1 Thessalonians 4:17b-18 And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

I will probably ruffle a few feathers here, especially if you are a millenialist. This passage is the one that millenialists point to as the basis for the rapture and the 1,000 year reign of Christ. But that is wrong. There is no rapture, and what they teach as the 1,000 year reign is false and misleading. Please note that the context of this section is speaking of the Day of Judgment. Just like Jesus does, it speaks of the trumpet sound and then there is Jesus coming on the clouds. From there we are going to be with the Lord forever! Now, where, where in that section do you find the idea of the rapture? The idea that believers are taken to heaven and others are left behind?

Now I wish I could make this easy, but it is so difficult. I say that because if you have studied what the millenialists say, then you recognize that they are all over the map. Some teach the rapture, 1,000 year reign, and Battle of Armageddon. Some teach 1,000 year reign, rapture, battle. Some teach rapture, battle, 1,000 year reign. Some teach battle, rapture, 1,000 year. If you have that many teachings on just one subject, hasn’t it ever dawned on anyone that maybe this teaching is wrong? So here are a few questions to ask millenialists. 1. Is there any place else in the Scripture that speaks of a day when only believers are taken to heaven and the unbelievers get another chance at believing? 2. If Jesus is going to have an earthly kingdom in which he reigns, how is it possible for people to live with and be ruled over by the glorified, exalted, Almighty God Jesus and not believe in God? 3. If the final battle of good and evil is at Armageddon and we have to help God win that battle, then what exactly did Jesus do when He came the first time?

I especially like that last question. My Savior Jesus came and won the battle, achieved complete victory over sin, death and the Devil. He has been exalted to the status of Judge of the living and the dead and Jesus does not need one more battle or our help in a battle to defeat his enemies. He is God! One word can fell his enemies and one word can bring to an end this entire universe! So if you believe that you have to help God win, then just what kind of God are you believing in?

As a Lutheran, I, like a true Lutheran theologian, reject the human idea of the millenialists. (It is the same false idea the Jews had of the Messiah, that the Messiah would be an earthly ruler and they were wrong!!) That’s the way it was with Luther and I don’t think he got it wrong. There is, as far as the clear, precise and wonderful Word of God goes, not a single passage to back up this false teaching!

Well, thank goodness I don’t want to spend my entire time speaking of this! In truth, what I want to do is highlight the wonder and joy of what our Savior Jesus reveals to us as we contemplate the lesson and theme for this Sunday. Our theme: **TRIUMPHANT SAINTS!**

Now, as we spoke of last week, the Last Day of Judgment is going to be an awesome and wonderful day, well, for the believer it is. To recap, on that day, as this section says, the trumpet of God will be heard and with that every living being will look and there will be Jesus. Where will that be? In the air, because with the sounding of the trumpet, this entire world will dissolve (or as described elsewhere, will be destroyed by fire) and the only place left to be will be “in the air” with Jesus right before you. This world and its elements will disappear, for that is really the only way for every human on this world, still alive on that day, to see Jesus coming on the clouds. It is a glorious day. It is an awesome day. And why those last two statements are true is what I really want to speak to you about.

We will begin by addressing that commonly asked question that many people have? What happens to our loved ones when they die? Without a lot of commentary, recognize that there are two possible destinations at this time. There is God’s eternal kingdom of heaven and there is the eternal death of hell. There is no other answer found in Scripture. These two places are granted on the basis of faith. If you have faith you go to heaven and if you do not have faith then you go to hell.

Let’s understand faith. Hebrews 11:1 **“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”** Our faith, the one God has revealed and carried forth in his divine majesty and wisdom, is that He is the Judge AND the Savior. He has revealed the horror of sin. He has sent His Son to atone for sin and give us eternal life and salvation. We get to heaven simply because we believe that Jesus Christ is God and Lord. That Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead as the absolute proof of his Victory on our behalf. Faith is about Jesus and what He has done. Now, it is true, a person who believes in Jesus as God and Lord is still a sinner. We still have no ability to save ourselves, still need to admit sin and cling to the hope of Jesus. God’s Word makes it clear that you cannot be a believer and then wallow in sin. Case in point, 2 Tim. 2:19. **“Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord, must turn away from evil.”** Believers have a drive and desire to live pleasing to God because they can’t help themselves. Faith is all about Jesus and His gracious redemption.

Now back to our question, what happens to loved ones, believing loved ones who die? Are they in a limbo world, just “asleep” until Jesus returns or what? Pay attention to what our section told you. It says, **“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.”** Immediately you should see two important things. First, this is all prefaced on the fact that Jesus died and rose! You eliminate that teaching of Jesus in any way and you do not have the Christian faith and hope. So if you decide sin is no longer sin or that the resurrection of Jesus is no longer real, you do not have Christian faith and hope. Secondly, please note that those who have fallen asleep, that is, those who have died before this final Day of Judgment, will be coming with Jesus! In other words, they are already with the Lord, already souls enjoying the peace, perfection and eternal wonder of God.

Did you catch that? They are with the Lord! There are other passages to help us grasp this truth. Look just a bit further in our text at verse 15: **“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.”** Our loved ones are there, with Jesus. Now as for the next line that speaks of **“the dead in Christ will rise first”** I believe that only references the fact that those coming with Christ will receive back their bodies as a part of that Day of Judgment, but it is still rather clear that the souls of our loved ones, those who believed, will be with the Lord from the very moment they die in this world.

We could also reference the words of Jesus in John 14:3. He says there in connection with the room / mansion he is preparing for us that, **“I** **will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”** Jesus is in heaven, sitting on the throne of God. We will be in heaven with him. In John 12:26 Jesus speaks a similar promise. He is speaking of his coming glorification, his resurrection and ascension into heaven and says there: **“where I am, my servant also will be.”** Again, clearly the context and words tell us that those who die in this world are indeed with the Lord in His kingdom of heaven.

And a few other passages for you. Paul speaks of the fact that He longs for death, a very Godly wish. In both places where he spoke of this, under verbal inspiration, he proclaims: **“We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”** Again he says, **“I desire to depart and be with Christ.”** It is clear that Paul knew that to leave this world in death for the believer means that we will be with the Lord. That was his clear confidence and confession.

With the Lord. There is the important part. We are with the Lord. Is that not what our section concludes as it speaks to us of the Last Day? It says, **“And so we will be with the Lord forever.”** Believers are blessed with the gift of heaven. Believers go to be in a place where the total wonder and awe of God is almost beyond our understanding. Did you know that when speaking of what heaven is like the Scripture speaks in negatives? What I mean is that we are told what will not be there! I believe this is done because we can grasp the lack of the bad stuff in our minds but cannot truly grasp eternity, perfection and pure joy. Listen to one of those sections that speaks of heaven.

Revelation 7:15-17 **Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. 16 Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

 Do you see what I mean when I say “negatives.” It is clear that the bad things of this world will be gone, absolutely gone. We will live with the Lord in such awe and majesty that there is just no way we, human that we are, can wrap our brains around the total wonder heaven is. Honestly, I have trouble even trying to grasp a world where there is nothing evil or bad at all! But that is what heaven will be!

 Another section that helps us grasp the total joy of heaven is again in Revelation. Chapters 21:3-5 says this: **“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."**

 Here is the wonder and awe of what we look forward to! Here is what our Savior Jesus has done for us. We are going to be with the Lord. We are going to live and dwell with him in eternal and perfect glory, never having to fear, never having a care or concern of any kind, never wondering or doubting the love and goodness of the Lord because that love and goodness will always be in our lives.

 Why do I tell you these things: Well, look at the last line of this section. **“Therefore encourage each other with these words.”** This is the Word and promise of Jesus. This is our hope, our comfort, our encouragement and our entire reason for faith. To know that God sent His son Jesus to save us that this eternal promise of life and wonder is ours. I can’t think of a better way to encourage than to tell you of Jesus and what He has won for us. He has forgiven our sins and He grants us eternal life and salvation. This eternal life and salvation is the trustworthy and true Word of our God. Amen.