

End Times/Last Judgment

November 12, 2006

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Our Hope for those Fallen Asleep

1. Resurrection
2. Reunion
3. Residing with the Lord forever

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.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our living Savior,

The Macedonian city of Thessalonica in St. Paul's time was in one respect very much like our time. People—even Christian people—were not sure what would happen after they died. Today you can hear people advancing theories ranging from reincarnation (where you supposedly come back as a different form of life) to annihilation (when you're dead, you're dead). Then there's also the persistent idea that those who die become angels. But none of these notions about life after death comes from God. By contrast, in our epistle lesson today the apostle Paul says that what he writes about life after death is "according to the Lord's own word."

We know that Paul hadn't been able to stay long in Thessalonica on his second mission trip. The opposition was too intense. That meant that his time for teaching the basics of the Christian faith was abbreviated. It's clear from reading this letter that some Thessalonian Christians weren't sure about the Bible's teaching regarding believers who have died. Some of them seemed to think that if you die before Jesus returns on Judgment Day, you won't have any part in the life to come. You can imagine the impact of that mistaken belief. Then death really is the end. You don't rise to live, you don't see your loved ones again, and you don't get to live with Jesus in heaven. But, in reality, the God has a far better

future planned for those who die believing in Jesus. What God reveals through Paul here is one of the most encouraging passages anywhere in Scripture. In the space of just six verses, Paul lays out **Our Hope for those who have Fallen Asleep**. It includes 1) resurrection, 2) reunion, and 3) residing with the Lord forever.

1. Resurrection

Paul begins with a Christian perspective on grief. He writes, “*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.*” Notice that Paul doesn’t say not to grieve. Grief is a normal reaction to the death of someone we know and love. We’re not stones. God created us with affections and emotions. Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus! But our grief is not the grief of those who have no hope. That grief despairs of ever seeing the dead again. For those without hope, death can be horrifying in its permanence. There is no real consolation.

But we Christians have hope: “*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.*” We sort of expect that when Paul writes, “*We believe that Jesus died and rose again...*,” that he will go on to write, “*and so we believe that those who fall asleep in Jesus will rise again.*” He will speak of the resurrection a couple verses later, but here he says, “*and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*” Bring those who have fallen asleep in Jesus where? Bring them to heaven. Those who die believing in Jesus aren’t gone forever; God will raise them from death and bring them to heaven along with those who are still alive when Jesus comes.

The believers who are still alive when Jesus comes have no advantage over believers who have died as far as going to heaven is concerned. That’s what Paul is emphasizing when he says here, “*Those who are left till the coming of the Lord will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*” Death is no disadvantage for those who die believing in Jesus. Here’s why: “*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.*” Paul has just referred to those who have died in Christ as “those who have fallen asleep.” Now he proceeds to tell about a day that even the dead won’t be able to sleep through: Judgment Day. That’s when the command of the Lord Jesus and the voice of the archangel and God’s trumpet will combine raise the dead. The bodies and souls of believers will be reunited. Bodies that were once lowly with sickness or injury will be transformed into glorious bodies. The mortal will put on immortality. Jesus, who tasted death for us, will, when he comes on Judgment Day, put death to flight. Our confident expectation is, first of all, this: that those who have died in Christ will rise to life.

It was ignorance of God’s promises that led to a lack of hope at Thessalonica for those who have died in Christ. Knowledge—in the form of God’s revelation through the apostle Paul—dispelled that ignorance and thus also the despair in

face of death. We know, because God has told us, that what we have to look forward to in the future is a resurrection of the dead and also a reunion of believers with their Lord Jesus.

2. Reunion

Paul continues, “*After that—(after that the joyful noise of Christ’s return)—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.*” This is one of the verses that those who believe in the so-called “rapture” use to support the idea. They say that before the seven years of tribulation prophesied in Revelation, God is going to instantaneously rapture (from the Latin word for “seize”) believers from this earth to heaven until the tribulation is over. Then they will return to live on earth with Christ during his 1000-year reign of peace. The problem with that idea is that it inserts non-biblical ideas into the Bible text. Paul is writing about Judgment Day here. It’s not that we Lutherans don’t believe in a rapture; it’s just that we believe that the day when God seizes us up from this earth to join him in heaven will be Judgment Day, not some day prior to that.

We see in these verses that Judgment Day will be a time of reunion. Those Christians who are still alive when Jesus returns will be caught up together with those who have died in Christ to meet the Lord. While hell is going to be a place of unrelieved loneliness and separation, heaven will be the scene of a great reunion.

The best part of heaven is that we will be with Jesus. There we will see with our own eyes the Savior who bought us with his blood. There we will join the angels in worshipping the victorious Lamb seated on his throne. This is what Jesus prayed for before he was crucified. He said, “**Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory.**” (John 17:24) And this is what Jesus promised us. He said, “**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.**” (John 14:3) This is the hope of every child of God—that when Jesus appears “**we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.**” (1 John 3:2)

But the promise of heaven also holds this hope for us, that we will be reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ. That’s part of what the little word “together” implies here. When Jesus’ friend, Martha, admonished him by saying, “**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,**” it was sort of like saying, “Jesus, where have you been? What took you so long?” Do you remember how Jesus replied? He said, “**Your brother will rise again,**” (John 11:23), that is, a reunion is coming. You’ll see your brother again. Now in that case Jesus was going to bring about that reunion in just a few moments. But what Jesus did for Mary and Martha there in Bethany he promises to do for all of us: we will receive back again our dead who have died in the Lord. By the power of Jesus’ resurrection, death is not the final word. Death is but a sleep from which we will awaken to a glorious reunion with Christ and all his believers.

Most of us are familiar with reunions. At a date set well in advance, family members from all over come together for a day or a weekend. Usually not more than that. Then the reunion is over. Not so in heaven. The apostle speaks to the never-ending nature of this heavenly reunion when he writes, “*And so we will be with the Lord forever.*”

3. Residing with the Lord forever

There’s a principle by which we live while we’re here on earth, perhaps without thinking much about it. It’s this: “All good things come to an end.” It doesn’t matter whether it’s an enjoyable vacation, a delightful dinner, or a satisfying career. Finally, it comes to an end. Everything good does, because this whole world is temporary. It’s passing away. But the good things of heaven will not come to an end. The vision of God, the presence of our Savior Jesus, the reunion with loved ones who shared our faith in Jesus—this will continue forever.

I remember when the New International Version of the Bible came out and I heard John 14:2 for the first time. Instead of the words I’d come to love—“**In my Father’s house are many mansions**”—I heard, “**In my Father’s house are many rooms.**” Like many others, I wondered what happened to my mansion. What changed was not the promise of Jesus, but the English language. In the 1600s, a mansion was an abode, a dwelling place of a permanent nature. Over time, “mansion” came to mean a stately home. There are other places in the Bible that talk about the beauty of heaven, but what Jesus was promising us in John 14 was simply that *there is most certainly a permanent dwelling place for us in heaven*. Jesus prepared it for us by becoming our sin and suffering the lethal punishment we had earned. Just as he came back from death, so he’ll come back from heaven and take us to be with him not for a day or a month, but forever.

So you can see that when our ignorance about what lies beyond the grave is relieved by God’s revelation, we Christians have all kinds of ways to encourage each other, even when death has made its presence felt. There will be a resurrection of all those who fall asleep in Jesus. In heaven we will see our Savior face-to-face and we will be reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ. And the joy of heaven will not be temporary, but never-ending.

What did you think about the hymn we sang just before the sermon? It may not have been familiar to you, but there’s a story behind it. It was written by Magnus Landstad, a Lutheran pastor and the son of a Lutheran pastor. It is reported that he wrote “I Know of a Sleep in Jesus’ Name” on Easter morning of 1851. In January of that year he had lost his 10-year-old daughter to typhus. And the previous evening, Easter eve, his 8-year-old son had succumbed to the same disease. It was with that mixture of grief at the death of his children and confidence in the Easter promises of Jesus that Landstad wrote, “*O Jesus, draw near my dying bed And take me into your keeping And say when my spirit hence is fled, ‘This child is not dead but sleeping.’ And leave me not, Savior, till I rise To praise you in life eternal.*” To believe that Jesus has died and risen again

from death does not mean the end of grief, but it is the basis for hope even as we grieve those who have fallen asleep. Those who fall asleep in Jesus will rise to life again. On the Last Day we will be united with Christ and reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ. And, together with them, we will be with the Lord forever. Amen.