COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE
65

The Coming of Jesus Christ

STUDY GUIDE 4 OF 6:

Caught Up to Meet the Lord

An overview of spiritual gathering and present union with Christ.



Equipping and empowering for effective service
2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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Few portions of Scripture have been used more often to teach a future physical rapture than **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**. Many Christians have been taught that Paul was describing physically dead believers rising from their graves, living believers being removed from the earth and both groups meeting Jesus Christ in the natural sky. Yet before accepting that interpretation, we must establish what Paul was actually teaching the Thessalonians.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**:

> *"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."*

The meaning of those who are *"asleep"* must be established from Paul's own teaching and its harmony with the rest of Scripture. We must consider the people to whom he was writing, the spiritual condition of those he described and the relationship between his words in chapters 4 and 5.

This Study Guide also examines an important interpretive principle: the words of Scripture were inspired, while the modern punctuation and chapter divisions were supplied later. The wording, grammar and context must therefore govern our understanding rather than allowing an English comma or an inherited interpretation to determine doctrine.

Jesus Christ fulfilled His promised coming at Pentecost in A.D. 31 when He came as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. Every born-again believer already possesses His life, and physical death cannot separate that believer from Him.

This Study Guide will examine spiritual sleep, the hope available through Jesus Christ, the meaning of Paul's Greek expressions and the life-giving voice through which the spiritually dead are raised in Christ. Each part of Paul's teaching must be understood within its immediate setting and in harmony with the spiritual language used throughout Scripture. Our purpose is to understand Paul's inspired words faithfully and recognise Jesus Christ as the One who brings spiritually dead people into His saving life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must Paul's teaching about the sleepers be read in its spiritual setting?

Personal Reflection

Have you regarded people outside Christ as beyond hope rather than recognising that His voice can still give them life?

Action Step

Identify someone for whom your hope has weakened. Explain how you will renew your concern, prayer or truthful witness without imagining that you can produce the new birth yourself.

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S TEACHING

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The familiar interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4 often begins with a picture of physical resurrection and believers ascending into the sky. However, we must begin with Paul's actual words and the spiritual setting in which he wrote them. His letter was addressed to believers who already possessed Jesus Christ and were being instructed concerning their conduct towards those who were without Him.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:12-13**:

> *"That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."*

Paul first speaks of those who are *"without"* and then immediately speaks of those who are *"asleep."* These expressions must be examined within his continuing argument rather than treated as unrelated subjects. We must not introduce a change of subject simply because a verse division appears between them.

The same principle applies when Paul's teaching continues into chapter 5. He contrasts those who are awake with those who sleep, and the children of light with those who belong to darkness. His own language therefore provides an important foundation for understanding what he means by spiritual sleep and spiritual life.

Jesus Christ had already explained how spiritually dead people receive life.

Jesus declared in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

The spiritually dead hear the voice of Jesus Christ, and those who hear receive life. This establishes the life-giving work of the Person who is central to Paul's teaching. Jesus Christ is the One who calls the spiritually dead into His saving life.

We must also distinguish the inspired Greek wording from the punctuation supplied later in our English Bibles. Particular attention will be given to the expressions *"through Jesus," "alive and remain,"* the Lord descending, His shout, the voice of the archangel and the dead rising first. The inspired words, their grammar and their surrounding context must determine our understanding.

Throughout this examination, the controlling truth remains the completed saving work of Jesus Christ. He has already come to dwell within His born-again people, and His Gospel continues to reach those who are spiritually dead. Those who hear His voice are brought into His life.

We begin by establishing a fundamental principle for reading Paul's words: the words were inspired, but the punctuation was supplied.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Jesus' promise that the dead will hear His voice help explain Paul's teaching?

Personal Reflection

When a loved one remains spiritually unresponsive, are you tempted to trust your own words or give up hope in Christ's life-giving voice?

Action Step

Name a person or situation you are concerned about. Explain how you will show patient love and share God's Word while trusting Jesus alone to give spiritual life.

THE WORDS WERE INSPIRED; THE PUNCTUATION WAS SUPPLIED

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Before we examine **1 Thessalonians 4:14-17** closely, we must understand an important fact about punctuation. Punctuation can completely change the meaning of a sentence even when the words themselves do not change. This becomes especially important when punctuation affects how the inspired words of Scripture are grouped.

Punctuation Can Change the Meaning

Consider these two sentences:

"Let us eat, children."

"Let us eat children."

The words are identical, but the comma changes how they are understood. In the first sentence, *"Let us eat, children,"* the speaker is addressing the children and inviting them to eat. In the second sentence, *"Let us eat children,"* the children themselves have become the object of the verb *"eat,"* so the sentence now says that the children are to be eaten.

Nothing has changed except the punctuation. The same words have been grouped differently, and the meaning has changed completely. This simple example establishes an important principle for our study of 1 Thessalonians 4: punctuation affects how words are grouped, and the grouping of words affects how a sentence is understood.

Paul Wrote the Words, Not the Modern Punctuation

Paul wrote the inspired words of the letter to the Thessalonians. He did not write the modern English commas, colons, semicolons and full stops that appear in our Bibles today. Neither did he write the chapter numbers and verse numbers by which we now locate his words.

Paul did not write Verse 14, Verse 15, Verse 16 or Verse 17. Those divisions were supplied later to make Scripture easier to locate and read. They are useful reading aids, but they are not inspired words.

The same is true of punctuation. Therefore, when supplied punctuation causes Paul's words to be grouped in a way that conflicts with their context and the harmony of Scripture, the

punctuation must be reconsidered. The inspired words are the authority, and the punctuation must serve those words.

What the Greek Wording Looked Like

We do not possess Paul's original handwritten copy of 1 Thessalonians. However, the Greek wording has been preserved through the manuscript tradition. Early Greek New Testament manuscripts were commonly written in continuous capital letters, without the modern word spacing, punctuation, chapter numbers and verse numbers familiar to us today.

The wording of what we now call **1 Thessalonians 4:14-17** can therefore be displayed in a form much closer to that early manuscript style:

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ΜΕΘΑ

Notice what is absent from this form. There is no 14, 15, 16 or 17, and there is no modern comma telling us where to pause. There is no colon telling us where one expression must end and another must begin, and there is no verse division forcing the reader to stop at one point and begin again at another.

The inspired words are present, but the later reading aids are not. This means that the way the words are grouped must be established from the wording, grammar, context and harmony of Scripture. We cannot allow a later punctuation mark by itself to settle the meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must inspired words be distinguished from punctuation supplied later?

Personal Reflection

Are you willing to reconsider a familiar interpretation when the Greek wording and surrounding Bible verses do not support it?

Action Step

Identify one assumption you have held about 1 Thessalonians 4. Explain how you will check the wording and context before repeating or defending that conclusion.

Compare This With the King James Version

The King James Version presents the same portion of Scripture in a form that is much easier for an English reader to follow. The translators supplied punctuation so that the wording could be read naturally in English. That punctuation is useful, but it must remain distinct from the inspired words themselves.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:14-17**:

> *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."*

The words are inspired Scripture, while the punctuation is supplied. That distinction is essential because the English punctuation causes the reader to group certain words together in particular ways. Those groupings have contributed to the familiar teaching of physically dead Christians rising from graves and living Christians being taken into the natural sky to meet a Jesus who is supposedly still absent from His Church.

That reading does not harmonise with the rest of Scripture. We must therefore return to the inspired words themselves and examine carefully how the expressions should be grouped and understood. Scripture must interpret Scripture.

Scripture Must Interpret Scripture

Jesus had already explained how He would come. His promise was made directly to His disciples and concerned His coming to them. He did not leave them with the expectation that His presence would remain absent for thousands of years.

Jesus said in **John 14:18**:

> *"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."*

Jesus promised His disciples that He would come to them, dwell within them and abide with them. His coming would establish the indwelling reality He described throughout John 14. His promise therefore provides an essential part of the Scriptural setting in which Paul's words must be understood.

Jesus also established the timeframe of His coming.

Jesus said in **Matthew 24:34**:

> *"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."*

Jesus did not place His coming thousands of years beyond the generation then living. He said that *"all these things"* would be fulfilled within that generation. Paul's teaching cannot contradict the timeframe Jesus Himself established.

The writer of Hebrews also connected Christ's appearing directly with salvation.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 9:28**:

> *"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation."*

The second appearing was *"unto salvation."* Salvation is here now, and Jesus Christ has already come to His people. He returned at Pentecost as the Holy Spirit and now personally dwells within every born-again believer.

Paul therefore cannot be teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4 that Jesus is still absent from His Church and will someday return physically from the sky to gather His people. Such an interpretation would conflict with the harmony of Scripture. Paul's words must be read consistently with what Jesus Christ had already established.

Jesus Comes to the Lost Through His Body

There is, however, a sense in which Jesus Christ still comes to people during the Gospel Day. He comes to those who are without Him through His body, the Church. Born-again believers carry the Gospel because Jesus Christ lives within them, but the human messenger cannot give spiritual life.

Jesus Christ Himself must speak to the heart. The messenger proclaims His Word, but only Christ can awaken those who are spiritually dead. Jesus described this life-giving work clearly.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

The spiritually dead hear His voice, and those who hear live. For the born-again believer, Jesus has already come and personally dwells within. For the person still without Christ, Jesus comes through the Gospel proclaimed by His body and speaks life to the spiritually dead.

This distinction is central to understanding 1 Thessalonians 4. We must distinguish between Christ already dwelling within those who are born again and Christ reaching those who are still spiritually dead through the proclamation of the Gospel. That distinction will help us follow Paul's wording correctly.

We Must Read Paul's Words Again

We will therefore examine Paul's wording carefully without changing the inspired words. Where supplied punctuation has caused those words to be grouped incorrectly, we will examine the grammar, context and wider harmony of Scripture to determine how they should be read. We will also consider the original Greek where necessary.

We will examine expressions such as *"them which are asleep," "in Jesus," "alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord," "in a shout," "in the voice of the Chief Messenger," "in the trumpet of God," "the dead in Christ shall rise first"* and *"caught up together with them."* Each expression must be understood from Paul's continuing argument rather than from punctuation alone.

We will then continue directly into chapter 5 because Paul did not place a chapter division between the two chapters. His teaching continues, and the language of sleep, watchfulness, darkness, light and salvation must remain connected with what came before. The later chapter number must not interrupt Paul's thought.

The rule that will govern everything that follows is therefore clear: The words were inspired. The punctuation and verse numbers were supplied later. Where supplied punctuation produces a meaning that conflicts with the context and harmony of Scripture, the punctuation must be corrected so that the inspired words are read according to the truth of God's Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How should the wording and context of the Bible guide the way we read Paul's words?

Personal Reflection

When speaking of salvation, do you offer people a distant hope while neglecting the life Jesus Christ offers now?

Action Step

Identify someone who needs to hear about Christ's present salvation. Explain how you will prepare to speak simply about His life-giving promise rather than relying on dramatic predictions.

THERE IS NO HOLDING PLACE

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Before we examine Paul's words concerning those who are *"asleep,"* another widely accepted teaching must be tested against Scripture. The teaching of a future physical rapture requires Christians who have physically died to remain somewhere awaiting a future return of Jesus Christ. They must then be restored to physical bodies, rise from the earth and join believers who are still physically alive before being taken to meet the Lord.

Scripture teaches no such holding place. The holding place exists only because a future physical rapture has first been assumed. Remove that assumption, and the supposed need for a holding place disappears with it.

The Body Returns to the Earth

Solomon tells us plainly what happens when the physical body dies. The body returns to the earth from which it came, while the spirit returns to God who gave it. Scripture does not place the believer in a temporary waiting place until Jesus physically returns to the earth.

Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 12:7**:

> *"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."*

The physical body returns to the earth, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Nothing in this verse requires the believer to wait somewhere until a future physical resurrection restores that body. The physical body is not required for the believer to remain with Jesus Christ.

Physical Death Does Not Separate the Believer From Christ

A person who is born again is already in Jesus Christ. Physical death does not remove that person from Him or break the relationship established through the new birth. Paul specifically includes death among the things that cannot separate the believer from what is found in Christ.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:38-39**:

> *"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The believer does not die physically, leave Christ, enter a holding place and then wait for a future rapture to be reunited with Him. The believer who is in Christ remains in Christ. Physical death does not undo the life and relationship already received in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does physical death not separate a believer from Christ?

Personal Reflection

Has fear of physical death weakened your confidence that Christ's life cannot be taken from the person who belongs to Him?

Action Step

Describe the fear honestly. Explain how you will answer it from the Bible and trust the continuing relationship established by Jesus Christ.

Absent From the Body, Present With the Lord

Paul explains physical death even more clearly. He gives no intermediate stage between being *"absent from the body"* and being *"present with the Lord."* His confidence rested upon continuing relationship with Jesus Christ rather than upon recovering the former physical body at a later event.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:6-8**:

> *"Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."*

Paul's words *"absent from the Lord"* do not mean that Jesus Christ is absent from the born-again believer. Paul explains the distinction with the words *"For we walk by faith, not by sight."* During this physical life, Christ already dwells within His people, although they walk by faith rather than sight. Physical death does not bring Christ into their lives for the first time or break their existing relationship with Him.

The believer does not need a future rapture to become present with Jesus Christ. Neither does the believer need to return to the dust, recover a former physical body and rise into the natural sky before being with Him. Paul's words are plain: to be *"absent from the body"* is to be *"present with the Lord."*

Physical Death Is Not Spiritual Sleep

Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus also shows that physical death does not place people into an unconscious spiritual sleep while they await a future resurrection. Both men

had physically died, yet neither is presented as spiritually asleep. Their conditions were already known after physical death.

Jesus said in **Luke 16:22-23**:

> *"And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."*

Lazarus was comforted, while the rich man was fully conscious of his condition. Jesus does not describe them waiting together in some intermediate place for a future resurrection before their spiritual condition could be known. Their physical deaths had already brought their earthly opportunity to an end.

Jesus continued in **Luke 16:25-26**:

> *"But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."*

Their physical deaths did not begin another period of decision because their condition was already settled. There was no holding place in which they waited together for some future resurrection so that God could later separate them. They were already separated according to the spiritual condition in which they had left this physical life.

The Judgement Seat of Christ Is Present Now

Another teaching commonly connected with the future rapture is that the whole human race will one day be physically resurrected, gathered before God and placed on trial. God is then pictured as opening books and examining people's lives before deciding who belongs to Him. That is not the judgement Paul describes.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:10**:

> *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."*

Notice where the life being judged is lived: *"in his body."* The judgement seat of Christ confronts us while we are living this physical life. This is where we hear God's Word, where truth exposes our condition and where we respond to Jesus Christ.

Judgement is not waiting until after physical death before it begins. The Word of God confronts the heart now, and Jesus Christ calls us now. While we are physically alive, we can hear, believe and pass from spiritual death into life.

Hebrews 9:27 Is Not Describing a Future Trial

The writer of Hebrews speaks directly about physical death and judgement. The Greek word translated *"judgment"* is KRISIS, which speaks of judgement, decision or determination. The

common future-judgement teaching reads this verse as though physical death is followed by a future courtroom trial in which God finally decides whether a person is saved or lost.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 9:27**:

> *"And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:"*

Jesus Himself used the same Greek word KRISIS when He explained judgement and salvation. His words show that this judgement operates while a person is physically alive and able to hear His Word. The person who believes already possesses everlasting life and has already passed from spiritual death into life.

Jesus said in **John 5:24**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."*

The word translated *"condemnation"* is the same Greek word, KRISIS. Notice when everything in the verse takes place: the person hears while physically alive, believes while physically alive, possesses everlasting life while physically alive and passes *"from death unto life"* while physically alive. Jesus is not describing a decision God waits to make after that person's physical death.

The judgement is operating now. The Gospel confronts people now, and Jesus Christ calls them now. Those who hear and believe receive His life now.

Jesus Said the Unbeliever Is "Condemned Already"

Jesus makes this even clearer by describing the present condition of the person who remains in unbelief. He does not say that the unbeliever must wait for physical death and a future courtroom before condemnation can be established. He says that the unbeliever is *"condemned already."*

Jesus said in **John 3:18-19**:

> *"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."*

Again, the word translated *"condemnation"* in verse 19 is KRISIS. Jesus says *"this is the condemnation"*: the Light has come, men and women are confronted by Jesus Christ, and their response to that Light reveals their spiritual condition. The believer is not condemned, while the unbeliever is *"condemned already."*

There is no future uncertainty waiting to be resolved after physical death. Jesus Christ has come as the Light, and people respond to Him during this physical life. Their response reveals whether they remain in spiritual death or receive the life found in Him.

The Decision Is Made While We Are Alive

Jesus stated the choice plainly. A person hears the Gospel and either believes or rejects it. The person who believes and is born again receives the life of Jesus Christ during this physical life.

The opportunity to receive Jesus Christ belongs to the time in which His voice can still be heard and answered.

Jesus said in **Mark 16:16**:

> *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."*

The baptism connected with salvation is God's spiritual work of placing the believer into Christ and into His body. It is not an outward water ordinance that produces the new birth. The believer possesses the Person through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 12:13**:

> *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*

Salvation is not waiting for a future judgement day. The person who is born again has already passed from spiritual death into life and has already been brought by one Spirit into the one body. Jesus Christ is the life that believer now possesses.

What Follows Death Is Not Another Trial

We must therefore read **Hebrews 9:27** correctly. While we live, the truth judges us, the Gospel confronts us and Jesus Christ calls us. While we live, we can repent, believe and be born again.

Physical death ends the opportunity to change that condition. What follows death is not another trial in which God must discover what we were or decide whether we belonged to Him. The judgement has been faced during this physical life, and the spiritual condition in which we leave this life is settled.

The judgement takes place now while we can still hear and respond to Jesus Christ, and after physical death the sentence is settled. There is no second trial, no second opportunity and no return to this physical life to make another decision. The earthly opportunity to respond to Jesus Christ has ended.

God Does Not Need Books to Discover His Children

The popular future-judgement picture often portrays God opening books before the assembled human race so that He can determine who belongs to Him. God does not need a book to discover His own children because He already knows those who have been born of Him. There is no uncertainty in Him concerning who belongs to Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 2:19**:

> *"Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity."*

Paul says plainly, *"The Lord knoweth them that are his."* He knows them now rather than discovering them after physical death. Jesus gives the same assurance when speaking about His sheep.

Jesus said in **John 10:14**:

"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."

Jesus also said in **John 10:27**:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:"

A father knows his children, and the Good Shepherd knows His sheep. God does not wait until the end of history, open a book and then discover which people were born of Him. Whatever the symbolic books of judgement represent, they do not provide information that God lacks because He already knows every heart and those who are His.

There Is No Second Chance After Physical Death

The opportunity to receive Jesus Christ belongs to this physical life. The opportunity to hear His voice, repent, believe and be born again also belongs to this physical life. When physical death comes, that opportunity has ended.

This is why the Gospel must be proclaimed now. The spiritually dead can hear now, and those who hear the voice of the Son of God can live now. Jesus Christ gives life while people can still hear and respond to Him.

This does not mean that salvation is earned by human conduct. Salvation is the completed saving work of Jesus Christ received through faith at the new birth. Faithful conduct is the expression of His life already dwelling within the born-again believer.

Eternity Is Not Governed by Earthly Time

While we live in physical bodies, we live within time. We count minutes, years, centuries and generations, and one earthly life can be separated from another by thousands of years. Adam died thousands of years before us according to earthly time, while others die today and others will die in years to come if time continues.

Eternity is not governed by earthly time. We do not take the calendar of this physical world with us into eternity and continue counting centuries while waiting for Jesus Christ to return physically to the earth. Eternity is not measured by the earthly intervals that separate one person's death from another.

When mankind enters eternity, earthly time no longer governs existence. In that sense, the whole human race enters eternity at the same moment because eternity itself is without the time by which we measure one person's death as centuries before another. We do not understand how eternity is governed, and Scripture does not explain those mechanics to us.

What we do know is that eternity is not a holding place measured by earthly centuries while the dead wait for a future rapture. Earthly time belongs to this present physical existence. It must not be carried into eternity as though the same calendar continues there.

The Future-Rapture Teaching Creates Problems Scripture Never Creates

If the believer is already in Christ, physical death cannot separate that believer from Him. If the believer who is absent from the body is present with the Lord, there is no need for a future physical rapture to bring that believer to Jesus. If the spirit returns to God while the

body returns to dust, Scripture gives no reason for the believer to return to that dust and reconstruct the former physical body.

If judgement confronts us now, there is no future trial needed for God to discover our spiritual condition. If the Lord already knows those who are His, He does not need to examine books to discover His children. The future-rapture teaching creates these difficulties, while Scripture creates none of them.

The difficulty begins only when a future physical rapture is first assumed and the rest of Scripture is then made to fit that assumption. When the assumption is removed, the need for a holding place, future reunion and future trial disappears. The believer already possesses Jesus Christ and remains His beyond physical death.

There Is No Holding Place

The conclusion is definite. There is no holding place where dead believers wait for a future physical return of Jesus Christ, and there is no future physical rapture required to unite the believer with Him. Physical death does not remove the believer from the Person already possessed.

There is also no future courtroom trial required for God to determine who belongs to Him. Jesus Christ has already come to His people and dwells within every born-again believer. God already knows those who are His.

When this physical life ends, the body returns to the earth and the spirit returns to God. Physical death does not separate the believer from Jesus Christ. The believer who belongs to Him remains His.

This Prepares Us to Understand Those Who Are “Asleep”

We can now return to 1 Thessalonians 4 without forcing physical death into Paul's language. Those who physically die in Christ do not become spiritually asleep because there is no spiritual sleep in Jesus Christ. The sleep Paul is about to describe concerns those who are spiritually dead while still physically alive.

Because they remain physically alive, they can hear the Gospel, hear the voice of Jesus Christ, believe and be made alive. Their condition can still change because Jesus Christ can call them from spiritual death into life. This is the kind of death Jesus Himself described.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”*

These are the dead who can hear, the dead who can live and the sleepers who can awaken. They need the spiritual life found in Jesus Christ, not a future physical resurrection from a grave. With that established, we can now return to Paul's words and identify exactly who he means by *“them that are without”* and *“them which are asleep.”*

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does being absent from the body and present with the Lord challenge a holding-place teaching?

Personal Reflection

Does knowing that the opportunity to respond to Christ belongs to this earthly life give urgency to your response and concern for others?

Action Step

Identify one response to God's Word that you have been postponing. Explain how you will address it now rather than assuming another opportunity is guaranteed.

WALK HONESTLY TOWARD THEM THAT ARE WITHOUT

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To understand who Paul means by *"them which are asleep,"* we must follow his argument from the beginning of 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul has not been discussing physically dead believers. He has been instructing living Christians concerning holiness, conduct and the witness of their lives before people who are still outside Christ.

That setting must control how we read the verses that follow. We should not introduce physical death into Paul's teaching unless his own words require it. We must first follow the subject he has already established.

Paul Is Teaching the Thessalonians How to Walk

Paul begins by teaching the Thessalonian believers how they are to live. His concern is the way the life they have received in Jesus Christ is expressed through their daily conduct. He is speaking to people who already belong to Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:1-3**:

> *"Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:"*

Paul's subject is clear in the words *"how ye ought to walk."* He is not teaching these believers how to earn or complete salvation. They have already received Jesus Christ, and His life within them is to be expressed through holiness and obedience.

Paul continues in **1 Thessalonians 4:4-8**:

> *"That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit."*

Paul contrasts the conduct of the believer with *"the Gentiles which know not God."* The Thessalonians had already received the Holy Spirit and were not waiting for another spiritual experience. Jesus Christ already dwelt within them, and their conduct was to agree with the holy life they possessed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Paul's instruction concerning holiness establish the setting of chapter 4?

Personal Reflection

Do your words and conduct towards people outside Christ agree with the holy life you profess to possess in Him?

Action Step

Identify one choice involving honesty, purity or responsibility that calls for correction. Explain how Christ's life within will govern your response, not as a way to earn salvation.

Their Lives Were to Be a Witness

Paul then turns directly to their relationships with other people. Their brotherly love, quiet conduct, honest work and responsible living were all part of the way Christ's life was expressed through them. People outside Christ could see how these believers lived.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:9-12**:

> *"But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing."*

Paul tells the believers to live quietly, work honestly, attend to their responsibilities and conduct themselves properly so that they may *"walk honestly toward them that are without."* Their lives were being seen by people outside Christ. Their conduct was therefore part of their witness.

A believer cannot proclaim that Jesus Christ has changed his life and then live dishonestly before the very people he is trying to reach. Faithful conduct does not produce salvation, but it expresses the life of Jesus Christ already within the believer. The Gospel proclaimed with the mouth should agree with the life being lived.

Jesus also explained that love among His disciples would be a witness to others. This agrees with Paul's instruction to walk honestly before those who are without Christ.

Jesus said in **John 13:35**:

> *"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."*

The love of Jesus Christ is to be expressed through His people so that others see the reality of His life within them. Their conduct does not produce the new birth; it bears witness to the life they have received.

Who Are "Them That Are Without"?

Paul's expression *"them that are without"* is definite. The Greek word translated *"without"* is EXŌ, meaning outside. Scripture uses the word plainly for something or someone who is outside rather than within.

John wrote in **John 18:16**:

> *"But Peter stood at the door without. Then went out that other disciple, which was known unto the high priest, and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter."*

Peter was *"without"* because he was outside the door. Paul uses the same language spiritually when distinguishing between those inside the body of believers and those outside. His meaning can be seen clearly in another letter.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 5:12-13**:

> *"For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."*

Paul identifies two groups: those *"within"* and those *"without."* Those within are inside the fellowship of God's people, while those without are outside. There is therefore no uncertainty about the meaning of *"them that are without"* in **1 Thessalonians 4:12**.

Those who are *"without"* are the unsaved. They are outside Christ, outside His body and without the spiritual life possessed by the born-again Thessalonian believers. Paul is telling the Church how to live before people who do not yet possess Jesus Christ.

Paul Uses the Same Expression Elsewhere

Paul gives the same instruction to the Colossian believers. Again, those who belong to Christ are told how to conduct themselves before people who are outside. The same expression carries the same spiritual distinction.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 4:5**:

> *"Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time."*

Paul also uses this expression when explaining the qualifications of those who oversee the Church. Their reputation among people outside the Church matters.

Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 3:7**:

> *"Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."*

The people *"without"* are living people who can observe the believer's conduct. This supports Paul's instruction that the Thessalonians should walk honestly before those who have not yet received Jesus Christ.

The Church is not called to despise those who are without Christ. Born-again believers carry the Gospel to them because Jesus Christ lives within His people. Those who are born again already possess the Person, while those who are without do not yet possess His life.

Their need is therefore Jesus Christ. The Church carries His Word, but the human messenger cannot produce the new birth. Only Jesus Christ can give spiritual life.

Jesus Comes to Those Who Are Without Through His Body

Jesus Christ is not absent from His born-again people waiting to return at some future date. He has already come to them and lives within them by His Spirit. His body, the Church, therefore carries His Gospel to those who are still without Him.

When the Gospel is proclaimed to someone outside Christ, the human messenger speaks, but the human messenger cannot give spiritual life. Jesus Christ Himself must speak to the heart through His Word. The spiritually dead must hear the voice of the Son of God.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

The spiritually dead hear His voice, and those who hear live. The life does not come from the ability of the messenger but from Jesus Christ. This is the spiritual movement Paul is about to explain in the verses that follow.

Paul Does Not Change Subjects Between Verses 12 and 13

We must now read verses 12 and 13 together. Paul first speaks about *"them that are without"* and immediately follows this with his concern about *"them which are asleep."* Nothing in Paul's wording requires us to introduce a completely different group of physically dead Christians between those statements.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:12-13**:

> *"That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."*

Verse 12 speaks about *"them that are without,"* and verse 13 immediately speaks about *"them which are asleep."* Paul has not abandoned the subject of living unsaved people and suddenly begun discussing physically dead Christians. He is continuing to deal with people who are outside the spiritual life possessed by the Thessalonian believers.

Those who are without are outside Christ, and those who are asleep are spiritually asleep because they are outside Him. They are physically alive but spiritually dead, which is why they can still hear the Gospel, hear the voice of Jesus Christ and be made alive. Their condition can still change because they can still awaken and live.

The next question is therefore not whether dead Christians will one day rise from physical graves. The question is: What does Paul mean by *"them which are asleep"*? Paul answers that question himself as the letter continues.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How are 'them that are without' connected with the sleepers Paul next describes?

Personal Reflection

Has a failure to keep your word or fulfil a responsibility weakened your witness before someone outside Christ?

Action Step

Identify one specific promise, task or relationship to put right. Explain how you will act honestly as an expression of the life of Christ within.

CONCERNING THEM WHICH ARE ASLEEP

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Paul has identified *"them that are without"* as those outside Christ, and he now immediately speaks of *"them which are asleep."* These are not physically dead Christians waiting for a future resurrection. They are spiritually asleep.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**:

> *"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."*

The setting establishes who these people are. Paul has just spoken about those who are without, and he now describes their spiritual condition as asleep. We must follow that continuing thought rather than introduce physical death into the verse.

Paul Has Not Changed His Subject

Verses 12 and 13 must be read together because Paul's thought moves directly from one into the other. Verse 12 identifies people who are outside, while verse 13 immediately speaks about people who are asleep. Paul has not announced a change from living unsaved people to physically dead Christians.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:12-13**:

> *"That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."*

The people who are without are outside Christ. The people who are asleep are spiritually asleep because they are outside Christ. Paul is continuing the same teaching and describing more fully the spiritual condition of the people about whom he has been speaking.

The later verse division must not be allowed to interrupt Paul's thought. Nothing in his wording requires us to move from living unsaved people in verse 12 to physically dead Christians in verse 13. His teaching continues naturally from those who are without to those who are asleep.

The Thessalonians Were Not Confused About Whether Dead Christians Were Saved

The Thessalonian believers were an established congregation whose faith was already widely known. They were examples to other believers, and the Word of the Lord was sounding out from them. Paul describes their faith towards God as being known in many places.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 1:7-8**:

> *"So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing."*

Paul is not writing to a congregation that believed physical death could somehow remove a faithful Christian from salvation. These believers knew Jesus Christ and were actively proclaiming His Word. The concern in chapter 4 is the spiritual condition of those who are outside Christ.

This keeps the setting before us. Paul is addressing spiritually living believers and speaking about people who do not possess the same life. His concern is how those who are asleep may be brought into the life found in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does Paul's concern about the sleepers follow his teaching about those outside Christ?

Personal Reflection

Are you more likely to judge a person outside Christ than to remember the life Jesus can give?

Action Step

Identify a person towards whom your attitude has become impatient. Explain how you will change your response, showing care while trusting Christ to awaken them.

Paul Himself Defines Spiritual Sleep

We do not need to invent a meaning for the word *"sleep."* Paul explains his use of sleep in the next chapter, which was not separated from chapter 4 in his original letter. What we call chapter 5 continues the same teaching.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:5-8**:

> *"Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation."*

Paul's contrast is unmistakable. He contrasts children of light with those of darkness, those who are awake with those who sleep, and those of the day with those of the night. These are spiritual conditions, not descriptions of natural sleep.

Paul even warns the living Thessalonian believers, *"let us not sleep."* He is not warning them against physical sleep or physical death. He is warning them against entering spiritual darkness rather than remaining awake and sober in the life they possess.

There Is No Spiritual Sleep in Jesus Christ

A person who has been born again has passed from spiritual death into spiritual life. The believer already possesses everlasting life through Jesus Christ and has crossed from death into life. That person is spiritually alive.

Jesus said in **John 5:24**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."*

A person cannot be spiritually asleep and spiritually alive in Christ at the same time. Scripture does not create a saved class of people who remain spiritually dead while continuing to possess the life of Jesus Christ. There is no spiritual sleep in Christ.

The believer possesses the Person and therefore possesses life. Those who are spiritually asleep need that life. Their need is to hear Jesus Christ, awaken and live.

Paul also describes believers as alive unto God through Jesus Christ. Their life in Him is a present spiritual reality, not something postponed until a future event.

Paul wrote in **Romans 6:11**:

> *"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

The distinction is dead unto sin, but alive unto God. The born-again believer possesses the life of Jesus Christ and is therefore spiritually alive. The new birth is God's work.

Sleep and Spiritual Death Describe the Same Condition

Paul uses the language of sleep and death together in another letter. He addresses someone who is sleeping and calls that same person to arise from the dead. The wording connects spiritual sleep directly with spiritual death.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 5:14**:

> *"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."*

The sleeper is told to *"Awake"* and to *"arise from the dead."* This person is physically alive because the person can hear the call to awaken and receive light from Christ. Sleep is therefore describing a spiritual condition of death.

Paul also uses the language of awakening when addressing sin and the knowledge of God. His words show that a call to awake can concern a person's spiritual condition rather than natural sleep.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 15:34**:

> *"Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame."*

The command is *"Awake to righteousness, and sin not."* Paul is not calling physically dead bodies out of graves. He is addressing people who can hear his warning and respond to the truth.

Jesus taught the same truth.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

These dead people can hear the voice of Jesus Christ and respond to Him. They are not physically dead but spiritually dead. When they hear the voice of the Son of God, they live.

This is the awakening Paul is describing. Those who are asleep need to hear Jesus Christ, arise from spiritual death and receive His life. The same spiritual movement appears in both the words of Jesus and the teaching of Paul.

A Person Who Falls Asleep Is Outside Christ

The same truth applies to someone who once walked with God but later turned away. If that person has entered spiritual sleep, that person is not still saved while spiritually asleep. The person has turned from the life of Christ and must awaken and return.

We must not create a spiritual condition that Scripture does not create. There are not three groups consisting of the spiritually alive, the spiritually dead, and a third group who are spiritually dead but still saved. Paul gives us two spiritual conditions.

The contrast is alive or dead, awake or asleep, light or darkness, within or without. A spiritually sleeping person is outside Christ and needs to awaken. Life is found only in Jesus Christ.

The Thessalonians Were Not to Sorrow Without Hope

Paul tells the Thessalonians that they should not sorrow *"even as others which have no hope."* He is not telling them that those who are asleep are beyond hope. He is telling the believers not to sorrow as people who possess no hope.

There is hope for a spiritually sleeping person while that person remains physically alive. That hope is Jesus Christ. The same Christ who gave life to the Thessalonians can give life to others who are spiritually dead.

Before we were born again, Jesus Christ was our hope. Before we passed from death into life and entered His body, we needed the same life that those who are asleep now need. The same voice that brought us life can bring them life.

Jesus Christ Is the Hope of the Sleeper

The Church cannot make a spiritually dead person alive. A preacher, family member or other human messenger cannot produce the new birth. Spiritual life comes only from Jesus Christ.

When His body carries the Gospel, Jesus Christ reaches the person who is without Him. The human messenger speaks, but Christ must speak to the heart through His Word. When the spiritually dead hear the voice of the Son of God and respond in faith, they live.

This is why the Thessalonians were not to surrender to hopeless sorrow concerning those who were asleep. The sleepers could awaken, the dead could hear and those without Christ could be brought into Christ. Jesus Christ remained their hope.

Verse 14 Must Therefore Be Read Correctly

Paul now continues into verse 14, and his wording must remain consistent with everything already established concerning spiritual sleep and life. The ordinary English grouping creates the expression *"them also which sleep in Jesus."* That grouping must be examined carefully because Paul has already connected sleep with spiritual darkness.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:14**:

> *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."*

Paul has established that sleep belongs to darkness, while those who belong to Christ are children of light. Jesus has established that the believer has passed from death into life. There is no spiritual sleep in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, **1 Thessalonians 4:14** cannot be interpreted as teaching that people are spiritually asleep while already in Jesus Christ. We must now examine Paul's inspired words carefully and determine how verse 14 is to be read.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does chapter 5 explain the contrast between spiritual sleep and light?

Personal Reflection

Does a habit, attitude or influence draw your attention away from the life and truth of Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Identify one danger of spiritual carelessness. Explain what you will refuse or change as you yield to Christ's indwelling life.

HOW 1 THESSALONIANS 4:14 SHOULD BE READ

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We have established from Paul's own context that those who are *"asleep"* are spiritually asleep. They are outside Christ and need to be awakened and made alive. That makes the ordinary English reading of the next verse especially important.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:14**:

> *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."*

When this verse is read with the familiar English grouping, the reader naturally joins the words *"them also which sleep in Jesus."* That grouping creates the idea that the sleepers are already in Jesus. Paul's continuing teaching does not allow that conclusion.

Paul has already distinguished between those who are spiritually alive and those who are spiritually asleep. A person cannot be spiritually asleep outside the life of Christ while at the same time possessing that life in Christ. There is no spiritual sleep in Jesus Christ.

The Greek Does Not Say "Sleep in Jesus"

The Greek wording uses DIA TOU IĒSOU, meaning *"through Jesus,"* rather than EN IĒSOU, meaning *"in Jesus."* This distinction is important because the familiar English grouping, *"them also which sleep in Jesus,"* can give the impression that those who are spiritually asleep already possess the life of Jesus Christ.

That understanding does not agree with the distinction between spiritual death and spiritual life established throughout the Bible. Those who are born again possess Jesus Christ and have passed from spiritual death into life. They are not spiritually asleep.

Paul has already spoken of *"them that are without"* in **1 Thessalonians 4:12**. He then speaks of those who are asleep. As his teaching continues into chapter 5, he contrasts the children of light with those who sleep in spiritual darkness.

Paul is therefore speaking of people who are physically alive but spiritually dead because they have not received Jesus Christ.

The Greek expression DIA TOU IĒSOU is understood here in connection with God's action through Jesus Christ. Accordingly, we can understand Paul's words this way: *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God, through Jesus, will bring with him those who sleep."*

This understanding rests upon the relationship between Paul's words and his wider teaching, not upon the Greek preposition alone. The sleepers do not already possess spiritual life. They must hear the voice of Jesus Christ, be born again and receive His life. Only then are they spiritually alive in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the One through whom God brings the spiritually dead into life. The spiritually dead are not beyond hope while they remain physically alive and able to hear the Gospel. Their hope is Jesus Christ Himself.

Read the Words Without the Supplied English Grouping

Once the familiar English grouping is removed, Paul's statement can be followed according to the argument he has already established. The sense is: *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God, through Jesus, will bring with him those who sleep."* The sleepers remain the same people Paul has been discussing.

They are spiritually asleep and outside Christ, but they are not beyond hope. God can bring them through Jesus. This agrees with Paul's earlier statement that the Thessalonians were not to sorrow as those who had no hope.

The emphasis is therefore not upon sleeping people already possessing Christ. The emphasis is upon Jesus Christ as the One through whom those who are spiritually asleep can be brought into life. The hope remains entirely in the Person.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does 'through Jesus' explain the hope available to those who are spiritually asleep?

Personal Reflection

Do you rely on persuasive speech or your own ability when explaining the Gospel to someone who needs Christ?

Action Step

Identify one way self-confidence or fear of inadequacy affects your witness. Explain how you will share God's Word faithfully while recognising that only Jesus gives new life.

Jesus Is the One Through Whom They Are Brought

The spiritually sleeping person cannot bring himself into Christ. A preacher or congregation cannot place that person into Christ or give spiritual life. God must do the saving work through Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in **John 6:44**:

> *"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day."*

Jesus also declared in **John 14:6**:

> *"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."*

Young's Literal Translation (YLT) renders **John 14:6**:

> *"Jesus saith to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one doth come unto the Father, if not through me;"*

The KJV's words *"by me"* translate DI' EMOU, *"through me."* DI' is DIA shortened before a vowel. It is the same preposition used in DIA TOU IĒSOU, *"through Jesus,"* in **1 Thessalonians 4:14**.

Jesus Himself is the way to the Father and the life the sinner needs. Coming to the Father depends upon Jesus Christ, not upon the saving ability of a preacher.

The sinner must be drawn by God, the spiritually dead must hear the voice of Jesus Christ, and the sleeper must awaken. The person must pass from spiritual death into life. This is why DIA TOU IĒSOU, *"through Jesus,"* fits Paul's argument exactly.

Jesus Christ is the One through whom the spiritually dead are brought into life. The human messenger carries the Gospel, but the saving life comes from Jesus Christ. The whole movement remains centred upon Him.

God Brings Them Into Christ

When a person hears Jesus Christ through the Gospel, believes and is born again, God places that person into Christ and into His body. This is not accomplished by human effort or religious membership. It is God's spiritual work.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 12:13**:

> *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*

The believer is brought by one Spirit into the one body. The Church does not manufacture spiritual life, and an outward act cannot produce that inward reality. God brings the believer into Christ through the new birth.

Luke records the same truth concerning those who were being saved.

Luke wrote in **Acts 2:47**:

> *"Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."*

The Lord added those who were saved. The Church did not produce spiritual life and then add people through human authority. Jesus Christ gave the life, and the Lord added them to His Church.

This is the same movement we are seeing in 1 Thessalonians 4. Those who are asleep are outside Christ, Jesus Christ reaches them through the Gospel and they hear His voice. When they are made alive, God brings them into Christ and into His body.

This Harmonises With John 5

Jesus had already explained how spiritually dead people receive life. His words describe spiritually dead people hearing His voice and living while still physically alive. He specifically said that this life-giving work was already taking place.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

Jesus says *"the hour is coming, and now is."* The dead hear His voice, and those who hear live. This is spiritual resurrection into the life found in Jesus Christ.

Paul is teaching the same spiritual reality. Those who are asleep can hear, those who hear Jesus Christ can awaken and those who are spiritually dead can be made alive. Through Jesus, God brings them into the life they did not previously possess.

This Is Why the Thessalonians Had Hope

Paul had told the Thessalonians *"that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."* They were not to surrender to hopeless sorrow because Jesus Christ could still reach those who were asleep. While physical life remained, the spiritually sleeping person could still hear His voice and live.

Jesus Christ is the hope of the sleeper because He is the way and the life. The person outside Christ cannot create spiritual life or enter Christ through human effort. Life must come through Jesus.

Jesus said in **John 14:6**:

> *"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."*

There is no other way for the sleeper to become spiritually alive. There is no other way for the person outside Christ to enter the life found in Him. It must be through Jesus.

The Future-Rapture Reading Creates a Contradiction

The traditional future-rapture interpretation makes the sleepers of 1 Thessalonians 4 physically dead Christians who are already in Jesus Christ. Paul's own explanation in chapter 5 makes that interpretation impossible. There was no chapter division in Paul's original letter, so his teaching continues directly from the end of chapter 4 into what we now call chapter 5.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:4-8**:

> *"But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation."*

Paul could not make the distinction clearer. The believers are *"children of light"* and *"children of the day,"* and Paul says, *"we are not of the night, nor of darkness."* He then identifies the opposite spiritual condition when he says, *"they that sleep sleep in the night."*

The sleepers belong to the night, while born-again believers belong to the day. The sleepers are in darkness, while believers are in light. These are opposite spiritual conditions and cannot describe the same person at the same time.

The Same "Others" Continue Into Chapter 5

There is another important connection between chapters 4 and 5. In **1 Thessalonians 4:13**, Paul says *"that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."* The Greek expression translated *"others"* is HOI LOIPOI, meaning *"the others"* or *"the rest."*

Then in **1 Thessalonians 5:6**, Paul says *"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."* Again, Paul uses HOI LOIPOI, *"the others."* Paul has not changed his subject because the same expression continues across the later chapter division.

In chapter 4, the others are connected with those who are asleep. In chapter 5, the others are the ones who sleep. The connection is direct: the sleepers of chapter 4 are the sleepers of chapter 5.

Night and Day Identify the Two Spiritual Conditions

Paul therefore gives us two completely different spiritual conditions. Those who are born again are alive, awake, children of light and children of the day. Those who are spiritually asleep are dead, asleep, of the night and in darkness.

A person cannot belong to both conditions at the same time. A person cannot be a child of the day while spiritually asleep in the night, nor can someone be in the light while spiritually asleep in darkness. A person cannot be spiritually alive in Christ while spiritually dead outside Him.

There is no saved class of spiritually sleeping Christians. Paul's contrast is between life and death, wakefulness and sleep, light and darkness, and day and night. Those who possess Jesus Christ possess His life.

This Exposes the Problem With "Sleep in Jesus"

The ordinary English reading of **1 Thessalonians 4:14** produces the expression *"them also which sleep in Jesus."* Chapter 5, however, establishes that spiritual sleep belongs to the night and to darkness. Jesus Christ is not darkness because He is the Light, and those who are in Him have passed from death unto life.

Therefore, the expression *"sleep in Jesus"* cannot describe the spiritual condition Paul is discussing. The Greek confirms this because Paul did not write EN IĒSOU, meaning *"in Jesus."* He wrote DIA TOU IĒSOU, meaning *"through Jesus."*

Those who are asleep are in darkness and need spiritual life. Through Jesus Christ, they can be brought out of darkness and into life. This reading agrees with Paul's contrast between the sleepers and those who are already alive.

Scripture Harmonises Perfectly

Paul's teaching remains consistent from chapter 4 into chapter 5. Those who are without are outside Christ, those who are asleep are spiritually dead, and those who sleep belong to the night. Those who are born again belong to the day and possess the life of Jesus Christ.

The spiritually dead need to hear the voice of Jesus Christ. Those who hear Him live, and through Jesus Christ God brings the sleeper from spiritual death into life. The whole movement is from darkness to light and from death to the life found in Christ.

There is no contradiction in Scripture. The contradiction appears only when the sleepers are made into physically dead Christians who are already in Christ and waiting for a future rapture. Paul teaches nothing of the kind.

The sleepers are of the night, while the born-again are of the day. The sleepers need to awaken, and through Jesus Christ they can be brought into life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does God bring people who are spiritually asleep into the life of Christ?

Personal Reflection

Have you been tempted to treat a preacher's gifts or personality as though they can produce spiritual life?

Action Step

Identify the confidence that needs correction. Explain how you will direct attention to Jesus Christ when speaking about salvation.

WE WHICH ARE ALIVE AND REMAIN UNTO THE COMING OF THE LORD

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Paul now draws a direct contrast between those who are alive and those who are asleep. He is not describing two groups of physically living and physically dead Christians waiting for a future rapture. He is continuing the spiritual contrast already established throughout the chapter.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:15**:

> *"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep."*

Paul identifies those who are alive and those who are asleep. The meaning of these expressions must remain consistent with the spiritual life and spiritual sleep he has already described. One group possesses the life of Jesus Christ, while the other still needs that life.

"Alive" Means Spiritually Alive

Jesus tells us what it means to pass from spiritual death into spiritual life. The person who hears His Word and believes has everlasting life and has already passed from death unto life. That person is spiritually alive.

Jesus said in **John 5:24**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."*

This is the condition Paul describes when he says *"we which are alive."* Those who are alive possess the life of Jesus Christ, while those who are asleep do not. The distinction is therefore not between Christians who happen to be physically alive and Christians whose physical bodies have died.

Paul is distinguishing between those who possess spiritual life and those who still need that life. The born-again believer has passed from spiritual death into life and now possesses Jesus Christ. The sleeper must still awaken and receive that life.

"Remain" Means They Continue in That Life

Paul does not say only *"we which are alive."* He says *"we which are alive and remain."* The Thessalonian believers had been made alive in Christ and were to continue in the life they had received.

Paul later warns them directly in **1 Thessalonians 5:6**:

> *"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."*

They were alive, awake and children of the light. They were to remain in that spiritual condition rather than turning from the life of Christ into darkness and sleep. Paul does not present spiritual death as another saved condition within Christ.

To remain is therefore to continue in the life already received. The believer does not maintain salvation through human effort, but the indwelling life of Jesus Christ is to govern and be expressed through that believer. Paul calls those who are alive to continue walking in that life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does remaining describe continuing in the spiritual life already received?

Personal Reflection

Have you confused remaining faithful with completing salvation by continual human effort?

Action Step

Identify one area of self-reliance. Explain how you will continue in the life already given by Christ instead of striving to earn a standing you cannot produce yourself.

Paul Says "UNTO," Not "UNTIL"

One expression in verse 15 requires careful attention. The King James Version does not say *"remain until the coming of the Lord."* It says *"remain unto the coming of the Lord."*

The underlying Greek expression is:

ΕΙΣ ΤΗΝ ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑΝ ΤΟΥ ΚΥΡΙΟΥ

EIS TĒN PAROUSIAN TOU KYRIOU

The preposition EIS carries the idea of movement to, into, toward or unto a point or goal. It is important to state this accurately: EIS is a preposition, not a tense. The continuing thought does not come from EIS itself but from Paul's description of those who are alive and remaining.

Paul's language therefore does not require a picture of Christians remaining physically alive until some distant event thousands of years in the future. His words are alive, remaining and unto the coming of the Lord. Those expressions must be understood within the spiritual argument he is developing.

The Coming of the Lord Is Not Still Future for the Born-Again Believer

The born-again believer is not waiting for Jesus Christ to become present. Jesus Christ has already come to His people and now dwells within them by His Spirit. His promised coming established an abiding relationship with those who receive Him.

Jesus said in **John 14:16-18**:

> *"And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."*

Jesus said *"I will come to you."* He fulfilled that promise at Pentecost when He came as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. The born-again believer therefore does not live in a state of waiting for an absent Christ.

Jesus Christ is already present within. His Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and the believer possesses the Person. Paul's words must therefore be understood in harmony with that fulfilled coming and present indwelling reality.

The Believer Has Already Been Brought Into Christ

Paul describes what has already happened to the born-again believer. Those who were spiritually dead have been quickened, raised and brought into a heavenly position *"in Christ Jesus."* This is already the believer's present spiritual reality.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:5-6**:

> *"Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:"*

The order is clear. They were dead, they were quickened, they were raised and they were placed *"in Christ Jesus."* This had already happened through the saving work of God.

Paul gives the same truth concerning the one body.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 12:13**:

> *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*

The born-again believer has already been brought into Christ and into His body by one Spirit. That person is not waiting for a future rapture to accomplish what God has already accomplished at the new birth. The believer already possesses the Person and already belongs to His body.

PAROUSIA Includes the Idea of Presence

In **1 Thessalonians 4:15**, the Greek word translated *"coming"* is PAROUSIA. The word carries the meaning of coming, arrival or presence. This is important because Paul's words must remain in harmony with the present reality of Jesus Christ dwelling within His people.

The coming of Jesus Christ is not the arrival of someone who has been absent from His Church for two thousand years. He came as He promised, He is present within His people and His body is the Church. His life now dwells within every person who has been born again.

Therefore, when Paul speaks of those who are alive and remaining unto the PAROUSIA of the Lord, we must not impose upon his words a future physical descent that contradicts the

fulfilled coming Jesus promised in John 14. Paul's words must agree with the present indwelling reality of Jesus Christ.

"Prevent" Does Not Mean Stop

The final part of verse 15 also requires explanation. Paul says that those who are alive *"shall not prevent them which are asleep."* In modern English, prevent usually means to stop something from happening, but that is not the meaning of the word in this verse.

The Greek word is PHTHANŌ. In this setting, it carries the meaning of to precede, go before or get ahead of. Paul is therefore saying that those who are already alive do not go before those who are asleep.

This immediately raises an important question. Why do those already alive not go before the sleepers? The answer becomes clear as Paul continues his argument.

Those who are asleep must first awaken. Those who are spiritually dead must first hear the voice of Jesus Christ and receive life. Only then can they be brought together with those who are already spiritually alive.

The Order Is Spiritual, Not Physical

The future-rapture teaching turns Paul's words into a sequence of physical events. Physically dead Christians are said to rise from graves, physically living Christians then rise into the sky, and both groups meet a physically descending Jesus. That is not the sequence Paul has been developing.

Paul's sequence is spiritual. Those already born again are alive, while those outside Christ are asleep. The living do not precede the sleepers because the sleepers must first be awakened and made alive.

Only when those who are asleep have received spiritual life can Paul speak of them being *"caught up together with them."* The word *"together"* depends upon the life that must first be given. Spiritual death must first give way to spiritual life.

This is why verse 16 follows immediately. Paul must now explain how those who are spiritually dead awaken and rise. The answer centres entirely upon Jesus Christ.

Paul Is About to Explain How the Dead Receive Life

The next verse begins with the words *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven."* Paul has not changed to another subject. He is explaining how those who are asleep can be made alive.

The Lord Himself comes to the spiritually dead. He comes in a shout, in the voice of the Chief Messenger and in the trumpet of God. The spiritually dead hear His voice, and those who hear live.

That is the movement of Paul's teaching. Those who are alive already possess Jesus Christ, while those who are asleep need His life. The living do not precede them because the sleepers must first hear His voice, awaken and be made alive.

Paul's next words therefore explain how this happens: *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven..."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must 'unto' not be changed into 'until' when reading the coming of the Lord?

Personal Reflection

Has expecting Jesus to arrive from the sky prevented you from relying upon His indwelling presence now?

Action Step

Identify an anxiety or expectation affected by that belief. Explain how you will respond to the Lord as present within His born-again people.

THE LORD HIMSELF SHALL DESCEND IN A SHOUT

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul has established the spiritual condition of the two groups. Some are already alive in Christ, while others are asleep and spiritually dead. He now explains how those who are asleep can awaken and how those who are dead can receive life.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:16**:

> *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:"*

This verse does not describe Jesus Christ physically travelling down through the natural sky at a future rapture. Paul is explaining how Jesus Christ reaches those who are spiritually dead. The whole movement continues the spiritual teaching he has already established.

The Lord Himself

Paul begins with the words *"For the Lord himself shall descend."* The emphasis is upon Jesus Christ Himself because spiritual life cannot be produced by a preacher, congregation or human witness. A believer may proclaim the Gospel, but only Jesus Christ can speak to the heart and give life.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

The dead hear His voice, and those who hear live. Therefore, when Paul says *"the Lord himself shall descend,"* the One who comes to the spiritually dead is Jesus Christ Himself. The life-giving work belongs to Him.

Descending From Heaven Is Spiritual

The word *"heaven"* in this verse must not be forced into the natural sky. Paul uses heavenly language to describe the spiritual position of people who have been made alive in Jesus Christ. Believers can occupy that heavenly position while their physical bodies remain on the earth.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:4-6**:

> *"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:"*

These believers had not physically travelled into the atmosphere. They had been spiritually dead, were quickened and raised, and were made to sit together *"in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."* Their heavenly position was found in Christ.

Those who are asleep in 1 Thessalonians 4 are not yet in that position because they are spiritually dead and outside Christ. For them to hear His voice, Jesus Christ reaches them through the Gospel. That is the descent Paul is describing.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the heavenly position in Christ explain the Lord reaching those who are dead?

Personal Reflection

Do you hesitate to share the Gospel because you think your words are not strong enough to change someone's heart?

Action Step

Name one opportunity for simple, truthful witness. Explain how you will speak faithfully while trusting Jesus to accomplish the saving work.

The Greek Says "IN"

The King James Version reads *"with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God."* The Greek structure is important because Paul repeatedly uses the Greek word EN. The repeated construction must remain visible as we examine what Paul is saying.

The expressions are:

EN KELEUSMATI

EN PHŌNĒ ARCHAGGELOU

EN SALPINGI THEOU

The repeated wording is in a shout, in the voice of the Chief Messenger, in the trumpet of God. The English word *"with"* can be used to translate EN according to context, but the Greek wording here repeats EN three times. That repeated structure helps us follow Paul's description of how the Lord comes.

A direct reading of the structure is: *"Because the Lord himself, in a shout, in the voice of the Chief Messenger, and in the trumpet of God, shall come down from heaven..."* Paul is not presenting three unrelated noises accompanying a physical descent through the sky. The Lord comes in the shout, in the voice and in the trumpet of God.

God Was Present in His Voice in the Garden

Genesis gives us a clear picture of God being encountered in His voice. Adam and Eve heard the voice of the LORD God, and through that voice they encountered His presence. The wording helps us understand how God can be present and encountered through His voice.

Moses wrote in **Genesis 3:8**:

> *"And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden."*

Adam and Eve *"heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden."* The verse does not require us to picture God as a physical man walking through the Garden. His presence reached them through His voice.

The same principle helps us understand **1 Thessalonians 4:16**. Jesus Christ comes to the spiritually dead in His voice. This is a spiritual coming through which those who are spiritually dead can hear Him and live.

The Shout Awakens the Sleeper

Paul says the Lord comes *"in a shout."* The Greek word KELEUSMA speaks of a commanding shout or authoritative call. That meaning fits naturally with the spiritual condition of the people Paul has been discussing.

Those people are asleep, and a sleeper needs to be awakened. The shout is therefore not an enormous physical noise descending from the atmosphere at the end of the world. It is the authoritative call of Jesus Christ reaching the spiritually dead.

Jesus had already explained the result when He said *"the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."* The shout awakens and the voice gives life. Jesus Christ calls those who are spiritually dead out of their condition.

The Voice of the Chief Messenger

Paul then says that the Lord comes *"in the voice of the archangel."* The Greek word translated *"angel"* is AGGELOS, meaning messenger. The word translated *"archangel"* is ARCHAGGELOS, which combines the thought of chief or ruler with messenger.

ARCHAGGELOS therefore means Chief Messenger. Scripture speaks of the Archangel in the singular, identifying one Chief Messenger. That Chief Messenger is Jesus Christ.

This does not make Jesus Christ a created angelic being. He is Lord over all created messengers and powers. His position as the Chief Messenger concerns His supreme revelation and communication of God.

Jesus Christ Is Not a Created Angel

Paul makes the position of Jesus Christ clear. All things in heaven and earth, including principalities and powers, were created by Him and for Him. He is therefore not one created messenger among many.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:16-18**:

> *"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."*

Jesus Christ is before all things, and all created powers were created by Him. He has the preeminence and is the Head of the body, the Church. He is the Chief Messenger because God is fully revealed through Him.

Michael: "Who Is Like God?"

Jude identifies Michael as *"the archangel."* The name Michael carries the question *"Who is like God?"* That question directs us to Jesus Christ, in whom the invisible God was fully revealed through genuine humanity.

Jude wrote in **Jude 1**:9:

> *"Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee."*

Jesus Christ is not simply someone who resembles God from a distance. He is God Himself revealed through genuine human life. John establishes this clearly when he identifies the Word as God and then tells us that the Word was made flesh.

John wrote in **John 1:1**:

> *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

John then wrote in **John 1:14**:

> *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."*

The Word was God, and the Word was made flesh. Jesus Christ is therefore the answer to the question contained in the name Michael: Who is like God? Jesus Christ. God was fully revealed through Him.

The Voice of the Archangel Is the Voice of Jesus Christ

Paul is not describing Jesus descending while another supreme heavenly being speaks beside Him. The Lord Himself comes in the voice of the Chief Messenger. That voice is the voice of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

Paul speaks of the voice of the Chief Messenger, while Jesus speaks of the voice of the Son of God. It is the same life-giving voice. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, and those who hear Him live.

This keeps the whole teaching centred upon Jesus Christ. The voice that awakens the spiritually dead does not belong to another divine Person or another source of spiritual life. Jesus Christ Himself speaks.

In the Trumpet of God

Paul then says the Lord comes *"in the trumpet of God."* Scripture connects trumpet language with the clear and authoritative proclamation of God's message. The trumpet announces truth so that people may hear.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 58:1**:

> *"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins."*

The voice is lifted *"like a trumpet,"* and God's message is proclaimed clearly. This provides the Scriptural setting for Paul's *"trumpet of God."* The trumpet represents the sounding forth of God's truth.

The trumpet announces, the voice calls and the shout awakens. These expressions belong together in the proclamation of Jesus Christ through the Gospel. The spiritually dead hear His call through His Word.

Jesus Comes Through His Body

During the Gospel Day, Jesus Christ comes to the lost through His body, the Church. He already dwells within every born-again believer, so the believer carries the Gospel to those who are still outside Christ. The life-giving power, however, does not belong to the human messenger.

Jesus Christ speaks through His Word by His Spirit. The witness can proclaim the Gospel, but only God gives spiritual life. Paul makes this distinction clear when speaking about his own ministry and that of Apollos.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:6-7**:

> *"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."*

One witness may plant and another may water, but only God gives the increase. The human messenger cannot awaken the spiritually dead. This is why Paul says *"the Lord himself shall descend."*

The Gospel messenger carries the Word, but Jesus Christ Himself must speak to the heart. The power is not in the preacher's natural ability, volume or personality. Spiritual life comes from Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of God must bring conviction to the heart, making people aware of their sinful condition and their need of Jesus Christ. A preacher can proclaim the truth, but cannot replace this inward work of God. The hearer must respond to Christ through faith.

Salvation is a spiritual work of God, not an emotional response produced by a preacher. Strong feelings do not create the new birth, and human persuasion cannot produce the life of Christ. The essential matter is that the person hears Jesus Christ, believes and is born again.

One Life-Giving Call

We must not turn **1 Thessalonians 4:16** into a future scene of Jesus physically descending through the atmosphere accompanied by three separate sounds. Paul is describing one spiritual operation in which the Lord reaches those who are spiritually dead. The shout, the voice of the Chief Messenger and the trumpet of God all belong to that life-giving call.

The Lord comes in the shout, in the voice of the Chief Messenger and in the trumpet of God. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, and those who hear Him live. This harmonises exactly with the words of Jesus concerning the dead hearing the voice of the Son of God.

Paul's next words describe the result of that life-giving voice: *"and the dead in Christ shall rise first."* The next question is therefore clear: Who are the dead, how do they become alive in Christ, and what does Paul mean when he says that they rise first?

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the shout, voice and trumpet describe one life-giving call?

Personal Reflection

When hearing strong preaching or experiencing deep emotion, do you mistake the intensity of the moment for the new birth itself?

Action Step

Identify one assumption about spiritual experience that needs correction. Explain how you will test it by the Bible and place your confidence in Jesus Christ, not in emotion.

THE DEAD, IN CHRIST, SHALL RISE FIRST

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul now reaches the result of the Lord's life-giving voice. He has already established that those who are dead are spiritually dead, that they are the sleepers and that they are outside Christ. They need to hear the voice of Jesus Christ and be made alive.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:16**:

> *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:"*

The final words of this verse are normally grouped as *"the dead in Christ shall rise first."* That grouping leads the reader to think of people who are already in Christ, physically die, remain dead for a period of time and then rise from their graves at a future rapture. Paul's continuing argument does not support that meaning.

The context has already identified these people as spiritually asleep and spiritually dead. They are outside Christ and need the life that only Jesus Christ can give. The words must therefore be understood in harmony with that spiritual movement: *"and the dead, in Christ, shall rise first."*

The Greek Words

The Greek wording is:

ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΝΕΚΡΟΙ ΕΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΩ ΑΝΑΣΤΗΣΟΝΤΑΙ ΠΡΩΤΟΝ

Word by word, the order is:

and, the dead, in Christ, shall rise, first.

The Greek contains the words EN CHRISTŌ, meaning *"in Christ."* The early Greek wording did not contain a modern English comma telling the reader whether to hear *"the dead in Christ"* or *"the dead, in Christ, shall rise."* The comma used in English is therefore a reading aid rather than an inspired punctuation mark.

The doctrine does not rest upon a comma. It rests upon the context Paul has already established and the harmony of Scripture. The spiritually dead are outside Christ, while those who are in Christ possess spiritual life.

Paul therefore cannot be describing a person who is spiritually dead while already possessing the life of Jesus Christ. The spiritual movement is clear: the dead hear Christ, the dead receive life, and in Christ they rise. The words EN CHRISTŌ describe the spiritual position into which they are raised.

Those in Christ Are Alive

Jesus has already told us what happens when a person hears His Word and believes. That person receives everlasting life and passes from spiritual death into spiritual life. The believer is no longer spiritually dead.

Jesus said in **John 5:24**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."*

The believer has passed *"from death unto life."* That person now possesses the life found in Jesus Christ. Spiritual death and spiritual life are opposite conditions.

Paul confirms the same truth.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:17**:

> *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*

A person who is in Christ is a new creature. That person has been born again and possesses spiritual life. There is therefore no class of people who are spiritually dead while at the same time spiritually alive in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can spiritual death not describe someone who possesses Christ's saving life?

Personal Reflection

Are you trying to improve yourself spiritually without first recognising that only Jesus Christ gives new life?

Action Step

Identify one way you have trusted self-improvement instead of Christ. Explain the response you need to make to His Word and the life He offers.

The Dead Hear the Voice and Live

Jesus explained exactly what happens to the spiritually dead. They hear His voice, and those who hear receive life. The order is death, hearing and then life.

Jesus said in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

This is exactly the spiritual movement Paul has been describing. The Lord comes in the shout, in the voice of the Chief Messenger and in the trumpet of God. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, and those who hear Him live.

Only after receiving life can they rise in Christ. The Lord's voice does not call physically dead bodies from graves in Paul's argument. It reaches spiritually dead people who can hear and respond.

Paul Explains This Rising in Ephesians

Paul gives us a clear description of this spiritual resurrection in Ephesians. He begins with people who are *"dead in sins"* and then describes God quickening and raising them. Their new spiritual position is found *"in Christ Jesus."*

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:4-6**:

> *"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:"*

The order is unmistakable. They were dead in sins, then God quickened them together with Christ and raised them. They were then made to sit together *"in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."*

They were not physically dead bodies coming out of graves. They were spiritually dead people receiving salvation, spiritual life and a new position in Jesus Christ. This is the same spiritual movement we must recognise in **1 Thessalonians 4:16**.

The Rising Is the New Birth

Paul uses the same resurrection language again in Colossians. He describes people who were dead in sins being quickened and risen with Christ. The rising belongs to the saving work of God.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 2:12-13**:

> *"Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;"*

Again, they were *"dead in your sins,"* then God *"quickened"* them and they were *"risen with him."* This is spiritual resurrection. It is the new birth in which a spiritually dead person is made alive in Jesus Christ.

The person does not improve an old spiritual condition. God gives new life. The spiritually dead person is raised into the life found in Jesus Christ.

Only Jesus Christ Can Raise the Dead

The Church can carry the Gospel, a believer can witness and a preacher can proclaim the Word. None of these human messengers can make a spiritually dead person alive. The life must come from God.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:6-7**:

> *"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."*

This is why Paul says *"the Lord himself shall descend."* Jesus Christ must speak, the spiritually dead must hear Him and God must give life. The human messenger carries the Word, but Jesus Christ raises the spiritually dead in Himself.

The new birth is God's work. The believer does not create spiritual life in another person. Jesus Christ is the source of the life by which the dead rise.

Paul also explains that salvation is God's gift, not the result of human works. Neither the hearer nor the preacher can claim to have produced the saving life that comes from Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:8-10**:

> *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."*

The words *"his workmanship"* identify God as the One who creates the new life in Christ. The good works follow from that life; they do not produce it.

The Gospel must be preached and received through faith, but no preacher can produce the new birth. Salvation is God's gift, and the glory belongs to Jesus Christ rather than to the human messenger.

Why Do They Rise "First"?

The word *"first"* belongs to the inspired Greek wording. The Greek word is PRŌTON, meaning *"first."* Paul then begins the next verse with EPEITA, meaning *"then."*

There is therefore a definite order: first, and then. The word *"first"* does not describe the first stage of a future physical rapture. It establishes the necessary spiritual order in Paul's teaching.

Those who are spiritually dead must first be made alive. Those who are asleep must first awaken, and those who are outside Christ must first be brought into Christ. Only then can Paul speak about those already alive being *"caught up together with them."*

The spiritually dead cannot be gathered together with the spiritually living while they remain dead. They must first receive the same spiritual life. The dead must first live, and then they can be together with those who are already alive.

The Same People Continue Into Verse 17

Paul has not introduced a new group as his teaching continues. In verse 13 they are called *"them which are asleep,"* and verse 15 uses the same description. Verse 16 speaks of them as *"the dead,"* while verse 17 refers to them simply as *"them."*

What changes is not the identity of the people but their spiritual condition. They were asleep and spiritually dead, then they heard the voice of Jesus Christ and were made alive. In Christ they rose.

Paul can now say that those already alive are caught up *"together with them."* The word *"them"* refers to the same people who were asleep and dead but have now received spiritual life. Paul's sequence continues without introducing another group.

The Future-Rapture Reading Breaks the Sequence

The future-rapture interpretation begins by making these people physically dead Christians who are already in Christ. That breaks the spiritual sequence Paul has been developing. It changes spiritual death, awakening and resurrection into physical death and bodily movement.

Paul is not describing dead bodies coming out of graves, living bodies leaving the earth and both groups rising into the atmosphere. He is describing salvation: the spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, those who hear live, and in Christ they rise. They can then be gathered together with those who are already spiritually alive.

This harmonises directly with Jesus' words in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

Paul now moves to what happens after those dead have received life.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:17**:

> *"Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."*

The next question is therefore decisive: Who are *"them"*? They are the people who were asleep and spiritually dead but who have now heard the voice of Jesus Christ, been made alive and, in Christ, risen.

Caught Up Together Into Christ and His Body

Paul explains in **Ephesians 2:6** that God *"hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."* This heavenly position is a present spiritual reality received in Jesus Christ, not a physical ascent into the atmosphere. Those who were spiritually asleep must first hear His voice and receive His life before they can share that place with believers who are already born again.

The clouds represent the redeemed people of God, the Church, which is the body of Christ. **Hebrews 12:1** speaks of *"so great a cloud of witnesses,"* and **1 Corinthians 12:13** explains that believers are brought by one Spirit into one body. To be caught up into Christ is therefore to be brought into His Church, not to be taken from the earth. The meeting with the Lord in the air is understood through this heavenly place in Christ, where His people share His indwelling life and are united in His one body.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must the sleepers first receive life before sharing the heavenly place in Christ?

Personal Reflection

Does a person's earlier resistance to the Gospel make you reluctant to welcome them if they are born again?

Action Step

Identify someone whose past you still hold against them. Explain how you will receive and encourage a believer as part of the one body in Christ.

CONCLUSION: THE DEAD HEAR HIS VOICE AND LIVE

BACK TO CONTENTS

The teaching of 1 Thessalonians 4 must be understood through Paul's own words, their grammatical setting and the wider testimony of Scripture. We must not begin with an inherited picture of a future physical rapture and then require every expression to fit that interpretation. The inspired words themselves must govern our understanding.

Paul was writing to born-again believers whose lives were to bear witness before those who were without Christ. His teaching concerning those who were asleep must be understood within that continuing setting rather than separated from what comes before and after it. The contrast between spiritual sleep and spiritual life becomes even clearer when his words are read alongside his teaching concerning darkness, light and watchfulness in chapter 5.

The distinction between inspired wording and supplied punctuation is also important. In **1 Thessalonians 4:14**, the Greek expression DIA TOU IĒSOU means *"through Jesus."* In verse 16,

the expression EN CHRISTŌ must likewise be understood within Paul's continuing teaching concerning those who are spiritually dead receiving life in Christ.

Physical death does not separate the born-again believer from Jesus Christ. There is no need for a future physical rapture to bring the believer into the presence of the Lord who is already possessed through the new birth. Salvation is complete in Jesus Christ, and His indwelling life is the present reality of everyone who is born again.

Jesus had already explained how the spiritually dead receive life.

Jesus declared in **John 5:25**:

> *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."*

These words provide the central spiritual truth. Jesus Christ reaches those who are spiritually dead through the proclamation of His Gospel, and those who hear His voice receive life. The human messenger proclaims the Word, but Jesus Christ is the One who gives spiritual life.

Paul describes the Lord descending with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God. These expressions direct our attention to the authoritative, life-giving call of Jesus Christ. His voice reaches those who are spiritually dead and calls them from death into life.

Paul declared in **1 Thessalonians 4:16**:

> *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:"*

The spiritual movement is from death into life. Those who sleep must awaken, and those who are spiritually dead must receive the life of Jesus Christ. In Him they are quickened and raised into a new spiritual position.

The word *"first"* establishes the order of this saving work. Those who are spiritually dead must first be raised into life in Christ before they can share the same spiritual fellowship as those who are already alive in Him. Life must come before fellowship with the living body of Christ.

The great assurance throughout Paul's teaching is that Jesus Christ Himself is the source of spiritual life. The believer does not possess an absent Saviour, and those who are spiritually dead are not beyond the reach of His saving voice while they can still hear and respond to the Gospel. Jesus Christ continues to call people from darkness into His life.

Jesus Christ gives life to the spiritually dead. Those who hear His voice live, and in Him they rise.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do Paul's context and Jesus' words explain the dead hearing His voice and living?

Personal Reflection

Has this study increased your confidence in Christ's power to give life to those who appear spiritually unresponsive?

Action Step

Identify an attitude towards someone outside Christ that needs to change. Explain how you will express patient hope and truthful witness because His voice can still awaken them.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How do Paul's words about those who are 'without', 'asleep' and 'alive' describe different spiritual conditions? Explain how hearing Christ's voice and rising in Him connect these parts of his teaching.

2. Understanding

Why must supplied punctuation and chapter divisions be tested against Paul's wording and context? Use 'through Jesus' in **1 Thessalonians 4:14** *and Jesus' words in* **John 5:25** *to explain your answer.*

3. Personal Reflection

What has the teaching that physical death cannot separate a believer from Christ changed in your understanding of death and hope? Explain which Bible verses support your response.

4. Response to Truth

When you meet people who have not received Christ, what attitude towards them needs to change? Explain why their hope rests in the voice of Jesus rather than in your ability to produce spiritual life.

5. Action Step

Identify a person outside Christ towards whom you have become discouraged or impatient. What will you change in your attitude, honest conduct or Gospel witness, and when will you begin? Explain why Jesus Christ remains that person's hope.

6. Early Response

Have you begun changing your attitude or conduct towards the person identified in Question 5? If yes, explain what you did and how you depended on Christ. If not, explain the obstacle and the response you intend to make.

7. Ongoing Practice

How could Paul's call to remain awake in Christ's life guide the way you continue to live and speak before people outside Him? Explain why hope rests on Christ's voice rather than your ability to produce the new birth.

8. Doctrinal Clarity

How do the shout, the voice of the Chief Messenger and the trumpet describe the Lord's call to the spiritually dead? Use verses to explain why this is Christ's own voice and why calling Him the Chief Messenger does not make Him a created angel.

9. Living the Truth

Someone says that 'the dead in Christ' means a spiritually dead group already possessing Christ's life. How would you answer using **John 5:24-25** *and Paul's order of 'first' and 'then'? Explain how this order also helps you read 'alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord'.*

10. Final Response

How do Christ's present life, the hope of the sleepers and their rising in Him explain Paul's teaching about being caught up together? Describe what has become clearer to you and any personal response you want to consider.