

*UNEDITED DRAFT*

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

Dear Friends in Christ,

In today's message we will be talking about something extraordinarily practical. We're talking about what happens when believers die, and more specifically, what will happen to the dead in Christ when Jesus returns. It's important that we know these things:

**1) We will miss out on the comfort and knowledge** that God wants us to have. We will unnecessarily fear death, and we will unnecessarily have no hope when a loved one dies. We will hear and hold on to empty sentiments, not knowing what God says at all.

**2) We will be able to give true comfort** to those who lose a loved one. Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to comfort someone who lost a loved one, but you didn't know what to say? Sometimes we say things that really aren't helpful. We have good intentions, but our words don't help. Here are some examples of things NOT to say to the grieving.

1) **I know just how your feel.** Then a person goes on to tell their own story about losing someone. But first of all, the grieving person needs your attention. This isn't time for story about you. Second, every person is unique and every situation is unique. Everyone grieves differently, so your really don't know how they feel.

2) **Now they're in heaven watching over you.** Nothing in the Bible indicates the dead can see us, or that they can influence our lives for good.

3) **Be strong. Don't cry.** It is good and healthy to express grief.

4) **If there's anything I can do for you, just call.** That one may surprise you. Why not say this? Their heads are spinning. A vague offer like that is ultimately not very helpful.

So what can you say? It's important to know what happens to the believer who dies -- now and when Jesus comes again and glory. First of all, you need to know that for yourself... for when you're coping with the death of a loved one... or your own death. That will also enable you to share this comforting truth with others. So let's learn that first. Then at the end, I'll also give you some practical things you can say to the person who is grieving.

There are a number of questions even life-long believers have about those who die. Perhaps we don't speak about this frequently enough. It's often: "Jesus saved us, so when we die, we go to heaven." Well, that's not the end of the story. That much is certainly true. But there's more than this. That leaves the impression that a person then remains a disembodied spirit floating amongst the clouds for all eternity. This is probably why so many people think that when people die they become angels. No, we don't. So what does happen?

The apostle Paul wrote about this topic to believes who lived in a town called Thessalonica. And they, many today, didn't really have it all straight when it came to believers who died. So Paul taught them. Let's listen carefully, and we'll learn something too.

**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.**

The Thessalonian Christians didn't fully understand what happens when a believer dies. They had a keen awareness of the impending return of the Lord Jesus. In fact, that was characteristic of the early Christian church. They eagerly anticipated his return, and believed it very well could be within their lifetime. But as the decade or two or three passed, believers in Jesus were dying. Well now what? What about them? Is it too late for them? Do they miss out because they didn't survive until Jesus returned? That would be very sad and tragic. There wouldn't be much hope at a Christian funeral if that was the case. And so Paul informs them about what happens to the followers of Jesus who die before Jesus comes back.

I don't want you to miss how Paul describes the death of a believer. He calls them "those who fall asleep." Isn't that an amazing picture? Death is so final. You wake up from sleep. For the believer, death is like a nap. You're down for a while, and then you get up again. What comfort! And this comparison of death to sleep for the believer is found throughout Scripture.

But understand that it is "sleep" from the perspective of those who are still alive. Their bodies rest, and then they will get up again. But the person who dies does not experience an unconscious state, like a sleep. The Bible is clear that their souls go to heaven, and that in heaven they are conscious and aware.

But that is not the end. Do they remain disembodied spirits in heaven forever? The answer is "no." Here's what Paul says next:

**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.**

Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross and that on the third day he rose again? That's what the Bible teaches. His truly dead, lifeless body came alive again, and Jesus - body and soul - lived again. Jesus set the mold, and that exact pattern will be followed with all who die in Christ.

So the risen Lord Jesus is coming back to judge the world. And when he does, he will bring with him the souls of believers who have died.

**According to the Lord's own word, [this isn't Paul's opinion or invention. Jesus himself taught this] 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. 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.**

So is there some advantage for you to still be alive when Jesus returns? No! It makes no difference at all. Those who are alive will receive glorified bodies. Those who have already died - their souls will come back with Jesus, he will raise their bodies and they will be perfect, glorified bodies. Their soul and body will be reunited. So there's no difference whether you're dead or alive. Either way you have a perfect, sinless, glorified body and soul. In fact, it says that the dead in Christ rise first.

And why do the dead in Christ rise first? Someone once joked that if we're all going to meet Jesus together, the dead have an extra six feet to travel, so they need to be raised first. But Paul's point is simply this: The dead in Christ are at no disadvantage whatsoever when Jesus returns in glory.

**After that [the dead are raised], 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.**

All believers, body and soul will be snatched up into the air to meet Jesus as he comes again to judge all people on earth. We will meet him together at exactly the same time. And with that begins eternal life with Jesus forever. Now, Paul stops there, but in 2 Peter 3 we get one more detail. We are caught up in the air with Jesus, and after the judgment, the earth will be laid bare by fire, and there will be a new earth where all believers will live in God's immediate presence forever and ever.

### **Therefore encourage each other with these words**

Friends, these words we just heard are true comfort to the grieving. The death of a believer truly is a sleep, because that body laid in the grave is a temporary matter. Just for a time. Just for a nap. When Jesus comes again, that body will rise... not like it was before, but new, and perfect and glorified. In the twinkling of an eye new body now reunited with its soul will be before Jesus along with you if you happen to still be alive. There will be a happy reunion of all the dead in Christ, as they are alive and well around the exalted Christ, and then will inhabit a new, cleansed, perfected earth for all eternity. We will see our deceased loved ones again. In fact, we will live with them in a physical existence once again. But it will be way better the second time, because there will be no sin, or death or pain or sorrow. This is good news! This is greatly comforting.

What to say to a fellow Christian who lost a loved one.

- 1) **Nothing** (at first.) Grieve with them. Hug them. Cry with them.
- 2) **Words:** My heart hurts for you right now. I am praying for you. I love you.
- 3) **He/she was such a blessing in my life.** I appreciated how he/she...
- 4) **I would like to help by...** Instead of a vague offer to help if they ask, tell them what you're willing to do.
- 5) When the time is right, **share with them what we learned today.** There will be a happy reunion. We will live together again in the body, but next time with no more tears, and around the throne of Jesus for eternity! We know where they are, and we will be together again, and we know where, and we know how great it will be. That's hope!

Conclusion: After a long and painful disease, a family's 10 year old son died. At the funeral, the 5 year old little sister asked her mother: "Mommy, where is brother?" The mom, through tears, answered, "He's in heaven with Jesus, sweetheart." She accepted the answer without any further questions. A short time later, the little girl saw her mother crying with her aunt, and she overheard her mother wail, "I've lost my son! I've lost my son! I've lost my son!" The little girl walked up to her mother and tugged on her skirt until she got her attention. "Mommy, how can you lose something if you know where it is?"

Isn't that just it? The believer hasn't really lost anything at the death of a loved one who also believed. We know exactly where they. And we know exactly when we'll see them again. The time of separation will surely be painful. But we do not grieve as those having no hope. We have the sure hope the resurrection, and eternal life together with our Savior. Comfort one another with these words! Amen.