

**4:9** *Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;*

**4:10** *for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,*

**4:11** *and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you,*

**4:12** *so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.*

Something that should give American Christians food for thought is the way in which the early church was characterized by love. Christians can love because they have been transformed by the power of divine love; they are taught by God to love (**4:9**). Because of this John can make love the criterion whereby a man can know if he is really passed out of death into life (1 Jn. 3:14; 3:10).

According to **verse 10** the Thessalonians not only loved one another. They also expressed their love toward all the Christians in Macedonia. Even so, Paul encourages them to excel still more (also 4:1) in loving others. “Christians must never be weary in well-doing. To sit back satisfied with what one has done is to sound the knell of effective Christian service” (Morris, 131).

Next, in **verse 11**, Paul calls them to lead a balanced life. They were to:

(1) make it their ambition to lead a quiet life

To “make it one’s ambition” means “to fix one’s gaze upon” or “to strive earnestly for.” This is the meaning in Romans 15:20 and 2 Corinthians 5:9, the only other New Testament passages where the verb is found. Paul is offering a paradox: seek strenuously to be still. Strive for tranquility of life.

(2) attend to their own business

“Those who are busy-bodies, meddling in other men’s matters, have little quiet in their own minds, and cause great disturbances among their neighbors” (Henry).

(3) work with their hands

Christians should be industrious and work with their own hands. In Greek culture manual labor was considered degrading. It was the type of thing that a slave would do, not a free man. Paul, however, taught that manual labor was good (Eph. 4:28). Surely, they also remembered that Jesus was a carpenter (Mk. 6:3). How could the followers of a carpenter feel indignant toward manual labor? Whatever we do should be done to the service of Christ (Col. 3:17).

In 2 Thessalonians 3:11–12 similar connections relative to one’s lifestyle appear: “For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”

In **verse 12** Paul gives two reasons for earning a living:

First, we must show that the Lord is our Master and we are His ambassadors. Therefore, we must always bear in mind the impact of our conduct on those who are without faith. When people do not work at all, but live off of the charity of others, they bring the church into disrepute.

The second reason for working is so that we may “not be in any need.” We should work so that we are not dependent upon other people for financial help or place a strain on others. Earning a living is closely connected with brotherly love. Those who impose on the generosity of fellow believers are not living in love.

### **The Instruction and Exhortation about the Coming of Christ**

#### **4:13–5:11**

***4:13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.***

***4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***

***4:15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.***

***4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.***

***4:17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.***

***4:18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.***

The coming of Christ is referred to as the *parousia* (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor. 15:23; Ja. 5:7, 8; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4; 1 Jn. 2:28). The word originally meant “presence” (2 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:12) or “arrival.” However, this gave rise to the sense of “coming to be present.” The term could be used in everyday life to describe someone’s arrival (1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; Phil. 1:26, etc.), but in its historical context, *parousia* “commonly meant the glorious ‘coming’ of a deity or an official visit of a sovereign to a city, who himself was often honored as divine. An Imperial visit was an event of great pomp and magnificent celebrations with rich banquets, speeches that praised the Imperial visitor, a visit to the local temple, rich donations, celebration of games, sacrifices, statues dedicated, and arches and other buildings constructed. Money was minted to commemorate the event, crowns of gold might’ve been given, and at times a new era was inaugurated” (Green, 223). If *parousia* was used of the arrival of lords and kings, it was the best word to use for the arrival of the Lord of lords and King of kings.

1 and 2 Thessalonians mention the coming of Christ a number of times (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8, 9). It is quite obvious that the Thessalonians had already received instruction about this subject and believed that Christ would return within their lifetime. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 it says that they were waiting “for God’s Son from heaven.” However, it appears that they were worried about what happened to believers who died before Jesus returned. Would they lose their share in the events associated with that great day? Verses 13–18 answer their concern; their belief in Jesus’ resurrection includes the teaching that the dead will be raised and will accompany Jesus at His return. There is,

therefore, no need to grieve over the dead or assume that they would be at a disadvantage on that wonderful day.

**Verse 13 says,** “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.” Sleep was a common euphemism for death both in the secular world and in the Old and New Testaments (1 Ki. 2:10; 11:43; 14:20, etc.). Many cultures saw a similarity between the restful appearance of the dead and sleep. But the term “sleep” is most applicable to Christians since, like sleep, Christians will awaken from it. Daniel 12:2 says, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life.” Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead He said to the disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep” (Jn. 11:11). From this perspective, “Cemeteries are dormitories of the dead” (Stott, 96).

Paul wants to inform the church of what will take place so that they “will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope” (4:13b). “The rest” are the unbelieving. Hope is more than belief in life after death; hope is based on faith in God. In Ephesians 2:12 Paul described the unbelieving as “having no hope and without God in the world.” Those who have no hope at death are those who have no knowledge of God. Many pagan religions had a belief in life after death, but they did not glory in it. Inscriptions on graves at the time reflect hopelessness, and the descriptions of life after death were far from satisfying (Marshall, 119). In our day, we hear people speak of the deceased as “being in a better place,” but often these are just hollow words; they are part of a psychological mind game in the quest to find personal peace. How much different it is for Christians! “For we believe that Jesus died and rose again” (4:14). The Christian’s confidence is not the result of philosophical speculation, wishful thinking, or myth. It has a historical foundation. His resurrection is the guarantee concerning the future for the believing dead (1 Cor. 15:17–18). Death has no sting for death has been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:55–57).

However, it should be noticed that although Christ’s resurrection is the basis of Christian hope, Paul is not attempting to prove to the Thessalonians that the dead in Christ will be raised—the Thessalonians already believed that. They wanted to know about the relationship of the dead to the return of Christ. Although we don’t know exactly what their concern was, we can speculate that they had thought that the dead in Christ would be at a disadvantage at the second coming. I say this because in verse 15 Paul tells them that the living will not “precede those who have fallen asleep” (4:15). The verb “precede” in Greek has the idea of doing something before someone else and gaining an advantage over them; by saying that the living shall not precede the dead, Paul is assuring his readers that when Jesus comes again no one (dead or alive) will have an advantage over the other (Marshall, 127).

Paul’s answer to their anxiety is that the dead would share in the glory of Christ’s return, for “God will bring with Him (i.e. with Christ) those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (4:14). In other words, when Christ comes again, those who had died in Christ will be raised to join Him. In addition, the living will be changed making it possible for them to ascend as well (1 Cor. 15:51–53).

In sum, the Thessalonians didn't need to worry about those who died before Jesus returned, for the dead will rise and will join Christ at the *parousia*. All who believe will have an equal share in that glorious day.

NOTE: When Paul said, “we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord” (4:15), he was including himself among those who would be alive at Christ's return. The early church expected Christ to return during their lifetime. Because of this, some have suggested that Paul and others were mistaken about Jesus' return. However, such conclusions are not necessary. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul lists two categories of people that are present at Christ's return—the dead in Christ and the living; since he did not fit into the former category, he took his place with the latter, although the presence in one group or the other was inconsequential (Thomas, 278). Paul was not intending to say with absolute certainty that Christ would return in his lifetime, for elsewhere he spoke as if he would die before that day. No one knows when Jesus will come again so each generation lives in anticipation of His return. Paul rightly lived a life of expectation.

**Verses 16 and 17** describe what will happen at Christ's coming. Even though these verses give us information not found anywhere else in the Bible, they still lack the kind of detail we wish we had.

Four points are undebatable.

1) The *Lord Himself* will descend from heaven. The Lord Jesus, who was crucified, rose bodily from the dead, and physically ascended into heaven will return to earth in the same way that He left. Acts says, “He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight . . . This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10–11). No other being will come in His stead. He will not return as an invisible presence. His coming will be personal and bodily.

2) The Lord's coming will be majestic. It will be announced with a shout, by the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God. The “shout” denotes an authoritative utterance; when used in military contexts it is a battle cry. The passage itself does not say who shouts, nor does it tell us the purpose of the shout. Some think this could be the voice of Christ summoning the dead to life (Jn. 5:28–29; 11:43–44). In John 5:28–29 Jesus said that “an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth.” Others believe that the shout is the voice of the archangel. Still others think it is an archangel-like shout. What is certain is that the shout signals that the event is of enormous importance.

Trumpets often accompanied festivities and battles; they also sounded an alert or warning, and announced God's Day of Judgment (Zeph. 1:14–16; Matt. 24:31). In Matthew 24:31 a trumpet blast precedes the gathering of the elect and in 1 Corinthians 15:51ff. it is a call to the dead to resurrection.

3) The coming of Christ is tied to the resurrection. Believers in Christ who died will rise from the dead first, then those who are alive at Christ's return will be caught up together with them to be with Him. The fact that the dead are still “in Christ” shows that the believer's union with Christ is not severed by death.

4) **Verse 17** says, “we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.” This is commonly referred to as the “rapture” (coming from the Latin *raptus*, meaning “to seize”).

The verb “caught up” means “to seize” or “carry off by force.” “There is often the notion of a sudden swoop, and usually that of a force which cannot be resisted” (Morris, 145). Although this is the only place where the verb is used in relationship to Christ’s return, there are other places in Scripture where people are snatched up into the air. In Acts 8:39 “the Spirit of the Lord *snatched* Philip away.” Paul in speaking of a personal experience said, “I know a man . . . 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. And I know how such a man. . . was *caught up* into Paradise and heard inexpressible words” (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Also in reference to Christ’s ascension, Revelation 12:5 says, “. . . a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. . . was *caught up* to God and to His throne.” In the Greek translation of the OT the word is used of Enoch being taken up into heaven (Gen. 5:24 LXX).

Those who are caught up meet the Lord. The word “meet” in most Bible versions is translated like an infinitive (“to meet”), but it is a noun (i.e. it is “a meeting”). Literally translated the verse would read “we will be carried off, into the clouds, *into a meeting of the Lord*” (εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου). This specific word was often used in Greek of meetings with people in honored positions.

The meeting takes place in the air. The phrase “in the air” certainly does not mean “heaven”; rather, in Jewish cosmology, it is the space between earth and heaven (Wanamaker, 175). A meeting in the air does not imply that they will be forever with Christ in the air.

Paul does not tell us what happens next. Do they all return to earth to establish His kingdom or return with Christ to heaven?

Those who think that they return to the earth, point out that the term “meeting” was commonly used of meeting a visiting dignitary on his way to the city by a representative group of citizens who would then escort him back to the city (Green, 226). In Acts 28:15 the word is used when Paul was met by Roman Christians some miles from Rome who escorted him back to the city. The same idea is found in the context of the second coming in Matthew 25:6. In this case the picture is of the Lord’s people going to meet Him in order to escort Him back to the earth where they will be with the Lord forever. This fits well with the meaning of *parousia* as well (a word used for the arrival of a dignitary or god; see above, page 2); in fact, both terms are found together in Greek literature with reference to this type of visit.

Those who believe that the Lord will return to heaven with the believing emphasize other aspects of Paul’s comments. Wanamaker says that “Those who meet the Lord in the air are caught up in a heavenly ascent by the clouds without any indication that they then return to the earth” (Wanamaker, 175). Apart from the possible connotation that “to meet” might have for a return to earth, the rest of the imagery (the clouds and being caught up to the Lord) are indicative of a return to heaven. “That Paul adds his own definitive statement concerning the significance of this meeting in the clause ‘and thus we will always be with the Lord’ suggests that both dead and living Christians will return to heaven with the Lord, not only to enjoy continuous fellowship with Him, but also, in terms of 1:10, to be saved from the

coming wrath of God. The idea of the return to heaven is supported by 1 Corinthians 15:23f. According to this text the dead will be raised at the coming of Christ, and then will come the end when He will deliver His dominion to God after He has destroyed all rule, authority, and power. While it is always dangerous to press apocalyptic imagery and accounts too literally, this does imply that the return to heaven is necessary for Christ to render up His rule to God. That 1 Thessalonians 4:16f. has an assumption in mind is also confirmed by the statement in verse 14 that ‘God will lead those who sleep in Jesus with Him.’ Since they are taken up into the air to meet Jesus this can only refer to their being led to heaven with Jesus” (Wanamaker, 175–176).

“In the clouds” is also taken in at least two ways. Some think the clouds are clouds of glory that are often associated with heavenly beings (Mk. 9:7; Dan 7:13; Exo. 16:10; 19:16; 40:34–35; Isa. 19:1; Ezek. 1:4–18). They tie the imagery to Daniel 7:13: “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man.” Others see the clouds as literal atmospheric clouds based on Acts 1:9 (however, it is also debated if the clouds in Acts 1:9 are atmospheric or not). Elsewhere, clouds accompany the Lord at His return (Matt. 24:30, 64; Mk. 13:26; 14:62; Lk. 21:27; Rev. 1:7; 14:14–16).

Although some see this as a secret action where the believing are suddenly removed from the earth, we should not be dogmatic about it, for it does not specifically say this is done in secret. We are only given a few basic facts. Those who see this as a public event argue that the Lord descending “from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God” and the fact that the dead are raised to life sounds much more public than private (compare Matt. 24:27–31 where similar phenomena occur that are seen by the entire world). Although we will come to our own conclusions about what is being said and how it fits with other places in Scripture, we do not have license to condemn those who do not see the same inferences that we do. We would also be wise to not be dogmatic in areas where Scripture itself is unclear. Christians need to be content with the lack of clarity.

In light of the many views on the return of Christ, it would be worthwhile to note what *these specific verses* do not say.

1. They do not say when this will happen.
2. They do not say if the Lord will return to the earth with the believing or they will all go to heaven.
3. They do not say if this will be seen world-wide or happen in secret.
4. They do not say what events will precede His coming, what accompanies it, or what will follow. Does the judgment in chapter 5 happen at the same time?

One thing is certain, this momentary encounter with Christ will result in everlasting fellowship (4:18). We should strengthen one another with these glorious truths **(4:18)**.