

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 in the Navajo Bible

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Nihik'isóó danohkíinii, daneeznáanii éí t'áá nihíł béeedahózin doo danihíinii'ní, áko ła' íł chohoo'í bee ádaadinii yínił danilínigi át'éego doo yínił biih dínóohdah da. ¹⁴ Háálá Jesus daaztsánii náadiidzáago deiniidlá, áko Jesus bií' dahojíłógo da'jiiłhaazhígíí áldó' Diyin God éí Jesus bił dah náhodidoo'ish. ¹⁵ Díí Bóhólníihii bizaad bee ádanihidii'ní, t'ah t'áá kóó dahinii'nánígíí Bóhólníihii nádzáago da'oodlání daneeznáanii ts'ídá doo t'áá bitsé dah didiikah da. ¹⁶ Háálá Bóhólníihii t'áá bí yá'aashd'éé' hadahooleelgo ayóó íits'a'go hadoodzih, áádóó aláahgo diyingo naal'a'í biinéé' índa Diyin God bidilní ayóó íits'a'go didoots'ííł. Áko Christ dayoodlāago daneeznáanii áłtsé náábidi'dooljah, ¹⁷ áádóó índa nihokáa'gi t'ah dahinii'nánígíí éí da'oodlání náabi'diiljée'ii bił wót'ááhgóó dah diikaigo k'os biyi'jii' Bóhólníihii áádóó ahóyéel'áágóó Bóhólníihii bił dahoniidłógo doo. ¹⁸ Éí ąą díí saad bee ahił dahółne'go bee hada'íínółní. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)¹

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)²

Introduction

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul is talking about the second coming of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. Since there are differences of opinion on what happens when people die, there are going to be differences of opinion on what happens when the process is reversed and people come back to life again.

The resurrection of the body

Whatever our disagreements on this topic might be, one thing is clear. At death the body remains here. About this there is no question. So if life continues at death (if the serpent, rather than God, was telling the truth in Eden [see Genesis 2:17; 3:4]), it will have to be in some form that does not include the body. Is this what the Bible teaches? There is a place where Jesus says, "have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matthew 22:31). We

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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know that the bodies in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived were buried in the ground, so what should we draw from Jesus' words? Whatever that is, we should draw it from all of Jesus' words and not just part of them. Let me now repeat the passage just quoted, adding in the first part of what He said.

"But about the resurrection of the dead- have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matthew 22:31-32)

"But about the resurrection of the dead" These words change the perspective. Jesus is not saying that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are alive. He is saying that when they are raised from the grave at the second coming they will live with God forever. Where are they now? They aren't. This is what Bible writers mean by saying that people "sleep" in the grave. The body decays. They have no existence until Jesus comes again in glory. So when Jesus speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as living, His words are a promise of future things.

He [Abraham] is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. (Romans 4:17)

In the present case, "things that are not" would include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus speaks of these men as though they were, and that is a promise that they have life in Christ, and will be raised again one day, when He comes to resurrect them. Remember that opening statement: "But about the resurrection of the dead. . . ." That's the context in which Jesus says these things.

Two methods of study

There's no way to be sure what the Bible means on any given topic without reading what it says. But what if we carefully read a given passage and still disagree? There are two ways to proceed. One is to compare one passage with another. If two passages use the same words in a similar context, it will be useful to compare them. That's the first way. The second way is to look inside the passage itself and look for parallels between the words and clauses that we find there. We'll start with this second method. There are certain features of the structure of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 that reward further study. So we start by looking within.

Questions

There are two main questions that we can hope to answer in this way. First, what does it mean for God to "bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (vs. 14)? Does it mean these people are in heaven and God brings them down to the earth when Jesus comes to the earth, as NIV implies? Or does it mean the people are in their graves and God raises them to life as He raised Jesus to life and, having done that, takes them to heaven with Him when He returns? The question is, are these people going down or up when God "bring[s] them"? Is Paul saying they come from heaven to earth with Jesus, or from earth to heaven?

A second question is what it means for those who are still alive "not [to] precede those who have fallen asleep" (vs. 15). Does this mean that those who die in Christ go to heaven immediately when they die and that "we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the

Lord" (vs. 15) wait until later? Or does it mean that, on resurrection day, Christ gives His first attention to those who have fallen asleep believing in Him?

The structure of the passage can help us answer both questions by showing what thoughts and understandings Paul built into his explanation. We can learn much from Paul by noticing the way he states himself.

The Structure of the Passage

Beginning and end

Paul's thoughts in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 are arranged in a very orderly way, so to understand the passage well we are going to have to notice how he does this. There is a clear pattern to what he says. Consider vss. 13 and 18 – the first verse in the passage and the last.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to **grieve** like the rest of men, who have **no hope**. (vs. 13)

Therefore **encourage** each other with these words. (vs. 18)

Notice especially the words "grieve" and "no hope" in vs. 13, and "encourage" in vs. 18. The emphasis here is on courage, but from different points of view. On the one hand, some (those who don't know God) have nothing to look forward to when their loved ones die. On the other hand, those who understand Paul's gospel should encourage each other with his teaching that Jesus will come again. So the passage begins with the idea of not having hope (i.e., courage), and ends with the idea of encouraging each other (i.e., sharing hope). In between these two points is the rest of what Paul says, which has to do with the second coming of Jesus and the resurrection of those who love Him. This teaching provides a basis for hope and is the Christian's primary source of courage. See fig. 1.

- A Some grieve and have no hope. (vs. 13)
- B Jesus comes again. (vss. 14-17)
- A' We should encourage each other "with these words." (vs. 18)

Fig. 1. Contrast between having no hope and being able to encourage others with the teaching that Jesus will come again.

Middle verses

We have talked about vss. 13 and 18. Now consider the middle part of the passage (vss. 14-17). It will be useful to take this in two parts. Verse 14 stands apart from the remaining three. We'll talk about that first, then about vss. 15-17, which have a structure of their own.

Verse 14. In vs. 14 Paul says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." Below is another verse that we should study together with this one.

Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones¹⁵ to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." (Jude 1:14-15)

Are Jude and Paul talking about the same things? Is there any conflict between the two passages? Is there a way to be sure? If the dead who die in Christ go to be with Him immediately, then do the words, "ten thousands of his saints," refer to people who had once lived on earth? If our dead loved ones sleep in the grave until Jesus comes, it would follow that the 10,000 "saints" Jude refers to are not human beings from earth, but angels from heaven. Jude says the angels come down with Jesus at the second coming. Paul does not deny the part about angels, but says those who have died in Christ go up with Jesus at the second coming. No, there is no conflict. And yes, there is a way to be sure.

The answer lies in the words of the passage. Again, to know what Paul means, we must read what he says. In vs. 14 Paul says two things. He begins by talking about Jesus and ends by saying something about us. In regard to Jesus Paul says that He "died" and "rose again." In regard to us he says that some of us "have fallen asleep in him." On the one hand, Jesus "died" and, on the other, some of us "have fallen asleep." He died, we die. There's a connection between those two clauses. What about the other two? The two items which remain are that Jesus "rose again" and that God brings these people "with him" when He comes. Which direction was Jesus going when He "rose again"? That's the direction the righteous dead go when God brings them "with him" on this occasion.

The words "with him" do not refer to Jesus coming down from heaven, but to His rising from death and then raising the dead. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ rise when He comes, just as He "arose." To do something "with" Jesus it must be the same thing He does. What Paul says He does in this verse is rise, as in rise from the grave. That's what our dead do when Jesus comes again. They rise from the grave. God raised Jesus and He raises us. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (vs. 14). The fact that God raised His Son is the evidence that He will raise. When he speaks about encouragement in vs. 18, this is what he means by that. God brings us with Jesus out of the grave. Not at the same time, but in the same way. When does He do this? When Jesus comes again.³

The order in which these events are mentioned is as follows: Jesus dies, Jesus rises, we rise, we die (AB:B'A'). Notice the word "mentioned." The order in which the events are mentioned is different from the order in which they occur. The reason why the events are mentioned in the sequence we see is merely to emphasize the connection between certain facts – i.e., that Jesus dies and we die, that He rose and we rise. The sequence is AB:B'A', with A corresponding to A' (A prime) and B to B' (B prime).

³ In Genesis 3:6 we have an example of the word "with" that is similar to that in 1 Thessalonians 4:14. In Genesis 3:6 Eve gives Adam some of the forbidden fruit. NIV, NJB, and NRS all say, "she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate." (The capital letters and commas are different from version to version, but these are the words.) And yet, in TNK (a Jewish version prepared by eminently qualified Hebrew scholars) it doesn't say "with her." These scholars understand the Hebrew word *immāh* (normally "with her") in the sense of "like her." In other words, she gave him some too. This is what "with" means in 1 Thessalonians 4:14. When Jesus died He rose, and when Christians die they rise too.

Notice how vs. 14 is stated in the Navajo translation: *Diyin God éi Jesus bit dah náhodidoo'ish* ("God will bring [them] *up* with Jesus"). The word *dah náhodidoo'ish* ("He will lead [them] *up*"), helps answer a question that had seemed difficult in NIV. In the Navajo the question disappears. When Jesus comes He raises from death all who have fallen asleep in Him and leads them *up*. (That's what the word *dah* means.) They are going up, not down, when God brings them with Jesus – back to heaven. And wouldn't this make sense? The primary reason for the second coming is to bring the saved from earth to heaven. They are not already there. If they are, why does Jesus come a second time?

Verses 15-17. In vss. 15-17 we find more examples of parallelism, but it is a different kind. Instead of mirror image parallelism (AB:B'A') we have a more common kind (AB:A'B'). Here's the text again, with certain key words underlined for emphasis.

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)

Here, "we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord" (vs. 15) corresponds to "we who are still alive and are left" (vs. 17), and "those who have fallen asleep" (vs. 15) corresponds to "them" (vs. 17) (again, AB:B'A'). The ones God takes into the clouds first when He comes are those who had died believing in Him, then "we who are still alive and are left" (vs. 17).

At the center of this structure (in vs. 16) we have a description of the second coming. Paul begins vs. 16 by showing the way in which Christ comes and then goes on to tell what He does when He gets here: (a) Jesus "will come down from heaven," (b) "with a loud command," (c) "with the voice of the archangel," (d) "and with the trumpet call of God." This much deals with how He comes. He comes with a lot of angels and with a lot of sound. It's not quiet. That's the first part of the verse. In the second part the first thing Jesus does is raise the righteous dead. "[A]nd the dead in Christ will rise first" (vs. 16b).

Here also, as in vs. 14, the Navajo wording is helpful. Where NIV says, "we tell you we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep" (vs. 15), the Navajo says, "we tell you that [when He comes = *nádzáago*] we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep." From this it is clear that the sequence of events described in vss. 15-17 all pertains to resurrection day, when Jesus comes again in glory.

Conclusion

There are a number of things to notice and a number of questions to answer in the passage we're studying. The basic structure is that of an ABA' mirror image parallel. Here I repeat fig. 1 for convenience.

- A [Some grieve and have no hope. (vs. 13)
- B [Jesus comes again. (vss. 14-17)
- A' [We should encourage each other "with these words." (vs. 18)

Fig. 1. Contrast between having no hope and being able to encourage others with the teaching that Jesus will come again.

This establishes a framework for the passage as a whole and it illustrates a way of organizing things that many Bible writers use, and which Paul himself uses again in vs. 14.

- A [Jesus dies.
- B [Jesus rises to life.
- B' [We rise to life.
- A' [We die.

Fig. 2. The main points of vs. 14, in which Jesus dies (A) and we die (A'), He rises to life (B) and we rise to life (B').

The special point of interest here is in the third line (We rise to life, B'). When Paul says "that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him" (vs. 14), he's comparing our death (A') with Jesus' death (A) and our resurrection (B') with that of Jesus (B).

- A [Some are alive and are left.
- B [Some have fallen asleep.
- A' [We who are alive and are left.
- B' [Them (=those who have fallen asleep).

Fig. 3. The main points of vss. 15-17, in which some live until Jesus comes (A, A') and others die before that time (B, B').

All of this happens on one day, when Jesus comes again in glory. On that day those who join Christ in the clouds first are those who died believing in Him. They are raised and join Christ in the air. Then those are still alive and see all this happening also join Christ in the air – along with the others. So "we who are alive and are left" (vs. 18) do not precede those who die in the Lord. Jesus takes them from the grave first. That's the first order of business. Then He turns His attention to those of us who are still alive.

None of this requires us to think that anyone goes to heaven immediately at death. Actually, it requires us to think they don't. There would be no reason for a second coming if the ones Christ comes for are already in heaven. If we are patient and let God do things in His own time and way, these events will be a source of encouragement to us. And if we remove the need for the second coming, we remove the need for a resurrection at the same time. Taking away the resurrection and the second coming would turn much of Scripture upside down. Let's just take it like it reads, drawing our encouragement from what Paul actually says – not from an alternative teaching that we might wish to substitute for it.