

Saints Triumphant

November 17, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Theme: **The Best Is Yet to Come**

1. No doubt
2. No believer left behind
3. No end

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

NIV 1 Thessalonians 4:13 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.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As believers in Jesus Christ, we live each day in the possession of a sure and certain hope. It is the hope of heaven, that is, the confident expectation that death is not the end of our existence but only the transition to a new and better life in the presence of our Lord Jesus. This hope enables us to face death—our own death or the death of fellow believers whom we love—with this confident assertion: *The best is yet to come.* While we don't have all the details about what the life to come is going to be like, the Bible does offer us some tantalizing clues about the next life. The apostle Paul writes in Colossians, "**When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**" (Col. 3:4) In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of the wonderful transformation that is going to take place in our bodies at Christ's return. He says, "**Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.**" (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

It's worth noting that the apostle is addressing all believers here. He doesn't say, "Some of us will appear with Christ in glory," or "A good many of you will be changed." He says, "**...we will all be changed.**" That means whether we've died before Jesus returns or we're still alive on that great Day makes no

difference. This promise applies to every believer in Jesus Christ. The believers at Thessalonica in northern Greece needed to be assured of this. Due to the pressure of persecution, their introduction to the Christian faith had been short and fast. As a result, there were some points of doctrine on which they were unclear. This doctrinal uncertainty, in turn, was depriving them of the blessed hope we have as Christians. For that reason, St. Paul, as he writes this letter, reviews with the Thessalonians the basic elements of the chronology of the Last Day. He wants to remove all doubt about this important teaching so that the Thessalonians know what's going to happen and who's going to be included. Summarized, his message is: **THE BEST IS YET TO COME.** There should be no doubt about this. There will be no believer left behind on that day. And there will be no end to the glorious life that lies ahead in heaven.

1. No doubt

The shepherd's heart of the apostle is plain to see when he writes to the Thessalonians, "*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.*" There's a basic storehouse of Bible knowledge that every Christian needs to have. Without that knowledge, we're going to be deprived of hope. God's intention in giving us his Word was that every one of us should live in hope. It says in Romans, "**For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**" (Rom. 15:4)

To fortify our hope, Paul reviews the truths that undergird our confidence of the resurrection to eternal life. He 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.*" There's a new hymn in our hymnal called "This Is the Threefold Truth." It says, "***This is the threefold truth on which our faith depends; And with this joyful cry worship begins and ends: Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!***" Each element in this threefold truth is vital. Jesus died with our sins upon him, suffering the penalty for our disobedience and thereby opening heaven for us. Jesus rose, showing not only that our sins have been forgiven but also that the One who raised himself from death has the power to raise us from death. And Jesus will come again. His own promise to us is, "**I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.**" (John 14:18) We expect that Paul will say, "We will believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that *God will raise* those who have fallen asleep in him." But Paul is a step ahead. He assumes that Jesus will raise us from the dead so he speaks of God bringing all believers, together with Jesus, to heaven. There's our hope. This is what we confidently anticipate through faith in Jesus.

Having this hope changes the way we look at the death of a Christian. We don't have to "*grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.*" Notice that Paul doesn't say we don't have to grieve. Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone dear to us. Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. But our grief at

the death of a Christian is not a despairing, hopeless grief. It's not the grief of those who don't know what's become of their loved ones or of those who think they'll never see their loved ones again. Jesus' death and resurrection and the reality of his return mean that we can refer to death as a sleep, like Paul does here. Dying as a believer is like falling asleep because we'll wake up again. It's temporary. Death will not have the last word. God will. With a loud command he'll wake the dead on the day that Jesus returns.

With the Thessalonians, it wasn't a matter of denying what the Bible says about the death and resurrection of Jesus and his glorious return on the Last Day. It was that they had formed some conclusions on the basis of incomplete information. They knew that Jesus died and rose again. They believed that Jesus was going to return. They seemed, though, to think that you had to be alive on the day of Jesus' return in order to go to heaven. If that had been true, it would have made the death of a believer every bit as much of a tragedy as the death of an unbeliever. If that was so, there was no hope for the dead. Thankfully, the Thessalonians were wrong about this. Paul, citing Jesus as his source, says that no believer, living or dead, will be left behind when Jesus comes to take us to heaven.

2. No one left behind

One of the most dramatic stories I've ever heard about being left behind is true account of Edwin Rose. Rose, a British citizen, was a prisoner of war during World War II, held by the Japanese at the Cabanatuan POW camp in the Philippines. When American troops returned to Philippines in 1945, they were determined to rescue the 500 men still being held at Cabanatuan because they feared that the retreating Japanese would kill the prisoners before leaving. A force of about 100 U.S. Army Rangers made their way to the camp and, at the predetermined signal, let loose with automatic weapons fire and bazookas. They knocked out the guard towers and several tanks, in addition to quelling all opposition the Japanese guards were able to muster. All 500 Allied prisoners were led or carried out of the camp to the safety of the U.S. encampment about 25 miles away. Oh, there was one exception. Edwin Rose. Rose was completely deaf. He never heard the firefight or the screams or the commotion. Only later when the British prisoners did a head count did they realize that Edwin was not along. The story had a happy ending, though, because the next day a squad of Philippine guerrilla fighters found Mr. Rose and took him to safety.

Could something like that happen when Jesus comes to take us home to heaven? Might we miss it or sleep through it? Or could those who've "fallen asleep" in Jesus stay in their graves? Listen to what Paul says. *"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."* Not only will those who have fallen asleep in Jesus not be left behind, they won't even experience any disadvantage because they died before Jesus returned. Jesus' first order of business when he returns will be to command the

resurrection of believers. And no one, not even Edwin Rose, will sleep through this. Never in all of human history has the decibel level reached what it will be on the Last Day: *“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”* I don’t expect to hear anything that comes close to this until Judgment Day. This will literally be the noise that wakes the dead. The cemeteries all over the world will become busy places. The oceans will give up the dead in them. People whose bodies were reduced to a few handfuls of ash by the fire of cremation will have their bodies restored. Jesus said once, **“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...”** (John 5:28-29) Somehow, I think we will be completely amazed, but we won’t doubt it because it will be happening right in front of our eyes. Believers and unbelievers will exit their graves, with the difference that for believers this will be a time of joyful amazement as we experience the fulfillment of our Savior’s promise to come and redeem his own people. And there will be no miscues, no one left behind, because Jesus absolutely knows those that are his.

What then? *“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.”* Sometimes Lutherans say they don’t believe in the “rapture.” What we mean is that we aren’t looking for believers to be raptured off of this earth in advance of a seven-year tribulation that serves as a prelude to Christ’s thousand-year earthly reign. But we do believe in a rapture—on Judgment Day. “Rapture” comes from a Latin word that means “to seize.” On the Last Day, when the dead in Christ have been raised from their graves, then they and all those believers who were still living on Judgment Day will be seized, will be raptured, by God to meet Jesus in the air and then to proceed to heaven with Jesus. What a joyful procession that will be! Whisked from the earth, reunited with fellow believers, and escorted by Jesus himself to our home in heaven!

3. No end

The only thing left that could possibly interfere with this day of amazing events and full-throated rejoicing would be if there were some kind of expiration date on what follows Judgment Day. You know what they say: “All good things must come to an end.” Whether it’s an enjoyable evening or a great vacation or strong, decades-long marriage, in this life all good things come to an end. But not in this case. On Judgment Day God is going to make that rule irrelevant. Paul says, *“And so we will be with the Lord forever.”* Whether eternity is time without end or timelessness we can let the philosophers argue about. What we know is that the life we believers have with Jesus after Judgment Day will never end. For all eternity we will enjoy the fellowship with God and with other believers that God intended that we have. And even then we won’t have enough time to give the Triune God all the praise he deserves.

Paul closes this beautiful section of Scripture by saying, “*Therefore encourage each other with these words.*” Last Sunday in Phoenix I spoke with a woman who in the last four years lost her husband to an illness and then her son, who had recently graduated from college, died in an auto accident. As she related her experiences in the aftermath of these losses, she expressed the hope that we Christians would get better at understanding those who are grieving and learn how to assist them. Though she was an active member of a Christian congregation, after the funerals were over, for the most part she bore her grief alone. That doesn’t have to be the case. In what the Bible tells us here, we have the most wonderful, most effective encouragement a grieving person can ever hear. We don’t have to settle for pious platitudes or mindless encouragements like, “Keep your chin up.” In Jesus Christ, who died and rose and is coming again, we have real hope. Those who fall asleep in Jesus will rise from death to live forever with the Lord.

May God help us not only to live each day in this hope, but to use this hope to encourage others. After all, who but a Christian can look death squarely in the eye and say, “*The best is yet to come*”? Amen.