

Comfort One Another With These Words

Thoughts on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 on Yom Teruah

notes by Tim Hegg

The last thing we read about Yeshua's life upon this earth was His ascension into heaven. Our Master had gathered His talmidim together to give them their final instructions. He told them not to leave Jerusalem, but that they should wait there until they received "what the Father had promised" (Acts 1:4). He went on to explain that this "promise" was what He had Himself told the disciples would happen: "Yochanan baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) not many days from now." From the time following Pesach, they had been counting the weeks toward Shavuot, which was just a few days away. They were to stay in Jerusalem until they received the baptism of which Yeshua had spoken.

All of this was a bit confusing to the talmidim. Was the era of peace promised by the Prophets to arrive in just a few days? Was the tyranny of Rome that held a strangle hold over the Jewish nation finally to be lifted? Was the end of days just a week or so away? Their question to the Yeshua is therefore understandable: "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Yeshua's answer seems hardly comforting! "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Ruach HaKodesh has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (1:7–8).

Then suddenly, as quickly as He had given them the answer to their question, He was taken up into heaven. They must have stood their, mouths agape, as they watched their Master ascend. How could the Kingdom be established if the King had left!? Then, to add even more mystery to the event, suddenly two men dressed in white were standing with them—two heavenly messengers with a divine word of exhortation: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Yeshua, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." Convinced that they had been given their mission, they returned to Jerusalem, back to the upper room they had rented for the festival. They were not discouraged or downtrodden. They realized now that the Master had given them a strategic mission, and they set themselves to begin its accomplishment. And the very first thing they set themselves to in preparation of this mission was prayer: "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Yeshua, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14). Mary, who had treasured in her heart the words of the angel who first announced to her the mystery of the One she was to bear, now understood more fully. He was the long awaited Messiah, and He had suffered as the Prophets spoke. Now the work of the harvest of nations lay before them all as they hoped for His return to reign as the victorious King. Now the talmidim understood that it was necessary for the Messiah first to suffer, and then to be glorified (Lk 24:26).

All of that happened nearly 2000 years ago, and still we await the return of Yeshua. Each year, as we celebrate Yom Teruah, the day of the blowing of the shofar, we are called to remember the words of the messengers given to the talmidim on that day of Yeshua's ascension. "Yeshua will come just as you saw Him ascend." But the long period of time may cause some to doubt that these words are true. Peter himself spoke of this in his second epistle. The long period that separates Shavuot from Yom Teruah, the period of winter in which no Torah festivals occur, reminds us that it is the time to accomplish the mission of the Master, but it also causes us to long for the sound of the Shofar that will announce the coming of the King. Some lose heart during this period of

waiting, and others mock. Peter wrote: “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2Pet 3:3–4). But Peter reminds us that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years to us. With that in mind, it has only been a couple of days since Yeshua ascended!

Still, we wait, and sometimes we get weary. The same was happening to the followers of Yeshua who met in the city of Thessalonica during the days of Paul. Nearly 20 years had passed since that day when Yeshua ascended into heaven, and things had not become any better. In fact, the political climate was growing increasingly ominous and war seemed imminent as more and more of the Jewish population suffered under the heavy hand of Rome. Even some of the prominent leaders in the Thessalonica messianic community had died without seeing Yeshua’s return, causing others to question whether their hope was ill-founded. How could they have known that the future would be even more bleak? Rome would crush the Jewish nation and utterly destroy the Temple itself. The priesthood would be banished, and the days of rejoicing during Festival times at the Temple would become a distant memory. Eventually the Jews would be banished from the Holy City itself, and made to wander among the nations. Who could have imagined that in just a century, people who name Yeshua as their Master would become the embittered enemies of the Jewish people? Or that this hatred of Yeshua’s own brothers and sisters would become so dominant in the world that attempts to annihilate entirely the people of Jacob would become a reality?

In our own times, the world is trembling from the evil intents of nations and governments to change society as we know it, who are not merely speaking a distant theology but are amassing ever possible evil to eradicate the truth of the Scriptures and of the God of creation Who sent His Son, Yeshua, to redeem a people from every nation and family of mankind to be His own people and to be saved to be with Him for eternity. But we must remember that the light of the Gospel in Yeshua shines all that much more brightly in the darkness and that we have the grand opportunity, privilege and duty to proclaim the gospel by word and actions.

When the Apostle Paul realized the broken spirit of the Thessalonican believers, he sought to encourage and comfort them with the words of truth. These same words remain our hope and comfort, for they are endowed with the stamp of divine reality, and remind us again that even in the darkened skies of evil, the sunlight of God’s truth shines through. Paul wrote: “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 Messiah will rise first. 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1Thess 4:16–18).

The first thing we notice is the emphatic pronoun “Himself”—“The Lord Himself will descend.” This echoes the exact same wording used by the two messengers at the time of Yeshua’s ascension: “This same Yeshua” (Acts 1:11). Yeshua will not send an agent, or a messenger, but He is returning Himself. Just as sure as He died and rose again, so sure is He physically, actually returning to live upon this earth. Secondly, we learn from this passage that His coming will be announced with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the “trumpet of God” (cp. 1Cor 15:52). This makes it clear: He’s coming back as the crowned King, not as the suffering Messiah humiliated by the death for sinners. He suffered once, but no more. Soon He will come in all of His glory to rule and reign. Like the thunder of Mt. Sinai, He will come with proper announcement, and all of the world will know that the Almighty has installed His King on Mt. Zion (Ps 2). Thirdly,

we discover that at His coming, those believers who have died will rise from the dead. In His first coming, Yeshua came to die. In His second coming, those who have died come to life. He is “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25) and at His coming, all will recognize this reality. Fourthly, we are told that those who are His, and who remain alive to see His return, will be “caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This seems too fantastic to be real! In our modern world that has jettisoned the whole idea of miracles, this reads like some ancient myth believable only in a pre-scientific age. But all miracles are equally fantastic. If the miracle of Yeshua’s resurrection is received, then surely the miracle of our being gathered together with Him in the clouds is no less certain. We must live with this truth ever before us: Yeshua is coming! Let us be diligent to be faithful to Him, serving Him as living trophies of His grace.

Finally, Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to “comfort one another with these words.” The same admonition is addressed to us today. In a world that seems to be hastening toward the end of days, where the threats of global evil grow constantly, and world instability is on the rise, we could become anxious or even distraught. We could lose sight of what is true and become consumed with the anxiety over what tomorrow holds. But Yeshua is coming and He will not tarry. The appointed time is set and His return is sure. We will see Him, we will hear Him, and He will bring the final victory of peace and righteousness. Don’t fear! Comfort each other with these words!

In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2–3)