

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 emphasizes the hope and urgency of Christ's return and the resurrection of the faithful.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13:3

Topics: "Second Coming", "Resurrection Hope"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the certainty of the Second Coming of the Lord, emphasizing that those who are alive will not precede those who have fallen asleep in Christ. He delves into the credibility of the prophets' visions and the authority of Paul's words spoken by the Spirit of God. Chrysostom highlights the events surrounding the Lord's descent from heaven, the resurrection of the dead in Christ, and the gathering of believers to meet the Lord in the air, encouraging believers to find comfort in these words and prepare for the honor of meeting the Lord.

Transcript

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in nowise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

The Prophets indeed, wishing to show the credibility of the things said by them, before all other things say this, The vision which Isaiah saw Isaiah 1:1; and again, The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah Jeremiah 1:1, Septuagint; and again, Thus says the Lord; with many such expressions. And many of them even saw God sitting, as far as it was possible for them to see Him. But Paul not having seen Him sitting, but having Christ speaking in himself, instead of Thus says the Lord, said, Do you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me? 2 Corinthians 13:3 And again, Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ. For the Apostle speaks the things of Him who sent him; showing that nothing is of himself. And again, I think that I also have the Spirit of God. 1 Corinthians 7:40 All those things therefore he spoke by the Spirit, but this, which he now says, he heard even expressly from God. As also that which he had said discoursing to the Elders of Ephesus, It is more blessed to give than to receive, he heard among things not recorded. Acts 20:35

Let us then see what he now also says. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in nowise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the

Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the last trump. For then, he says, The powers of the heavens shall be shaken. Matthew 24:29 But wherefore with the trumpet? For we see this on Mount Sinai too, and Angels there also. But what means the voice of the Archangel? As he said in the parable of the Virgins, Arise! The Bridegroom comes. From Matthew 25:6 Either it means this, or that as in the case of a king, so also shall it then be, Angels ministering at the Resurrection. For He says, let the dead rise, and the work is done, the Angels not having power to do this, but His word. As if upon a king's commanding and saying it, those who were shut up should go forth, and the servants should lead them out, yet they do this not from their own power, but from that Voice. This also Christ says in another place: He shall send forth his Angels with a great trumpet, and they shall gather together his Elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Matthew 24:31 And everywhere you see the Angels running to and fro. The Archangel therefore I think is he, who is set over those who are sent forth, and who shouts thus: Make all men ready, for the Judge is at hand. And what is at the last trumpet? Here he implies that there are many trumpets, and that at the last the Judge descends. And the dead, he says, in Christ shall rise first. Then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Ver. 18. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but those of the domestics who have offended remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For He received Him up in the clouds, and we shall be caught up in the clouds. Acts 1:9 Do you see how great is the honor? And as He descends, we go forth to meet Him, and, what is more blessed than all, so we shall be with Him.

Who shall speak of the mightinesses of the Lord, and make all His praises to be heard? Psalm 106:2, Septuagint How many blessings has He vouchsafed to the human race! Those who are dead are raised first, and thus the meeting takes place together. Abel who died before all shall then meet Him together with those who are alive. So that they in this respect will have no advantage, but he who is corrupted, and has been so many years in the earth, shall meet Him with them, and so all the others. For if they awaited us, that we might be crowned, as elsewhere he says in an Epistle, God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect Hebrews 11:40, much more shall we also await them; or rather, they indeed awaited, but we not at all. For the Resurrection takes place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

But as to the saying, that they are gathered together; they arise indeed everywhere, but are gathered together by the Angels. The former therefore is the work of the power of God commanding the earth to give up its deposit, and there is no one who ministers in it, as He then called Lazarus, Lazarus, come forth John 11:43; but the gathering is the work of ministers. But if Angels gather them together, and run to and fro, how are they caught up here? They are caught up after the descent, after that they are gathered together.

For this is also done without any one being aware. For when they see the earth agitated, the dust mingling, the bodies rising perchance on every side, no one ministering to this, but the shout being sufficient, the whole earth filled (for consider how great a thing it is that all the men from Adam unto His

coming shall then stand with wives and children) -- when they see so great a tumult upon the earth -- then they shall know. As therefore in the Dispensation that was in the Flesh, they had foreseen nothing of it, so also will it then be.

When these things then are done, then also will be the voice of the Archangel shouting and commanding the Angels, and the trumpets, or rather the sound of the trumpet. What trembling then, what fear will possess those that remain upon the earth. For one woman is caught up and another is left behind, and one man is taken, and another is passed over. Matthew 24:40-41; Luke 17:34-35 What will be the state of their souls, when they see some indeed taken up, but themselves left behind? Will not these things be able to shake their souls more terribly than any hell? Let us represent then in word that this is now present. For if sudden death, or earthquakes in cities, and threatenings thus terrify our souls; when we see the earth breaking up, and crowded with all these, when we hear the trumpets, and the voice of the Archangel louder than any trumpet, when we perceive the heaven shriveled up, and God the King of all himself coming near -- what then will be our souls? Let us shudder, I beseech you, and be frightened as if these things were now taking place. Let us not comfort ourselves by the delay. For when it must certainly happen, the delay profits us nothing.

How great will then be the fear and trembling! Have you ever seen men led away to death? What do you think is the state of their souls, as they are going on the way to the gate? Is it not worse than many deaths? What would they not choose both to do and to suffer, so that they might be delivered from that cloud of darkness? I have heard many say, who have been recalled by the mercy of the king (Emperor), after having been led away, that they did not even see men as men, their souls being so troubled, so horror-struck, and beside themselves. If then the death of the body thus frightens us, when eternal death approaches, what will be our feelings? And why do I speak of those who are led away? A crowd then stands around, the greater part not even knowing them. If any one looked into their souls, no one is so cruel, no one so hard-hearted, no one so firm, as not to have his soul dejected, and relaxed with fear and despair. And if when others are taken off by this death, which differs nothing from sleep, those who are not concerned in it are thus affected; when we ourselves fall into greater evils, what then will be our state? It is not, believe me, it is not possible to represent the suffering by words.

Nay, you say, but God is full of love to man, and none of these things will happen! Then it is written in vain! No, you say, but only as a threat, that we may become wise! If then we are not wise, but continue evil, will He not, tell me, inflict the punishment? Will He not then recompense the good either with rewards? Yes, you say, for that is becoming to Him, to do good even beyond desert. So that those things indeed are true and will certainly be, while the punishments will not be at all, but are only for the purpose of a threat, and of terror! By what means I shall persuade you, I know not. If I say, that the worm will not die, and the fire will not be quenched Mark 9:44; if I say, that they shall go away into everlasting fire Matthew 25:41-46; if I set before you the rich man already suffering punishment, you will say that it is all a matter of threatening. Whence then shall I persuade you? For this is a Satanic reasoning, indulging you with a favor that will not profit, and causing you to be slothful.

How then can we banish it? Whatever things we say from Scripture, you will say, are for the purpose of threatening. But with respect to future things this indeed might be said, but not so concerning things that have happened, and have had an end. You have heard of the deluge. And were those things also said by way of threat? Did they not actually happen? Those men too said many such things, and for a hundred years while the ark was building, and the wood was being wrought, and the righteous man was calling aloud, there was no one who believed. But because they did not believe the threat in words, they suffered

the punishment in very deed. And this will be our fate too, if we shall not have believed. On this account it is that He compares His coming with the days of Noah, because as some disbelieved in that deluge, so will they in the deluge of hell. Were these things a threat? Were they not a fact? Then will not He, who then brought punishment upon them so suddenly, much more inflict it now also? For the things that are committed now are not less than the offenses of that time. How?-- because then, it says, the sons of God went in unto the daughters of men Genesis 6:4, and those mixtures were the great offense. But now there is no form of wickedness, which is unattempted. Do you then believe that the deluge took place? Or does it seem to you a fable? And yet even the mountains where the ark rested, bear witness; I speak of those in Armenia.

But, even superabundantly, I will turn my discourse to another thing more evident than that. Has any one of you ever traveled in Palestine? For I will no longer mention report, but facts, and yet the other were clearer than facts. For whatever things the Scripture says, are more to be trusted than things we see. Has any one of you then ever traveled in Palestine? I suppose so. What then? Bear witness then for me, you who have seen the places, to those who have not been there. For above Ascalon and Gaza up to the very end of the river Jordan there is a country wide and fruitful -- or rather there was -- for it is not now. This then is that which was as a garden. For it is said, Lot beheld all the plain of Jordan -- and it was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the Lord. Genesis 13:10 This, therefore, that was so flourishing, and that rivaled all countries, which for thrivingness exceeded the Paradise of God, is now more desolate than any wilderness. And there stand trees, indeed, and they bear fruit. But the fruit is a monument of the wrath of God. For there stand pomegranates, I speak both of the tree and the fruit, having a very fine appearance, and to the ignorant man holding out great hopes. But if they are taken into the hand, being broken open they display no fruit indeed, but much dust and ashes stored up within. Such also is the whole land. If you find a stone, you will find it full of ashes. And why do I speak of stone and wood and earth, where the air and water partake of the calamity? For as when a body is burnt and consumed, the shape remains, and the outline in the appearance of the fire, and the bulk and the proportion, but the power is no more, so truly there you may see earth, which yet has nothing of earth about it, but all ashes; trees and fruit, but nothing of trees and fruit about them; air and water, but nothing of water nor of air about them, for even these are turned to ashes. And yet how could air ever have been burnt, or water, while it remained water? For wood and stones indeed it is possible to burn, but air and water it is altogether impossible. Impossible to us, but possible to Him who did these things. Therefore the air is nothing else than a furnace, the water is a furnace. All things are unfruitful, all unproductive, all for vengeance; images of wrath that has gone before, and proofs of that which is to come.

Are these too but threatening words? Are these but the sound of words? For to me indeed the former things were not incredible, but things not seen were equally credible with things that were seen. But even to the unbeliever these are sufficient to produce faith. If any one disbelieves hell, let him consider Sodom, let him reflect upon Gomorrha, the vengeance that has been inflicted, and which yet remains. This is a proof of the eternity of punishment. Are these things grievous? And is it not grievous, when you say that there is no hell, but that God has merely threatened it? When you slack the hands of the people? It is thou who disbelievest that compellest me to say these things; it is thou that hast drawn me out into these words. If you believed the words of Christ I should not be compelled to bring forward facts to induce belief. But since you have evaded them, you shall be persuaded henceforth, whether willing or unwilling. For what have you to say concerning Sodom? Would you wish also to know the cause, for which these things were then done? It was one sin, a grievous and accursed one certainly, yet but one. The men of that time had a passion for boys, and on that account they suffered this punishment. But now ten thousand sins

equal and even more grievous than these are committed. Then He who for one sin poured forth so much anger, and neither regarded the supplication of Abraham, nor yet Lot who dwelt among them, the man who from honor to His servants offered his own daughters to insult, will He spare, when there are so many sins? These things truly are ridiculous, trifling, delusion, and diabolical deceit!

Do you wish that I should also bring forward another? You have certainly heard of Pharaoh, king of the Egyptians; you know therefore the punishment also which he suffered, how even with his whole host, chariots and horses and all, he was engulfed in the Erythræan sea. Would you hear also other examples? He perhaps was an impious man, or rather not perhaps, but certainly he was an impious man. Would you see those also punished, who were of the number of believers, and who held fast to God, but were not of upright life? Hear Paul saying, Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us murmur, as some of them murmured, and perished by the destroyer. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them tempted, and perished by the serpents. 1 Corinthians 10:8-10 And if fornication, and if murmuring had such power, what will not be the effect of our sins?

And if you do not now pay the penalty, do not wonder. For they knew not of a hell, therefore they were visited with punishments following close at their heels. But you, whatever sins thou commit, though you should escape present penalty, will pay for it all there. Did he so punish those who were nearly in the state of children, and who did not sin so greatly -- and will He spare us? It would not be reasonable. For if we commit the same sins with them, we shall deserve a greater punishment than they did. Wherefore? Because we have enjoyed more grace. But when our offenses are numerous, and more heinous than theirs, what vengeance shall we not undergo? They -- and let no one think I say it as admiring them, or excusing them; far be it: for when God punishes, he who passes a contrary sentence, does it at the suggestion of the devil; I say this therefore, not praising them nor excusing them, but showing our wickedness-- they therefore, although they murmured, were, however, traveling a wilderness road: but we murmur though we have a country, and are in our own houses. They, although they committed fornication, yet it was just after they came out of the evils of Egypt, and had hardly heard of such a law. But we do it, having previously received from our forefathers the doctrine of salvation, so that we are deserving of greater punishment.

Would you hear also of other things? What were their sufferings in Palestine, famines, pestilences, wars, captivities, under the Babylonians, and under the Assyrians, and their miseries from the Macedonians, and those under Hadrian and Vespasian? I have something that I wish, beloved, to relate to you; nay, do not run away! Or rather I will tell you another thing before it. There was once a famine, it says, and the king was walking upon the wall; then a woman came to him and uttered these words: O king, this woman said to me, Let us roast your son today, and eat him -- tomorrow mine. And we roasted and ate, and now she does not give me hers. From 2 Kings 6:28 What can be more dreadful than this calamity? Again, in another place the Prophet says, The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children. Lamentations 4:10 The Jews then suffered such punishment, and shall we not much rather suffer?

Would you also hear other calamities of theirs? Read over Josephus, and you will learn that whole tragedy, if perchance we may persuade you from these things, that there is a hell. For consider, if they were punished, why are we not punished? Or how is it reasonable that we are not now punished, who sin more grievously than they? Is it not manifest that it is, because the punishment is kept in store for us? And, if you please, I will tell you in the person of every individual how they were punished. Cain murdered his brother. A horrible sin indeed, who can deny it? But he suffered punishment; and a heavy one, equivalent

to ten thousand deaths, for he would rather have died ten thousand times. For hear him saying, If Thou castest me out from the land, and I shall be hidden from Your face, then it will happen that every one who finds me will slay me. Genesis 4:14, Septuagint Tell me then, do not many even now do the same things that he did? For when you slay not your brother according to the flesh, but your spiritual brother, do you not do the same? For what, though not by the sword? Yet by some other means; when being able to relieve his hunger, you neglect him. What then? Has no one now envied his brother? Has no one plunged him into dangers? But here they have not suffered punishment, yet they will suffer it. Then he, who never heard the written laws, nor the prophets, nor saw great miracles suffered such great vengeance; and shall he who has done the same things in another way, and was not rendered wise by so many examples, shall he go unpunished? Where then is the justice of God, and where His goodness?

Again, a certain one for having gathered sticks on the Sabbath was stoned, and yet this was a small commandment, and less weighty than circumcision. He then who gathered sticks on the Sabbath was stoned; but those who often commit ten thousand things contrary to the Law have gone off unpunished! If then there be not a hell, where is His justice, where His impartiality, that respects not persons? And yet He lays to their charge many such things, that they did not observe the Sabbath.

Again, another, Charmi, having stolen a devoted thing, was stoned with all his family. What then? Has no one from that time committed sacrilege? Saul, again, having spared contrary to the command of God, suffered so great punishment. Has no one from that time spared? Would indeed that it were so! Have we not, worse than wild beasts, devoured one another contrary to the command of God, and yet no one has fallen in war? Again, the sons of Eli, because they ate before the incense was offered, suffered the most severe punishment together with their father. Has no father then been neglectful with respect to his children? And are there no wicked sons? But no one has suffered punishment. Where will they suffer it then, if there be no hell?

Again, numberless instances one might enumerate. What? Ananias and Sapphira were immediately punished, because they stole part of what they had offered. Has no one then since that time been guilty of this? How was it then that they did not suffer the same punishment?

Do we then persuade you that there is a hell, or do you need more examples? Therefore we will proceed also to things that are unwritten, such as now take place in life. For it is necessary that this idea should be gathered by us from every quarter, that we may not, by vainly gratifying ourselves, do ourselves harm. Do you not see many visited by calamities, maimed in their bodies, suffering infinite troubles, but others in good repute? For what reason do some suffer punishment for murders, and others not? Hear Paul saying, Some men's sins are evident,...and some men they follow after. 1 Timothy 5:24 How many murderers have escaped! How many violators of the tombs! But let these things pass. How many do you not see visited with the severest punishment? Some have been delivered to a long disease, others to continued tortures, and others to numberless other ills. When therefore you see one who has been guilty of the same things as they, or even much worse -- and yet not suffering punishment, will you not suspect, even against your will, that there is a hell? Reckon those here who before you have been severely punished, consider that God is no respecter of persons, and that though you have done numberless wickednesses, you have suffered no such thing, and you will have the idea of hell. For God has so implanted that idea within us, that no one can ever be ignorant of it. For poets and philosophers and fabulists, and in short all men, have philosophized concerning the retribution that is there, and have said that the greater number are punished in Hades. And if those things are fables, yet what we have received are not so.

I say not these things as wishing to frighten you, nor to lay a burden on your souls, but to make them wise, and render them easier. I could wish also myself that there were no punishment -- yes, myself most of all men. And why so? Because while each of you fears for his own soul, I have to answer for this office also in which I preside over you. So that most of all it is impossible for me to escape. But it cannot be that there is not punishment and a hell. What can I do? Where then, they say, is the kindness of God to men? In many places. But on this subject I will rather discourse at some other season, that we may not confuse the discourses concerning hell. In the meantime let not that slip, which we have gained. For it is no small advantage to be persuaded concerning hell. For the recollection of such discourses, like some bitter medicine, will be able to clear off every vice, if it be constantly settled in your mind. Let us therefore use it, that having a pure heart, we may so be thought worthy to see those things, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man. Which may we all obtain by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, etc.

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