

## **“We will be with the Lord forever”**

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

When I was on Sabbatical in 2009 in the lush Cascade Mountains of Washington state, I had a vision while sitting at the foot of a very large and old cedar tree. Leaning against the tree with a flowing stream next to me and mountains in the background, I closed my eyes and opened myself to the Spirit of creation. I wasn't on any drugs.

When I was laying in a hospital bed in ICU this past summer, very much on drugs, I had a similar vision, dream, hallucination or whatever you want to call it. I remembered it because I had a similar version of it 11 years earlier. I share with you the hospital version that culminates with our “being with the Lord forever” from 1 Thessalonians.

Before me was a long, windswept plain somewhere in Africa. Movement caught my eye. A small group of humans, unclothed was foraging on a field of berries. Their lives centered around the challenges of their search for food and being a part of their clan. The strongest has power and the rest accepted their place in the constant struggles of life without reflection.

As I watched, thousands of years passed by. Then, slowly, certain individuals began to grow restless with the routines of life. When a child died in their arms they began to ask why and wondered how it might be avoided in the future. They were beginning to gain self-awareness.

Life, they knew, endured through the cycles of the sun and moon and seasons, but as people died, it also has an end. What was the purpose?

Along with exhilaration and freedom of knowing they were alive came the fear and uncertainty of being alive without knowing why.

On the one hand, they believed they were not alone. There was purpose and meaning underlying the mystery of existence.

On the other hand, Fear would bring them into a frightened self-protection, fighting to retain their positions of power, always resisting change, regardless of what new, better information was available.

As the awakening continued another millennium passed, and I watched as humans began to gather into ever larger groups, following a natural drive to be in communion with more people. They began to realize they could move beyond the nomadic life of gathering and hunting and begin to cultivate earth's plants and domesticate animals resulting in large farming villages.

Surpluses prompted trade allowing occupations like shepherds, builders, merchants, metalworkers, and soldiers. Quickly came the invention of writing. Yet the question still loomed: Why were they alive?

They tried to answer that question by worshiping gods that existed outside of themselves that ruled the weather, the seasons, and the stages of harvest. In their fear, they tried to appease these gods with rituals and sacrifice.

So began the era of empires and tyrants, as one great leader rose up after another, uniting the strength of his people, conquering as much land as possible, convinced that the views of his culture should be adopted by all.

After so much blood, finally the ancient Greeks taught them to see the waste of unending violence. The Greeks implemented a new system for the exchange and comparison of ideas,

a system that protected the right of every individual to hold his own riches, regardless of physical strength. As this new way emerged it became known as “democracy”.

At the same time, another idea, one destined to transform the human understanding of spiritual reality, surfaced in a small tribe in the Middle East. They said there is one God still existing outside themselves – but for the first time a God who is personal and responsive, and the sole creator of all humans.

Meanwhile, cultures in the east were developing Hinduism and Buddhism that emphasized a connection with God on the inside by shifting to a higher awareness and harmony with creation.

These Gods on the outside and the inside came together at the Sea of Galilee in the person of Jesus. He was here to bring a new energy into the world, a new culture based on love. His message was the one God was a Holy Spirit whose existence could be felt and proven through their experiences. Coming into spiritual awareness meant more than rituals and sacrifices. It involved repentance of a deeper kind, a “letting go” of the ego and its addictions to experience the true fruits of the spiritual life.

As this message began to spread, I watched as one of the most influential of all empires, the Roman, embraced the new religion and spread it through much of Europe. I watched the church lapse into the Fear, its leaders sensing a lack of control, building doctrine around the powerful hierarchy of the churchmen, who made themselves the mediators between God and humans.

Soon came Martin Luther, and the Protestant reformation which held the promise that individuals could go directly to the scriptures themselves and conceive a direct connection with God.

I saw the scientific method being embraced as the way to understand the world as the power of the church to define reality was diminishing.

But those in the church, entrenched in Fear, sought to squelch this new science. A compromise was reached. Science would be free to explore the outer, material world but leave the spiritual to the churchmen.

Our God became a distant God who pushed the universe into being and then stood back to let it run on its own. We were created to build, produce, and work.

The United States was created with its system of checks and balances spelled out in its constitution. At first it was made up of primarily rural people. Then came the industrial revolution and great numbers of people moved into great urban centers of production.

In Europe, I saw a whole nation bow down to the dictates of one man who taught them that if they're a certain race, they can become a supnation that will rule the world. The Third Reich.

After the war, I saw a whole generation growing up, myself included, who were constantly reminded that we lived in the greatest country in the world, the land of the free, with liberty and justice for all its citizens. Yet as we matured in the 1960's and 70's, we experienced a disturbing disparity between this popular American self-image and actual reality. We found that many people in this land, women and certain social minorities were definitely not free.

Just as disturbing was our culture's spiritual practice. Materialism pushed the mystery of life and death far into the background. Church attendance began to fall because people began to think it was meaningless ritual that was more social than spiritual.

Then I saw a contagion of divisiveness between those who wanted to maintain the old worldview and those who wanted to change to a more spiritual way of life. Those who didn't want change became convinced that they were facing a life and death struggle against the permissiveness and chaos of last 25 years. Advocates for liberation and change wanted a smooth transition from the old materialistic worldview to a new spiritual one; a transformation in which the best of the older traditions would be recognized and integrated into the new world view that was emerging.

In this new, emerging world, giving replaces greed, listening replaces judgment, prayer and worship has priority over screen time, forgiveness replaces vengeance, love replaces hatred, spirituality replaces not knowing God, and faith replaces denial.

As I shared my vision with you, I obviously filled in the details from what I've learned about human history. I hope it helps you look back in a new way.

In our text from 1 Thessalonians, Paul makes it very clear that we are divided between those of us are informed and the uninformed, between those who have died and those who are alive, between those who believe Jesus died and rose again and those who don't believe, between those who will hear the sound of the trumpet on the last day and those who won't.

Then Paul writes, "we will be with the Lord forever". You are saved by God's grace through your faith in Jesus Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

#739 – Touch the Earth Lightly