



A Well-Defined
FAITH

[fāth] (noun)

Biblical words used in church...
Discover what they really mean.



Sunday
May 24, 2026

Example Teaching Rhythm

Welcome and Connect: 10 Minutes

This helps people feel connected and more comfortable participating in the study and discussion.

Look Forward: 5-10 Minutes

Share any important church events, service opportunities, or upcoming group plans. Keep this brief but clear.

Look at Scripture: 25-35 Minutes

This is the main focus of Community Groups. Read the selected scripture together and guide the group through discussion questions and observations.

Prayer: 10 Minutes

Invite members to share prayer requests and praises, then pray together as a group. This is a time to support one another.

Explaining the H.E.A.R Method

The acronym **HEAR** stands for **Highlight, Explain, Apply, and Respond**. Each of these four steps aims to cultivate an atmosphere to hear God speak.

Highlight - After praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance, read the passage of scripture, and highlight each verse that speaks to you.

Explain - Explain what the text means. Ask questions like:

- Who wrote this, to whom, and why? What does this reveal about God? What do the key words actually mean? What did this call the original audience to, and what does that reveal for me?

By asking questions, with the help of God's Spirit, and by using helpful study resources, you can understand the meaning of a passage or verse.

Apply - This application is the heart of the process. Everything you have done so far culminates under this heading. As you have done before, work to uncover the significance of these verses and the implications they have. Ask questions like:

- What does this passage reveal about God, yourself, or the world that you need to embrace or sit with? Does this passage challenge an attitude, assumption, or habit that needs to change? Is there something to do? Is there someone to love?

Respond - Your response to the passage may take on many forms. Ask: Is there something to pray? - Let the passage shape your prayer, not just inform it. Use the "Five Daily Prayer Prompts" to guide you in your response.

“Heaven - The Place of God's Uninterrupted Presence”

Introduction

Most people have a working definition of heaven that they've never actually examined. It got assembled somewhere along the way – a funeral, a song, a painting, a well-meaning thing someone said at the wrong moment – and it has been quietly running in the background ever since. Clouds. Reunion. Rest. Something better than this, but hazily so. Pleasant in the way that a destination feels pleasant when you're not really planning to go there anytime soon.

Which means the first thing to do is clear the ground.

The biblical picture of heaven is not a disembodied drift into the infinite. It is the full and unmediated presence of God – not filtered through a broken world, not obscured by grief or confusion or distance, but direct. Face to face. Final. The word for it in Hebrew carries the sense of a dwelling – a place where God actually is, not merely in the sense that God is everywhere, but in the sense that His presence is the defining reality of the place itself.

Most people think of heaven as the destination. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, presents it more like a direction – the orientation toward which the whole creation is pulling, and the confidence that shapes how a Christian lives before they get there.

First Thessalonians 4:13–18 was written to a church in genuine grief. Some of their members had died, and the Thessalonians were afraid those people had somehow missed what was coming. Paul does not offer them a vague comfort. He offers them a specific one – grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, pointing toward a definite future event, and landing with the weight of something true enough to actually change how you face a grave.

What Paul gives them – and what this passage gives us – is a structured argument with a destination. And the place it lands will redefine what the word heaven actually means.

The honest question this passage presses is not theological. Most people in the room already believe in heaven in some general sense. The question is whether that belief has any mass – whether it actually changes something about the way you grieve, the way you hold on, the way you speak to someone standing at a grave. This one was written to do something. The question is whether you will let it.

Discussion Questions + Illustration

Select a question or two below to open up discussion.

- When you think of heaven, what image actually comes to mind – and how much of that came from Scripture versus from culture?
- Have you ever been with someone who was dying, or at a graveside, and felt the gap between what you believe and what you actually feel? What was that like?
- What's the difference between a hope that comforts and a hope that changes the way you live? Which does heaven feel like to you?
- Is there a loss in your life – a person, a relationship, a version of yourself – that you have not fully grieved before God?
- Paul says to "encourage one another with these words." Who in your life needs to hear what this passage says – and have you said it to them?

In the winter of 1914, the story goes that Ernest Shackleton recruited men for an Antarctic expedition with a notice that promised nothing comfortable: months of darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Hundreds applied – despite the difficulty, but because something specific was being promised at the end.

- That is exactly the shape of what Paul gives the Thessalonians. A sequence of events. A named person. A trumpet. A reunion. The hope that changes how you grieve has to point somewhere real.

Highlight | Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

First Thessalonians was written to a young church in a Greek city that Paul had planted and then been forced to leave – after only a matter of weeks. He has heard they are troubled – not just by persecution, but by a specific theological fear. Some of their members have died. They are wondering whether those people have missed the return of Christ.

Paul's response is not to minimize the grief. He names it directly – he does not want them to grieve like those who have no hope. The distinction is not between grieving and not grieving. It is between grieving without a horizon and grieving with one.

The passage moves in three stages. First, Paul anchors everything in the resurrection of Jesus. Second, he describes a sequence of events surrounding the Lord's return: the dead in Christ rise first, then those still living are caught up together to meet Him. Third – and this is the weight-bearing phrase – they will be with the Lord forever. The destination is not a place. It is a person. It is uninterrupted presence with the person who is the source of every good thing.

The passage ends with an instruction easy to rush past: encourage one another with these words. Paul does not close with a creed or a conclusion. He closes with something to do – and someone to do it for.

- What does it mean that Paul grounds hope in an event rather than a feeling or disposition?
- Why does Paul describe a specific sequence rather than just saying "it will all work out"?

Explain | Consider the Context

Thessalonica was a prosperous Roman city. When people there believed Paul's message, they gave up something real – social standing, religious community, economic connection. And then some of them died, and those who loved them began to wonder whether the sacrifice had been for nothing.

The Greco-Roman world had sophisticated beliefs about the afterlife, but not bodily resurrection. The idea that the dead would physically rise to meet a returning Messiah cut against everything that world assumed. Which is why Paul's argument has to rest on Jesus. If the resurrection happened, the pattern exists. The ones who have died have not missed anything – held in the same hands that held Jesus in those three days, they will rise at the same summons.

Paul's closing instruction – encourage one another with these words – is itself historical context worth sitting with. He is writing to a community, not a reader. The hope he describes was never meant to be processed alone.

- Paul doesn't say "those who have died" – he says "those who have fallen asleep." What does that word choice assume before it even makes an argument? Who comes to mind when you hear it?
- Where do you carry the Thessalonians' fear – that something irreplaceable is gone permanently?

Apply | Discuss as a Group

If heaven is not escape but renewal – the same world, remade and fully pervaded by God's presence – then how a Christian grieves is not a retreat from this world but a refusal to let death have the final word over it.

That matters for how a Christian grieves. Paul does not say the grief is wrong. He says it should have a different shape – oriented toward reunion rather than permanent loss, toward a future that is not a consolation prize but the thing the whole story was building toward.

It also matters for how a Christian lives now. The person who genuinely believes they will be with the Lord forever is freed to engage the world without the desperate grip of someone who believes this is all there is. Generosity becomes easier when your security is not threatened. Forgiveness becomes possible when you're not settling every account before time expires.

The hardest application is not intellectual – it is the cost of staying silent. Most people who believe this passage do not withhold it out of doubt. They withhold it because grief feels fragile or because the words might land wrong. But Paul does not treat silence as the safe option. He treats it as a failure to carry something that was never meant to be carried alone.

- Is heaven something you lean into – or something you've quietly set aside because it feels too remote to depend on?
- What would it look like for the way you face grief – your own or someone else's – to actually be shaped by what Paul describes here?

Respond | How should I live/pray?

Paul does not end this passage with a doctrine. He ends it with a direction: encourage one another with these words.

The appropriate first posture before 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is not to resolve every question about what heaven will be like. It is to receive what Paul is actually giving – a specific, anchored, unflinching hope in the face of death – and to let that hope do what hope is meant to do: change the weight you assign to what is temporary and what is permanent.

The passage was written into grief. That is where it lives. And if you have been carrying grief that has no horizon – a loss you have not allowed yourself to bring before God, a fear about someone who has died, a creeping suspicion that death gets the final word – this passage is not primarily asking you to understand something. It is asking you to receive something. A resurrection already happened. The pattern exists. The trumpet will sound. The reunion is coming. You do not persevere through grief by gritting your teeth and waiting. You persevere by trusting someone who has already walked through the grave and come out the other side.

And then – this is Paul's instruction, not an optional pastoral note – you say it to someone else. The word he uses is *parakaleite*, the same root as the Holy Spirit's own title. This is not small talk about a better place. It is a proclamation spoken into grief with weight, carrying the same comfort the Spirit carries. The hope is not meant to stay private. Someone in your life is grieving without a horizon this week. Someone near you is afraid. The words exist to travel – and now you know what kind of words they are.

- Where are you carrying grief or fear about death – your own or someone else's – that you have not yet brought fully before God?
- Who needs to hear what this passage says, and what would it cost you to actually say it to them this week?

Response Tool: Five Daily Prayer Prompts

As you leave today, let these five questions carry the weight of your response into the week ahead – not as a checklist, but as an ongoing conversation with God. Introduce the five daily questions as a simple spiritual practice that can help us intentionally live out our faith in our workplaces, homes, families, and communities.

- God, where do you want me to go?
- God, who do you want me to see?
- God, what do you want me to say?
- God, what do you want me to pray?
- God, how do you want me to serve?

After this time of reflection, transition into a time of prayer requests. Allow time for members to share and, if appropriate, allow others in the class to pray for each other.

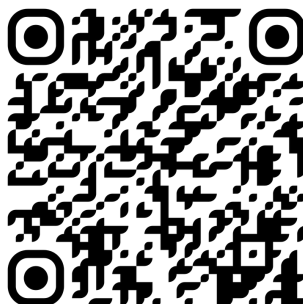
Additional Commentary

- On parousia (v.15) – "the coming of the Lord": The Greek term was used in the ancient world for the official arrival of a king or emperor into a city – a formal, public, announced entrance that reorganized everything around it. Paul borrows the word deliberately. The return of Jesus is not a quiet spiritual event. It is the arrival of the rightful king into his own creation, and the whole passage is shaped by that image.
- On "those who have fallen asleep" (v.13): The metaphor is not evasion. Sleep carries an implicit promise of waking. Paul's choice of the word is theological before it is comforting – it assumes resurrection the way sleep assumes morning. He is not softening death. He is naming what kind of thing it is.
- On "caught up together" – harpazo (v.17): The word carries the sense of being seized, taken quickly, without resistance. It is the same word used for Philip being taken up in Acts, and for Paul's vision in 2 Corinthians 12. The emphasis is not on the direction of travel but on the completeness of the gathering. No one left behind. No one who missed the moment.
- On 'with the Lord forever' (v.17): The phrase has two load-bearing words, and the second is easy to rush past. 'Forever' is not simply duration – it is the end of interruption. Every experience of God's presence in this life has been partial, filtered, contested by grief or distraction or sin. What Paul is describing is not more of what we already have. It is presence without interference, for the first time, and without end. The destination is a person. All other features of the new creation flow from that single fact.
- On 'encourage one another' (v.18): The Greek is parakaleite – the same root as parakletos, the word Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit. Paul is not prescribing optimism or warmth. He is prescribing a proclamation. The same word the Comforter bears is the word Paul puts in the mouth of ordinary believers speaking to each other across grief.

Community Group Resource Page

Visit our website to view our **leadership resources.**

From Community Group training and resources to Discipleship Group starter guides, we want to equip you to make disciples.



Additional Study

Watch/Listen

Bible Project - 1 Thessalonians



See a collection of videos, classes, and articles that dive into **1 Thessalonians** and its themes.

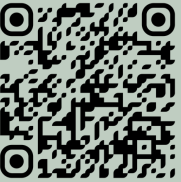
Bible Project - Heaven & Earth



In this video, we explore the surprising biblical viewpoint that **Heaven and Earth** were meant to overlap.

Overview

Enduring Word - 1 Thess.



Text commentary, written materials, and audio/video recordings over **1 Thessalonians**.

Got Questions - Heaven



Biblical Q&A, articles, translations, audios, videos, apps, social media, podcasts, and more on **Heaven**.

Expand

Bible Ref - 1 Thessalonians 4



Explore chapter and verse commentaries to deepen your understanding of **1 Thessalonians 4**.

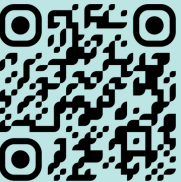
Bible Hub - 1 Thessalonians 4



Parallel translations, language tools, commentaries, and much more on **1 Thessalonians 4**.

Deepen

Logos Factbook - Heaven



Logos Factbook shares information resources and articles about **Heaven**.

Blue Letter Bible - 1 Thess.



Original texts, Translations, Cross-Refs, Commentaries, Dictionaries + more on **1 Thessalonians 4**.

