

Prayer

This is a truly wonderful day, Lord Jesus Christ; for on this day I set myself aside to love and worship You; to honour and praise You! Whatever people may think of me, it can be no worse than the crowd who bayed for Your blood and shouted 'crucify!' But through Your death and resurrection I am liberated! By Your ascension and eternal reign I receive my commission to do Your will! So as I touch eternal things on this most glorious day, inspire me to live for You, forever! ALLELUIA!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Politicians

You may read this anywhere in the world, but in England, politicians are currently getting into a mess concerning the expenses they claim. Pray for integrity amongst politicians!

On-going prayers

- Pray for those who plan big events important to your country
- Give thanks to God for His mercies whilst travelling
- Pray for people who are in despair or suicidal

Meditation

What is worship?

Is it that which lifts the soul to heaven above?

Maybe, but only if

the hand of God has done the lifting, nothing else.

What is faith?

Is it having faith in God and living by the Bible?

Maybe, but only if

the Lord has changed the heart within to make it so.

What is prayer?

Is it praise and thanksgiving, confession and request?

Maybe, but only if

The encounter is a conversation in which truth is spoken.

What is the Gospel?

Is it the truth of Christ's salvation, spoken out forever?

Maybe, but only if

The message we proclaim is changing us, right now.

Bible Study - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, fellow believers, about those who have 'fallen asleep', lest you should grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have 'fallen asleep'. ¹⁵ For we say this to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will most certainly not precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of

an archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up with them altogether in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air! So we will be with the Lord forever! ¹⁸ Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

Review

Here in these verses, are some of the most well known words about the return of Christ in glory! For us today, who long to know what will happen when the Lord returns, this passage can be added to 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (and possibly Romans 8:18f.) to give us some idea of what Paul believed would happen at that glorious moment. If we put together all of what he said, then we have a consistent picture of Christ as coming at a moment known only by God Himself, but with heavenly power and authority and at the sound of a 'last trumpet'. This is the final call for God's people to meet the Lord Jesus 'in the air' (1 Thess 4:17), and when 'the mortal body must put on immortality' (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Jesus Himself spoke about these same events and used similar language, but added other fascinating details. In Matthew 24 he spoke about the 'birth-pangs' of the new age (Matt 24:8) and the prior declaration of the Gospel to all nations (Matt 24:14). He spoke about catastrophic signs on earth and in heaven (Matt 24:15-29) before the Son of Man comes in glory 'on the clouds', with angels announcing His coming and the sound of 'a loud trumpet call'. At this point, 'the elect' will be gathered 'from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other' (Matt 24:30,31). The other major text of the New Testament to speak about this is the book of Revelation, which cannot be summarised here, except to say that it uses a complex model of overlapping and repeating stories of glory and tragedy, and they emphasise the importance of God's gradually unfolding victory over all evil. This enables the book to conclude with a picture of God's final triumph, and His creation of a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21) that is the eternal home of God's elect.

I mention all this because it can be hard to read any text about Christ's coming without getting a wider perspective on what Scripture says about the events we are discussing. Paul's word to reassure the Thessalonians are clearly standard 'doctrine' as he understood it, but what was it that the Thessalonians were ignorant of, and why did Paul find it necessary to speak to them in this way? Something was clearly not right, according to his comment, 'we do not want you to be uninformed, fellow believers ...'. The issue was not about the use of the term 'falling asleep', and whether it really meant 'death'. Many people used this term to refer to those who had died. Jesus did it (John 11:11f.) as did other people in the Roman world as a whole, according to documents of the day. No, the problem may well have arisen because of the use of the apocryphal book 'Esdras' in the Scriptures of some early churches (today, this is found in the Deuterocanonical section of some Bibles). In this book, we find the phrase; 'those who are left (i.e. until the end of the world) are more blessed than those who have died' (2 Esdras 13:24). This was a late Jewish comment on expectations that the Messiah would come and bring the End of the World with Him, and in this case, those who were alive at such a time were clearly more 'blessed' because they would experience this great event on earth!

For early Christians, the problem was this; Jesus had come, and was due to come again, and in their minds, this could be quite soon. As time went by, some people died (fell asleep) and those who remained wondered whether they were privileged or not, according to Jewish tradition recorded in Esdras. It seems that the Thessalonians, with little time having passed since their receipt of the Gospel (see Acts 17:1f.), had not yet addressed this issue or come across the standard Christian teaching on the subject. Paul put them right, by saying that there was no priority amongst the raised at the coming of Christ,

whether they had died or not. He said this most emphatically, asserting that what he said was a 'word from the Lord (4:15).

Over time, the concerns of Christians about the details of the coming of Christ have changed. Whilst it was the immediate concern of the Thessalonians to know where they stood in relationship to their own relatives who had died, it is our concern today to know when these things will happen, how they will happen, and what the signs will be! We scour the Old and the New Testaments to find clues, and with our incredible desire to know when it will happen appear to take on our Lord Jesus, who said categorically 'you do not know what day your Lord is coming' (Matt 24:42, and other places). Providing we keep Jesus' words in mind, what this passage says is clear and helpful, though the fullest explanation of what will happen when the Lord comes is perhaps best dealt with as part of a far wider discussion!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what people most want to know about the coming of Christ in glory?
2. As far as you are aware, what can be said, for sure, about what will happen when Christ comes in glory?
3. What does it mean for Scripture to say that we who have not died will have no priority at the resurrection over those who have?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Because of my scientific background, I have a belief that God made time, and because of this, when we die, we may well escape the time frame of this world in which we live and experience a new 'time' in God's heavenly order of things. This is purely speculation, of course. However, this belief of mine enable me to handle the notion that we who die 2,000 years after Jesus' death, will not feel as if we are arriving in heaven at the end of the party! I reckon that all who die are transported into God's order of things in which we see each other in an equality of time; it is beyond our comprehension, but it makes perfect sense to me! I, like others who think about these things, must ensure however, that our pet theories do not cut across what Scripture says!

Further ideas to think about, and for prayer

- *Look at each of the things Paul says about the coming of Christ in glory, and make a list of the things that you believe will happen. Keep this list to hand, and when you hear people talking about this in church, use this list as a means of checking out the Scriptural truth of what is said!*
- *Pray for the day to come when Christ will come in glory. Then ask yourself what it felt like to pray for this. What do your feelings say about your attitude towards this great coming event?*

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, have done for me what is impossible for my mind to grasp, my heart to comprehend or my feelings to appreciate; and somewhere within my spirit lies the unspoken yet powerful bond by which You draw me heavenward and I do not let go. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for Your amazing Love for one such as me! AMEN