

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. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

We Win!

The church where I served as a vicar had a weekday Bible class for people who had suffered some kind of tragic loss. It was led by a member who would gather people from this large congregation who needed to talk about their hurt. I remember one lady in particular from this class. Her son was a WELS teacher. She had been a member of the church all her life. But her husband had died suddenly a few years before. She sank into depression. She started to drink. Sometimes she would show up for this morning Bible class already more than half drunk. And as I listened to her talk during those months, I got more and more concerned because it seemed like she was losing her faith. Then one day, with no warning at all, she died. My friends, did she win? It might not seem like it. Clearly, the loss of her husband destroyed her and her final months were dark and sad. But I believe she did win, because the week she died, I did hear her still confess her faith in Christ, no matter how weak it had become. I believe that God took her home before her faith could die and today, she is living with Jesus in heaven. That's really the point of the portion of God's Word that we have before us today. St. Paul assures us: **we win!**

I.

St. Paul begins this reading by saying, **“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.”** Now, does that sound like someone who's talking to winners? Not really. But you have to understand the situation. In this chapter, he clearly is addressing a concern that he knows the members of this church have: what happens to Christians who die? In fact, it's clear that the real question was, do they miss out when Jesus comes back because they didn't live to see it? In our day, it's a little hard to imagine having a question like that. Two thousand years worth of Christians have died. If you lose something by not making it until Jesus comes back, well then the overwhelming majority of all Christians are going to miss out. We know that isn't the case. But in Paul's day, this was all pretty new. The early church had a very strong sense of anticipation. They took Jesus' promise to return seriously and they thought they could very well see him come back.

We don't share that specific question, but there is much here that we still need to know. Paul is talking about the dead in Christ. As hard as it is for us to think about, those who die without faith in Christ have none of the promises that God gives us here. They've missed their chance and are now in hell. So Paul focuses on believers. Over the years, I've conducted many funerals, always for people who gave a confession of faith. Usually, among their friends and family who gather at that service, there are people with the same kinds of questions in their hearts that Paul was addressing here. Where is Grandma? What is happening to my husband? What does God promise them on a day like today? To all of us who have ever gathered around the casket of a believer in Christ with those kinds of questions in our breaking hearts, St. Paul says, **“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.”**

He wants us to know what God promises at that moment. He wants us to understand what Jesus has done for all people who die trusting in him. What happens to them? First of all, they go to heaven. We say that pretty blithely today, but it is absolutely true. I once got a call from a family asking me to come to the hospital right away. When I got there, I learned that their daughter – a woman in her twenties – had suddenly died. Her parents and siblings were there. There were many tears. But I noticed her father wasn't crying, even though I knew he was very devoted to his family. He was sitting by her body which was still in the room and I went over to him to talk him. Almost before I could speak, he said, “This isn't her. This is just a shell.” He knew

God's promise: his daughter was in heaven. Jesus had taken her home. The truest part of us is our soul. That soul is what gives life to the body. It lives on when our body dies. At the moment of death, it goes to heaven or hell. At that moment already a Christian wins.

What is heaven like? The Bible doesn't tell us much about it. We know that in heaven, we will be conscious. We won't be sleeping. We know that all pain and sorrow are done, all the sin that infected our hearts in this life and led us to all kinds of sinful and self-destructive decisions will be wiped out of our hearts. We know that we will rejoice to see our Savior and we will sing his praises, free from all the scars and damage that life inflicted on us here. We will truly be happy in Christ's presence.

But we also know that we will be waiting for one more thing. You see, Jesus came here to set us free from all that sin does to us. He died and he rose so that all our guilt is gone. God rules that we are holy and innocent because of Jesus. He came to set us free from all pain and sorrow and all those things that make this life hard. But he didn't just do that for our souls. He did it for our bodies, too. He did it for our world. He died and rose so that we will rise. During the time between our death and the resurrection, we will eagerly look forward to that day.

Paul says that Jesus will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Christ. In fact, he 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."** There is no special advantage to still being alive when Jesus comes. While I regularly pray for him to come back, especially when I see how evil our world is, if I die and he comes back the next day, I won't miss anything. The dead in Christ come back with Christ. Then the living in Christ join them for the final victory celebration.

Paul tells us all that so that we aren't ignorant. But he's not just passing out information. He's not trying to prepare us to win in some "Judgment Day" category on *Jeopardy*. He tells us all this so that we don't have to grieve like people who have no hope. What does that mean? Is Paul telling us that it's a sin to be sad when someone we love dies? No. Death is an unnatural interruption into our lives. God designed us to live forever in perfect harmony with him and with each other. Just as divorce and strife hurt because they ruin God's design, death hurts because it blows a hole in our lives that nothing can ever fill. We get used to the hole. We can get to the point where we don't think about it all the time. But we lost someone and on this side of heaven, that person can't be replaced.

Yet God doesn't want us to mourn *like people who have no hope*. That's the key. That's what almost destroyed that poor Christian woman that I met when I was vicaring. We have hope even when someone dies. We can be glad that the Lord has taken someone we love home. We can be thankful for the faith that person got from the Holy Spirit and rejoice in all God's promises to the one we love. And we can look forward to joining them around the throne of the Lamb. We can eagerly wait for the day when that person we love finally has the perfect life that God always wanted them to have in a new world. On the day we say goodbye to someone we love and every day after that when it hurts, we have these promises. My friends, in Christ **we win! So don't grieve like people who have no hope.**

II.

In the modern church, "heaven" has become a kind of shorthand for all our hopes. That's not a bad thing. But it's not the whole story, either. Paul talks here about the resurrection. In many ways, that teaching underlines the difference between being a Christian and just being "spiritual." Most Americans believe that you go to a better place when you die. They believe that you continue on a new plain of existence or whatever and they're OK with calling it heaven, most of the time. But the Christian faith is much richer than that. It promises more than a new and different kind of existence after we shed this body. It promises life to this body after it dies. To many Americans, that's unthinkable. I once taught an adult membership class in which I made that point and a young woman asked me, "Pastor, are you saying our bodies are going to come back to life?" She had never heard that before. But that is our hope.

In fact, the Bible speaks much more about the resurrection than it does about "going to heaven." That's because Jesus came to give us new life in a new world with new and perfect bodies that will live with him forever. To focus us on that total victory, St. Paul reviews the main events of Judgment Day: the Lord himself comes down from heaven. He will come with a loud command and the voice of an archangel and the trumpet call of God. The whole world will see Jesus when he comes. The whole world will know that the Son of God has returned to judge the world.

Paul says, **“The dead in Christ will rise first.”** That “first” has confused some people. They think that it means that the unbelieving dead will rise later. But that’s not the point here. Rather, the “first” refers to the dead in Christ, and those who come after are those believers who are still alive and see Jesus come back. Paul says that the dead will rise and then the living will be **“caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”** And then, Paul says, **“And so we will be with the Lord forever.”**

I find it interesting that he doesn’t say anything here about the new heavens and the new earth. He doesn’t talk about our new bodies which will be like Christ’s body. He certainly talks about those things in other places, but he doesn’t mention them here. Here he focuses on one simple truth: we will all be together with Jesus. The whole Christian Church will be with the Lord forever. That is our greatest comfort. It’s the best part of heaven and it is the best part of the resurrection. That might be hard for us to see. If you’ve reached the point in life where it hurts just to walk from the living room to the bedroom and you need a walker or a wheelchair, you might think that new legs will be the best part of the resurrection. If you’ve struggled all your life with addiction issues or you’ve allowed laziness or selfishness to destroy marriages and jobs, you might think that being free from sin is the best part of the resurrection. If you love nature and you spend every vacation up north, you might think that restoring this world to the state it had in the Garden of Eden is the best part of the resurrection. All those things are going to happen and every one of them will be a rich blessing.

But the greatest blessing of all will be Jesus. We will be with him forever. We will see the one who loved us, who lived in our place, who died so we don’t have to suffer hell, who rose to lead us out of the grave and give us that life that’s coming. He will know us by name and share himself with us. And it will be that way forever. Here and now, sin and death blow holes in our lives. But still **we win! So encourage one another with that promise!**

That’s what makes life here livable. That’s what enables us to conquer grief when we lose someone we love. I’ve told this story many times, so you’ve probably heard me say it. But when I was vicaring, a friend from the seminary called me and asked me to visit his grandfather who was dying at the VA hospital in the city where I was serving. He told me that his grandfather didn’t have faith. He had lived a sinful life and had abandoned his family. He didn’t have much time. Well, to make a long story short, I got to baptize that man the first time I met him. He lived and rejoiced in Christ for a month or two. He told the pastor there, “You’re just the man I want to see. Tell me about Jesus. Tell me that my sins are forgiven.” When my friend called me later and told me his grandfather had died, I told him, “Your grandfather won.” We, too, will win. Amen.