Peace and perseverance in our Lord Jesus

From Psalm 40

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
And He reached down to me and heard my cry.
2He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud;
And He set my feet on a rock, making my footsteps firm.
3He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God;
Many will see and fear
And will trust in the Lord.*

What wonderful promises we have from the Lord! He is far above us in every way, yet He does care for us; He hears us; He will come to us. He is powerful and able to save us from every trial we face in this life. He will save us; He will bring us out of our difficulties no matter how badly we are stuck or how much we are out of control. He is the God of the impossible.

He will bring us to joy. We will praise Him and sing of all His glorious ways. We will be used by Him to bring others into His Kingdom when they see what He does for us.

The hard part, though, is in the first line: *waited patiently*. We don’t like that part. It’s hard. We want things to be better now. But notice how that comes before all the good stuff. The Bible lets us know many times that we must wait. We must wait for the Lord. When we face trials, we pray, we persevere, we suffer: But through all of it we wait.

Yes, waiting is hard; waiting patiently is harder still. But that is what we are called to do as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. It is how we show our trust in Him. We show that trust to ourselves; but more importantly, we show it to the world. All this glorifies God.

In trusting God while we wait, we will receive all the good promises of God.

In Christ’s love

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

I think these verses may begin, what is for most of us, the most intriguing part of 1 Thessalonians. And these verses are intriguing. They tell us of wonderful things that will happen when Jesus returns. The things that we are told are almost beyond belief; but they are to be believed because they are contained in the Bible, the word of God.

There are two facts about these verses: they describe some amazing events and they don’t give us very much detail. Our problem, then, is that we want to know all the details and we find it difficult to be content with what we do know. This leads to speculation; it leads to people having theories about these verses and then teaching them as doctrine. It leads to a lot of confusion. As we go through these verses, I will do my best to stick with exactly what we are taught. Hopefully, when we get through, we will have a clear understanding of what we are told here in God’s word.

Paul had certainly told the Thessalonian church that Jesus was coming back. That is a clear teaching in the Bible. That is part of the very basics of Christian belief: Jesus is the Christ; He was born of a virgin; He was crucified and died; He was buried; He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven; and He will come again. The Bible is very specific about the timing of His coming: we don’t know. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus tells us, “*But about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone*.”

However, we can consider the coming of Jesus to be imminent. It could happen at any time. The Thessalonians knew this, and they were ready. They were very expectant of the return of Jesus. But then a question arose. As time went on, some of the Christians died. What happened to them? If they died before Jesus came back, would they miss something? The Thessalonian church was concerned about their brothers and sisters in Christ who had passed away.

Paul wanted to reassure them that those who preceded them in death would be okay. He didn’t chide them for their questions. He again called them brothers, because they were dear to him. He didn’t want them to be uninformed. Part of Paul’s ministry as an apostle was to be a teacher; the last thing a true teacher wants is for his students to not know. He wanted them to have an understanding, as far as the Lord had revealed, of how things would work for the living and the dead when Jesus returned.

What Paul wanted his readers to be informed about was those Christians who were asleep. Make no mistake, the word “asleep” here is a metaphor for dead. This metaphor is used throughout the Bible. Many times, we read about the patriarchs or kings who “*slept with their fathers*”. Jesus uses this term for Lazarus and for Jairus’ daughter. The expression was used in pagan speech at the time and is still used today in our culture.

The word used in this way refers to physical death and not the concept of “soul sleep”. Soul sleep is the idea that when we die, our soul goes into a state of unconsciousness until the return of Christ. There are several verses in the Bible that let us know that this isn’t the case. The most straight forward is when Jesus told the thief beside Him on the cross “*Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*.” Another is Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:8, “*prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord*.” As soon as a Christian dies, their soul goes to be with the Lord and remains with Him.

Paul wants the church to be informed about what happens to departed loved ones in the Lord so that they “*will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope*”. What a beautiful hope we have, knowing that for followers of Christ Jesus, death has become a doorway into eternal life with our Saviour. We no longer need to fear death since it simply gets us where we want to go. And our hope is based on fact and promise from Almighty God, who never lies and will never go back on His promises. Our hope is a sure hope based on the word of God and the work of Jesus on the cross. Our salvation is not based on our own work.

In Paul’s world, and in our world at present, there is no hope like the one from Jesus. No matter how you look at it, non-Christians basically have no hope. Many of the Greeks taught that at death, one simply ceased to exist. This really leaves no purpose in living. Another teaching was that people simply continued their existence as shades in a dark and dreary land. There are many religions that teach happiness for those who are good enough. Well, that leaves the question: How do you know when you are good enough? There is no assurance.

The Christian knows he can’t be good enough. The Christian knows that he has to depend on Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and to be acceptable to God the Father. Because of this, we can have the hope that no-one else can have.

A note of caution here: There are those who will teach that a Christian ought not to grieve over the loss of a loved one who has died in the Lord. That is not what Paul is teaching here. We see grief lots of times in the Bible. We have the famous passage that Jesus wept over the death of His friend Lazarus and the sadness of Lazarus’ family. He expressed grief. Grief is one of the God-given ways for us to deal with tragic loss. When we lose a loved-one, we need to grieve. It is the process that we go through to settle our hearts in this life. We are just not to grieve as those with no hope. When a loved-one dies in Christ, the loss is ours; they have gained eternity with Jesus, never to be separated from Him again.

There is one more interesting thought about the Christian use of the death metaphor: sleep. It leaves the idea of an awakening. Just as we wake up from natural sleep, our physical bodies will one day wake up from the sleep of death. What a wonderful awakening that will be: We will see Jesus and we will be like Him.

Verse 14 begins with “*For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again*”. This is again a basic pillar of the Christian faith. The return of Jesus does not depend on whether or not we believe; Jesus is coming back whether we believe it or not. The important point here is that we believe this as Christians. The Bible makes it very clear that Jesus is going to return to the earth. When He does, it will not be in the form of an infant; He will not return in weakness as He did the first time. Be sure that Jesus will return in power and glory.

The reason this statement applies here is because we know that what happened to Jesus is what will happen to we who are His disciples. 1 Corinthians 15:20 tells us, *But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep*. Hearing of “first fruits” implies that more fruit is coming. In the Bible, the offering of first fruits ensures a bountiful harvest. So, what we have is a bountiful harvest of Christians who will be raised from the dead just like their Master, Jesus.

Notice here in verse 14 that Paul doesn’t use the euphemism “sleep” for Christ’s death. He bluntly states that Jesus died. He doesn’t want any confusion regarding what happened to Jesus. The man Jesus actually died; His physical body ceased to have life. He was dead in every sense we know in this world; and from this state of death, God brought Him back to life. How comforting it is to know, that God the Father wants His adopted sons and daughters to be with Him forever, just like He does His only begotten Son, Jesus. And He will make it happen.

Next Paul tells us, “*even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus*.” God the Father will bring with Jesus the souls of the redeemed. In this Parousia, in this second advent of Christ, He will not be alone. There will be a vast multitude with Him. It will be the souls of all those who died in Christ; it will be the souls of the Old Testament saints who died with faith in God for salvation.

In this verse we can see that it is God who will bring this about; it is God who will have all these souls with Jesus when He returns. This brings us back to God the Father being the only One who knows when this will all take place. In His perfect timing and according to His plan, He will have Jesus come back to earth to collect His people to Him bodily, and God will send these souls with Him.

Paul has an authority far above his own when he tells us what will happen. He tells us “*For we say this to you by the word of the Lord*”. In other words, what Paul is telling us comes directly from Jesus. Because these things come from Christ, we can believe them wholeheartedly and without any question. The question here is how did Paul get this word. There are two main possibilities. One is that it was a direct revelation to Paul. The other is that it is something Jesus said during His earthly ministry that isn’t elsewhere recorded.

The first option considers that Paul did receive revelation directly from Christ. Certainly when he was on the road to Damascus, He encountered the risen Lord. In order for him to be a biblical apostle, He had to see the risen Lord Jesus with his own eyes. We also know that Paul had a powerful experience in which he was taken to heaven.

2 Corinthians 12:1-2

*Boasting is necessary, though it is not beneficial; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.*

Paul learned things while he was in heaven, however, he apparently wasn’t allowed to say much about what he heard or wasn’t able to. He said he “*heard inexpressible words*”. Regardless, we know that Paul heard things directly from the Lord.

The other possibility involves a saying of Jesus that isn’t recorded elsewhere in the Gospels. This has also taken place. There are several examples in the Bible where something is attributed to Jesus that we don’t find in the Gospels. One good example is in Acts 20. This is the account of Paul stopping for a short while in Asia in order to say farewell to the Ephesian elders. In verse 35 he tells them, “*remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive*.’” Jesus said this, but this is the only place it is recorded.

The important thing is not how Paul got these words, but that they are from Christ. We as Christians believe the whole Bible. It was written by men, but they were “carried along” by the Holy Spirit. All of the Bible is the word of God. But in a case like this where the verses are directly from Jesus, they carry a special weight.

For example, consider 1 Corinthians 15:29, *For otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them*? Nothing about being baptized for the dead is said anywhere else in the Bible. Apparently, Paul was referring to a practice that was taking place in order to make a point. He was not endorsing the practice. There is no reason to institute the practice of being baptized for the dead based on this scripture. The words are true, the practice was taking place, but there is no compelling reason for us to do it.

On the other hand, these verses here in 1 Thessalonians have weight; they come from words that are directly from Jesus. We need to pay attention to them and act accordingly. This is important because these verses describe something we’ve never seen before, never experienced before. What will take place when Jesus comes back sounds fantastic. But that’s because it is fantastic. It will be an unprecedented display of the glory of Jesus and of God the Father.

What an amazing thing this will be to see. And we will see it, whether we are still alive or whether we have fallen asleep.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as in the Lord’s supper, we proclaim Your death. We acknowledge that You died and were buried. But Lord, our hope and joy are in Your resurrection. You have defeated death and so we know that we will live forever in You. We also proclaim that You live now and forever more.

We also confess Your second advent. You will come again to this earth and establish Your Kingdom here. We look forward to Your rule and to being subjects of Your kingship. It will be good to be among all of those who have been redeemed by Your work on the cross. All of us will be there only because of You, by the grace of the Father.

We ask that Your Holy Spirit keep in our minds that we are subjects in Your kingdom now. Help us to act as Your citizens in this life, even if the Kingdom of Heaven is invisible to us now. Although we can’t see it, it is real. Guide us in our kingdom work so that we are busy when our Master returns.

It is in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ we pray

Amen