

**Vicarious Sacrifice: Characteristics of the Resurrection Body; Believers at Thessalonica Are Confused about the Rapture; Paul Writes 1 Thessalonians to Clear Up Misunderstandings; They Understood the Imminency of the Rapture but Thought Those Departed Would Be Left Behind; Uses “Sleep” as a Metaphor for Physical Death**

- (1) Paul’s journey had taken him to Athens where he was accompanied by Silas<sup>1</sup> and Timothy when he received word that Jewish opposition had caused trouble for the church in Thessalonica.

Paul received his inducement to write 1 Thessalonians from the reports which Timothy brought him from Thessalonica. Timothy’s report led Paul to counsel them in respect to several matters:

- He reiterated the Christian standard of holiness for those new converts who were still tempted by the prevailing immorality of the time (4:1–8).
  - He clarified certain features of the doctrine of Christ’s Return for the sake of those members of the congregation who had become concerned over the welfare of departed loved ones. Paul sought to comfort such through further instruction.
  - He rebuked those of the congregation who had become lax in tending to their daily tasks in light of what they considered to be the imminently impending return of Christ (4:11).<sup>2</sup>
- (2) It is the second of these concerns that we address in our passage. The concern of the believers in Thessalonica had to do with details associated with the Rapture of the church.
- (3) They understood the imminency of the Rapture, but were fearful that fellow believers who had already died would not receive a resurrection body.
- (4) Paul refers to these departed saints as “those who are asleep.” The word asleep is the present middle participle of the verb **κοιμάω (koimáō)**: “to cause to lie down to sleep.”
- (5) This word can be taken literally or figuratively, dependent on context. In our verse, Paul is obviously speaking about believers that have died physically.
- (6) Here is some clarification on Paul’s use of this word:  
**For an understanding of Pauline usage it is especially noteworthy that [κοιμάω] is used primarily in connection with questions about the fate of Church members who die before the parousia (1 Thessalonians 4:13ff.) or before the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12ff.). [Κοιμάω] not only emphasizes the fact of death and is also not merely used in the customary ancient euphemistic sense. Instead the ambiguity of the term makes possible an affirmation of both the fact of death and the Christian hope.**<sup>3</sup>
- (7) Paul is using sleep in a figurative sense. In the context of this paragraph, he is going to paint a verbal picture of believers lying down (burial) and going to sleep (physical death).

<sup>1</sup> A Gentile who was a member of the Jerusalem church and probably a Roman citizen. He accompanied Paul along with Timothy on Paul’s second missionary journey.

<sup>2</sup> Horne, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*, 5:723.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Völkel, “Κοιμάωμαι,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 2:302.

- (8) When a person lies down to sleep, he loses consciousness and, several hours later, regains his consciousness. The period he is asleep is not remembered. Thus he goes to sleep and seemingly, without pause, he is awake.
- (9) The body lies down to “sleep” and without reference to the lapse of time is suddenly awakened in resurrection body.
- (10) The catalyst for the transformation is the return of the soul and spirit from heaven to the resurrected body and the activation of eternal life.
- (11) The present tense of *koimáō* is historical. It is employed when a past event is viewed with the vividness of a present occurrence.
- (12) This is also referred to as a dramatic present. It is quite dramatic when a person dies and instantly finds himself absent from the body and face-to-face with the Lord.
- (13) The middle voice indicates that the subject – “those who are asleep” – are benefitted by the action of the verb of lying down to sleep.
- (14) The entire sequence is described by Paul in the following verses. In verse 13, he states the reason for teaching this doctrine: “so that you will not grieve.”
- (15) The word “that”: *ἵνα* (*hína*) introduces a negative result clause which is indicated by the negative conjunction *μή* (*mé*): “not.”
- (16) This introduces the verb, the present passive subjunctive of *λυπέω* (*lupéō*): “that you should not be caused to grieve.”
- (17) The present tense is durative which indicates that it began in the past with a fellow believer’s death and continues into the present.
- (18) The passive voice indicates that the death of these people has caused some of those in the church at Thessalonica to become grieved.
- (19) The subjunctive mood stresses that this mental anguish is prompted by a volitional decision to be negatively affected by the death of fellow saints.
- (20) It is quite natural and expected for those left behind to be remorseful over the death of a relative or friend. What is abnormal is for such individuals to remain in a constant state of sorrow.
- (21) The worry that affects so many in Thessalonica is that these people will miss the Rapture and as such will not receive a resurrection body.
- (22) Paul is about to crack open an entirely new doctrine that will relieve the sorrow of those that have lost loved ones.