re 22:20) “He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

When the Lord does come, there is an order to the resurrection. Christ was the first fruits. Those that are asleep will be brought back with Christ and will be the first to rise. Then, those that are still alive when He comes will join them in the skies, and they are the second to receive their resurrected bodies.

Our first application is to ask ourselves if we have understanding about this? Paul said he did not want them to be uninformed. Are you uninformed? If so, take time to study this passage, and 1 Corinthians 15. Look at the messages again; they are posted on the website. If you have questions, come ask. God wants all of us to have understanding.

Our second application is to be comforted about the loss of believers. Since we know that they are with Christ, and are in a better place, we should not grieve as those who have no hope. We should be comforted.

Our third application is to comfort others so that they do not grieve the loss of loved ones that are believers. Are you able and willing to comfort others? We are exhorted in our text to comfort one another with these words. We should be prepared and ready to comfort others with these words.

A fourth application is to be ready for His coming. Are you living for Christ? Are you living uprightly and walking in the light? Are you being faithful in your calling and service to Him? Are you without spot or wrinkle? Are you a pure virgin that will be presented to Christ? Is Christ your first love? Are you excited about His return and being in His presence? Are you praying for His return? Are you looking for His return?

### **Closing Prayer**

Father God, thank You for this passage in 1 Thessalonians. Thank You for informing us about what is going to happen, and the specifics about how it is going to happen. Thank You for comforting us with these words. Help us to be ready for Your coming. Help us to be found faithful in the things that You have called each of us to do. Help us to comfort others with what we have learned today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.



## **What Happens to Those Who Are Asleep**

**Introduction** (1 Th 4:3–5, Col 1:1, 1 Th 5:16-18, 1 Th 4:13–18)

1. **Purpose of writing** (1 Th 4:13–18, Jn 11:11–15, Ac 7:59-60, 1 Th 4:13, Jn 5:28–29, 5:24, Php 1:21-24, Mk 16:19, Eph 1:20, Ro 8:34)
2. **Basis of the Resurrection** (1 Th 4:14, Ro 6:5)
3. **Sign of His coming** (1 Th 4:16, 2:19, 3:13, 1 Th 5:23)
4. **Order of the Resurrection** (1 Th 4:15–17, 1 Co 15:20–23, Rev 20:5-6)

**Conclusion and Applications** (Re 22:20)