



**LC STUDY GUIDE**  
**“Strong to the Finish” Series**  
 The Passage: I Thessalonians 4:13-18  
 June 6-19

**Intro:**

This may be one of your last meetings before the summer break. Before we enter into our time of study, let’s pause and reflect on this year that was framed as “Re-Discovering Jesus.” What highlights will we walk away with? How have we been affected individually, and how have we grown as a group? (Take some time and reflect, validate, and celebrate together.)

Regarding the study, tonight we want to look at how Paul describes the return of Jesus in I Thessalonians. It’s a complicated subject, filled with fear and hope. Let’s begin by asking, “What are your recollections and reactions to any end-of-the-world/Jesus’ return types of predictions?” And the flip-side of the topic, “What excites you most about the return of Jesus?”

**Context:**

I Thessalonians is an epistle written by Paul to the churches in Thessalonica with the purpose of encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith in Christ despite the hardships and suffering they were experiencing.

Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia and it was the capital of that Roman province. Paul, Silas and Timothy arrived in 49 A.D. after they left Philippi during their second missionary journey (Acts 17). Paul began preaching to the Jewish community on the Sabbath, demonstrating that Jesus was the fulfillment of Scripture. Paul’s efforts attracted many Jewish followers and many Gentile believers as well. This created two sets of disruptions, one amongst the Jewish community who were frustrated by the loss of their members, and second, by the Roman stake-holders who saw their citizens and city non-citizen occupants proclaiming their allegiance to Jesus over Caesar (this was treason in their eyes).

The tensions culminate when the Jewish leaders stir up the crowds in the marketplace which leads to an arrest of Paul’s friend Jason (who was hosting Paul and his friends). Paul and his companions leave the city quickly but it’s worth noting that the Gospel message was quickly embraced by the people of Thessalonica and new believers were quickly persecuted against.

**Central Idea: Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, those who have passed and those who are still alive who believe in Jesus will be raised and will be with Him forever. Despite the inevitability of death, we can be encouraged by the hope we have in Christ.**

## I Thessalonians 4:13-18

<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage each other with these words.

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**O** – Spend a few moments reading this passage to yourself. What phrases and verses strike you as interesting? For those familiar with this passage, what words or features feel new to you?

**I** – Paul expresses that he does not want the Thessalonians to live in ignorance or in hopelessness as it relates to those who died and also for those still alive. What do ignorance, hopelessness, and the “falling asleep” euphemism (v. 13) imply about the belief system in Thessalonica?

*(As with most people—including most of us—there was great fear associated with dying and also with our loved ones who have died before us. Complicating matters, was the widely-held belief that there was no afterlife, which was rooted in pagan philosophy, superstition, and lore. Christianity's narrative was distinct—because of Jesus' death and resurrection, believers receive His life, in this life and in the next. This was a radical thought in the Roman colony of Thessalonica but this hope was among the reasons why Christianity flourished there and throughout Asia Minor.)*

**A** – One of today's popular spiritual notions is that everyone who is fairly good and appropriately sincere goes to heaven. Further, only wicked people who cause great hurt to others are deserving of hell. How does Paul's teaching to the Thessalonians also work in current contexts?

*(Verse 14 is clear about the basis of the afterlife. It's not about moral performance or societal behavior. In fact, heaven isn't the focus, as it's more about “God [bringing] with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” For some, Jesus and the Triune God described in the Bible are not a necessary part of heaven; rather, heaven is about living blissfully forever in celestial space. This is not the Gospel that is being proclaimed in Scripture, which teaches that eternal salvation is found in restoring our relationship with our Creator. This salvation is found in placing our faith in the work of Jesus.)*

**I** – There has been a lot written and preached from vs. 16-18 regarding the return of Jesus. At first glance devoid of ancient language and context, a straight reading would lead us to a few literal conclusions, but it would also lead to a few complications. What do you see resulting from a straight literal reading of these three verses?

*(According to New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, “The key is to realize what **resurrection** itself means: it doesn’t mean disembodied life in some mid-air ‘heaven,’ but the re-embodiment of God’s people to live with and for God in the new, redeemed world that God will make. It would therefore be nonsense to imagine that the presently alive Christians are literally going to be snatched up into the sky, there to remain for ever. How would they then be with the others who, having died previously, will be raised and given new bodies?)*

*When Paul talks of Jesus ‘descending,’ he doesn’t suppose that Jesus is physically above us at the moment. Heaven, where Jesus is, isn’t another location within our space, but another dimension. The language of ‘descending’ is the risky metaphor—all metaphors are risky when talking of the future—that Paul here chooses. Elsewhere (e.g. Colossians 3:4) he can speak simply of Jesus ‘appearing,’ emerging from the presently hidden world of heaven, as heaven and earth are at last united, visibly present to one another. Here he builds into the picture, confusingly for later readers, an echo of Moses going up the mountain, the trumpet-blast as he is given the **law**, and coming down again.*

*So when Paul talks of Christians ‘being snatched up among the clouds,’ he is again not thinking of a literal vertical ascent. The language here is taken from Daniel 7, where ‘one like a **son of man**’ goes up on the clouds as he is vindicated by God after his suffering—a wonderful image not least for people like the Thessalonians who were suffering persecution and awaiting God’s vindication. And their ‘meeting’ with the Lord doesn’t mean they will then be staying in mid-air with him. They are like Roman citizens in a colony, going out to meet the emperor when he pays them a state visit, and then accompanying him back to the city itself.<sup>1</sup>)*

**Follow-up I** – How does Wright’s excellent summary of these verses help us in understanding the return of Jesus?

**A** – In vs. 14-15, Paul emphasizes the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation of what will then happen to believers who have fallen asleep and for believers who are yet alive. How do these verses help us in creating and building perspective on our own mortality and our hope?

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (p. 125). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

- a. Please note that not all these questions are to be asked in a single meeting. Take some time to prayerfully discern what will serve your LC the best. Select and reword the questions that best fit your voice and your Life Community group.
- b. Complement these questions with “process questions” (what else? what more? what do others think?)
- c. When you ask questions, give people ample time to think and respond. Wait. Take your time; don’t rush people but encourage participation. Avoid answering your own questions!
- d. Application: Pace the study to conclude with difference-making application.
- e. Secondary texts—use other texts sparingly, even if they are relevant. Such texts will push you into “teaching” rather than facilitating, causing people to feel distracted or de-powered.