

# The return of Christ the King

**1 Thes 4:13-5:11; Eze 34:11-16, 20-24; Ps 95:1-7; Mat 25:31-46**  
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## Introduction

We all have to deal with death among our family members, friends, and other people we really love. The crushing mill of death never stops.

What happens to those who have died? In Thessalonica, some of the believers had died and the congregation was in deep mourning. And they wondered: are they lost? They died before the return of Jesus Christ, so have they missed out on the salvation that Jesus offers?

Paul offered comfort: those who have died are not lost; they will be raised from the dead and together with those who are alive at the return of Christ, be forever with the Lord!

## 1 Comfort about those we lost

Paul, whenever he speaks of people who have died, uses the language of sleep. He says: they sleep. The comparison with sleep is appropriate – it implies not only rest from labor but also the glorious awakening which believers expect on the other side of death. For those who have passed away in the faith of Christ, death is not the end.

This is a promise for all who are connected with Jesus Christ; they will rise up just as He did. A great promise to comfort us when we have lost family and friends, but also a great promise that when we die, we have hope. Listen to what St Paul wrote to Timothy: "If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him".

Death is not the end; a body goes into the ground, but that is like a seed planted in the ground. The resurrection body is the flower that comes from that seed.

The fact that those who have died in Christ are called 'asleep' does not mean that they are not conscious. The reference to sleep is about the body, about the soul. In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul says that those who died are 'absent from the body, but present with the Lord'. The body sleeps; the soul is with God.

In spite of this comfort, we still seriously miss those we love! To grieve is not wrong – it is normal. But Paul warns us that we must not grieve *as other people who have no hope*. Even though we have this hope, it is perfectly understandable for us to feel sad when people we love die. We miss them! This sadness is a good sign of affection. But excessive grief is not needed.

John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, wrote in his *Homily* on 1 Thessalonians:

To be excessively downcast by the death of friends is to act like someone who does not have the spirit of Christian hope. A person who does not believe in the resurrection and who sees death as total annihilation has every reason to weep and lament and cry over those friends and relations who have passed away into nothingness. But you are Christians, you believe in the resurrection, you live and die in hope: why should you mourn the dead excessively?

According to most philosophers of that time the body has no future – the body was seen as the prison of the eternal soul. As Christians, we know that we, if we die in the Lord, we have a great future – at death our soul goes to be with our Lord, and when he returns one day, our soul will be reunited with a brand new, resurrected body!

## 2 His glorious return

Paul underlines that those beloved of us who have died in the past, will have no disadvantage when our Lord returns. Therefore He describes what will happen at that moment of the return of our Lord. First those who died will rise from the dead, and those who at that time are still alive will be changed, and together as one Church, as one body, we will altogether united, meet with the Lord who comes back.

There are people who believe that this return of Jesus will be a secret one, invisible, and that after this, later, He will come back once again, but then in glory. Silly movies have even been produced on the basis of this idea, and Christian bookshops are full of books that try to make us believe this idea.

I cannot accept this strange idea. What Paul describes here is not a secret return at all! You can follow this in your bible in 1 Thes 4:16:

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, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

He returns with a shout, a cry, a command. The Greek historian Herodotus used the same word for a command given in a battle. That is loud, and audible, and very public. This is God's battlecry – when He comes to protect and save his people.

Paul writes about the voice of an archangel. A voice is not secret or hidden. The only archangel

mentioned in the Bible, by the way, is our own Michael (Daniel 10:13, 12:1, Jude 9). He is the protector of the people of God. He is involved in the return of Christ!

Then we read of the sound of a trumpet of God. Ever heard of secret and hidden trumpets? This is actually the sound of the Jewish ramshorn, the *shofar*. When God descended to make a covenant with Israel, this ramshorn, the shofar sounded from heaven.

Every weekday in the Jewish synagogues this is read:

Sound the great shofar for our freedom, and raise the banner to gather our exiles, and gather us into one from then four corners of the earth. Blessed are you, Adonai, who gathers the dispersed of the people Israel.

These signs that Paul mentioned are to be found in all the great manifestations of Yahweh; they will also be heard on the day of the return of our King, to reveal his absolute majesty and his saving appearance. Today, by the way, is called Christ the King in our liturgical year. That is the weekend before the beginning of Advent.

So it is abundantly clear – this return of Christ is public; there is nothing secret or hidden about it. It is the reversal of his Ascension into heaven. He left with a cloud, he returns with the clouds.

This is described in our Old Testament reading of Ezekiel; this is also the same coming of our Lord that we heard about in our Gospel reading from Matthew 25. This is when all the promises of the Old Testament and the New Testament are fulfilled. When Jesus completes and perfects our salvation.

When this glorious King returns, we go up into the air, to meet with Him in the clouds, St Paul writes. That is strange to imagine... St John Chrysostom explains it beautifully:

If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but those of the domestics who have offended remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For He received Him up in the clouds, and "we shall be caught up in the clouds." Do you see how great is the honor? And as He descends, we go forth to meet Him, and, what is more blessed than all, so we shall be with Him.

We go towards Him to honor Him, and then, to escort our King to this world. As the welcoming committee that goes to meet with the king while

St Michael's, 18 November 2011

he is still on the way to a city. Yes, we meet Him in the sky, but it is not so important where we meet with Him; much more important is that as believers we will be united with Him forever. We will be forever with our Lord. We, with all beloved people who have passed away, and with Moses, Abraham, Mary, Paul, with those of our family and friends who died in the past years. Believers from all times and all places, gathered by our King in his Kingdom.

### 3 Our preparation

How great our glory will be on that day! St Josemaria Escriva (1902-1975, founder of Opus Dei), in *Furrow*, p. 891:

Think of this: Heaven awaits us; what will it be like when all the infinite beauty and greatness and happiness and Love of God are poured into the poor clay vessel that the human being is, to satisfy it eternally with the freshness of an ever-new joy?

The Bible speaks of great glory, but it also gives us a grave warning. We should always be on the watch, for we never know for sure when the last day of our life will be or when Christ returns. The second coming of the Lord will take people by surprise.

So, it would be rash to postpone repentance to some time in the future. Once the Lord appears upon the clouds, there will be no opportunity for conversion. His coming is absolutely decisive. He comes not to convert but to judge. This means there is urgency for us to set out life in order. Now is the time of salvation. 1 Thes 5:9: *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

God does not desire us to suffer his wrath. "Wrath" refers to the condemnation earned by those who die in sin; and "salvation", in the New Testament, means being protected from danger and able to live free from anxiety in communion with our Lord.

If we belong to the light, to the world of God, we already today live in accordance with the life of the King and His coming kingdom. How is that? In the Gospel reading of Mat 25, Jesus also gave a description of the expected lifestyle: His followers feed the hungry, welcome strangers, give clothes to the poor, visit prisoners.

*Put on faith, and love as a breastplate, and the hope that belong to salvations as a helmet*, Paul advises us in 1 Thes 5:8. This is language that belongs to warfare. John Calvin said in his Commentary on 1 Thessalonians: *With these words, Paul shakes us out of our inertia for he calls us to arms to show that this is not the time to sleep.*

We have to fight hard to strengthen our faith, and love, and to continue hoping for the coming of our King.

If we fight this good fight, by loving God and by loving our fellow men, we may face many problems. We may suffer hard times. But then, one day, during the fight, we will hear the 'loud command, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call of God' and we know that our victory has come. The Lord Himself will come to finish the battle, and make us and all things new. And He will tell you: *Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

### **Conclusion**

What a day that will be! So be not too distressed that death still takes those whom we love. We will see each other again, and we will all be with the Lord Christ!

And let us make sure that even today, we live for Him. Our Lord wants our salvation. Do not postpone anything that you know you must do for serving our Lord.

And a final word from the apostle Paul: 1 Thes 5:11: *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Do you see how Paul puts the health of our community into the hands of each individual? Encourage one another. The good day of His return is coming, so let us all be prepared to receive Christ our King!

**+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen**