

# GOOD GRIEF

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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*1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

How do you deal with the death?

You can avoid the subject. You can obsess over it. Hoping for discoveries after your death, you can “cryofreeze” your body. Or you can do what Oracle founder Larry Ellison is doing. His biographer observes that part of Ellison thinks he’s smart enough to beat death: “Death is just another kind of corporate opponent that he can outfox.”<sup>1</sup> Ellison, who has proclaimed his wish to live forever, has donated more than \$430 million to anti-aging research. Well, you probably can’t do what Larry Ellison is doing, unless you have \$430 million that you don’t know what else to do with.

We may be able to lengthen life, but we won’t beat death, not as long as sin is around. Death entered the world when humans sinned. It will stay around as long as sin is around, and sin will be around until Jesus returns to vanquish it and usher in a new creation in which righteousness dwells, “in which God’s justice and joy and peace and love will grow like flowers on every roadside and come like showers on every spring morning.”<sup>2</sup>

Until then, between the times, between the resurrection of Christ and the return of Christ, how do we deal with death? For that matter, how do we deal with loss, for is not loss a kind of death, and is not death the ultimate loss? The apostle Paul in his writings doesn’t avoid death, obsess over it, or try to beat it. Instead, he confronts it head-on, not least in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

## The last enemy

The apostle Paul has been very positive toward the Thessalonians throughout this letter. Most of what he says has been applauding them and urging them to keep going. This passage begins the same way.

**1 Thessalonians 4:13:**

**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.**

Those who are asleep are those who are dead. Specifically, Paul is referring to the “dead in Christ” (1 Thessalonians 4:16b)—that is, believers in Jesus Christ who have died. Paul’s purpose in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is to inform the Thessalonians so that they “may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

Note that Paul does not discourage grief, only hopeless grief. Grief in the face of death is utterly appropriate, for death has not yet been destroyed. But it will be destroyed, and that is one of Paul’s points as the passage unfolds. In fact, Paul says elsewhere, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). When death is destroyed, “then shall come to pass the saying that is written” (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55). When death is destroyed, then grief will be inappropriate. In fact, grief will be utterly inconceivable. Because grief will one day be inconceivable, believers should, in the present, grieve appropriately, in anticipation of that day.

Notice that Paul’s purpose is not to answer our questions about the future; his purpose is to inform us so that we will grieve appropriately. Therefore, let his words inform us. Where they don’t inform us to the extent that we would like to be informed, let us believe that we don’t need to know everything and that, in fact, we’re better off not knowing everything. Let us believe that our heavenly Father knows what we need to know when we need to know it (Matthew 6:8).

Those who do not believe in Christ constitute, for Paul, “others who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). For Paul, only believers in Christ have reason to grieve hopefully. Certainly, many who don’t believe in Christ would say they have hope in some sort of happy afterlife, but Paul would say they’re whistling in the dark.

Some of us, like the Thessalonians, may be uninformed or misinformed. If we believe in Christ, may Paul’s words also help us to grieve appropriately. If we don’t believe in Christ, may his words help us to believe in Christ so that we may grieve appropriately.

## Empty the cup

We moderns don’t deal with death well because, quite frankly, we don’t like bad feelings. In fact,

we tend to apologize for them. Not many people apologize when they laugh publicly, but people will often apologize for crying publicly. We don't know how to grieve. It is popular these days to call a memorial service a "celebration of life." Although I am by no means opposed to celebrating someone's life, I am not in favor of denying those who loved the deceased the opportunity to mourn his or her death.

The psalms of lament tell us not to avoid bad feelings but to embrace them. Such psalms help us find words for our feelings, and as we find words for our feelings, we unlock them. Writing in a journal, composing poems, and crafting vignettes can be helpful exercises in feeling, expressing, and processing grief. The psalms of lament tell us to empty the cup of grief. As guides, consider Psalm 22 and Psalm 79. For my treatment of those psalms, see: [www.pbc.org/messages/from-groaning-to-praise](http://www.pbc.org/messages/from-groaning-to-praise) and [www.pbc.org/messages/the-cry-of-a-wounded-people](http://www.pbc.org/messages/the-cry-of-a-wounded-people).

If death is loss, then life is marred by all sorts of deaths—all sorts of losses. You lose a relationship, you lose a job, you lose your health, you lose a dream, you lose your old world. As the losses pile up, maybe you lose hope. Go to the psalms and grieve.

Or go to Shakespeare. At the end of *King Lear*, when virtually everyone dies and the stage is littered with corpses, Edgar says, "The weight of this sad time we must obey / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."<sup>3</sup> Yes, in the wake of death, or even in the wake of a lesser loss, lament: speak what you feel.

Where does grief take us?

## The 'intermediate state'

### 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17:

**For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.**

Because Jesus "died and rose again" (1 Thessalonians 4:14a), he will "bring with him" (1 Thessalonians 4:14b) the believers who have fallen asleep, which means that they also will rise from the dead at the "coming of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15b). Where are they now? Their bodies are in the ground, but Paul says elsewhere that he would expect to be, in some sense, in the presence of the Lord when he dies (Philippians 1:23). Likewise, Jesus told the rebel on the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Whatever the nature of the so-called "intermediate state," the time between death and resurrection, the intermediate state is just that: intermediate and therefore temporary. We hope not for heaven, so to speak; we hope for the resurrection of the dead—and for the new creation: the new heaven and the new earth, alternatively called the new heavens and the new earth (Romans 8:18-25, 1 Corinthians 15, Philippians 3:20-21, 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1). Paul sees Christ, in his resurrection, as "the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). As such, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees the full harvest: the resurrection of the dead in Christ and their participation in the new creation.<sup>4</sup>

We don't know precisely why Paul deemed it necessary to inform his readers of these things or how precisely they may have been uninformed or misinformed, but verse 15 at least indicates that they thought that their brothers and sisters who had died would be somehow disadvantaged at the coming of the Lord. They therefore may have been inclined to grieve hopelessly for the deceased. Paul is emphatic that those who have fallen asleep won't miss out.

While Paul refers to deceased believers as both "those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:14b) and "the dead in Christ" (1 Thessalonians 4:16c), he refers to living believers as both those "who are alive" (1 Thessalonians 4:15a) and those "who are left" (1 Thessalonians 4:15b). In a sense, the dead in Christ have left us. Their absence is reason to grieve, at least for a while. At the same time, in that we have been left, God's purpose for our lives is not yet complete.

## An endless worship service?

In popular conceptions of the afterlife, the intermediate state has become the final state. People talk of going to heaven when you die—true enough, if you believe in Christ. There are at least two problems with such formulations, however. First, such

formulations tend to leave the dead in heaven forever, often in disembodied or angel-like states, when their final destination is the new creation. Second, such formulations don't tend to leave the living with much to anticipate, for we humans don't resonate with disembodied or angelic bliss. If that's what God is offering, who can blame Larry Ellison for wanting to live forever here? Popular conceptions of the afterlife are not familiar enough to inspire hope, and, as John Eldredge observes, "you can only hope for what you desire":

*Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service. After all, the Bible says that the saints "worship God in heaven," and without giving it much more thought we have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks. Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news?<sup>6</sup>*

Therefore, because we don't find heaven all that appealing, we try to get everything we can out of earth, checking off items on our bucket lists, but earth, to paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, tumbles short of our dreams (page 97). Our destination is not heaven but the new heaven and the new earth, the new creation, which we will inhabit with new and eternal human bodies. The new creation will be an enhancement of the best parts of the present creation. It is pictured in the Scriptures as familiar enough to want and as unfamiliar enough to really want. Life in the new creation will be humanity enhanced, apart from the influence of evil. The new creation will be even more physical than the present creation, for there will be no decay. Wow!

## The coming and presence of the Lord

What does Paul mean when he speaks of the "coming of the Lord"?

The noun translated "coming" (parousia) can mean either "coming" or "presence." Paul used the word in both senses in connection with either the coming or presence of people (1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6, 10:10; Philippians 1:26, 2:12). He also used the word, as he does here, in connection with the future coming or presence of Christ, especially in his letters to the Thessalonians. Also, he speaks of the future "appearing" of Christ, using a different word (epiphaneia) to describe the same event (1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 1:10, 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13). Especially enlightening is 2 Thessalonians 2:8, where Paul uses both words, speaking of the "appearance of his coming," which in this case would be better translated

the "appearance of his presence," for how can an "appearance" come?

Although Paul depicts the Lord as descending from heaven, in the Scriptures heaven is pictured as being above us so that we will understand that it, and especially the God who dwells there, is different from us. Heaven is another dimension of reality, though for the time being a mostly unseen dimension. The word parousia was also used of the coming of a ruler to a city. The Thessalonians would no doubt be familiar with the coming of Roman rulers to cities, especially the Roman king, Caesar, who was called Lord. When Jesus Christ, the world's true Lord, arrives, he will upstage all the world's would-be Lords.

In a metaphorical sense, the Lord will descend from heaven. In a literal sense, the presence of the Lord will be revealed. What will happen then?

## Triumphal return

Jesus will receive the royal treatment—"a cry of command," "the voice of an archangel," and "the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16)—much as God was heralded when he "came down on Mount Sinai" (Exodus 19:20a), as Israel's King, to give his law to his people (Psalm 24:7-10). When the Lord comes, "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16d), receiving new bodies that are suited to the new and eternal age (Romans 8:11, 23). They will not be disadvantaged; in fact, they will rise first.

What about believers in Christ who are alive when he comes? They will be "caught up together with them [the formerly dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17a-b). If the dead in Christ rise first, those who are alive in Christ rise second, although technically if they're not dead, they don't rise, which is probably why Paul neither uses the word "rise" nor the word "second" in connection with them. Elsewhere, he says that everyone, both the dead in Christ and the living in Christ, will receive new, immortal bodies.

### 1 Corinthians 15:51-53:

**Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed,<sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.<sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.**



When Christ comes, he will “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21a).

Just as the coming of Jesus echoes the coming of God to Mount Sinai, the ascension of the living to meet the Lord echoes the prophet Daniel’s vision of the ascension of “one like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13b) who represents God’s people and comes up to God “with the clouds of heaven” (Daniel 7:13a) to be vindicated over his enemies and receive an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14). Daniel’s vision, of course, was fulfilled first by Christ, the representative Son of Man, in his resurrection and ascension. Believers in Christ likewise will be vindicated to reign with Christ in the new creation (Revelation 22:5). In the Scriptures, clouds often serve both as celestial vehicles and as signals for the divine presence.

Together, the living and the formerly dead will “meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). First, the Thessalonians should not grieve hopelessly because the dead in Christ will be resurrected. Second, the Thessalonians should not grieve hopelessly because they will be reunited with the dead in Christ at the coming of Christ.

Just as the word translated “coming” (*parousia*) was used to describe the coming of a ruler to a city, the word translated “meet” (*apantesis*) was used to describe the sending of a delegation from a city to receive the ruler. Josephus, a historian who lived in the first century, described the celebration that ensued when the new emperor, Vespasian, returned to Rome after quelling a Jewish rebellion that began in 66 A.D.: “All poured forth in such crowds—for to all it seems simpler and easier to go than to remain—that the very city then for the first time experienced with satisfaction the paucity of inhabitants; for those who went outnumbered those who remained.”<sup>7</sup> Just as Roman citizens celebrated the victory of their king, we will celebrate the victory of our king—his final victory over evil.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the city of kings, the city snubbed him. The so-called Triumphal Entry was in reality the Triumphal Approach, as pilgrims hailed him along the way. No one went out from Jerusalem to greet him, and no one welcomed him once he entered the city: “And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve” (Mark 11:11). Such will not be the case when Jesus comes again.

## Grieve hopefully

When someone you love dies, or when you suffer loss of another sort (e.g., the loss of a relationship, the loss of a job, the loss of health, the loss of a dream, the loss of your old world), by all means, grieve—but don’t grieve as others who have no hope.

When I traveled with a team to Bulgaria some years ago to teach the Scriptures in churches there, we stayed in the homes of locals. In one city, we stayed in the home of a woman whose son had died seven years earlier. Her house was a shrine to her son, with photos of him everywhere. All she wanted to talk about was her son. She wore black every day. Seven years on, she was grieving hopelessly.

The psalmists don’t simply grieve; they grieve purposely. Don’t wallow in grief; reach out to God through grief. Go to the psalms and lament. Find words to unlock your feelings. Empty the cup of grief. Don’t hold back, as if God can’t take your grief or fill your empty cup. When you empty the cup of grief, it can be filled with something else. Filled with what? Filled with hope. Hope for what?

Those of us who believe in Christ will be reunited with our brothers and sisters in Christ when he returns. What a meeting that will be! Moreover, for the believer in Christ, every death—every loss—will be turned into victory. Although it is true that some wounds will never heal completely until we see Jesus face to face, we will see Jesus face to face. Today is not forever, and forever is good.

Most of us, however, can’t embrace a hopeful outlook all at once—nor should we. It’s not as if we can simply flip a switch in our hearts. You don’t flip a switch; you pour out a cup. Just as you don’t empty the cup all at once, and have to process grief on an ongoing basis, God usually doesn’t fill the cup with hope all at once either. You cannot rush the process. Grief must be embraced, not defeated. It must be befriended, not banished. If you move through it too quickly, it will fester. Grieve and grope. Watch and wait. Watch and wait for God to fill the cup with the hope.

Although I am uncomfortable with a memorial service that marginalizes grief, I am equally uncomfortable with a memorial service that marginalizes hope. We should not only feel free to mourn the death of a loved one in Christ, we should also feel free to celebrate that person’s life—and rejoice that a new world is coming. Some years ago I attended a memorial service for a young man whose

father announced at the outset of the service, “This is going to be a celebration,” and as soon as he said those words, he began to weep (words unlock feelings). Indeed, we celebrated, and enjoyed our memories of the young man, but we also grieved.

Presumably because Paul’s purpose is to comfort believers concerning the dead in Christ, he doesn’t here speak of the fate of those who don’t believe in Christ. However, Jesus said “those who have done evil” (unbelievers) will be resurrected to face judgment (John 5:29), and Paul says elsewhere that “there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15). Those who don’t believe in Christ will not be with Christ (why would they want to be with him?), and, according to Paul, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

In the new creation, will those of us who believe in Christ therefore grieve hopelessly for those we have loved who, in virtue of their choice and God’s verdict, will be excluded from the new creation? Listen to a loud voice from the throne of God:

#### **Revelation 21:4:**

**He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.**

Quite simply, whatever could cause us grief won’t cause us grief, including the exclusion of loved ones. How can that be? Scholar G.K. Beale expects that “a new dimension will break into the old physical dimension, and the possibilities of new kinds of perception and of existence beyond present understanding will then be realized.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **Yes, but where?**

Jesus will come/appear again; all his followers, whether living or dead, will meet him; “and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17c). We are, of course, already “with the Lord”: he is Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23); he told his disciples, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b); and he dwells with us and even in us (Romans 8:10). When he comes/appears again, however, and when we receive new and eternal bodies, we will be with him in a new way.

Yes, we will always be with the Lord—but where? Paul doesn’t say, at least not explicitly.

Beginning in the 19th century, some biblical interpreters began to teach what they called “the rapture.” The doctrine, based primarily on 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, but also on a few other passages, was popularized by John Nelson Darby of Ireland and the Plymouth Brethren movement. Belief in the rapture took hold in the United States in the twentieth century with the widespread circulation of the Scofield Reference Bible. In more recent times, the rapture has featured prominently in Hal Lindsay’s book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and in the *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

According to this view, believers will meet Jesus in the air—before, during, or after a period of tribulation, usually understood to be seven years—in order to be taken to heaven, and the second coming proper, when Jesus comes to earth, will occur after the tribulation and usher in the so-called Millennium, which is conceived of as the reign of Christ on earth in advance of the final judgment and the new creation. In this view, the rapture is usually seen also in John 14:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-56.

In my view, neither Paul nor Jesus teaches that Jesus will return to take us to heaven. Instead, they teach that he will come to be with us on earth—the new earth, which will be part of the new creation (Romans 8:18-25, 2 Peter 3:3-13, Revelation 21:1-22:5). Here are some of my reasons for this interpretation (if such detailed reasoning doesn’t interest you, skip this section):

**First**, when citizens of a city went out to meet (apantesis) a coming ruler or some other dignitary, they did not meet him and then go to some other place. No, they escorted him back to the city. When the believers in Rome went out to meet (apantesis) Paul, Luke, and others, the visitors continued to Rome, presumably with the greeting party. Here’s Luke’s description:

#### **Acts 28:14b-16**

**And so we came to Rome. <sup>15</sup>And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. <sup>16</sup>And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.**

**Second**, when Paul used the word *parousia* in connection with the “coming” of people, he depicted those people as coming all the way to some place, not part of the way (1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6, 10:10; Philippians 1:26, 2:12). When ancient writers described the *parousia* of rulers to cities, they depicted them as coming all the way to those cities. When Jesus comes, he will come all the way to earth, or, to put it another way, he will appear on earth from the heavenly dimension.

**Third**, when the apostles watched Jesus ascend to heaven in a cloud, two angels told them, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). If (a) Paul wrote about a future coming of Christ from heaven being accompanied by clouds and if (b) Luke expected Christ’s return to mirror his departure, which was accompanied by a cloud, then it’s reasonable to assume that Luke and Paul are envisioning the same event. If Jesus went from earth to heaven and he will return in the same way, it’s also reasonable to assume that Paul means that Jesus will come from heaven to earth, not just to the air above the earth.

**Fourth**, Peter spoke to people in Jerusalem concerning the ascension and return of Christ, “whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago” (Acts 3:21). Peter seems to expect that when Jesus leaves heaven, which has received him, all things will be restored: the new creation will commence.

**Fifth**, when Paul, in Acts 24:15, and Jesus speak of the resurrection of the dead, there is no hint that believers are resurrected at a different time from unbelievers. Listen to Jesus in **John 5:28-29**:

**Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup>and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.**

An hour, or a time, is coming—not two hours or two times.

**Sixth**, Peter used the word *parousia* in connection with the first coming of Christ, which of course involved a coming to earth (2 Peter 1:16). It makes sense, therefore, that when Paul used the word in connection with another coming of Christ, he did so to depict Christ’s coming to earth, not to the air about the earth.

**Seventh**, if the dead in Christ are raised, why do they need physical bodies to be with the Lord in heaven? They are already with him in heaven without their bodies.

**Eighth**, the phrase “we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17c) is more in keeping with being with the Lord in one place (the new creation) than two places (heaven first, the new creation second). We will not “always be with the Lord” in heaven, but we will “always be with the Lord” in the new heaven and the new earth—the new creation.

**Ninth**, in Philippians 3:20-21, when Paul speaks of the resurrection of believers, he speaks to them as citizens of heaven, as opposed to citizens of Rome. The Roman king, Caesar, who was called Savior and Lord, would come to rescue and liberate a Roman colony such as Philippi if it was threatened. Paul evokes such imagery when he says that Christ, the true Savior and Lord, will come to transform our bodies. To rescue and liberate a colony, Caesar wouldn’t come part of the way to it. That Paul evokes such imagery suggests that Christ will appear on earth in connection with the transformation of our bodies, and the transformation of our bodies is clearly in view in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

**Tenth**, Paul says in Romans 8:18-25 that creation waits for the revealing of the sons of God, which he defines in Verse 23 as the “redemption” of the bodies of those who believe in Jesus—that is, the resurrection and transformation of their bodies. Creation waits because it too wants to be rescued from corruption, and Paul says it will be rescued when God’s people are resurrected and transformed. When the resurrection happens, new creation happens—and resurrection is clearly in view in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

**Eleventh**, those who believe that the Paul teaches that believers will be raptured into heaven usually draw a sharp distinction between the *parousia* (the rapture) in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and the “day of the Lord” (the second coming) in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. However, a natural reading of the two passages suggests that they refer to the same event.

**Twelfth**, when you read **2 Thessalonians 2:1-2**, it’s hard to understand how you can get a razor blade between the *parousia* and the day of the Lord:

**Now concerning the coming [parousia] of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup>not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either**



**by a spirit or a spoken word, or letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.**

**Thirteenth**, Paul equates the day of the Lord, the subject of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, with the parousia in 2 Thessalonians 2:8: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming [parousia].”

**Fourteenth**, if Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is trying to convince the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord has not yet arrived, and the rapture supposedly precedes the day of the Lord, why does he try to prove his point by observing that certain precursors to the day of the Lord (the “rebellion” and the advent of the “man of lawlessness”) have not yet taken place? If he expects the rapture to take place before such precursors, why doesn’t he say, “You know the day of the Lord has not yet come because you and I are still here”? Why would Paul flag precursors that the Thessalonians could never be present to see?

**Fifteenth**, Peter equates the parousia with the day of the Lord and says that when the day of the Lord comes, the old creation will be destroyed, or possibly purged, to make way for the new creation (2 Peter 3:3-13).

The evidence suggests that the parousia will occur on the day of the Lord, that the rapture is the second coming, and that the new creation commences with second coming. On the other hand, we can’t suppose that we have been told everything about how the consummation of the kingdom of God will unfold. In fact, we can assume we haven’t been told most things about how the consummation will unfold. God usually doesn’t tell us what he’s going to do or how he’s going to do it. More often, he tells us to trust him—his goodness and his power.

What would Paul have us do with his words concerning the coming/appearance of Jesus?

## Be encouraged

“Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Paul’s main point is to encourage the Thessalonians so that they will not grieve hopelessly for those who have died in Christ. No matter how we understand the rapture in this passage, the main point

is not negated (although it might be lost by those intent on arguing their position!). If we rise to meet Christ in the air and go off to be with him in heaven, and the new earth commences at some later point, be encouraged: do not grieve hopelessly. If we rise to meet Christ in the air and escort him back to the new earth, be encouraged: do not grieve hopelessly. Whether or not Christ comes first in a partial sense to remove us from earth temporarily, he will at some point come in a final and full sense to be with us on the new earth permanently. Please note: either way, we will always be with the Lord.

Moreover, I don’t think it matters much whether you believe in my interpretation of the rapture or not. On the other hand, I do think it matters whether you grieve hopelessly or not.

If you believe that we will be taken up to heaven when Jesus appears, and you’re right, I expect to be raptured with you. In such an event, I’ll be happy to turn to you and say, with more than a little excitement as we jet our way toward heaven (if in fact we literally jet our way to heaven), “Doggone it, you were right!”

## The main point

In any event, don’t lose sight of the main point: In the face of loss, particularly the death of a loved one in Christ, grieve—but grieve hopefully. Empty the cup of grief so that God can fill it with hope.

Encourage one another with these words.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>Matt Marshall, “Ellison Seeking Fountain of Youth *San Jose Mercury News*, April 28, 2001, A1.

<sup>2</sup>N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 102-02.

<sup>3</sup>*King Lear* V, iii, 342-3435.

<sup>4</sup>An alternative view, which believes in “sleep-death,” postulates that when we die and lose consciousness, the next thing we experience is the resurrection. Yet another view has it that when we die, we immediately pass into eternity, which supposedly transcends time. In this view, there really is no intermediate state.

<sup>5</sup>Paul invokes “a word from the Lord,” or, more likely, “the word of the Lord,” the gospel, to emphasize the veracity of his words. Paul equates the word of the Lord and the word of God with the gospel in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-8, 2:13. Also, to emphasize that the dead are not disadvantaged, Paul uses a double negative: literally, those who are alive will “not not” precede those who have fallen asleep.

<sup>6</sup>John Eldredge, *Journey of Desire* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 110-11, 117.

<sup>7</sup>Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 7.68-72 (7.4.1).

<sup>8</sup>G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 139.