

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When I was a kid I used to think that when people died, they became angels. I know I was never taught this in Sunday school. I know I never heard it in a sermon. But probably from TV or a book, I picked up that idea. I was ignorant about what happens to a believer at death. Ignorant is a word that has a negative connotation, but the plain meaning of the word is “without knowledge.” I was “without knowledge” or ignorant about the believer and death.

It is always bad for a believer to be lacking knowledge about any spiritual truth that God has revealed to us. The more we know of God’s truth, the more we will lead our lives in comfort and certainty.

Our text begins with these words: **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.**

The Holy Spirit had the apostle Paul write the words of our sermon text today for the very reason that we not be ignorant (without knowledge) about believers who die. The death of a loved one is the most difficult thing we will experience in life. It’s a time of intense and mixed emotions. If you’ve lost someone close to you, perhaps you can remember feeling deep sadness. Loss. Perhaps anger. Maybe feelings of unfairness. An uneasiness about the future. Perhaps what your mind drifted back to over and over again was the question, “Why?!” We need to know what happens and what will happen when a believer in the Lord dies. And if we don’t know, we will needlessly suffer. And as our text says, is so that we will not **“grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”**

With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at the text before us today: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18. From this text we answer the question: The grave... the end?

The Thessalonians were lacking knowledge about what happened when a believer died. We aren’t told directly what their misunderstanding was, but we can guess based on what Paul says here. Perhaps they were thinking that there was no bodily resurrection from the dead. As such, perhaps they saw that those still living when Christ returned would be at some sort of advantage. We would have bodies, and they would not. Perhaps they thought the dead were dead and were no more, and would never be again. Whatever the case, Paul fills them in on what happens at death, and what happens when Jesus returns. And he tells them all of this so that they could encourage each other and comfort each other at the death of a believer.

First note this: Paul doesn’t say that believers “die.” He says they fall asleep. Is this simply a euphemism... a nice way to talk about something very unpleasant? No! It really is a sleep for the believer. The labors and trials of this life are over and the believer rests. It’s also a good term because of the new life believers awake up to in heaven. But note that this is not teaching a “soul sleep” in which the believer is unaware until the resurrection. There are plenty of other passages which describe an awareness of believers... not of life on earth, but of the joys of heaven.

The text continues: **“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.”**

Here we get right to the heart of the matter. Do we have anxiety over the death of a loved one? Do we feel hopeless? Does Satan tempt us to doubt God and his love and his wisdom and his power? Then step back a moment and simply ask this question: Do you believe that Jesus died and rose again? That’s the very heart and core of our faith, isn’t it? Do you believe God sent his son Jesus to this earth

2000 years ago? Do you believe Jesus lived the holy and perfect life God demanded? Do you believe that when he went to the cross he was bearing the full burden and guilt of all of your sins? Do you believe that he literally, physically died on that cross because of the sins of the world? Do you believe that his body was in the grave from Friday late afternoon until early Sunday morning? Do you believe that he then miraculously rose from the dead... that his real, physical body came back to life by the power of God and that he still lives to this day?

I'm guessing that all of you here would say, "Amen! Yes, that is what I believe." And then that same believer may add, "But I'm feeling lots of doubts and anxiety over the death of my loved one." And here's where God helps us. If you are so certain that Jesus was truly dead and that he physically rose from the grave on the third day, then we just as surely believe **"that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."** If our God is powerful to raise his Son from the grave, he is just as powerful to raise all believers on the last day and reunite those souls with their bodies. And that's just what he promises to do. He promises that all believers who died will return with him on the Last Day. If God will bring them with him, that means, obviously, that they are with him! The souls of the believers are living and reigning with Christ in heaven.

And then this added detail: **"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."** Is there some advantage on the Last Day to being alive, rather than dead? The text makes it clear, "no." There is no advantage. In fact, the very first thing that will happen on the last day is that the believers who are in the grave will be raised first.

Here's some more detail: **"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."** Don't let anyone try to tell you that Christ's return will be a quiet or secret matter. When Christ comes, the whole world will know. It will be loud and it will be visible. Jesus will come down from heaven accompanied by a whole host of angels. There will be a loud shout like a trumpet call. The archangel will announce Christ's coming like a herald that goes before a king.

Confidence: This passage shows us the decisive end. The person who is indecisive and unsure of himself is very quiet and mutters and waits and pauses. We get no sense of that at Christ's second coming. It is loud, it is fast, it is glorious and majestic, it is definite and secure. What happens here is not open to debate or second guessing. What will happen is a fact, and we can believe it.

And what's the first thing that will happen? The dead in Christ will rise first. The text continues: **"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."** So the physical bodies of dead believers rise first. Their souls and bodies are reunited. And they are caught up in the air to meet the Lord Jesus. And we together with them are caught up with them to meet Jesus in the clouds. Our Lord Jesus decisively claims all believers as his own and quickly gathers them to himself. They will not experience any of the terrors of Judgment Day. They will be safely and securely at Jesus' side before anything scary happens.

This is the beginning of an eternal, physical life in the immediate presence of our Savior God forever. What a happy reunion this will be. Certainly we will be reunited with our loved ones... the believers who have gone before us. We will be with Jesus together with them. Here on this earth, perhaps we often think about that. We miss that person now, but we'll be with them again. As big as that truth is, though, what does the text identify as the far more important reunion?

It's completely overshadowed by the joy we will receive by being together with our loving Savior. It says, **"And so we will be with the Lord forever."** As much as we look forward now to seeing our loved ones on the Last Day, when that day comes, that particular joy will be far overshadowed by the much greater joy of knowing that now we are with our loving creator and Savior, and we will be forever! What comfort is ours in this veil of tears.

Now the thought may have crossed your mind at one point: "But I want more details. When will

this happen? How will it happen? I want more details about heaven and what I'll be doing there! These 6 verses are not enough!" A man once went to his pastor's house with exactly these questions about life after death. They went into his study, and the pastor shared with him what God has revealed to us, but the man wanted to know more. He didn't think he knew enough. The pastor then went to the door (which was closed) and called his dog. The dog came scampering up to the closed door, excited and whining and scratching at the floor in front of the door. He desperately wanted in. The pastor opened the door, and the dog, without hesitation ran in straight to the pastor to be petted. He was happy. The pastor turned to the man who had come to visit and said, "I have never allowed my dog to come into my study. This is the very first time he's ever been in here. The door is always closed. He didn't know what was in here at all. All he knew is that I was in here. And that was enough for him."

Friends, we don't know every detail of what happens when a believer dies, but then we don't need to know, do we? What we do know is certainty because it is God's own word. We have confidence in knowing the factual events of his return. We have the comfort of knowing he is coming. And the most important fact above all others, is that we will be with him. We will be with him. And that is enough. Therefore, the text concludes, "**encourage each other with these words.**"

Is the grave the end? We *know*, don't we? It's not a guess. It's not a suspicion. We know. God has told us. It is not the end. We are not hopeless at the grave of a loved one. We know there is a joyful reunion coming on the Last Day when we will all stand around the throne of the Lamb giving him worship and honor and glory and praise. May God fill us with comfort and hope. Amen.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thess 5:9-11). Amen.