

HOPE AT A FUNERAL

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Introduction

1. If you have been around the evangelical church very long, you have heard about the return of Jesus Christ. The promise of His return even predates His first coming (Jude 14-15). The word rapture, though it does not appear in the sacred text, is probably part of your vocabulary. Two passages are often cited in the discussion: the passage before us today, and Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 15. The Corinthian passage is mostly an explanation about resurrection. This passage is similar, but in the context of believers grieving over those who had died, and wondering what would become of these loved ones. Both passages deal with the return of Jesus but that is more in the background than we might have realized.
2. The purpose of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 was not to deliver a lecture on eschatology, to answer all of our questions about "last things." Rather, it was an attempt to encourage a group of believers who had lost loved ones in death, and who were confused as to what had and would happen to them. What we have here are kind, comforting words flowing from a true pastor's heart, spoken softly to grieving people who were wondering if there was any hope for their loved ones who had died and

presumably were missing out on the Lord's return, and if there was any hope for those who were grieving?

3. Confusion about serious issues impacts our hope. Paul was concerned about people knowing the truth of God's Word. It is through the Word of God that we receive hope and help. When we are uninformed, that condition can lead to anxiety and despair – which was the case for some in Thessalonica. So, Paul writes what he does in verse 13 – ***“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”***
4. We need to be informed so we are not confused about death or Jesus' return or eternal life with Jesus. In doing so, our hope will remain and be strengthened.
5. Kids, the Bible tells us that Jesus died, was buried and rose again and then He went up into heaven. He disappeared in the clouds. Angels said He was coming back like He went away. That was a long time ago, and He hasn't come back yet, but He always keeps His promises. The Thessalonians were sad because some of their friends and family died before Jesus came back. They were confused. What word did Paul use to describe death (**sleep**)? Is anyone coming back with Jesus when He comes (**yes**)? Who will rise first (**the dead in Christ**)? Where will everybody meet (**in the air**)? What were these words from Paul designed to do (**encourage**)?

I. CONFUSION CONCERNING DEATH

- A. What death is to the believer (death and eternal life)
 1. In Paul's proclamation of the Gospel and his discipleship training for these new believers, the return of Christ was included. Based on the Thessalonian letters, we could say that they had a prominent place in Paul teaching. In this letter he mentions the Lord's return in each of the five chapters of his letter.
 2. The talk of Jesus' return apparently fostered anticipation and the expectation of Christ's soon coming. But when some of the loved ones from the Thessalonian assembly died, these new believers were confused. What would happen to

them? Would they miss out? They didn't know, and that compounded their grief.

So what did they lack in terms of understanding?

3. Jesus Christ died for our sins. That's basic Bible theology. The word for death carries the idea of judgment. Jesus, who knew no sin, "became sin", that is He took our place, bearing the penalty for our sin. The wages of sin is death – if you sin, you die. All of us have sinned, so all are destined to die. But Jesus never sinned. He was not a sinner by nature or practice, so that penalty for sin, which was death, should not have been attached to Him. The only reason Jesus died was that He volunteered to do so in order to pay the penalty for us. But the story does not stop there. Jesus did not remain dead. Death, though real, could not hold Him. He in fact rose from the dead, forever defeating the enemy of death, because He had conquered sin. Sin could no longer take its wages (death) from certain sinners, because Jesus had already paid in full, the payment for those who would believe in Him!
4. But don't even these people, believers in Jesus, die? Yes, but with an important difference. Paul describes their deaths as having "fallen asleep" (vv. 13, 14, 15). The Greek word is "cemetery." It actually means, "resting place" or even "dormitory." The difference in the death of a believer and the death of one who does not belong to Christ, has to do with judgment. When people die without Christ, they face the full impact of the judgment of God on sin, and the result of that judgment is eternal separation from God, in a place of torment forever. When people in Christ die, that judgment is not applicable. Jesus already endured the judgment due. It was applied to Him while He was on the cross. So the death of believers is separation of the body from the spirit – that's true, but without the judgment. In a word, it's like sleep! We still sorrow when our loved ones die, but we have hope because the sting of judgment has been removed already, and the promise of resurrection is given to us.

B. What death does to the believer (the place of grief and hope)

1. Death for everyone is a reminder of sin – the affects of sin, the penalty for sin. Death for everyone is an enemy. It robs us of people we love. It brings to an end an earthly existence that means something to those who remain alive. When people we love die, there is grief. There is loss. There is sadness. There are usually tears. And all of that is appropriate. We have lost the presence of someone dear to us.
2. But there is a vast difference between the death of one who has believed in Jesus, and one who has not believed in Jesus. But these Thessalonians were not fully aware of that difference. So Paul needed to explain to them that their hope was not shattered. Their joy was not destroyed. And that their relationship with these now deceased friends and family, was not forever ended. Much of this confusion would be cleared up as they came to understand what will happen at the return of Jesus Christ.

II. CONFUSION CONCERNING JESUS' RETURN

A. Every believer will be affected at Jesus' return

1. Listen carefully to what Paul says. Let's start with verse 14 – ***“God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”*** “Him” in verse 14 is Jesus. “Those who have fallen asleep” are believers in Jesus, saved people who had previously died – quite possibly the dead of all the ages who believed, will accompany Jesus at His return. (At the very least this would involve all who had died from the time of Jesus ascension until He return.
2. More about this in a moment, but those who are alive in Christ, that is believers who are alive at Jesus coming (v. 15), will be included. They will be snatched up into the air to meet the Lord and those He brought with Him! So, everybody who belongs to Jesus will be there! But we are not done yet.

3. Paul says in verse 16, “***And the dead in Christ will rise first.***” Wait a minute. I thought the dead in Christ were with Jesus, that they came with Jesus from heaven. Who are these people, the dead in Christ who are being raised? These are the bodies of those who previously had died. In other words those bodies that were buried or cremated or blown up or lost at sea or whatever, they will be raised and joined with the spirits of those who have returned with Jesus to be now perfected with a new body.
4. And those who remain will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The last time I checked, we can’t do that on our own. We can’t just rise up into the clouds. But here are all of these dead bodies rising up, each connecting to the right person and all of these alive people getting a major body makeover as well! And all of that happens really fast.

B. Every believer will be perfected at Jesus’ return

1. Those who have died before us, who belong to Jesus, they are with Jesus, right now. They are in heaven right now. But even they are waiting for something. They are waiting for the completion of their redemption. And that involves their body.
2. If Jesus came back right now, all of us who are believers in Him would suddenly be changed. Our bodies, such as they are will be retrofitted for heaven, for eternity. All who belong to Jesus will be perfected at the same time.
3. The coming of Jesus is more about that, than it is about escaping a terrible, wicked world. It’s about the completion of our redemption. When that happens for our loved one who died, it will also happen for those who are alive.
4. When someone we loved, who loved Jesus, dies that’s is not the end of our relationship with them. There will be an amazing, grand reunion when Jesus returns!

III. CONFUSION CONCERNING ETERNAL LIFE

A. Eternal life involves those who belong to Jesus

1. Not everyone believes there is an afterlife. Some assume that this is all there is. But most believe there is something beyond this present life. Some think reincarnation is the answer to that mystery. Some think its more like a force or karma. Others think that everyone goes to heaven – or at least almost everyone.
 2. If we accept the Bible as God’s revelation to us, there is little room for misunderstanding. Those who belong to Jesus will experience life forever with Him and those who do not know Jesus, that is, who have not been saved by Him, they will be forever separated in a place of torment, as it were, paying for their own sin, but never able to actually succeed in accomplishing that impossible task.
- B. Eternal life involves our whole person – body and spirit.
1. When God created Adam and Eve, He created them to live forever. Sin is what brought death. Death was spiritual, in that it separated man from God. Death was also physical. It separates the body (the material part of us) from our spirit (the immaterial part of us). When God saved us He restored life to us spiritually. We were no longer dead in our sin. We were now alive in Christ. When Jesus returns the final impact of sin on our physical being will be gone and our bodies will be restored to new life.
 2. We will once again be whole, redeemed in body and spirit, acceptable to God and able to have a face-to-face relationship with God. All the residual effects of sin will be gone and we will know His salvation fully!
 3. Knowing that, takes the sting out of death that we feel when we lose a loved one – a loved one who belonged to Jesus. We will be in some sense reunited in body and spirit with them – and all of that will be without sin and without the possibility of sin ever invading us again! That is hope on steroids!

Conclusion

1. So, if one of these things invades your life: “My loved one has died. What am I going to do?” “I have been diagnosed with a terminal disease. How can I cope?” “I am

getting older and the world is increasingly evil. I was so sure the Lord would come in my lifetime, but now I am not so sure. I am so discouraged!”

2. Those concerns and a myriad of others may well be on your heart even this morning. There is comfort available in the Lord Jesus – in what He has done that we might be saved, in what He continues to do that we might live for Him in confidence and joy, and what He will do for all who belong to Him when He comes again to gather us together, to perfect us together, and to be with Him forever together.
3. That is really what this passage is about. It is a comfort passage about Jesus. Now all of the good news that is here is only good news if you belong to Him. If you don't, there is no comfort here. Frankly, you should be terrified. But you could be saved. You have to trust Him. You must believe what He said about Himself and what the Bible says that He did that we might have eternal life. You take that by faith, and turning from your sin and selfishness, you place your whole future in His hands. And He will save you and some day He will come for you – and you will be ready when He comes!
4. If you know Christ, be encouraged. It won't be long – we will be going home!