

The Translation of the Church

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the daily expectation of the early church, the doctrine of translation, and the certainty of Christian hope, emphasizing the importance of loving the Lord's appearing.

Scripture: Daniel 12:2, Matthew 24:31, John 14:1, 1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "Eschatology", "Resurrection"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the daily expectation of the early church regarding Christ's return, highlighting the Old Testament predictions of both His first and second coming. He explains the doctrine of translation introduced in John 14, revealing a new purpose of God before establishing the millennial kingdom. Walvoord discusses the order of resurrection and translation, addressing the Thessalonians' questions about the timing of their loved ones' resurrection. He emphasizes the certainty of Christian hope based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, urging believers to love His appearing and be prepared for His return.

Transcript

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Daily Expectation of the Early Church

The fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians contains one of the outstanding prophetic or eschatological passages of the New Testament. In this epistle there is constant reference to future things, each chapter closing with some allusion to prophecy. It was typical of the early church to have daily expectation that Christ would return. None of the apostles or early Christians, however, realized that the church age in which we find ourselves would be extended two thousand years. They, of course, did not set any date for the return of the Lord, but they were looking for Christ's coming in their lifetime, and this expectation continued in the early church fathers.

In the Old Testament there had been many predictions concerning Christ's coming, including His first as well as His second coming. As far as the Old Testament revelation was concerned, both comings were seen in one picture. The disciples did not understand the distinction between the two comings because the Old Testament does not make clear that there was to be a period of time between the first and the second coming of Christ. The disciples anticipated that when Christ came the first time He would fulfill the

prophecies that actually pertained to His second coming, such as the earthly reign of Christ, the kingdom of righteousness and peace, and the deliverance of the Jews from their enemies, the Romans. They confidently expected that Christ would reign and that they would reign with Him. That is why they were so disappointed and disillusioned when Christ began to tell them that it was necessary for Him to die. They could not fit this into the picture. They thought Christ was going to bring in the Messianic kingdom immediately.

Doctrine of Translation Introduced in John 14

In Chapter 14 of John, in the very shadow of the cross, Christ reveals an amazing new revelation which He had not tried to teach them before, that is, that there was another purpose of God to be fulfilled first before bringing in the millennial kingdom. Christ told the disciples that He was going to leave them and go to heaven, that He would prepare a place for them in heaven, and that He would come back to receive them unto Himself. In other words, He revealed to them that before He fulfilled His purpose to bring in a kingdom on earth He was going to take them home to glory first. He would come back for them and take them to dwell with Him in the Father's house in heaven before His return to the earth. This truth, of course, was not completely understood by the early Christians, just as it is not completely understood by many Christians today, but it inspired a daily expectancy of His return. They were looking for Christ to come and take them home to glory. This was not death, though of course when a Christian dies we believe that he is "absent from the body" and "present with the Lord." They were looking for Christ to come and take them home to glory without dying.

The Order of Resurrection and Translation

Though Paul had been in Thessalonica a short time, it is quite clear that he taught the Thessalonian Christians this truth. As this epistle makes plain, they had no doubt as to the truth of the coming of Christ for them. But there was a problem which Paul had not made clear to them. That was the question concerning the time when their loved ones who had died in Christ would be raised. It is evident that Paul had taught them that there would be a number of resurrections in a chronological order as the Scriptures portray--not just one general resurrection as some believe today. The question in their minds was: When, in the order of the various resurrections, would the loved ones in Christ be raised? Apparently they thought they would be caught up to be with the Lord at any time and that the resurrection of their loved ones would be delayed, possibly until after the great tribulation when Christ came back to establish His kingdom. They wanted some instruction on this point. Paul writes this letter to answer this question.

The Certainty of Christian Hope

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 Paul states: "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." One of the great facts of the Christian faith is that we have hope when our loved ones in Christ are taken away from us in death. Christians often fail to realize the hopelessness that characterizes heathen religions. There is no hope in the future life apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. A Christian has a wonderful hope that after this life there is going to be a glorious, unending existence in the presence of God with all the joy and ecstasy that will be ours when we are joined to Christ and with our loved ones in Christ who have gone on before us. So Paul tells the Thessalonians that he does not want them to have the attitude of the pagan world which has no hope, but instead he wants them to enter experimentally into the glory of the hope that is before them.

In verse 14 the ground for that hope is given. How certain is our hope? "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." In other words, the precious truth concerning the coming of Christ for His own is as certain as the central doctrine of the death and resurrection of Christ. Unless we are absolutely certain concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, we are not certain in our Christian hope. The place to begin is at the cross of Christ. It is there that Christ died for our sins; it is there we learn that we had a substitute--one who was able to save us and one who provided a sufficient sacrifice for our sin. We do not progress in our Christian faith until we come to the cross. Linked with the cross is the resurrection of Christ which is God's seal and the evidence or the apologetic for our Christian faith. Here is the stamp of certainty: Christ rose from the dead. If we believe that Christ died for us, if we believe that Christ rose from the dead, and really believe it by receiving Jesus Christ as our Savior, then we have a ground for hope.

Loving His Appearing

One of the reasons why so many in these days do not consider seriously the coming of Christ for them is that they have not been at the cross of Christ enough. Pulpits that do not proclaim the death of Christ and His resurrection can hardly be expected to preach the coming of the Lord. It is all tied together. If we accept what the Scriptures teach about the first coming of Christ and put our trust in Him, then there will be planted in our hearts an earnest desire to see the Savior, and the truth of His coming for us will be exceedingly precious. Do we really love the Lord's appearing? Does it mean anything that Christ might come back today? There are many Christians who may have it as a part of their creed, but not as a living expectation. The difficulty is that their hearts and minds are not really fixed on Christ. We will love the appearing of the Lord in direct proportion as we love the Lord Himself. If we love Him, if we long to see Him who first loved us, then the truth of the Lord's coming and the fact that He could come today will be a precious truth.

Them Which Are Asleep

In verse 14 there is the statement: "Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." Reference is made in verse 13 and in verse 15 to "them which are asleep," and in verse 14 to them "which sleep in Jesus." What does it mean? Sleep is a softened expression for death, which for a Christian is very much like sleep. We understand from Scripture that it refers to bodies which are laid in the grave. As far as our souls and spirits are concerned, we go immediately into the presence of God, into the conscious enjoyment of heaven, for "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord." We believe in the sleep of the body, but we do not believe in the sleep of the soul. Those whose bodies are sleeping in the grave, according to this Scripture, will be resurrected when Christ comes back.

There is a problem in verse 14 in the statement, "them also which sleep in Jesus." Literally, it is "them also which sleep through Jesus," the preposition being not in according to the Greek New Testament, but through. What does it mean to sleep through Jesus? The meaning is that when a Christian dies, his hope of being in the presence of God is made possible through Jesus. Our loved ones who are asleep through Jesus go to sleep in the certain hope of waking. Some have taken the expression "through Jesus" to go with "shall God bring with him." This is also true and may be the meaning of the expression. All our hope is certainly "through Jesus."

The Time of the Resurrection

In verse 15 and following Paul answers their main question. This question was not "Is the Lord coming?" or "Are we going to be with the Lord?" They believed that. The question was: "What is going to happen to our loved ones who have preceded us in death?" Some of the Thessalonians may have died a martyr's death. The expression "asleep through Jesus" could mean this. In any case, in the few months since Paul had been in Thessalonica these had slipped away from their mortal bodies. It reminds us of the uncertainty of life. Whether we are young or old, whether well or in poor health, we do not know how much time God is going to give us to serve Him in this world. These few in the Thessalonian church who had already died in Christ were illustrations of the uncertainty of human life. We should be living every day in such a way that if it is our last day on earth it will be a day well spent in the Master's will.

Because some had gone on to be with the Lord, Paul writes the Thessalonians in verses 15 and 16: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent [or "shall not precede"] them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first." The question had been asked: "When will the dead in Christ be raised?"

The answer is: "The dead in Christ will be raised before we go to see the Lord." Then it follows, verse 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." This passage teaches that when Christ comes back He will come back to the atmospheric heaven. When that occurs and the other events which are pictured here, Christians whose bodies have been in the grave will be resurrected, their bodies will be transformed into resurrection bodies and they will meet the Lord in the air. All of this will take place in a split second before living Christians are translated from these bodies of flesh into resurrection, immortal, incorruptible bodies.

The Translation of Living Saints

The companion passage to 1 Thessalonians 4 is the revelation given in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. Just as 1 Thessalonians 4 teaches about the dead in Christ, so 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 teaches concerning the translation of the living saints. It reveals that they will be transformed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and will be given immortal, incorruptible bodies. This Corinthian passage teaches very plainly the order of the resurrection of Christians. It is going to occur just a moment before the translation of the church. Those rising from the grave and the church on the earth are going to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

The Scriptures also seem to make it very clear that when Christ comes for His own He will take them to heaven where He has gone now to prepare a place for us in the Father's house (John 14:1-3). Thereafter on the earth, while the church is in glory, will take place the great climactic event of this age--the great tribulation, and the outcalling of a great many Jews and Gentiles even in that awful time who come to trust in Christ. There will be many martyrs in this period. The climax will come when Christ returns in power and glory with the angels and with the church from heaven to set up His righteous kingdom on the earth.

The Shout of Command

There are some aspects of the revelation that deserve closer study. In verse 16 it is stated that the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. This word for shout is a peculiar word. It is a word for a command. It is the shout of a military officer giving a command such as "Forward, march." When Christ comes back He will give a shout of command. In Chapter 11 of John the account is given of Lazarus

being raised from the dead. When Christ went to the tomb and said, "Lazarus, come forth," Lazarus came forth. Some have commented that if Christ had left off the name of Lazarus, all the dead would have come forth. Such was the authority and sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lazarus was not resurrected in the sense that we will be. He was restored to a mortal body and in due time, as age came upon him, it can be presumed that he died a natural death and was returned to the tomb. Christians will be resurrected like the resurrection body of Christ and will have a resurrection body which will never wear out, which will never be subject to death or disease or pain, a body which will last for all eternity, suited for the glorious presence of the Lord.

The Voice of the Archangel

In attendance was the voice of the archangel, who is none other than Michael, the chief of the angels, and the special protector of Israel. He also gives a shout. The Bible does not explain why Michael gives this shout or why he should be included. The Scriptures do reveal, however, that there is a great battle going on, a battle which began in the Garden of Eden and perhaps even before, and has continued through the present age. This battle is against the forces of darkness, the forces of Satan and the wicked angels and the demons who are associated with him. This is why Paul tells us that we wrestle not with flesh and blood. This is why we need to pray without ceasing. This is why we need to come to God for protection, care, and guidance. When the archangel speaks, it is a shout of victory not only for men but a shout of victory for the angels. It is a great victory for the angels when Christ comes for His church. Even though it is a work of Christ and not the angels, the archangel rejoices and exults in the tremendous victory over the forces of evil that is occasioned by the resurrection of the church from the dead.

The Trump of God

Another significant expression is "the trump of God." There are many trumpets mentioned in Scripture. There were trumpets in the Old Testament at the beginning of each month. There was the feast of trumpets and countless different trumpets. In the order of march, trumpets were used. The trumpet seems, in Scripture, to be a sign of assembling, a sign of going forward, of taking a new step, of unfolding something that has not been revealed before. The sounding of the trumpet here is like the sounding of the trumpet to an army. It is the call to forward march. So in this passage there is the shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God. These are three separate things, but they picture to us one grand event: the coming of Christ for His church, and the translation of the church living and dead from scenes of earth to the scenes of heaven.

Some students of Scripture have had difficulty with the trump because they find other trumps in the Bible. For instance, in the Book of Revelation there is mention of seven trumpets. These are part of the dramatic sequence of events unfolded in what Christ called the great tribulation. Revelation presents first of all seven seals. Out of the seventh seal there comes a series of events which is called the seven trumpets, and out of the seventh trumpet comes another series of events known as the seven bowls of the wrath of God or the seven vials. These picture in very graphic language in the Book of Revelation the climactic events of the great tribulation leading up to the second coming of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15 there is mention of the last trump and some have said: "If this is the last trump, it must be the seventh trump of Revelation." That certainly is not true! Anyone who will study the subject of trumpets from Genesis to Revelation will find that there are many trumps. In fact, the last trump of Revelation is not the last trump in the Bible at all. At the second coming of Christ, which is after the seven

bowls of wrath, there still is another trump that calls the elect, mentioned in Matthew 24:31.

Is this trump of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 the same as the seventh trump of the Revelation? What do the seven trumpets of Revelation do? Every one of them is a judgment of God upon a Christ-rejecting world. They assemble no one; they are not symbols of salvation; they are not symbols of deliverance; there are no resurrections; they are symbols of judgment upon men living in the world who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ.

By contrast, what is the significance of the trump of 1 Thessalonians 4? It is a call addressed to the saved, to those who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a trumpet of deliverance, of grace, and of mercy. God is dealing with His saints only in this trump and there is absolutely no connection with judgment upon unbelievers. The only similarity is that in both cases there are trumps. Simply because there is mention of the last trump in 1 Corinthians 15 does not mean that it is the last trump in God's whole program.

At Dallas Theological Seminary there are classes regulated by a system of bells. These bells ring several times each hour. The question sometimes arises concerning what bell has been ringing. There is a series of bells: a three-minute warning bell, then the bell to start the class, another warning bell five minutes before the end of the class, and finally the last bell closing the class period. When the warning bell preceding the beginning of the class rings, someone might ask, "Is that the last bell?" The answer would be, "No, that is the first bell." A few minutes later the last bell--which is the bell that begins the class--would ring. After forty-five minutes, the warning bell near the end of the class session would ring. Someone then might ask, "Is that the first bell?" The reply of course would be, "Yes, that is the first bell." In another five minutes, the bell would ring again--the last bell for the class hour. In a few minutes the whole cycle of bells begins again for the next hour. The last bell for one class hour would ring before the first bell of the next hour. How ridiculous it would be to make all the "last bells" one and the same. So it is with the trumpets of Scripture. The last trumpet for the church is long before any of the trumpets of Revelation.

Meeting the Lord in the Air

The Thessalonians passage continues with another tremendous revelation. "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." This Scripture does not reveal where we are to go with the Lord, but, as has been already indicated, John 14 tells us plainly that when Christ comes for us He will take us to the Father's house in heaven. When we meet the Lord in the air, we shall assemble in the atmospheric heaven and from there go to the third heaven, which is the immediate presence of the Father. This is indicated in the last part of the preceding chapter where Paul speaks of our being in the presence of God the Father, unblamable in holiness.

It will be a wonderful event when you and I who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ in this life stand in His presence. In that triumphant moment we will be like Christ for we are told in 1 John 3 that we will be perfectly holy. We will be cleansed from every spot and wrinkle and every sign of age and corruption. We will be a perfect and a beautiful bride for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and shall be with Him forever. Whether Christ is in heaven or reigning on the earth, or in the new earth or the new heaven in eternity future, wherever Christ is there shall the church also be. We are going to be with the Lord forever.

The Dead in Christ

A fascinating sideline study is the expression "the dead in Christ" (v. 16). What does it mean to be "in Christ" and who are the dead in Christ? Obviously the "dead in Christ" are those who in life were in Christ and have died a physical death. In other words, their bodies have been laid in the grave and their spirits have gone to heaven. This expression occurs about forty times in the New Testament and in most of these instances refers to our position in Christ. When a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior and trusts in Him as the Son of God, as the one who died for him on the cross and who shed His blood for his sins and rose in triumph, God does something. He saves his soul.

At the very moment God saves us many wonderful things happen. Lewis Sperry Chafer in his book *Salvation* lists thirty-three things that occur instantaneously the very moment a person puts His trust in Jesus Christ. One of the things that occurs is that we are placed in Christ which the Scriptures explain by telling us that we are baptized into one body and are baptized into Christ. We become an integral part of the organism which is the church of Jesus Christ in the world. This occurs the instant we really trust in Christ. Every genuine Christian is equally in Christ. First Thessalonians 4 teaches that the dead in Christ will be raised when Christ comes back. It is a selective resurrection. All dead will not be raised. The Scriptures make it plain that unsaved people will not be raised until many years later after the predicted millennium as is made very clear in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation. The question which has bothered Bible students is whether the dead in Christ include all the saints who have died up to this point or does it include only the saints of this dispensation, that is, from the Day of Pentecost until the present time?

C. I. Scofield, who edited the Scofield Reference Bible which has been such a blessing to countless numbers of readers, says in a note on 1 Thessalonians 4 that the dead in Christ includes all the saints. Lewis Sperry Chafer, who was for nearly two decades Scofield's associate, after studying the question for many years came to a different conclusion, that the expression the "dead in Christ" refers only to the saints of this dispensation. If the translation occurs before the time of great tribulation pictured in the Bible, then the resurrection of the Old Testament saints would occur after the tribulation in connection with Christ's return to establish His kingdom. If two men of God like Scofield and Chafer differ, how can we determine the correct interpretation? The key seems to be in the phrase "in Christ."

This expression "in Christ" in every one of its many instances in the New Testament refers only to the saints of this dispensation. As far as the expression "the dead in Christ" indicates, only those in Christ are raised. Of course, all the saints are in Christ in the sense that Christ is their substitute, but the question is whether they are in the body of Christ, baptized into His body, as the Scriptures picture.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the Old Testament saints, as it is revealed in the Old Testament itself, relates the event to the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. By way of illustration, Daniel 12:1 deals with the great tribulation. Daniel 12:2 speaks of many being raised from the dust of the earth. If that is a genuine resurrection, it is a clear indication that according to Daniel the resurrection of the Old Testament saints occurs after the tribulation. The resurrection of the church, however, occurs before the tribulation. There is no explicit teaching anywhere in the Bible that reveals that the Old Testament saints are resurrected at the time the church is resurrected. In other words, the two events are never brought together in any passage of Scripture. The best explanation of the expression "dead in Christ" is to refer it to the church alone.

The Comfort of the Lord's Return

The Thessalonians were having a hard time and this wonderful truth of the coming of the Lord, the resurrection of their loved ones, and their being gathered together to be with the Lord was a joyous prospect. Paul writes accordingly, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." This is another good reason why the Lord is going to come for His church before the tribulation. Paul did not tell these Thessalonian Christians: "Now if you endure through the tribulation time, if you survive that awful period, then you will see your loved ones at the end." That would not have been an encouragement to them. They were in trouble already and no doubt they had been taught that the time of great tribulation would be much worse than the trouble they then had. Instead, Paul lifts up their eyes to contemplate the coming of the Lord and they were comforted; they were encouraged by the fact that the Lord would come at any time to receive them unto Himself.

The Challenge of the Truth

This very precious truth of the Lord's return is certainly very important and one that is most significant, but it depends on our personal relationship to Jesus Christ. Are we really trusting Him? Is our heart, our faith, our life really centered in the Lord Jesus Christ? Some Christians are actually afraid of the doctrine of the Lord's coming, and of the thought that the Lord might come today. Such an attitude is born of ignorance and unbelief. Oh the prospect, the joy of looking forward to the coming of the Lord, and of resting in these precious truths! There are so many ills of life that nothing can heal except the Lord's return. How many loved ones are on the other side and how many problems of this life, incurable diseases, pain, sorrow, difficulties will be made all right. As we face the duties and the challenges and the trials of life, God has given us this blessed hope, this hope of the Lord's return. May we take it to our bosoms, may we live in its reality, and may our hearts be refreshed by this precious truth. This hope can be the certain prospect of anyone who will trust in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who loved us and died for us, who shed His blood that we might be saved, and who rose in victory that we might have hope.

Questions

1. Where is the doctrine of the rapture first introduced in the Bible?
2. What was the problem which the Thessalonians had concerning the relationship of resurrection and translation?
3. Is there evidence that God wants believers to understand prophecy?
4. How does prophecy relate to comfort?
5. How certain is the hope of the Lord's return?
6. What does it mean that Christ will bring those "which sleep in Jesus" with Him and why does He do it?
7. What is Paul's authority for his teaching on the rapture?
8. Explain how the shout of the Lord, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God relate to the rapture.
9. Who responds first to the command to be raptured and how does this solve the problem of the Thessalonians?
10. Where do believers meet Christ?

11. Is there any indication in Scripture where the saints will go after they meet Christ in the air?
12. What does the expression "the dead in Christ" mean?
13. In what sense is the Lord's return a comfort to the Thessalonians and to us?
14. Does Paul predict any events as preceding the rapture of the church in this passage?

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/the-translation-of-the-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net