COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE 66

The Coming of Jesus Christ

STUDY GUIDE 5 OF 6:

Caught Up Together With Them In The Clouds

An overview of spiritual gathering into Christ and His body.



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.

Content

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION: GATHERED TOGETHER IN JESUS CHRIST

CAUGHT UP TOGETHER WITH THEM IN THE CLOUDS

TO MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR

LET US NOT SLEEP, AS DO OTHERS

DETAILED SUMMARY: UNDERSTANDING 1 THESSALONIANS 4 AND 5

CONCLUSION: COMFORT ONE ANOTHER WITH THESE WORDS

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**).

Contact and Links

Website: cogma.com.au

Email: admin@cogma.org.au

Radio COGMA: radiocogma.com

YouTube: youtube.com/@COGMAChannel

Facebook: facebook.com/profile.php?id=61585399471540

SEARCH THIS STUDY GUIDE

Windows: Ctrl + F | Mac: Cmd + F | Phone or tablet: use Search in your PDF reader.

PREFACE

BACK TO CONTENTS

The expression *"caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air"* has become closely associated with the expectation of a future physical rapture. Many Christians have been taught that believers will eventually leave the earth and ascend into the natural sky to meet Jesus Christ. Yet Paul's words must be understood within the spiritual teaching he was giving to the Thessalonians.

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 expressions *"together," "clouds," "air"* and *"meet the Lord"* require careful examination. Scripture connects clouds with God's presence and glory, identifies His faithful people as a great cloud of witnesses, and uses wind and breath to illustrate the unseen operation of the Spirit. These Scriptural connections provide the foundation for understanding Paul's language.

Jesus Christ fulfilled His promised coming at Pentecost in A.D. 31 when He came as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. He is not absent from His Church while believers wait for another physical return. Everyone who is born again already possesses His indwelling life and belongs to His one spiritual body.

This Study Guide examines the gathering of believers into Christ, the spiritual meaning of the clouds and air, and the relationship between Paul's teaching in chapters 4 and 5. Particular attention will be given to the distinction between spiritual sleep and spiritual life, and to the meaning of being *"ever with the Lord."* The comfort Paul offered is found in Jesus Christ Himself and in the life believers already possess in Him.

Our purpose is to understand what it means to be gathered together in Christ and to recognise that the believer's continuing fellowship with the Lord is established through His indwelling life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Paul's spiritual sequence help explain being caught up together?

Personal Reflection

Does an outward religious connection give you confidence without examining whether you have received the life of Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Identify what you have relied upon for belonging to God's people. Explain what must change so your confidence rests upon the new birth and Christ Himself.

INTRODUCTION: GATHERED TOGETHER IN JESUS CHRIST

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul's teaching concerning those who are caught up together in the clouds must be understood within the spiritual sequence he has already established. He speaks of those who

were asleep, the life-giving voice of the Lord and the dead rising first. He then explains how those who have received life are gathered together with those who were already spiritually alive.

Paul declared in **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17**:

> *"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 word *"Then"* establishes the order of Paul's teaching. Those who were spiritually dead must first hear the voice of Jesus Christ and receive His life. They can then be gathered together with those who already possess that life, making the emphasis spiritual union rather than physical movement into the atmosphere.

The meaning of the clouds must also be established through Scripture. The Old Testament connects clouds with God's presence and glory, while Hebrews describes the faithful people of God as a great cloud of witnesses. Under the New Covenant, Jesus Christ is the Head of His redeemed people, and the Church is His one spiritual body.

Paul also speaks of meeting the Lord *"in the air."* Scripture uses wind and breath to illustrate unseen spiritual realities, while Jesus taught that the new birth is the work of the Spirit. Paul's language must therefore be examined in the light of the spiritual life and fellowship believers receive through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has already come as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. The believer does not need to leave the earth in order to possess Him because His saving life is received at the new birth. Everyone who is born again is brought into fellowship with Jesus Christ and His one spiritual body.

With this foundation established, we can now examine Paul's words concerning believers being *"caught up together with them in the clouds."* The central question is not how believers might physically rise into the natural sky, but how Scripture explains the spiritual gathering of those who have received life in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must receiving spiritual life come before being gathered with believers?

Personal Reflection

Do you welcome people into fellowship according to their background, or according to the one life believers share in Christ?

Action Step

Name one difference that has made fellowship difficult. Explain a personal change in welcome or understanding required by the one body of Christ.

CAUGHT UP TOGETHER WITH THEM IN THE CLOUDS

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul now continues the spiritual sequence he has already established. The sleepers have heard the voice of Jesus Christ, they have been made alive and, in Christ, they have risen. Paul now describes them being joined with those who were already spiritually alive.

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 future-rapture interpretation pictures believers physically leaving the earth and rising into natural clouds in the atmosphere. That reading does not fit the spiritual movement Paul has been describing. His emphasis is upon those who have received life now being gathered together with those who were already alive in Christ.

Who Are "Them"?

Paul says that those who are alive are *"caught up together with them."* The word *"them"* connects verse 17 directly with the people he has already been discussing. Paul has not introduced another group.

In verse 13 they were *"them which are asleep,"* and in verse 15 they were again *"them which are asleep."* In verse 16 they were *"the dead."* They then heard the voice of Jesus Christ and were made alive.

Now in verse 17 Paul simply calls them *"them."* Their identity has not changed, but their spiritual condition has. They were asleep and spiritually dead, but now they are awake and alive.

They were outside Christ, but now they have been raised in Christ. Paul can therefore speak of those who were already alive being gathered *"together with them."* The same people continue throughout the whole argument.

They Are Gathered Together

Paul's emphasis is upon being *"caught up together with them."* The spiritually dead could not be joined spiritually with those who were already alive while they remained dead. They first had to hear the voice of Jesus Christ and receive life.

This is why Paul first says *"the dead, in Christ, shall rise first."* He then continues, *"Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them."* The spiritual order is first life, then union.

The movement is not away from the earth but into spiritual union with those who already possess the life of Jesus Christ. Paul explains elsewhere how this union takes place.

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 one body. That body is the Church of Jesus Christ. Those who were spiritually separated are now joined together through the life they possess in Him.

Paul also explains in **Ephesians 2:6** that God has already raised believers and seated them in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is a present spiritual position in Christ and His body, not a physical ascent into the atmosphere.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Who are the people gathered together, and how are they joined in one body?

Personal Reflection

Do you think of heaven and the cloud mainly as physical places and objects rather than asking what the Bible says about Christ's redeemed people?

Action Step

Identify one familiar picture you need to test. Explain how you will study the Bible's cloud imagery without letting imagination determine your treatment of fellow believers.

What Are the Clouds?

Paul says that those who have been made alive are gathered *"in the clouds."* This expression has caused great confusion because many readers immediately picture natural clouds in the sky. Some then wait for Jesus Christ to appear physically upon a cloud.

Scripture itself shows us how cloud imagery is used. The Scriptures repeatedly connect the cloud with God's presence, God's glory, God's dwelling place and God's people. We must allow those uses to help us understand Paul's words.

The Cloud Marked the Presence of God

When the tabernacle was completed, a cloud covered it and the glory of God filled the dwelling place. The cloud was directly connected with God's presence among His people. It marked the place in which His glory was revealed.

Moses wrote in **Exodus 40:34-35**:

> *"Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."*

The same thing happened when Solomon's Temple was dedicated. Once again, the cloud was connected with God's presence and glory filling His appointed dwelling place. The imagery was not simply about weather.

The writer of Kings wrote in **1 Kings 8:10-11**:

> *"And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, So that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD."*

The cloud and the glory of God were connected with His habitation. This becomes important when we move into the New Covenant, where God's dwelling place is no longer a physical tabernacle or Temple. His habitation is now His people.

God's Dwelling Place Is Now His People

Under the New Covenant, God dwells within His born-again people. The Church is not a physical building in which God is confined. His people are His living habitation through the Spirit.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:21-22**:

> *"In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."*

The Church is *"an habitation of God through the Spirit."* The Old Testament cloud was connected with God's presence filling His dwelling place, while the New Covenant reality is God dwelling within His redeemed people. The cloud imagery therefore fits naturally with the people in whom Jesus Christ now lives.

The believer possesses the Person. Jesus Christ does not simply dwell near His Church or outside His people. He personally dwells within every person who is born again.

Hebrews Calls God's People a Cloud

The writer of Hebrews gives direct Scriptural evidence that a cloud can represent people. Hebrews 11 describes faithful men and women who trusted God before the completed work of Jesus Christ. Their faith is then connected directly with the cloud mentioned at the beginning of chapter 12.

The writer concluded in **Hebrews 11:39-40**:

> *"And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."*

They lived by faith and obtained a good report, but they had not yet received the completed promise. They were waiting for the fulfilment that would come through Jesus Christ. The writer then continues directly into what we now call chapter 12.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 12:1**:

> *"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,"*

The word *"Wherefore"* connects the cloud directly with the faithful people described in Hebrews 11. They are called *"so great a cloud of witnesses."* Scripture therefore plainly uses a cloud to represent a company of people.

They Were Made Perfect Through Jesus Christ

The faithful of Hebrews 11 could not be made perfect through the sacrifices of the former covenant. Their perfection depended upon the completed work of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice accomplished what the former sacrifices could never accomplish.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 9:15**:

> *"And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance."*

Notice the words *"by means of death."* The death of Jesus Christ reached those who had lived faithfully under the former covenant. His completed sacrifice provided the redemption towards which those faithful people had looked.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 10:14**:

> *"For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."*

When Jesus Christ offered Himself at Calvary, the sacrifice towards which the faithful had looked was complete. They were made perfect through Him. The one offering accomplished what the former covenant could not produce.

The Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect

Hebrews 12 then describes the spiritual company to which New Covenant believers have already come. The language is present and definite: *"ye are come."* The writer is not describing a destination believers must wait to reach after a future rapture.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 12:22-24**:

> *"But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."*

Born-again believers have already come spiritually to Mount Sion, the heavenly Jerusalem and the general assembly and Church of the firstborn. They have also come to *"the spirits of just men made perfect."* This answers what Hebrews 11 had said about the faithful not being made perfect without us.

Hebrews 11 said *"they without us should not be made perfect."* Hebrews 12 now speaks of *"the spirits of just men made perfect."* These faithful people are not described as restored to physical earthly bodies but as spirits within the one spiritual assembly centred in Jesus Christ.

There Was Already a Cloud Before Acts 1

This gives us an important chronological point. Calvary occurred before the ascension, and by the time Jesus ascended in Acts 1 His sacrifice had already been completed. The faithful who had waited for the promise had therefore already been made perfect through His one offering.

There was already a redeemed spiritual company. There was already a *"cloud of witnesses,"* and there were already *"the spirits of just men made perfect."* The completed work of Jesus Christ had brought them into that fulfilled spiritual reality.

This matters when we come to the cloud that received Jesus in Acts 1. The cloud imagery did not appear without a Scriptural setting. God's redeemed spiritual company already existed.

The Repentant Thief Joined That Redeemed Company

The repentant thief on the cross also shows that this redeemed spiritual company was not limited to faithful people who had lived centuries before Calvary. Jesus told the thief that he would be with Him in paradise that very day. He was not told to wait for a future physical resurrection before he could be with Christ.

The thief said in **Luke 23:42**:

> *"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."*

Jesus answered in **Luke 23:43**:

> *"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

Jesus said *"To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."* The thief's physical body died, but his spirit entered the redeemed spiritual company with Jesus Christ. He became part of the people whose life and hope were found in Him.

By the time of the ascension, therefore, the redeemed company already existed. The faithful of the former covenant had been made perfect through Christ's completed sacrifice, and the repentant thief had entered paradise. This provides important background for the cloud that received Jesus.

A Cloud Received Jesus

Luke records what happened when Jesus ascended from the sight of His disciples. Everything about the event was miraculous. Jesus was taken up before their eyes, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

Luke wrote in **Acts 1:9**:

> *"And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight."*

The wording is especially important: *"a cloud received him."* The cloud is presented as receiving Jesus and belongs to the supernatural event itself. The disciples were not simply witnessing an ordinary cloud formation moving across the sky.

The cloud was connected with the event by which Jesus disappeared from their sight. Scripture had already connected clouds with God's presence, glory and people. Hebrews also identifies the faithful as a cloud of witnesses.

The Cloud Was Something Extraordinary

The Old Testament had already connected the cloud with the glory and presence of God. Hebrews identifies God's faithful people as a *"cloud of witnesses"* and speaks of the faithful of

the former covenant as *"the spirits of just men made perfect."* These Scriptures provide the wider setting in which Acts 1 can be understood.

Acts 1 does not directly say, *"the cloud was the Old Testament faithful."* However, Scripture gives strong reason to understand the imagery in that way. The redeemed spiritual company already existed, the spirits of just men had been made perfect and the repentant thief had entered paradise.

Then Acts records that *"a cloud received him out of their sight."* The language fits naturally with the wider Scriptural picture of God's presence and His redeemed people. The cloud belongs to something greater than ordinary atmospheric weather.

The Disciples Were Told Not to Keep Gazing Into Heaven

Luke continues by describing the disciples looking upward after Jesus had been taken from their sight. Two men in white apparel then addressed them directly. The question turned their attention away from continuing to gaze into the natural sky.

Luke wrote in **Acts 1:10-11**:

> *"And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."*

The disciples were literally looking upward, but they were not instructed to spend the Gospel Day watching the natural sky for another physical cloud. They returned to Jerusalem and waited for the promise Jesus had already given them. He had said, *"I will come to you."*

At Pentecost, He came. Jesus Christ returned as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. His promised coming established the New Covenant reality of Christ within.

Jesus Came in the Cloud

When Jesus Christ came at Pentecost, He came by His Spirit to dwell within His people. He did not come as an isolated Person separated from His body. He came in and among His redeemed people.

The faithful of the former covenant had already been made perfect through His completed sacrifice. New Covenant believers were now being brought by one Spirit into the same redeemed body. Jesus Christ is the Head, His people are His body and He dwells within them.

Therefore, when Scripture speaks of Christ coming in the clouds, the imagery directs us to Jesus Christ revealed in and through His redeemed people. The cloud is connected with the people who are His dwelling place. The Head is revealed in His body.

Peter and Jude Confirm That Clouds Can Represent People

Peter also uses cloud imagery for people when describing false teachers. His subject is different, but the imagery establishes that a cloud can represent people rather than natural weather. Jude uses the same kind of language.

Peter wrote in **2 Peter 2:17**:

> *"These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever."*

Jude wrote in **Jude 1**:12:

> *"These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots;"*

In both verses, the clouds are people. Peter and Jude are describing false teachers rather than God's redeemed people, but their wording establishes an important Scriptural principle. Clouds in Scripture can represent people.

This confirms that cloud imagery must not automatically be interpreted as natural clouds in the atmosphere. The context determines the meaning. In 1 Thessalonians 4, the context concerns spiritually dead people being made alive and gathered into the redeemed company.

"In the Clouds" Does Not Mean Into the Atmosphere

We can now return to Paul's words *"caught up together with them in the clouds."* Paul is not describing Christians floating into weather clouds. He is describing spiritually dead people being made alive and gathered into the redeemed company in which Jesus Christ dwells.

The cloud represents God's people and is associated throughout Scripture with His presence and dwelling. Hebrews calls the faithful a *"cloud of witnesses,"* and the redeemed company includes the spirits of just men made perfect through Jesus Christ. The person who is born again is gathered into that same spiritual body.

The movement is therefore into fellowship with Christ and His redeemed people. The person who was outside is brought inside, the spiritually dead person receives life and the separated person is joined with the body. This is what it means to be gathered *"together with them in the clouds."*

The Direction Is Into the Church, Not Out of the Earth

The future-rapture interpretation sends the Church away from the earth. Paul's teaching brings the spiritually dead into the Church. The future-rapture interpretation sends believers upward into natural clouds, while Paul gathers the newly awakened *"together with them in the clouds."*

The movement is not separation but union. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, are made alive, rise in Christ and are joined with those who were already spiritually alive. They are gathered into the redeemed company in which Jesus Christ dwells.

That is the spiritual movement Paul has been describing from the beginning. Those who were without Christ are brought into the one body through His saving life. This is what Paul means when he says *"caught up together with them in the clouds."*

Paul now tells us where this spiritual meeting takes place: *"to meet the Lord in the air."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the cloud of witnesses help explain the redeemed company in Christ?

Personal Reflection

Has someone's past or social position caused you to overlook their place among Christ's redeemed people?

Action Step

Identify a judgement you need to correct. Explain how you will recognise and honour that believer as part of the same redeemed company.

TO MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul now completes the spiritual picture of **1 Thessalonians 4:17**. The sleepers are spiritually asleep, the dead are spiritually dead, they hear the voice of Jesus Christ, receive life, rise in Christ and are gathered together with His redeemed people. Paul now says that this meeting with the Lord takes place *"in the air."*

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."*

We have already established that the clouds are not natural weather clouds but represent the redeemed people of God in whom His presence and glory are revealed. The future-rapture teaching interprets the air as a physical meeting place somewhere in the natural atmosphere above the earth. That does not fit the spiritual argument Paul has been developing.

The whole movement is spiritual. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, receive His life, rise in Him and are gathered into His redeemed people. The air therefore belongs within that same spiritual picture.

The Greek Word Means Air

The Greek word translated *"air"* is AĒR. The word genuinely means air, and we should not redefine AĒR itself to mean Spirit. The spiritual meaning must come from the symbolism established throughout Scripture rather than from changing the meaning of the Greek word.

Air is invisible, wind is moving air and breath is connected with life. Scripture repeatedly uses these natural realities to illustrate the invisible operation of the Spirit. The air is therefore the symbol, while the Spirit is the spiritual reality represented.

This distinction keeps the interpretation clear. We are not claiming that the Greek word AĒR lexically means the Holy Spirit. We are allowing Scripture to show us how air, wind and breath can represent unseen spiritual life and activity.

Jesus Connected Wind With the Spirit

Jesus Himself establishes this connection while teaching Nicodemus about the new birth. He used the movement of the wind to illustrate the unseen operation of the Spirit. The wind itself was not the Spirit, but it provided a natural picture of spiritual reality.

Jesus said in **John 3:8**:

> *"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."*

The wind cannot normally be seen, although its effects can be heard and observed. Jesus used that invisible movement to explain the work of the Spirit and then said, *"so is every one that is born of the Spirit."* He therefore gives us a direct Scriptural connection between invisible wind and the operation of the Spirit.

This helps us understand Paul's language concerning the air. A natural reality that cannot normally be seen can represent an unseen spiritual reality. The meaning does not depend upon physical altitude or movement through the atmosphere.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Jesus' wind illustration help distinguish a natural sign from spiritual reality?

Personal Reflection

Do you become discouraged when there is no immediate outward evidence that someone is responding to the Gospel?

Action Step

Name one situation that tests your patience. Explain how you will continue showing faithful love and speaking truth while leaving the work of the new birth to Jesus Christ.

Pentecost Was Accompanied by the Sign of Wind

The same imagery appears when Jesus fulfilled His promise to come to His disciples. On the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Ghost was accompanied by a sound *"as of a rushing mighty wind."* The natural sign pointed towards the invisible spiritual reality taking place.

Luke wrote in **Acts 2:1-4**:

> *"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."*

The rushing wind was not the Holy Ghost Himself. It was a sign representing the invisible coming and operation of the Spirit. The natural sign revealed the spiritual reality.

This follows the same principle already seen with the cloud. The cloud was not God Himself, but it represented His presence and glory. In the same way, the rushing mighty wind was not the Holy Ghost Himself, but it revealed the unseen presence and work of the Spirit.

Wind, Breath and Life

Ezekiel uses the same imagery when describing life coming to the dead. The vision moves from death to life as the breath comes upon those who were slain. This provides another Scriptural connection between breath, unseen movement and life.

Ezekiel wrote in **Ezekiel 37:9-10**:

> *"Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."*

The sequence is clear: they are dead, the breath comes and they live. That closely parallels the spiritual movement Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4. The people are spiritually dead, they hear the voice of Jesus Christ, the Spirit gives life and, in Christ, they rise.

The imagery of air, wind and breath therefore belongs naturally with Paul's words *"to meet the Lord in the air."* The whole setting concerns spiritual life being given to those who were dead. The meeting must remain within that spiritual movement.

The Air Represents the Realm of the Spirit

Paul is not giving us the altitude at which Christians will one day meet Jesus Christ. He is describing a spiritual meeting. The air symbolises the invisible realm of the Spirit.

The spiritually dead person does not travel upward into the atmosphere to find Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to that person through the Gospel, His voice is heard and His Spirit gives life. The believer rises in Christ and is joined with His redeemed people.

The meeting therefore occurs in the spiritual realm. The destination is not a location above the earth but living fellowship with Jesus Christ. The whole movement leads the spiritually dead person into the life of the Lord.

Christ Is No Longer Known After the Flesh

This becomes even clearer when we consider how Paul says believers now know Jesus Christ. He does not say that believers no longer know Him. He says they no longer know Him *"after the flesh."*

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:16**:

> *"Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more."*

During His earthly ministry, Jesus Christ had been visibly present among His disciples in genuine human life. They saw Him, heard Him, walked beside Him and ate with Him. They knew Him through His visible bodily presence.

Paul says that this is no longer the manner in which Christ is known. *"Though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more."* The New Covenant relationship is different because Christ is now known through His indwelling Spirit.

His Genuine Humanity Did Not Cease

This does not mean that Jesus Christ ceased to be the risen Christ or that His genuine humanity became unreal. The same Jesus who was crucified was raised from the dead, and His identity was not erased. Paul's point concerns how His people now know Him.

The Church does not know Jesus Christ by having His visible human body physically walking beside them. His people know Him through His indwelling Spirit. This is the relationship Jesus had already promised before His death.

The change is therefore not in the truth of who Jesus Christ is. It is in the manner in which His people experience His presence. He is now known inwardly through His life dwelling within.

"The World Seeth Me No More"

Jesus Himself had already explained this change. He told His disciples that the world would no longer see Him, yet they would continue to see and know Him. He then connected that continuing relationship with His indwelling presence.

Jesus said in **John 14:19-20**:

> *"Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."*

Jesus said *"the world seeth me no more,"* yet He also said *"ye see me."* Their continuing relationship with Him would therefore no longer depend upon His visible physical presence. Jesus explained that reality with the words *"I in you."*

They would know Him inwardly and spiritually as the indwelling Christ. This agrees directly with Paul's statement that Christ is no longer known *"after the flesh."* The relationship is now the life of Jesus Christ within His people.

"I Will Come to You"

Jesus had already connected this indwelling relationship with His promised coming. He spoke of the Spirit being within the disciples and then immediately said that He Himself would come to them. The two statements belong together.

Jesus said in **John 14:17-18**:

> *"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 that the Spirit *"shall be in you."* He then said *"I will come to you."* His coming and the coming of the Spirit cannot be separated.

Jesus Christ came to dwell within His people by His Spirit. At Pentecost, the promised coming became the present indwelling reality of the New Covenant. The Person came to live within His people.

The Lord Is That Spirit

Paul states this truth directly. He does not describe Jesus Christ as an absent Lord who must physically return before His people can truly meet Him. He identifies the Lord with the Spirit.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 3:17**:

> *"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."*

Paul says *"the Lord is that Spirit."* Therefore, when he speaks of believers meeting *"the Lord in the air,"* the spiritual meaning agrees with the wider teaching of Scripture. The air represents the invisible realm of the Spirit, and the Lord whom the believer meets is Jesus Christ Himself.

The meeting is therefore not with another divine Person separate from Jesus Christ. The Spirit through whom the believer receives life is the Spirit of Christ. The Lord Himself comes to dwell within.

The Spirit of God Is the Spirit of Christ

Paul gives the same teaching in Romans. He uses the expressions *"the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ"* and *"Christ be in you"* within the same teaching. These do not describe separate indwelling realities.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9-10**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness."*

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus Christ dwells within the born-again believer by His Spirit. This is how Christ is now known and possessed.

The believer therefore does not wait for a future physical journey into the sky in order to meet Jesus Christ. The meeting occurs when His life is received. The believer possesses the Person at the new birth.

The Meeting Occurs at the New Birth

We can now follow Paul's sequence without introducing a future physical rapture. The person is spiritually asleep and spiritually dead, and Jesus Christ comes through the Gospel. The spiritually dead person hears His voice, and the Spirit gives life.

In Christ the person rises and is joined with the redeemed people of God. The believer then meets Jesus Christ in the Spirit. That is the new birth and the spiritual meeting Paul is describing.

The whole movement is from spiritual death into life in Christ. The person who was outside receives Jesus Christ and becomes part of His body. The meeting establishes living fellowship with the Lord.

Christ in You Is the New Covenant Reality

Paul describes this New Covenant reality with the words *"Christ in you."* The Gospel does not direct us towards an absent Jesus waiting somewhere beyond the atmosphere. It reveals the present indwelling life of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:27**:

> *"To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:"*

The Gospel reveals *"Christ in you."* The Christ whom Paul says is no longer known *"after the flesh"* is now known through His indwelling spiritual presence. The believer does not need a future physical journey into the sky to meet Him.

Jesus comes to the believer. His life is received through the new birth, and He personally dwells within by His Spirit. That is the New Covenant reality.

"And So Shall We Ever Be With the Lord"

Paul concludes with the words *"and so shall we ever be with the Lord."* This is not a brief meeting in the atmosphere. It is an abiding spiritual union with Jesus Christ.

The spiritually dead person receives life, Christ comes within and the believer is joined to His body. The Lord becomes the believer's life. The relationship continues because Jesus Christ remains within His people.

Paul wrote in **Galatians 2:20**:

> *"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."*

Paul's testimony is not that he is waiting to meet Christ in the sky. He says *"Christ liveth in me."* That is the New Covenant reality and the continuing relationship Paul describes.

The Meaning Is Clear

The air of **1 Thessalonians 4:17** is not a future physical meeting place in the atmosphere. It is a spiritual symbol. Jesus compared invisible wind with the operation of the Spirit, Pentecost was accompanied by the sign of a rushing mighty wind, and Ezekiel used wind and breath to picture life coming to the dead.

Paul says *"the Lord is that Spirit"* and also explains that Christ is no longer known *"after the flesh."* The clouds represent the redeemed people of God, while the air represents the spiritual realm of the Spirit. The spiritually dead hear Jesus Christ, receive His life, rise in Him and are gathered with His redeemed people.

They meet the Lord in the Spirit. To meet the Lord in the air is to meet Jesus Christ in the Spirit. Because He comes to dwell within the believer, Paul can conclude: *"and so shall we ever be with the Lord."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Christ's indwelling Spirit explain meeting the Lord and remaining with Him?

Personal Reflection

Have you been waiting for a future physical meeting with Jesus before recognising the living fellowship He gives at the new birth?

Action Step

Identify one expectation that has weakened your confidence in Christ's present life. Explain how you will respond to Him as the indwelling Lord now.

LET US NOT SLEEP, AS DO OTHERS

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul's teaching does not stop at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4. The chapter division was added later, and Paul's letter continues directly into what we now call chapter 5. The same contrast between those who are awake and those who sleep continues without interruption.

This is important because chapter 5 helps us identify exactly what Paul means by sleep in chapter 4. We do not have to supply a meaning from an inherited teaching. Paul explains the spiritual contrast himself.

Paul Continues the Same Teaching

Paul continues by contrasting darkness and night with light and day. He speaks to the same Thessalonian believers and reminds them of the spiritual condition they possess. They are not of the darkness because they belong to Jesus Christ.

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

> *"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. 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."*

The *"times and the seasons"* concern the occasions when God deals with people through the Gospel. The Thessalonians knew this coming of the Lord because they had experienced His call and been born again. They had entered the Day of the Lord rather than remaining in spiritual night.

God deals with people at different times and through different circumstances. He may bring His Word to their attention through preaching, a personal conversation or the faithful witness of a believer. The circumstances and messengers differ, but Jesus Christ alone gives spiritual life.

Someone who is not born again today may yet be drawn by God, hear the Gospel, believe and be born again tomorrow. Their present condition need not be their final condition. This strengthens the hope the Thessalonians were not to forsake concerning those still spiritually

asleep. We should continue praying and sharing the Gospel, without assuming that another opportunity is guaranteed or encouraging anyone to delay responding to Christ.

His coming *"as a thief in the night"* describes that unexpected confrontation with His truth. The *"sudden destruction"* brings down the sinner's false peace and confidence in the old life.

Isaiah gives a picture of judgement sweeping away false security.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 28:17**:

> *"Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place."*

The *"refuge of lies"* is falsehood trusted as protection. God's truth exposes and sweeps away that false security, leaving the sinner without a hiding place. The person must respond to Christ; accepting or rejecting His call has consequences. Conviction is not itself salvation, and falsehood cannot protect those who refuse Jesus Christ.

"Therefore Let Us Not Sleep"

Paul then moves directly from light and darkness to wakefulness and sleep. He tells those who belong to the day how they are to continue walking. They are not to enter the spiritual condition associated with night and darkness.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:6-8**:

> *"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 hardly make the meaning of sleep clearer. He says *"let us not sleep,"* then explains that *"they that sleep sleep in the night,"* while those who are of the day are to watch and be sober. Sleep belongs with night and darkness, while wakefulness belongs with day and light.

Paul is not warning the Thessalonians not to die physically. He is warning people who are spiritually alive not to move into spiritual sleep. His use of sleep is therefore spiritual.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Paul's warning not to sleep continue the contrast from chapter 4?

Personal Reflection

Is there a habit or influence that is making you careless about the truth of Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Identify the influence and the choice it affects. Explain what you will change as an expression of Christ's life within, rather than to earn salvation.

The Sleepers of Chapter 4 Are the Sleepers of Chapter 5

This takes us directly back to the people Paul described in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**. The later chapter number must not cause us to separate Paul's words. The same language continues from one chapter into the next.

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."*

Then Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:6**:

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

Chapter 4 speaks of *"them which are asleep"* and *"others which have no hope."* Chapter 5 then says *"let us not sleep, as do others."* Paul has not changed the meaning of sleep between these statements.

The sleepers are those who are spiritually in darkness and outside the life of Christ. The believers are children of light and children of the day. Paul's own continuing words identify the two spiritual conditions.

There Is No Saved Sleeping Class

This confirms what Paul has already established concerning spiritual life. A person cannot be spiritually asleep and spiritually alive in Christ at the same time. The person who receives Jesus Christ has 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 born-again believer has *"passed from death unto life."* Paul therefore does not create a third spiritual condition consisting of people who are spiritually dead or asleep while still possessing the life of Jesus Christ. Scripture gives us the contrast between darkness and light, sleep and wakefulness, death and life.

Those in Christ are spiritually alive. Those who are spiritually asleep need to awaken and receive His life. There is no saved sleeping class between those two conditions.

Christ Died So That We Should Live With Him

Paul then directs attention to the saving work of Jesus Christ. The hope for those who sleep is not found in their present condition. Their hope is found in the One who died so that they might live with Him.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:9-10**:

> *"For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him."*

Verse 10 must be read within the contrast Paul has just established. Someone could isolate the words *"whether we wake or sleep"* and conclude that spiritually sleeping people already possess life in Christ. Paul does not say that.

The controlling words are *"Who died for us, that ... we should live together with him."* Paul is describing the purpose and saving result of the work of Jesus Christ. Christ died so that those who are spiritually asleep can be brought into life with Him.

The Same Spiritual Conditions Remain

Paul continues to use the same contrast he used only a few verses earlier. Verse 6 says *"let us not sleep ... but let us watch,"* while verse 10 speaks of *"whether we wake or sleep."* The same two spiritual conditions remain before us.

Some are awake, while others sleep. Christ died so that the saving result can be *"we should live together with him."* This does not mean that spiritual sleep itself is life with Christ.

It means that Jesus Christ is the hope of those who sleep. Through His saving work, those who are spiritually dead can receive life. The purpose is that they should no longer remain in spiritual sleep but live together with Him.

The Sleeper Must Be Made Alive

This agrees directly with the words of Jesus concerning the spiritually dead. Jesus does not describe dead people remaining dead while somehow possessing His life. They hear His voice, and those who hear live.

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, and then they live. In the same way, the sleeper does not remain spiritually asleep while living with Christ. The sleeper must awaken.

This is why **1 Thessalonians 5:10** fits the spiritual movement already established in chapter 4. Jesus Christ died so that those who are asleep may hear His voice, receive His life and live together with Him. His saving work brings them from spiritual death into life.

"Whether We Wake or Sleep"

Paul's words therefore show the reach of Christ's saving work. Some are already spiritually awake, while others are still asleep. Jesus Christ is the hope of both because those who are awake live through Him, while those who sleep need the life only He can give.

This does not teach universal salvation. The spiritually dead must hear and respond to Jesus Christ. Jesus said *"they that hear shall live."*

Those who refuse His voice remain in spiritual death. Those who hear Him are awakened and brought into life with Him. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ, not in remaining asleep.

This Explains the Hope of Chapter 4

We can now understand more clearly why Paul told the Thessalonians not to sorrow concerning those who were asleep *"even as others which have no hope."* The sleepers were not beyond hope while they remained physically alive and able to hear the Gospel. Jesus Christ was their hope.

He had died so that they could live. His voice could awaken them, His Spirit could give them life and they could be raised in Christ. They could then be gathered together with those who were already spiritually alive.

This is the hope Paul gives the congregation. The Thessalonians were not to look at the spiritually asleep and conclude that nothing could change. Jesus Christ could still call them from death into life.

The Purpose Is to Live Together With Him

The final words of **1 Thessalonians 5:10** are *"we should live together with him."* These words correspond directly with Paul's conclusion in chapter 4: *"and so shall we ever be with the Lord."* Both statements centre upon continuing life and fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4 says *"so shall we ever be with the Lord,"* while chapter 5 says *"we should live together with him."* Paul's subject has not changed. He is describing people being brought into living union with Jesus Christ.

The Person remains the centre of both statements. The goal is not escape from the earth or movement into the atmosphere. The goal is life with Jesus Christ.

Paul Ends With the Same Comfort

There is another important connection between the two chapters. Paul concludes chapter 4 by telling the believers to comfort one another, and after explaining light, darkness, waking, sleeping and salvation in chapter 5, he repeats the same instruction. The repeated call to comfort shows the continuity of his teaching.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:18**:

> *"Wherefore comfort one another with these words."*

Paul then wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:11**:

> *"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."*

This is one continuing message of hope. The believers were not to look at those who were asleep and conclude that there was no hope for them. Jesus Christ had died, His voice could still be heard through the Gospel and the spiritually dead could still receive life.

The sleepers could awaken, those in darkness could come into the light and those outside Christ could be raised in Him. They could then *"live together with him."* This is why Paul tells the congregation to comfort and edify one another.

Chapter 5 Confirms Chapter 4

Chapter 5 confirms the spiritual meaning of the sleepers in chapter 4. Those who are awake are children of light and children of the day, while those who sleep belong to night and darkness. Paul tells the believers, *"let us not sleep, as do others."*

The sleepers of 1 Thessalonians 4 are therefore not physically dead Christians waiting for a future rapture. They are spiritually asleep and need the life of Jesus Christ. Paul gives them hope because Christ *"died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him."*

The sleeper does not remain asleep. Through Jesus Christ, the sleeper can awaken, the dead can hear and those who hear can live. Those who receive His life are then brought together in Him.

This is why Paul can conclude with the same message of encouragement: *"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does Christ's saving purpose explain the hope of living together with Him?

Personal Reflection

Have you lost hope for someone outside Christ because they have not yet responded to His voice?

Action Step

Identify how discouragement has affected your attitude. Explain how you will renew your concern and speak encouragingly without assuming you can give that person life yourself.

DETAILED SUMMARY: UNDERSTANDING 1 THESSALONIANS 4 AND 5

BACK TO CONTENTS

The teaching of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 has been examined through two connected Study Guides because of the importance of understanding Paul's inspired words within their original setting. Study Guide 65: Caught Up to Meet the Lord establishes the foundation, while Study Guide 66: Caught Up Together With Them in the Clouds continues the explanation through the gathering of believers and Paul's teaching concerning spiritual sleep, watchfulness and comfort.

Together, these Study Guides present one continuous teaching centred upon Jesus Christ. The subject is not a future physical departure of believers from the earth but the saving work through which Jesus Christ brings spiritually dead people into His life and gathers them into His one spiritual body. The message throughout is one of spiritual life, fellowship and hope in Him.

The Words Were Inspired; the Punctuation Was Supplied

The first important principle is that Paul's inspired words must govern their interpretation. Modern English punctuation, chapter divisions and verse numbers were supplied later to assist readers. Although these are useful, they must not determine doctrine independently of the wording, grammar, context and harmony of Scripture.

This becomes especially important in **1 Thessalonians 4:14-16**. The Greek expression DIA TOU IĒSOU means *"through Jesus,"* while EN CHRISTŌ means *"in Christ."* These expressions must be understood within Paul's continuing teaching concerning spiritual death, spiritual life and the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The meaning must arise from the inspired words rather than from an inherited picture of a future physical rapture. Scripture must interpret Scripture, and Paul's teaching must remain in harmony with the revelation of Jesus Christ throughout the New Testament. The wording and context must therefore come before assumptions created by later punctuation.

There Is No Holding Place Awaiting a Future Rapture

The teaching establishes that physical death does not separate a born-again believer from Jesus Christ. The believer already possesses His life, and that relationship is not interrupted when the physical body returns to the earth. Jesus Christ is not absent from those who belong to Him.

Scripture describes the body returning to dust and the spirit returning to God. Paul also speaks of being absent from the body and present with the Lord. There is therefore no need for a future physical rapture to reunite a believer with the Saviour who is already possessed.

The judgement of God is also a present reality in the response people make to Jesus Christ. While people remain physically alive, they hear the Gospel and respond to the truth revealed in Him. Those who believe pass from spiritual death into life, while those who reject Him remain in unbelief.

The Lord already knows those who are His. A future courtroom examination is not required for God to discover who belongs to Him. The spiritual condition in which a person leaves this physical life is already known to God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why do Paul's context and the believer's continuing life in Christ matter together?

Personal Reflection

When thinking about physical death, do you concentrate on fearful speculation rather than the assurance that Christ does not abandon those who belong to Him?

Action Step

Name the fear or question that troubles you. Explain how you will answer it from the Bible and rest in Christ's continuing life.

Those Who Are Without Are Spiritually Asleep

Paul first instructed the Thessalonian believers concerning their daily conduct towards those who were without. These were people outside Christ who did not yet possess the spiritual life found in Him. The believers were to live faithfully before them as witnesses of the life they had received.

Paul then spoke of those who were asleep. These expressions occur within Paul's continuing instruction and must not be separated simply because a verse division appears between them. The teaching identifies spiritual sleep with the condition of those who remain outside Jesus Christ.

This understanding is reinforced by the language of chapter 5. Paul contrasts those who are awake with those who sleep, children of light with those of darkness, and those of the day with those of the night. His own language establishes a continuing spiritual contrast.

A person who has been born again has passed from spiritual death into life. There is no third spiritual condition in which someone remains spiritually dead while possessing the saving life of Jesus Christ. Those who are spiritually asleep need to awaken, and their hope is Jesus Christ, whose voice can call them from spiritual death into life.

Through Jesus Christ the Spiritually Dead Receive Life

Paul's words in **1 Thessalonians 4:14** direct attention to Jesus Christ as the One through whom the spiritually sleeping are brought into life. The saving movement begins with Him and depends entirely upon His life-giving work. Human ability cannot produce this spiritual change.

The Greek expression DIA TOU IĒSOU is important because it directs attention to what takes place through Jesus. The person who is spiritually asleep cannot produce spiritual life through human effort, religious observance or the authority of another person. Only Jesus Christ gives spiritual life.

Human messengers may proclaim the Gospel, but the new birth is the work of God. Jesus Christ must speak to the heart through His Word and bring the spiritually dead into life. The messenger carries the Gospel, but the Person gives the life.

The comfort offered to the Thessalonians was therefore not that physically dead Christians would someday rise into the sky. It was that those who were spiritually asleep were not beyond hope while they remained physically alive and able to hear the Gospel. Jesus Christ could still call them from death into His saving life.

We Which Are Alive and Remain

Paul then contrasts those who are asleep with those who are alive and remain. Those who are alive possess the spiritual life of Jesus Christ. They have been born again, brought into His body by one Spirit and raised into a heavenly spiritual position in Him.

The expression EIS TĒN PAROUSIAN TOU KYRIOU must also be examined within this setting. The Greek word PAROUSIA carries the meaning of coming, arrival or presence, and Paul's wording must be understood in harmony with the fulfilled coming and present indwelling life of Jesus Christ. The believer possesses the Person now.

Jesus Christ fulfilled His promised coming at Pentecost in A.D. 31. The born-again believer is therefore not waiting for an absent Saviour to become present. Christ already dwells within His people as their spiritual life.

Those who are alive remain in the life they have received. Their faithful conduct does not produce or complete salvation but expresses the life already within them. The indwelling Christ remains the source of their spiritual life, growth and faithfulness.

The Lord Himself Shall Descend in a Shout

Paul describes the Lord descending with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God. These expressions belong together within the saving work of Jesus Christ. They direct attention to His authoritative call reaching those who are spiritually dead.

The shout represents His authoritative call. The voice of the Chief Messenger identifies the revelation and communication of God through Jesus Christ, who is not a created angel but God revealed through genuine humanity. The trumpet represents the clear proclamation of God's Word.

These are not three unrelated physical sounds accompanying a future descent through the atmosphere. They belong together in the work of Jesus Christ reaching people through His Gospel. The Lord Himself is the One whose voice gives life.

Jesus Christ must speak to the heart. The Gospel messenger carries His Word, but the messenger cannot produce spiritual life. Only the voice of the Son of God can awaken the spiritually dead and cause them to live.

The Dead, in Christ, Shall Rise First

Paul then declares that the dead in Christ shall rise first. The teaching examines the Greek expression EN CHRISTŌ within Paul's continuing argument and explains the spiritual movement from death into life. Those who are spiritually dead must hear Jesus Christ, receive His life and be raised in Him.

This resurrection is the new birth. The believer is quickened from spiritual death, raised in Christ and brought into His saving life. It is not a future event in which physically dead bodies must be reconstructed and raised from their graves.

The word *"first"* establishes the order of this saving work. Those who are spiritually dead must first become spiritually alive before they can share the fellowship of those who already possess the life of Jesus Christ. Spiritual life comes before spiritual fellowship with the living body.

First comes spiritual life in Christ; then comes the gathering together of those who share that life.

Caught Up Together With Them in the Clouds

Paul continues by describing those who are alive being caught up together with those who have now received spiritual life. The important expression is *"together with them."* The people who were spiritually asleep have heard the voice of Jesus Christ and received His life, so they can now share the same fellowship as those who were already spiritually alive.

The clouds must be understood through the symbolic language of Scripture. Under the former covenant, clouds were associated with God's presence and glory filling His dwelling place. Hebrews also describes the faithful people of God as a great cloud of witnesses.

The redeemed people of God form one spiritual company, and Jesus Christ is the Head of His body, the Church. Those who receive His life are brought by one Spirit into that one body. The gathering is therefore centred in Jesus Christ and His redeemed people.

The movement is not a physical departure from the earth. It is spiritual union in Jesus Christ, where those who have received life are joined with all who already possess that same life. They are gathered together in Him.

To Meet the Lord in the Air

Paul then speaks of meeting the Lord in the air. The Greek word AĒR means air, and its lexical meaning must not be changed. Its spiritual significance is established through the symbolic language and spiritual realities revealed elsewhere in Scripture.

Jesus used the wind to illustrate the unseen operation of the Spirit when teaching Nicodemus about the new birth. Pentecost was accompanied by the sound of a rushing mighty wind, while Ezekiel used wind and breath in a vision concerning life coming to the dead. These examples connect unseen natural realities with the spiritual work of God.

The air therefore represents the spiritual realm of the Spirit within Paul's teaching. To meet the Lord in the air is to meet Jesus Christ in the Spirit through the saving work of the new birth. The Person is received spiritually.

The believer does not travel into the natural atmosphere to meet an absent Christ. Jesus Christ comes to dwell within the believer through His Spirit. The meeting is the saving encounter in which the spiritually dead receive His life.

And So Shall We Ever Be With the Lord

Paul concludes his description with the assurance that believers shall ever be with the Lord. This is the continuing spiritual relationship established when Jesus Christ comes to dwell within His people. His presence is not temporary, and His people do not need another physical coming before they can enjoy fellowship with Him.

Paul declares that the Lord is that Spirit. He also identifies the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Christ and describes the New Covenant mystery as Christ in the believer. These truths establish the present reality of the indwelling Christ.

The born-again believer therefore possesses Jesus Christ now. The Person has come, His life is within, and His people belong to His one spiritual body. Their fellowship with Him begins through the new birth and continues because His life remains within them.

Physical death does not remove the believer from that relationship. The believer's confidence is not in a future physical gathering but in Jesus Christ Himself. To possess Him is to possess eternal life.

Let Us Not Sleep, As Do Others

Paul's teaching continues into chapter 5, where he contrasts children of light with those of darkness and those who are awake with those who sleep. These expressions confirm the spiritual distinction already developed throughout the teaching. Those who are spiritually awake possess the life of Jesus Christ, while those who sleep remain in spiritual darkness.

Those who are asleep need to be awakened. Their condition is not without hope while they remain physically alive because the Gospel can still reach them. They may hear the voice of Jesus Christ, believe and receive His saving life.

Paul then explains the saving purpose of Jesus Christ. He died so that those who receive His salvation might live together with Him. The purpose throughout is life and fellowship in Christ.

Paul's teaching is therefore encouragement rather than fear. His repeated instruction is that believers should comfort and strengthen one another. Their confidence rests in the saving work and life-giving voice of Jesus Christ.

Comfort One Another With These Words

The complete teaching brings us back to the words with which Paul concluded 1 Thessalonians 4.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:18**:

> *"Wherefore comfort one another with these words."*

Paul then repeated the same instruction in **1 Thessalonians 5:11**:

> *"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."*

These instructions reveal the intended outcome of the entire teaching. Believers are to take comfort in Jesus Christ, whose completed saving work provides the answer to spiritual death. The focus is not fear concerning a future event but hope in the Person who gives life.

Those who are asleep can awaken. Those who are spiritually dead can hear His voice and live, and those who receive His life are brought into His one spiritual body. They enter continuing fellowship with the Lord who now lives within His people.

The Church cannot produce spiritual life through human ability. The indwelling Christ sends His people to proclaim the Gospel, and through that proclamation the spiritually dead can hear the voice of the Son of God. Jesus Christ Himself gives the life.

The message of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 is therefore a message of hope. Jesus Christ gives life to the spiritually dead, gathers believers into His one spiritual body and remains their everlasting life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do hearing, life, rising, gathering and meeting form one spiritual sequence?

Personal Reflection

Has the teaching about being gathered into one body made you more willing to welcome those whom Jesus Christ has saved?

Action Step

Identify one relationship or fellowship habit that needs to change. Explain how you will treat another believer as someone who shares Christ's life with you.

CONCLUSION: COMFORT ONE ANOTHER WITH THESE WORDS

BACK TO CONTENTS

Paul did not conclude his teaching concerning those who were asleep by encouraging believers to anticipate a future physical rapture. He concluded by directing them to comfort one another. The hope he presented was centred upon Jesus Christ, whose saving work makes it possible for those who are spiritually dead to receive life and be brought into fellowship with Him.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:18**:

> *"Wherefore comfort one another with these words."*

The Thessalonian believers were not to look upon those who were spiritually asleep as though they were beyond hope. While they remained physically alive, they could still hear the Gospel, respond to the voice of Jesus Christ and be made alive. The same Lord who had brought the Thessalonian believers from spiritual death into life could bring others into that same saving reality.

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."*

This is the foundation of the comfort Paul was giving. The spiritually dead can hear, those who hear can live, and those who receive the life of Jesus Christ are brought into His one spiritual body. Through the new birth, they are no longer outside Christ but possess His indwelling life.

Paul continued the same teaching into chapter 5. He contrasted those who were awake with those who slept, and the children of light with those of darkness. He then returned directly to the saving purpose of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:9-10**:

> *"For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him."*

The comfort is found in Jesus Christ, who died so that people might live. Those who remain spiritually asleep are not without hope while they can still hear and respond to His Gospel. His saving work is complete, His voice gives life, and those who are born again enter living fellowship with Him.

The words *"whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him"* confirm the saving purpose running through Paul's teaching. Those who are already spiritually awake possess His life, while those who sleep need that same life. Jesus Christ is the One through whom both life and fellowship with Him are received.

Paul therefore repeated his instruction.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:11**:

> *"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."*

The two instructions belong together. Believers are to comfort and strengthen one another because Jesus Christ is the source of life, His Gospel continues to reach those who are spiritually dead, and His saving voice can awaken those who sleep. Those who hear and receive Him are brought into fellowship with the Lord and His one spiritual body.

The comfort of 1 Thessalonians 4 is therefore not the promise of escape from the earth. It is the saving reality of Jesus Christ Himself. He gives life to the spiritually dead, dwells within everyone who is born again and brings His people into continuing fellowship with Him.

Comfort one another with these words: Jesus Christ is our life, He remains the hope of those who are spiritually asleep, and those who hear His voice can live together with Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does Paul conclude this teaching with comfort and encouragement?

Personal Reflection

Do you know someone who is troubled by fear, bereavement or uncertainty about the Lord's presence?

Action Step

Identify one person you can encourage and the promise of Christ you will share. Explain how your words and conduct will express His love rather than offering empty reassurance.

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

What does being 'caught up together' mean in Paul's spiritual sequence? Explain how receiving life from Christ comes before being gathered with those already alive in Him.

2. Understanding

How do the cloud of witnesses and the spirits of just men made perfect explain the people gathered in Christ? Use a verse to show why this does not describe a physical ascent into the sky.

3. Personal Reflection

How has the teaching about being gathered into Christ's one redeemed company challenged your attitude towards a believer of another background? Use a Bible verse to explain the change.

4. Response to Truth

What does the assurance of Christ's indwelling life and continuing fellowship require you to reconsider about fear, discouragement or spiritual carelessness?

5. Action Step

Identify one person you could encourage with the truth that Jesus Christ gives life and remains with His people. What will you say or do, and when? Explain how your encouragement will direct them to Christ rather than to your own ability.

6. Early Response

Have you encouraged the person identified in Question 5? If yes, explain what you said or did and how the truth was received. If not, explain what held you back and how you intend to respond.

7. Ongoing Practice

How could being 'ever with the Lord' guide the way you encourage others over time? Explain how this hope relates to Paul's call to remain spiritually awake.

8. Doctrinal Clarity

How does 'whether we wake or sleep' in **1 Thessalonians 5:10** *fit Paul's contrast between spiritual life and spiritual sleep? Explain why the sleeping people still need Christ's life.*

9. Living the Truth

Someone says that Paul's comfort requires a future physical rapture and a waiting place for departed believers. How would you explain continuing life in Christ from Paul's connected teaching in chapters 4 and 5? Use a verse in your answer.

10. Final Response

How do receiving life, being gathered in Christ and meeting Him through His Spirit explain Paul's comfort? Describe what has become clearer to you and any personal response you want to make.