

R.H.E.Uprichard: Exposition of 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

The section 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18 stands among various exhortations which Paul gives to the Thessalonians in his letter. There is a sense in which 4.13 introduces a new subject for exhortation, viz., the return of Christ, the parousia. Detail concerning Christ's return forms the substance of the exhortation given from 1 Thess. 4.13 to 1 Thess. 5.11. The first part of this material, 1 Thess. 4.13-18, deals with the problem of those Christians who had died before the Parousia. The second, 1 Thess. 5.1-11, is concerned with the sudden unexpected nature of Christ's return and the effect this should have on the believer's daily living.

This is not to say that the whole subject of the parousia was entirely new to the Thessalonians. It seems clear that Paul had already given instruction to them on this matter, perhaps on his founding mission (1 Thess. 5.1). There are frequent allusions to this very theme in the letter itself (1.10; 2.19; 3.11; 5.23). But the way in which the subject is introduced, and the substance of the teaching given in 1 Thess 4.13-18 is decidedly new, and in this it stands in contrast to 1 Thess 5.1-11, where Paul comments on their knowledge of the facts he is about to give. " But we would not have you ignorant, brethren" (v13) is a phrase we find Paul using when he wished to introduce some point which is important and which may be new to his hearers (Rom 1.13; 9.25; 1 Cor. 10.1; 12.1; 2 Cor. 1.8). As such it draws attention to the significance of what is to follow. The fact that in 1 Thess 4.9 and 4.13 we find the phrase 'peri de' ('and concerning') and 'de, peri' occurring respectively has led to the suggestion, in the light of the repetition of this phrase in 1 Corinthians, that Paul is here replying to written enquiries from the Thessalonians. This need not, however, have been the case. He may equally well have been responding to oral questions put to him. It does however seem to suggest that he answers questions on which his advice had been sought.

The problem dealt with by Paul in 1 Thess 4.13-18 appears to have been quite a specific one. Essentially it was an answer to the question, "Would Christians who had died before the Lord's return be at any disadvantage, or even miss that event when it occurred?" The matter is couched in quite general terms in v13, "concerning those

who are asleep that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." The contrast here would seem naturally to be between the Christian and the non-Christian reaction to death. The Christian dead are described as 'asleep' (present participle) which seems not merely to be a meaningful euphemism but also to anticipate a future awakening.

The total depression and gloom of the pagan attitude to death can be substantiated in contemporary literature and inscriptions. From this, it might be thought that perhaps the Thessalonians' problem was simply fear that their dead had through being denied resurrection, forfeited existence completely. That this was not the case seems evident in Paul's teaching in this section. He lays little stress on the believer's resurrection, but rather takes it for granted. He moves directly from their condition of sleep to their accompanying Christ at his return. He is concerned to emphasize that those surviving to the parousia will have no precedence over the Christian dead at that event. Indeed, the dead will rise 'first'. The burden of the comfort afforded by his instruction is in the simultaneous ('hama sun'='together with') nature of the rapture of survivors and Christian dead, and in their eternal union with their Lord. The problem is obviously not the general one of the believer's immortality but rather the specific matter already mentioned.

As such, the problem was quite distinct from other difficulties in connection with the parousia and the after-life in Paul's letters. In 1 Thess 5 the nature of the parousia is the matter under discussion. This theme seems to be developed in 2 Thessalonians, where some evidently thought the day of the Lord had arrived and were given instruction on the order of events preceding the End. In 1 Cor 15 the difficulty seemed to be more related to the concept of bodily resurrection, perhaps on the background of the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. But the problem in 1 Thess 4.13-18 is one which we could naturally anticipate in an early Christian community, where deaths of believers would occur within a context where the Lord's return was expected soon. Indeed, in the light of 1 Cor 11.30 with its link between death and God's judgment, the tension caused by the demise of believers would be particularly heightened.

But what answer does Paul give to this particular problem of the Thessalonians? He assures them that their dead will be at no disadvantage whatsoever when the Lord

returns. In this respect, he indicates that the ground of the believers' hope rests on two historical events and traces out the implications of these events for the believers. The first of these is the death and resurrection of Christ which he mentions in v14; the second is the parousia of Christ which he deals with in vv 15-17.

1. The death and resurrection of Christ (v14). The way in which Paul alludes to these occurrences emphasizes both their historicity and their authority. The use of the name 'Jesus', which is comparatively rare in Paul may well direct our attention to the earthly life of our Lord. More likely, however, the context reflects a credal connotation: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again." In this connection, it is significant that here Paul uses 'anistemi' (= 'raise'), not 'egeirein' (also = 'raise'). He uses the latter much more frequently, and when he does cite the former, it is in quotations (Rom 5.12; 1 Cor 10.7 cf Eph 5.14). Is Paul then here reminding the Thessalonians of a basic primitive tenet of their faith, a faith lodged firmly in the historical events of the earthly life of Jesus? Certainly the format in which they occur lends strong probability to this suggestion.

The conditional form in which the sentence is put underscores the importance of these historical events for the believer: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." At first reading, the form of the sentence might seem to suggest some doubt as to the Thessalonians' belief in these facts. This is not at all the purpose. It is rather meant to emphasize that belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, basic undisputed facts of the Thessalonians' faith, carry these overwhelming implications which Paul goes on to express. Indeed the very way in which Paul alludes to these implications clarifies the point. After the expression "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again", we would expect some statement like "Even so we ought to believe.....". But this is not the case. Paul moves directly from his proposition concerning belief to a statement of fact. It is precisely because the Thessalonians believe in the death and resurrection of Christ, that they can be assured that God will bring their departed loved ones with Jesus at the parousia. It is on the grounds of Christ's death and resurrection that comfort and assurance are offered to Christians concerning their loved ones who have died in the Lord. These are the bases of the be-

lievers' solace regarding his believing friends at a time of bereavement. What greater foundation of comfort, what stronger encouragement of hope can we have than these?

The phrase 'through Jesus' can be taken either with 'bring' (as RSV) or with 'asleep' (as AV). While there is some degree of difficulty in accepting the sense of 'asleep through Jesus', this seems preferable on the following grounds: it is clumsy to qualify 'bring' with both phrases; it provides a greater balance to the sentence as a whole to take the phrase with 'asleep'; it clarifies that it is the dead to whom the reference is made and it assures the bereaved that a relationship with Christ even in death is maintained, in keeping with Paul's purpose.

2. The parousia of Christ (vv 15-17). This is the second ground to which Paul directs the Thessalonians in comforting them concerning their departed friends. Again, the form and content of this teaching not only comes with great authority to the Thessalonians but offers direct and precise assurance to them concerning the matter which troubles them.

The instruction given them is "by (literally "in") the word of the Lord" (v15). It is difficult to define exactly what Paul means by this expression. Various suggestions have been made: (i) a saying of the Lord, with reference to Matt 24.30f; John 6.39; Mark 9.1; but the precise truth taught in 1 Thess 4.15f is hardly evident in these sayings and there are no strong verbal parallels;

(ii) a reference to 4 Esdras 5.41; but the verbal links are slight and literary dependence unlikely.

(iii) a special revelation given to Paul as an apostle; this is possible though the phrase 'Word of the Lord' seems to point more to the actual words of Jesus rather than to a revelation.

(iv) an opinion of Paul as he speaks in the Spirit (cf 1 Cor 7.25-40); but the expression is too precise.

(v) an 'agraphon', an unwritten saying of our Lord; but this is purely conjectural and can neither be proved or disproved.

Whatever the origin of the saying, it serves to add authority to the teaching he is about to give. It comes with the authority of the exalted Lord to men's hearts.

Not merely the form but the details of the revelation support its authority. This is clear in a variety of ways: the event is described as 'parousia' (v15), a term used for the arrival of a great civic dignitary or royal personage; closely linked in thought with this 'parousia' is the term 'apantesis' (= 'meeting'), which suggests the formal reception of the distinguished personage.

The note of authority and majesty is also clear in the apocalyptic descriptions of the event. We have the 'keleusma' (v16), 'a cry of command', used of the charioteer to his horses, or of the hunter to his hounds, or of the ship's master to his rowers. It includes urgency as well as authority. It does not seem clear who issues the command or to whom it is issued. The former is perhaps the Lord. The note of authority continues with the expression "the archangel's call". It is hardly possible to make any specific identification in the light of the absence of the article with 'archangel'. "The sound of the trumpet of God" completes the rousing picture, typical of apocalyptic imagery. On two occasions in 1 Cor 15.52 Paul mentions the trumpet in connection with the parousia and it is frequently associated with divine activity in the OT (Exodus 19.16; Isaiah 27.13; Joel 2.1; Zechariah 9.14). It links up with the final judgment in our Lord's teaching (Matt 24.31). It is not clear whether the three descriptions, 'cry of command', 'archangel's call', 'sound of the trumpet', refer to one sound only or to three separate entities, though the latter seems to be more probable.

The sovereign emphasis continues in the description of the actual event of Jesus' arrival. It is the Lord 'himself' ('autos') who descends. The believers are 'caught up'. The verb 'harpazo' means to 'seize', 'carry off by force', thus the compulsive nature of the 'rapture' is reflected. The believers are caught up 'in the clouds' - a frequent symbol of an OT theophany. They are to meet the Lord 'in the air', conceived of as the abode of all kinds of evil spirits, where Christ's triumph with his people is now complete.

The emphasis is on the sovereign act of Jesus, the Lord bringing solace and hope for the believer amid circumstances of bereavement.

The parousia of the Lord also carries implications for the believer which allay his fears for his departed friends. "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep."

This is sometimes said to imply that Paul at this stage believed that he would survive to the parousia, while at a later point in his writings he altered his view. This does not necessarily seem to have been the case. The 'we' can simply be taken in a general sense as indicating those who are surviving at the time. It is noticeable that at 5.10 Paul leaves the matter open in the allusion "whether we wake or sleep", not committing himself on that particular occasion to any definite view.

More important here is the emphasis on the fact that the survivors will on no account precede the 'dead in Christ' who are raised first. Paul uses the double negative 'ou me' (v15), "shall NOT forestall those who have died" (NEB) - thus Paul gives his answer to the fears which haunted the Thessalonians. Is Paul here quoting from words of our Lord? He uses 'ou me', and 90% of the occurrences of this in the NT either come from passages quoted from the Lxx or from words of the Lord. The word for 'forestall' is 'phtharō' and of seven occurrences of the word in the NT, five are from Paul and two from the Q source in the Gospel. The latter two are sayings of our Lord. Thus we have additional evidence for suggesting that Paul is perhaps quoting from the sayings of Jesus, thus strengthening his reply to the Thessalonians' anxieties.

Indeed far from being at any disadvantage, the order of events is such that the dead will be raised 'first' (v16). Only then will events proceed to their climax. And, in case the thought of being separated from their loved ones, even in their risen condition should trouble them, Paul in this word of the Lord, stresses that they will be caught up together with their risen friends and be for all time with their Lord (v17)

The comfort in this revelation lies not merely in the order of events at the parousia but also in the constancy of the relationship of the believer, whether dead or alive, with Christ, which underlies the whole passage. According to the particular interpretation given to v14, we depict the dead as either sleeping through Jesus or brought back by God at the parousia through Jesus. It is their relationship to him which is basic to the comfort. In v16 they are described as the 'dead in Christ'. While this may indicate merely a description of the believers who have died, it could imply something more. Paul as so often thinks of the integral union 'in Christ'. The ultimate consolation is in the prospect of both survivors and the raised being "with the Lord" for ever (v18). Paul

here uses 'sun' ('together') though he might have used 'meta' (= 'together' also). It would appear however that invariably in eschatological contexts he uses 'sun', while other NT writers appear to prefer 'meta' in eschatological contexts. There is little discernible difference in meaning. But Paul also uses 'sun' in compounds which speak of dying, suffering, living, rising with Christ (Rom 6.3-11; Gal 2.19; Rom 8.17; Col 2.12-3.5) and the use of the same term is hardly insignificant. Does this suggest here a relationship with Christ in his glory of the parousia akin to the believer's relationship with him in his saving activity? At the very least identification with Christ forms the basis of consolation here.

Thus it is as believers contemplate the great historic event of Christ's death and resurrection, as they look forward to his royal advent to meet them, as they see in such an event the blessings for both the living and the dead, as they recall the constancy of their relationship to Christ in life and in death, and its glorious climax at his return, that they will be able truly to comfort one another (v18). It will be no mere comfort in words but rather a real 'paraklesis' (= comfort). They will thus stand side by side and strengthen one another in knowledge of these truths. They will come alongside one another to comfort and encourage in the light of the word of the Lord. Such a word will relate to their condition of distress and offer them eternal hope.