

Our Faith As To Those Who Are Asleep.

Text: 1 Thess 4:13-18

Suggested Hymns:
474, 494, 483, 497, 881

- 1) We Believe That They Sleep In Jesus
- 2) We Believe That On The Last Day
They Will Rise From The Dead Unto Eternal Life

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,

Our text says, ¹⁸ *Therefore comfort one another with these words.* The object of this Epistle is to give comfort. Often we get into situations in which we need comfort.

If we have met with reverses, if by a fire or a storm or in some other way we have been deprived of our earthly possessions, what a soothing balm is it to have friends to sympathise with us and to offer us their assistance!

If we are slandered, if evil reports are circulated about us, and all manner of evil is spoken against us falsely, how anxiously we look for true friends who take our part, and cling to us, and will not join in the defamation of our character.

If illness has fastened upon us or upon some one in our home, or if an accident has befallen us, what comfort is it to have others come and inquire and take an interest in our welfare.

But on no other occasion in life are we so greatly in need of comfort as when death has entered our home, and has robbed us of those who are near and dear to us. If ever we look for comfort, if ever we need consolation, it is when we are bowed down with sorrow and grief at the departure from this life of some one whom we love.

Unbelievers have nothing to comfort them in such a dire calamity. All that they can say to themselves is, that they must wait until time heals the aching wound; and what poor consolation that is! As to their loved ones who are resting beneath the sod, all they know is, that their bodies are decomposing in the earth, that they are gone, and that they shall see them no more.

O how miserable is the unbeliever at the death-bed, at the coffin, and at the grave, having no comfort!

But we Christians have true comfort. Christ says, ***“Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.”***¹ And that is true with us Christians. Our faith as to those who have died in the faith of the Son of God gives us true comfort. Let us consider, *Our Faith As To Those Who Are Asleep*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. We Believe That They Sleep In Jesus.

It appears that the Thessalonians were in perplexity and distress concerning the fate of their deceased friends. They had an idea that Christ would come immediately to establish His glorious kingdom, and they feared lest their dead might be excluded from the blessings which they expected with Christ’s coming.

The Apostle, therefore, relieves them of their anxiety, and informs them as to the true state of those who are asleep. He says: ***“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.”***

What, then, is our faith as to those who are asleep? What do we believe as to the state of those who preceded us into eternity? We believe that they sleep.

Their state and condition is similar to that of a person in a slumber. Now we know that when a person sleeps, he does not cease to exist. He lies quiet and motionless, but his mind may be active in dreams.

And so we believe that death has not ended the existence of our Christian dead. While their bodies are in the stillness of the grave and are being reduced, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust, their souls are active and alert. The body sleeps. They have, therefore, not ceased to exist. And because they sleep, they are in a state of rest and repose.

In sleep we lose our hold upon the world. We forget its cares and pleasures. We are being calmed and soothed in our feelings. And so we are to think of our Christian dead as forever released from the work and toil, the pain and sorrow, of this life, and now calmed and soothed in the presence of God.

But the greatest comfort we find in the fact that our Christian dead sleep in Jesus. Death is fierce and powerful, he is the king of terrors; but what harm can death do those who have departed from us while they sleep in Jesus?

Let us note that this “*sleep*” applies only to the body of the dead believer, and not to his soul.² There is no intermediate place between heaven and hell. In no sense do the souls of the dead “sleep.” Were Abraham and Lazarus asleep in Luke :22? Lazarus lay on Abraham’s bosom as John lay on the bosom of Jesus.³

This is why we are told in Revelation 14:13, ***‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’***

Jesus is a thousand times stronger and mightier than this fiercest enemy of mankind. Has not Jesus forever conquered the king of terrors and taken away death’s sting for those who have entrusted themselves to the Prince of Life?

Blessed, therefore, are the dead who die in the Lord, as the Book of Revelation says. Their sleep in death is not a state of unconsciousness, not a condition in which they do not know anything of themselves, but they are truly blessed. The soul lives on in heaven while the body sleeps awaiting for the resurrection call.

Jesus was with them as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death and fell asleep in Him. In death Jesus divested them of all their sinfulness, and adorned them with the white robe of His righteousness.

Did not Jesus say to the robber who was crucified with Him: *“Today you will be with Me in Paradise”*?⁴ O what comfort for us to know that our loved ones who have died in the Lord are in such a blessed state, being with Christ, our blessed Redeemer! Let us not sorrow, then, as others who have no hope!

God does not forbid us to mourn over the departure of our loved ones. Christ Himself wept at Lazarus’ grave, and so we may shed tears when we commit the mortal frame to the earth, or when in our thoughts we dwell on the deceased with whom we had been so intimately connected to in this life.

But there should be a limit to our sorrow. We should not sorrow as others who have no hope. We should not sorrow as the heathen with whom death means the end of existence, and who know of nothing to comfort them in their bereavements. We should not go to excess in our grief, and act and carry on as if everything and all were lost and gone.

There should be a marked difference between the sorrow of a Christian who believes that his deceased relatives are with Jesus and that death does them no harm, and the sorrow of an unbeliever who has no hope, who does not believe in a blessed hereafter, and who sees in death nothing but destruction.

2. We Believe That On The Last Day They Will Rise From The Dead Unto Eternal Life.

But our faith as to those who are asleep does not only regard them in a blessed state and condition because they are asleep in Jesus. We also believe that on the last day they will rise from the dead to eternal life. This is the second part of our meditation.

The foundation of our faith in the resurrection of our Christian dead is Christ’s resurrection, as the Apostle says: *we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.*

Who can deny the fact that Christ rose from the dead? Did He not appear to His disciples in the glorious body of His resurrection, and converse with them for forty days after He was risen from the dead until before their eyes He ascended into heaven? Did He not institute the office of the holy ministry and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism after His resurrection? Was not the Christian Church founded on the very fact of His resurrection?

Now, what is the result and consequence? What is one of the blessed fruits of Christ's resurrection? It is the resurrection of all who have believed in Him and have fallen asleep in the blessed faith of their Redeemer. For all these are one with Christ. He is the Head of the body, and they are the members, and what happens to the Head must also happen to the members. As the Head rose, so must the members rise with it.

And how shall this resurrection be? The Apostle says: 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.*

Now if we compare these words with other passages of Scripture, we find that Christ's return will be on the last day of this earth. Christ distinctly says in Mark 13:31–32, ³¹ *Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.* ³² *“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

And Peter says in his Second Epistle, 2 Peter 3:10, ¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.*

What a glorious manifestation of the Son of God on The Last Day! He will descend with a shout, says the Apostle in our text, with a shout that penetrates everything, and echoes and re-echoes through the entire creation, and with the voice of the archangel; for all the holy angels will come with Christ, singing His praises, and with the trumpet of God, the blast of which shall terrify the earth.

And the dead in Christ will rise first. The fact is, that all the dead shall rise, whether they have died in Christ or not. For Christ distinctly says 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 — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

But in our text St. Paul is consoling the Thessalonians because they feared lest their dead might come short of the blessings of Christ's return, and he tells

them that the first thing Christ will do on His visible return will be to raise the dead, before He attends to those who are alive and remain.

And so the dead in Christ shall rise first. Some people have called this the first resurrection, and have supposed that a millennium will intervene between the first and the second resurrection. But this doctrine of the millennium is an idle dream. Not the slightest suggestion of it is in the text.

Finally the Apostle says, “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.*”

What blessed consolation for those who mourn over those who have died in the Lord! Not only do we know that on the last day, when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, that they will rise from the dead with a glorious body, fashioned like unto the body of Christ, but we also know that we shall meet them again; for the Apostle says in our text that we shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

And both we and they will enter into life eternal, body and soul; for we shall be forever with the Lord.

May the Lord grant us all His grace that we may always find true comfort in our afflictions, and that we never sorrow as those do who have no hope. Amen.

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

¹ Matthew 5:4

² R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of First Thessalonians*, Columbus Ohio:Wartburg Press, 1945, p326

³ John 13:25

⁴ Luke 23:43