

A Comforting Look Beyond The Grave.

Text: 1 Thess 4:13-18

Suggested Hymns:
471, 477, 483, 486, 494

- 1) Look At The Glory Of That Sight
- 2) On The Last Day All Christians Living And Dead Will Be Reunited To Be With Christ Forever

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, ¹³ *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.* ¹⁴ *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.*

¹⁵ *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.* ¹⁶ *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*

¹⁷ *Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.* ¹⁸ *Therefore comfort one another with these words.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

*If a man dies, shall he live again?*¹ Ever since death came into the world by sin, this question has been one of humanity's chief problems. It especially troubled the minds of the Christians at Thessalonica at the time Paul wrote them his first Letter.

In the passage before us Paul in a kindly, fatherly manner gives the Thessalonians a sure and extremely comforting answer to the question of the ages, *If a man dies, shall he live again?*

The theme of our sermon today is "*A comforting look beyond the grave.*" May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. A Comforting Look Beyond The Grave Look At The Glory Of That Sight

For the Christian, death is a sleep in Jesus. Our text begins, ¹³ *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.*

Paul frequently uses the expression, *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren,*² to introduce his readers to a new subject. However, in view of the situation among the Christians at Thessalonica, there is a special reason for its use here. These Christians had revealed a real ignorance regarding the condition of those among them who had died.

These people had only recently *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”*³ They were still babes in the faith. They felt that the day of Christ’s return would come at any moment, and while they knew that this would be a day of inexpressible joy for the Christians still living, they felt that somehow the Christians who had died, either would not share in this blessedness at all, or would suffer some loss for not being alive at the time of Christ’s return.

As a result, whenever one of their company died, they gave themselves to unrestrained and inordinate sorrow. All of this Timothy told Paul when he came to Corinth to report to Paul on the affairs of the congregation at Thessalonica.

To dispel the shades of this ignorance Paul is writing the words of our text.

Concerning those who have fallen asleep. The term “falling asleep” is a euphemism frequently used in Scripture to picture the death of the Christian. Of Stephen we are told that *“he fell asleep.”*⁴ Jesus said of Lazarus, *“Our friend Lazarus sleeps.”*⁵

However, the expression *“to fall asleep”* is no mere euphemism. It is a beautiful picture of what happens when a child of God dies. Sleep implies, first of all, rest from labour, rest from work. In death Christians are at rest *“from the thousand ills that flesh is heir to.”* We read in Hebrews 4:9 that *“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.”* And in Revelation 14:13 that *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ... that they may rest from their labors.”*

Secondly, sleep implies a continuing existence. When we fall asleep, we do not cease to be. At the time of death the body of the believer ceases its earthly

existence; but the soul is with Christ in heaven. We read in Luke 23:43, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* And in 2 Corinthians 5:8, *“We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”* And in Philippians 1:23, *“For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.”* And Rev. 14:13, *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”*

Thirdly, sleeping implies a waking again. Our text says, *lest you sorrow as others who have no hope*. The Apostle does not forbid weeping over the loss of a loved one. Christianity does not preach a cold restraint. Christ Himself wept at the grave of Lazarus.

However, Scripture does forbid despondency, as though God was not God and heaven was not heaven. It would be unseemly if these Christians gave themselves up to unrestrained grief as did the heathen. They were not to grieve like pagans.

Our text mentions *others who have no hope*. *“Others”* includes all unbelievers. Paul describes them in Ephesians 2:12 as *having no hope and without God in the world*. The Apostle is not saying that heathen do not hope for their dead. The fact of the matter is that many of them do. The immortality of the soul in one form or another is a part of many heathen religions.

But the point that Paul is making is that while they may entertain hope, pagans have no hope. The Lutheran commentator Lenski correctly remarks, *“There is only one hope for those who die, the hope based on the sure promises of God in Christ; all who do not have this hope are without hope, whatever they may think of death and the hereafter, whatever hope or hopes they may manifest for themselves.”*⁶

It is this fact which must fill the hearts of those who mourn the death of an unbeliever with only an empty despair.

Verse 14 of our text reads, *“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”* Paul now proceeds to show the Thessalonians why they have no good reason to weep like those who have no hope. Paul is not casting doubt on the question whether Christ actually did die and rise again.

The conditional clause declares the death and resurrection of Christ to be absolutely certain. In fact, Paul builds everything he has to say about the rising again of those who have fallen asleep on the fact of Christ's death and resurrection.

These two facts are the objective ground of the Christian's hope of heaven. Christ died voluntarily. He died to pay the ransom price for the souls of sinners, to reconcile the fallen world to God, to atone for man's sins, to take the sting out of death, to close the doors of hell, and to open for all people the gate to eternal life.

And Jesus rose again as the Conqueror of death. In His death, death is swallowed up in victory. We read in Romans 4:25 that Christ *was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification*. This is the Gospel, condensed but mightily summarised.

Paul's argument continues, *even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus*. The very thing that happened to Christ will happen also to believers. As surely as Christ died and rose again, so surely also Christians who have died will rise again. This is Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, ²⁰ *But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* ²¹ *For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.* ²³ *But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.*

Jesus promises the same blessedness when He says, *"Because I live, you shall live also,"*⁷ and *"where I am, there My servant will be also."*⁸ Where the Head is, there the members will be also.

With the words, *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus* we have the hope of heaven stated both objectively and subjectively. Objectively, the Christian's hope of eternal life rests on Christ, who died and rose again for us. Viewed subjectively, it rests solely on faith, without the deeds of the Law. Those who fall asleep trusting only in the death and resurrection of Christ as the sole ground of their hope have everlasting life. We read in John 3:16, ¹⁶ *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not*

perish but have everlasting life. And in John 3:36, ³⁶ ***“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”***

God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. In other words, the dead appear to be swallowed up by death, but, never fear, they will appear again in glory with Christ, so that they, too, will have a complete share in the blessing of His appearance. They will suffer no loss.

2. A Comforting Look Beyond The Grave On The Last Day All Christians Living And Dead Will Be Reunited To Be With Christ Forever

To bring out even more strongly the fact that those who have fallen asleep shall suffer no disadvantage at the time of Christ’s return, Paul continues in verse 15, ¹⁵ ***“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede [or have an advantage over] those who are asleep.*** And verse 16, ¹⁶ ***“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.***

Verses 15 and 16 illustrate the truth established in verse 14, first negatively in verse 15 and then positively in verse 16.

By the word of the Lord Paul is referring to the totality of the Lord’s teaching. That is what the Lord taught. The important point to remember here is that Paul calls forth the highest authority to substantiate what he says. The most potent factor in preaching is still, ***“Thus says the Lord.”***

When Paul speaks of ***“we who are alive”*** he is not presuming that he himself shall surely be alive when Christ comes. ***“He speaks not of himself, but of Christians who would be alive at the day of judgment.”***⁹ The point that Paul is making is that the dead in Christ shall suffer no loss on the Last Day because those who are living at that time shall not get ahead of them to enjoy the resurrection glory before them. The living shall have no advantage over those who have died.

Now Paul proceeds to give the positive illustration of what he had said in verse 14. Verse 16 reads, ¹⁶ ***“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven***

with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Here the Apostle in bold strokes begins to paint a picture of the return of Christ. He brings out in this verse and the next especially four important aspects: (1) Christ will come in power and glory; (2) the dead in Christ shall arise; (3) Christians living will be reunited with those who have died; and (4) they together shall be forever with the Lord.

It should be noted in passing that in this whole picture Paul says nothing about the resurrection of the damned or of the Judgment. This is understandable when we remember that Paul is writing for the express purpose of comforting Christians who were concerned about those Christians who had died. His writing is pointed only in the direction of comforting them in their sorrow.

The first point to note in this picture is that ***“the Lord Himself will descend from heaven.”*** The word ***“Himself”*** is emphatic. It fixes our attention on the Lord. The very Lord who died to redeem us as His own, will at the Last Day come to claim us as His own. The very Lord who has promised us eternal salvation will Himself fulfil that promise.

We read in Acts 1:11 that ***“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”***

He will come ***with a shout***. The Greek word for shout¹⁰ occurs only here in the New Testament. It designates a ***“loud military command, the shout of a charioteer to his horses, of the hunter to his hounds, or the shipmaster to his rowers.”***¹¹ In other words Christ will call the dead just as we read in John 5:28-29, ²⁸ ***“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice”*** ²⁹ ***“and come forth.”***

Our text says, ***with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.*** That the angels will accompany Christ in His descent is evident from many Scripture passages.¹² There is only one archangel mentioned in the Bible, Michael in Jude 6.

Other passages also speak of the sound of the trumpet in connection with Christ’s return. For example 1 Corinthians 15:52, ⁵² ***in a moment, in the***

twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

And Matthew 24:31, ³¹ ***“And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.***

On this picture the Lutheran commentator Kretzmann¹³ remarks: *“The events of the Last Day are here unfolded before our eyes as successive acts. With a loud summons, with a shout of command, as a victorious captain going forth to the destruction of his enemies, with the voice of an archangel summoning the great host of heavenly spirits, with the trumpet of God, a majestic note that will strike terror into the hearts of His enemies and cause the hearts of believers to beat higher with exultant joy, the great King will descend from His throne.*

It will be, as Luther writes, ‘like the coming of a great and powerful king and emperor in full battle array filling the air with the clamour of battle cries and trumpets.’”

Verse 16 concludes with the words ***And the dead in Christ will rise first.*** As to the dead having no part in the *parousia*, as the Thessalonians were tempted to believe, the fact is that they will rise first, before those still alive are changed. Here we have the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the dead on the Last Day.¹⁴ We read in Philippians 3:20-21, ²⁰ ***For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.***

What a glorious hope we Christians, like the Thessalonians, have for those who fall asleep! We need not weep as those who have no hope.

¹⁷ ***Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*** Here we have the third and fourth parts of the picture which Paul is painting. The Christians who are living on the day of Christ’s return will be snatched away swiftly and with irresistible force. Their bodies in a moment will be changed like Christ’s glorious body, and they will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The text says that they will be caught up in clouds. Clouds are called the chariots of the Lord which carry Him through the air.¹⁵

This verse teaches, first of all, the union of the believers who have already died with those living at the time of Christ's return. Christian faith sings the hope of this reunion in the hymn verse,¹⁶

*When here our pathways part,
We suffer bitter pain;
Yet, one in Christ and one in heart,
We hope to meet again.*

It will be a glorious day when Christians will for all time be reunited in the Church Triumphant, when as we read in Matthew 8:11, ¹⁷ ***“And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*** How well this thought is proficient to give comfort to grieving hearts who mourn the loss of those who have fallen asleep in Jesus!

The final point which Paul brings out is that ***we shall always be with the Lord.*** The Last Day will usher in not only a reunion of all believers with one another, but a more blessed union of believers with the Lord. We read in Colossians 3:4, ⁴ ***When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.***

People often wonder what heaven is like. It is being forever with the Lord, living in blessed communion with Christ, knowing even as also we are known of God, having perfect righteousness and true holiness, and all that endlessly.

Here is Paul's answer to the anxieties of the Thessalonian Christians. Here was hope that could banish all their grief.

Our text concludes with the words, ¹⁸ ***Therefore comfort one another with these words.*** The Thessalonians were not only to comfort themselves with these words, but they were also to share this comfort with one another when one of their Christian company died.

It is proficient to drive out the feeling of empty despair with the assurance that those who have died are with Christ, and that all believers in Christ shall at the time of Christ's return be reunited to be with the Lord, and with one another forevermore.

This is the only answer to the age-old question, ***“If a man die, shall he live again?”*** The Holy Spirit through Paul has given us Christians a look beyond the valley of the shadow of death and paints a glorious picture of the glory of the departed. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Job 14:14

² Cp. 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; Phil. 1:12; Col. 2:1.

³ 1 Thessalonians 1:9

⁴ Acts 7:60

⁵ John 11:11; cp. 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Cor. 15:18

⁶ Lenski, Interpretation of Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, p. 371

⁷ John 14:19

⁸ John 12:26

⁹ Pulpit Commentary, XLVIII, 76.

¹⁰ “keleusmati”

¹¹ Lenski, p. 341

¹² Cp. 2 Thess. 1:7; Matt. 16:27; 24; 30 f.; 25:31.

¹³ Popular Commentary, N. T., II, 353

¹⁴ Cp. John 5:28; 1 Cor. 15

¹⁵ Cp. Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7; Psa. 104:3.

¹⁶ Blest be the tie that binds