

Sermon for November 16, 2014 – Saints Triumphant

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18(NIV84)

Theme: Our Most Comforting Hope

- 1) *Because Christ died, Christians only sleep.*
- 2) *And He will wake us up to live with him forever.*

¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *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.* 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.* ¹⁶ *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.* ¹⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *Therefore encourage each other with these words.*

What do you say to the woman whose believing husband has just died? What comfort is there for the father who has lost his Christian son?

Loosing someone we love is probably the most painful thing we will face on this earth. Words cannot describe the emptiness we feel. We are drowning in an ocean of emotion. We need help. We need some hope to grab onto . . .

Brothers and sisters in Christ, hope is exactly what the Lord provides for us in today's sermon text. No, the hope God offers us will not automatically take away the pain we feel of missing our departed loved ones, but clinging to this hope will help us float above the waves of despair. This hope will bear us up in our weakness and give us the strength we need to cope with our loss.

Without further ado, let us consider **our most comforting hope:** *1) Because Christ died, Christians only sleep. 2) And He will wake us up to live with him forever.*

Part One: Because Christ died, Christians only sleep.

Our sermon text is part of a letter Paul sent to a fledgling congregation in Thessalonica. Since the believers in that city had just recently converted to Christianity, they still struggled in their understanding of some of the Bible's basic teachings. One question they particularly struggled with, is a question that pastors are still often asked today: What happens to our loved ones when they die? Thankfully, the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to answer this question.

"Brothers, (ie. fellow believers in Christ) we do not want you to be ignorant (ie. uninformed) about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

First of all, note that Paul isn't saying that Christians shouldn't grieve at all. It is perfectly acceptable to mourn when someone we love passes away. Even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. What Paul wants us to avoid, however, is grieving like those who have not hope (like those who do not believe in Jesus).

God has given believers a wonderful promise – an anchor of hope that the rest of the world does not have. What is it? That Christians never really die. While their bodies rest in the grave, their souls live on with God in heaven.

St. Paul describes the death of a Christian as falling asleep. At first glance this might seem like a mere euphemism for death, but it is far more than that. You see, the Bible only describes the death of believers as a sleep. Unbelievers die. What is the difference? The Bible defines death as “separation” - physical death being the separation of a soul from its body. Spiritual death, however, is the separation of a soul from God. Unbelievers are spiritually dead - separated from God because they do not believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sin. When they physically die, their souls enter a state of eternal separation from God and his goodness. The Bible calls this eternal death.

Believers, on the other hand, are never separated from God – neither in life nor in death. Faith unites them with Christ. This is why the LORD calls their physical death a sleep because, even though their souls are separated from their bodies, they remain close to God – enjoying his spiritual presence in heaven until the time comes for them to awake. This is what Jesus meant, when he told Martha at the death of her brother Lazarus: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26 NIV84)*

And why can believers have this hope of never really dying? Because, as Paul 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.”*

It is interesting to note that, even though the New Testament often describes the death of a believer as “falling asleep,” it never describes Jesus’ death with that term. Why is that? Because Jesus really died! While on the cross, Jesus was separated from God – suffering the full wrath and punishment our sins had incurred. This is why He cried out: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”* (Matthew 25:6, NIV84)

Jesus died so that we never will. In other words, Jesus was actually separated from God and all of his goodness for a time, so that we never have to experience this hell. And to show that the LORD accepted his payment for our sins, Jesus rose from the grave, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God – from where he will return to judge the living and the dead.

And what is Jesus doing in heaven right now? Aside from leading his church and governing all the affairs of this world for the benefit of his elect, and preparing paradise for us; he is also consoling the souls of all those who passed away while believing in him.

Listen to how the Bible describes what the souls of our sleeping brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing in heaven right now. St. John wrote: *“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes –who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 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. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will*

not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. 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.” (Revelation 7:9-17, NIV84)

Brothers and sisters in Christ: God has given us a wonderful hope regarding our loved ones who have passed away while believing in Christ: they are not dead, but asleep. And this sleep is a wonderful thing. It gives rest, as the Scriptures say: *The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart . . . that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.* ² *Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death. (Isaiah 57:1-2 NIV84)*

And do you know what else is great about this sleep? Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection for us, we will wake up from it, as St. Paul says:

Part Two: *He will wake us up to live with him forever.*

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. ¹⁶ 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.

What a glorious day it will be when Christ leads the train of saints back to this earth. A trumpet will sound, a command will be given, and then all those who died while trusting in Jesus will open their eyes and, once again, fill their lungs with air. They will feel their heart beat – throbbing with joy and excitement. They will rise with a glorified body – resembling that of Christ’s. And then we, who are still alive when Christ returns, will also be changed in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:51ff). St. Paul says that we *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.

Over the course of my ministry, People have asked me a lot of questions about heaven; like, will we know our loved ones? Will my spouse whom I loved on this earth, still know and love in heaven - even though there will be no marriage? Will I recognize my friends etc. . . . As valid as these questions are, and concerning all of them I can say yes, they still distract us from the true joy of heaven.

The true joy of our salvation is not found in the grand reunion we will have with our believing loved ones on the Last Day – even though that will certainly make us happy. It is not found in the perfect harmony and peace that will exist between all believers. It is not found in having the ultimate mansion by the seashore that I always wanted in this life but could never afford. No, the true joy of heaven - the thing Christian’s look forward to most of all – is that we will be with the LORD forever. There will be no more longing for him or being afraid of him because of our sin. Like little children, who run into the arms of their Daddy who has just come back from a long business trip, so we will run into the arms of our true Father and get to spend eternity with him. This is what the heart of every Christian longs for, as St. Augustine once wrote: “Our hearts are restless, O LORD, until they rest in Thee!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ: rejoice in the wonderful hope God has given you. Even though you will one day pass through the valley of the shadow of death, because of Christ you will never really die. You will merely sleep as your body rests in the grave and your soul rests with God in heaven. And when the Last Day dawns, the Lord will wake you up – breathing new life into your body. You will rise from the dead, and live with the LORD forever.

Therefore encourage each other with these words. It is true, this comfort will not take away the pain of missing our loved one when they die – and we should acknowledge this fact. But this comfort will most certainly help us cope. How? By giving us a day to look forward to when we will be reunited with both our believing loved ones and the LORD, and by reassuring us with the knowledge that all is well with their souls as we patiently wait for the day the LORD will wake them up. Amen.