

## The End!?

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage each other with these words.

In Christ Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, dear fellow redeemed,

Have you ever watched a movie from start to finish only to discover that “the end” isn’t really the end? I don’t get to too many movies, but in recent years I’ve discovered that there is a series of superhero films in which the words “the end” really mean nothing. Imagine my surprise when after leaving the theater, I heard people talking about a clip from the movie that I had never seen. “Where was that?” I asked. “At the end.” I was told – not the end of the movie, but the end of the credits. I missed out on some of the movie’s best scenes because “the end” wasn’t the end at all.

The Apostle Paul wants to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to us when it comes to matters of life and death. He doesn’t want us to miss what the Bible has to say about such important things. We’ll consider his words with this simple theme in mind: The End!?

Because of deadly threats to his life and to the lives of those he was serving, the Apostle Paul’s time in the city of Thessalonica was cut very short. He could do nothing more than offer a crash course in the faith – Christianity 101 – the basic truths of Scripture, which apparently included the good news that a day is coming when Jesus will return to bring this evil age to an end.

Paul left the city not knowing if the faith that had been kindled there would be fanned into flames or quickly snuffed out by persecution. How he must have rejoiced months later to learn that the church in Thessalonica had not only survived but was thriving! That didn’t mean there weren’t any concerns. For example, it came to Paul’s attention that there was a big misunderstanding in the congregation about death. Apparently, the Christians in Thessalonica had the mistaken notion that any believer who didn’t live to see Christ’s return would be lost. Can you imagine how those people must have feared death?

Maybe you can do more than imagine. Maybe you fear death. Let’s face it – although people die every day, there is something very unnatural about death. After all, God didn’t make us to die. He made us to live forever. But sin, the sin we have inherited and the sin we commit comes at a terrible price. Death is sin’s wages and try as we might, we cannot cheat sin out of its pay. That fact seemed to haunt the Christians in Thessalonica, despite what Paul taught them. So Paul writes the words of our text with one goal in mind – the end of this ignorance about death and the fear it causes: **“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).**

No less than three times in these six short verses Paul refers to the Christian’s death as “sleep.” It’s really quite an inviting picture. At the end of the day, you’re not afraid to lay your head down on your pillow, are you? We’re not afraid to tuck our children or grandchildren, our aging parents or grandparents into their beds. In the same way we need not fear death, our own or the death of

our fellow Christians. At the funeral of a Christian, we're simply tucking the body of our loved one, our friend into bed for a peaceful nap, a short slumber.

I realize, of course, that poets of every age, followers of every religion, even atheists may speak of the "sleep of death." For all such people outside of Christianity, this is nothing more than a euphemism, a nice way of talking about something very unpleasant. They speak of death as something peaceful, but they don't believe it. They're the folks Paul is talking about – the ones who grieve without hope.

Notice how carefully Paul chose his words. He doesn't suggest for a moment that you and I should not grieve when Christians die. We're going to be sad – for ourselves, for the fact that we won't see, won't be talking with, laughing with, celebrating with people we've grown to know and love so much. We will miss them terribly – this grieves us. Even here on earth when we are apart from one another we are sad. We have tearful farewells at airports and in driveways. We grieve, but we don't grieve like people without hope. Why? Because we're going to see each other again. We expect this to be true of family we say goodbye to at the airport. It is most certainly true of believers we say goodbye to at the cemetery.

This is our hope, not in the sense of wishful thinking, but hope that eagerly and confidently anticipates the fulfillment of Christ's promise: "**Because I live, you also will live**" (John 14:19). Our hope is sure and certain for: "**We believe that Jesus died and rose again...**" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). It all hinges on Christ and what he has done for us. Left to ourselves, we unholy sinners cannot live with Holy God. Instead we deserve to die, forever separated from him. This is our sin-debt. In his great love, God the Father sent Jesus to offer up his holy life as the wages of our sin. As he hung on the cross, Jesus suffered our eternal torment, announced our sentence served, and then proved that death no longer has any claim on him or us by rising from the grave. Christ's resurrection is God's own guarantee that our debt is satisfied and that we have a new status in God's eyes. Thanks to Jesus who has taken away our sin, God now declares you and me and all believers his "holy ones" – his "saints" and with this title grants us all its rights and privileges.

Of course, our enemy, Satan, doesn't want us to believe this. He knows that we're saved by faith alone in Christ's promise. So he's out to destroy God's gift of faith by sowing seeds of doubt whenever and wherever he can – like at a Christian's funeral. Satan is right there to whisper in our ear – "What's going on here? If sin is paid for, why did this Christian die? Are you sure God's telling you the truth? Did God really say all is well with your soul?" Yes, God said it and so it's true! The Christian's death is not punishment. It's the way God delivers us from this sin-ruined world. Because of Jesus, death isn't really death anymore. This is why Paul could taunt our enemy so: "**Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ**" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). By his death and resurrection, Jesus has forever changed the nature of our death so that death can no longer hurt us.

The story is told of a Christian father whose wife had just died. As he was driving his children to their mother's funeral, a large truck passed by, casting a giant shadow across their car. Turning to his oldest daughter, the father asked, "Tell me, sweetheart, would you rather be run over by that truck or by its shadow?" Looking at her father like he had just lost his mind, she said, "By the shadow, of course. It can't hurt you." That dad went on to explain to his kids: "Your mom hasn't been run over by death, but by its shadow. There's nothing to be afraid of. Your mom is just fine. She's perfect!" Because Jesus died and rose, I can say the same thing to you. When we Christians die we're not run over by death – only its shadow, and shadows can't hurt us. You can't be bitten

by the shadow of a dog. You can't be stabbed by the shadow of a knife. Right? Jesus turned death into a mere shadow when he rose from the grave. Now instead of hurting his people, death must serve every believer it touches by delivering our soul into our Savior's waiting arms.

Thanks to Jesus, death means sleep for the believer's body. For the believer's soul, death means instant joy and peace in the presence of God in heaven. That's what Jesus promised the dying thief who confessed his faith in Christ on Good Friday: **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise"** (Luke 23:43). Paul alludes to this same truth when he writes: **"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"** (1 Thessalonians 4:14). When Jesus returns to this world at the end of time, it won't be the bodies of believers that will accompany him. It will be their souls. And as each soul is reunited with its body, that body, no matter where it is or what condition it is in, will be awakened from the sleep of death by its Creator's command and will be raised a glorious body, immortal and imperishable. **"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first"** (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

With the words, "rise first," Paul is simply giving us the sequence of events that will unfold upon Christ's return. Remember, the fear among those early Christians was the thought that their fellow believers who had died had missed out on the fulfillment of Christ's promises. But that's not true. Their resurrection is the first event that will occur when Christ comes back and so they will be right there in the thick of all the action to receive all the blessings God has in store for them. They haven't missed out on anything. The truth is, the souls of those who have died trusting in Christ are getting an early taste of the glories that await us all. We refer to those believers in heaven as the "saints triumphant." They are saints, as we are, not by any effort of their own, but solely by the saving works and merits of Jesus. We call them "triumphant" because by means of their death, God has put an end to the struggles and troubles that sin caused in their life here on earth. God has given them the victory. They triumph! They are in place where sin can never touch them again.

Knowing this, believing this, Paul says to you and me: **"Therefore encourage each other with these words"** (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Certainly Paul has in mind the comforting words of encouragement we can speak to each other at the time of a believer's death. We can console each other with the truth that our loved ones and friends who have died in Christ are safe in his presence, free of all sin and all its heartaches. And we can remind each other that our separation from these dear souls is very temporary. What looks, even feels like the end, is not the end at all. It's just like those movies I was telling you about. Don't go anywhere, the credits are rolling. They all point to Christ. He's taken care of everything and even now he's ruling this world for the benefit of his church. The last scene will soon unfold. Christ will appear, the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will be raised and...**"After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"** (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Is that the end? No. It's only beginning:

**"And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:17)**

**Amen!**