

Rev. Dan Welch 12-13-23 Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
The Third Part in the Series, "Lo He Comes with Clouds Descending"  
"You've Got a Ticket to Ride!"

This evening we come to part three in a five part sermon series on the book of 1 Thessalonians. I've named this series after a hymn we sang last week "Lo He Comes with Clouds Descending". Let's jump right into tonight's installment!

I don't get to take too many airplane rides. When I do, it's almost always business related. I understand though that one of the most nerve-racking experiences that can happen in an airport when you really need to get someplace, but you find out that for one reason or another, you have been placed on the dreaded "*standby list*."

Once you're on the standby list of passengers you have no peace of mind. Every airport announcement and every conversation the ticket agent has brings on more stress, to see whether there will be enough room for you on the flight you want or if you will have to wait perhaps hours and hours for the next available flight. Ticketed passengers, by contrast, read magazines and thumb through their iPhones and iPads. They are at peace. Almost like having the peace of God that passes all human understanding!

Oh, to be numbered with the confirmed. Oh, to have your very own seat number and departure time. Oh, to be guaranteed that you're on the next flight going home!

Let's be honest, though. This time of the year often times we all feel like we're stuck on the standby list. Others have the ticket to make all of the big purchases, but not me. Others have the ticket to all of the fun, but not me. Others have the ticket for perfect families, but not me. I have several options. One is to throw a pity party and say, "Why me?" Another is to become a Scrooge and say "Bah, humbug to it all!" Still another way to respond to all of the holiday cheer is to become small, jealous, vindictive, and petty. In every case I end up stuck and trapped, kind of like the feeling of not knowing if you'll be allowed on the next flight. Often, we feel as though we are on the standby list, forever. And that would be Satan's plan. Shove our face in our filth. Remind us of our wretchedness. Point out our duplicity. Get us feeling absolutely hopeless.

I have good news for you! You **have** a seat for the final flight home. Reservations have been made. The fare has been paid for, in full. In the immortal words of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, *you've "got a ticket to ride!"*

That's what St. Paul, the Apostle, (not Paul the Beattle), says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

RETURN "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. 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. 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." (1 Thessalonians 4:14-16a).

The Thessalonians were not only worried about their own departure; they were also worried about loved ones who had died in the Lord. Paul assures us that Christians who die have only, in fact, fallen asleep. This is what Jesus teaches just before he raised Jarius' daughter in Matthew 9:24 and that's how Luke describes Stephen's death in Acts 7:60. That's what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15:51. And so Paul repeats the expression fallen asleep two times in these verses. When you die, if you die (if Jesus doesn't come again before you die), are you immediately resurrected? No. Our body stays here on this earth. But our spirit goes to be with the Lord. We have fallen asleep.

Jesus said as much when he said to the penitent thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Paul talked about it in 2 Corinthians 5 when he wrote, "To depart from this body is to be present with the Lord." In Philippians 1:21 he says, "For me to live is Christ; to die is gain." When believers die their spirits go to be with the Lord. And they fall asleep.

But not forever.

Christ will return with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God. The only angel that's called an archangel in the Bible is ... Michael (Jude 9; Revelation 12:7). It's going to be quite a day! Those who have fallen asleep will wake up! Meaning what? If you die trusting in the shed blood of the Lamb and believe that God raised Him from the dead ... there is no purgatory, there is no suffering. You've got a ticket to ride!

RESURRECTION "And the dead in Christ will rise first." (1 Thess. 4:16b)

Aristotle called death, "The end of everything." A French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, wrote, "Death removes all meaning from life." Another French philosopher, François Rabelais, said at the end of his life, "I am going to the great ... Perhaps." Not Jesus. He claimed in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies." Because Jesus lives, you, too shall live, too. Guaranteed. Bank on it! You are not on standby. You've got a ticket to ride!

RAPTURE “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.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17a)

Christians who are alive when Christ returns will be caught up to be with Jesus. The term “caught up” in Latin is *rapiemur*. From this comes the English word “rapture.” So “rapture” is a biblical idea. The problem is that some Christians distinguish the rapture from the Second Coming of Christ to judge the world. This is incorrect. The rapture and the Second Coming are the same thing. They are the same event. If you believe and have been baptized then you are rapture ready!

REUNION “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thess. 4:17b)

How many of you have been to your twentieth high school reunion? Thirtieth? Fortieth? Fiftieth? Sixtieth? Seventieth? How many of you have a regular **family** reunion? Reunions are wonderful opportunities to see friends and relatives you love.

But can you imagine **this** reunion? People’s bodies being reunited with their spirits for eternity. Family members seeing each other for the first time in decades, if not centuries, as they rise to meet Jesus Christ. It’s part of an incredible reunion.

This experience tops everything. I can look at every one of you straight in the eye and say with confidence that the most exciting thing in your life has not happened yet. I don’t care what you’ve done. You may have landed that dream job; purchased that dream house; gone on that dream vacation. You may have skydived again and again. This is not skydiving. This is the opposite! We will be caught up to join this joyful and wonderful reunion.

And that means no matter what you’re going through, and some of you are going through some very difficult days, as a believer in Jesus the best is yet to come. You are **not** on the eternal standby list. What am I saying? I’m saying that by God’s grace in Christ Jesus you most certainly have a ticket to ride! Amen.