



Sermon for Sunday, November 14, 2021

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (EHV) <sup>13</sup> **We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope.** <sup>14</sup> **Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.** <sup>15</sup> **In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep.** <sup>16</sup> **For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.** <sup>17</sup> **Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.** <sup>18</sup> **Therefore, encourage one another with these words.**

I wonder who died? The members at Thessalonica had seen their share of funerals. Paul, like any other pastor, would have received a letter telling him that one of the members had died. As he read it, he could feel their grief and hurt. He could certainly feel the force of their many questions. Why did it have to happen now? He had just become a believer! Why couldn't one of those unbelieving Romans have died instead?

Paul had taught these people the things Jesus said about faith and life. **“Whoever lives and believes in me will never die”** (John 11:26 NIV84). If what Jesus said is true, then why did dad have to die? Does anyone know what the five stages of grief are? Back in 1969 a psychiatrist named Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was working with terminally ill patients. She wrote a book outlining the five stages of grief entitled, *On Death and Dying*. The first stage is...DENIAL. This can't be happening! It feels like a dream and when I wake up and open my eyes my loved one

will be here. The second stage is...ANGER. It isn't fair! It isn't right! How could God let this happen?

After the numbness had worn off, after they worked through their anger and hurt, came the third stage...BARGAINING which is also accompanied by GUILT. It settles in like it's an old friend. "We asked God for help. What if I had prayed more, or trusted more? If only I hadn't walked out the door, or gone to the doctor earlier, this wouldn't have happened." Then comes the fourth stage...DEPRESSION. They had a feeling of loss that covered them like a heavy blanket. They had lost someone they loved deeply, and the realization that they were not coming back would finally sink in. In the weeks and months that followed, they would realize that they were in a new stage of their lives...ACCEPTANCE... and they would learn to live in that new, permanent reality.

Some of the believers struggled with fear. They were afraid that they would never see their loved ones again. After all, Jesus said that he was going to come back soon, and the believers took him at his word. What would happen to all those believers who had died before Jesus came back? Would they miss out on eternal life?

How many of us like attending funerals? Can you think of any reasons why? We need to understand that God never wanted us to attend a funeral. Death was not part of his perfect creation. When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they disobeyed God's direct command. They brought death into the world: "**For when you eat of it you will surely die**" (Genesis 2:17 NIV84).

We don't like funerals because they are the most powerful preaching of God's ancient law that we can experience. When we hear the voice on the phone say, "I'm sorry, he's dead," our sinful nature deep down inside realizes that what God said is true. "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23 NIV84). "**For the wages of sin is death**" (Romans 6:23 NIV84). "**The soul who sins is the one who will die**" (Ezekiel 18:20 NIV84). The person we loved really was sinful. God was serious, and he'll be that serious about my sin.

There's another thing that makes it hard to go to a funeral--we haven't gone through death. The unknown is frightening. We wonder, "What will I feel? Does it hurt? Will I know what's happening?" Our fears go even deeper, because we know our own sinfulness. We wonder, "Will God really let me into heaven? I haven't done all the things he asks. I haven't been perfect. What if he says no? I'll end up in hell for eternity, instead of with him!" Those thoughts can come to trouble us at any time!

Wouldn't it be nice if we could just fly away to a place where no one died, where fear couldn't shake our faith? There's an old-time spiritual that came to mind whenever I read this section of Scripture. The hymn is called "I'll Fly Away." ***Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away; To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away. I'll fly away, Oh Glory I'll fly away; in the morning. When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.***

For believers who struggled through slavery, poverty, war, and hunger, death was a welcome release because it brought freedom and life. That's exactly what Paul shared with his friends. "**We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen**

**asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13 EHV). He wanted them to know what happens to people who fall asleep in Jesus. That’s God’s way of looking at death—it’s just falling asleep. He also wanted them to know that they don’t need to grieve like the rest of the world—empty, hopeless, keening grief. We have hope.

When we face death, we find our hope in Jesus. **“Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus”** (1 Thessalonians 4:14 EHV). We believe that Jesus died. Jesus died. How profound! When thoughts of death trouble us, we can take comfort knowing that Jesus went there too. He too struggled with thoughts of death, but they did not trouble him enough to keep him away from the cross. He went to his death willingly, knowing that it was the doorway to his Father’s house. He went willingly, because he knew it would pay for all that Adam and Eve had done, along with the sins of the world!

We believe that Jesus rose again. Jesus did the impossible. He went through death and came back again! He left plenty of witnesses. Each of his disciples saw him with their own eyes, touched the places where the nails had bitten so cruelly through his hands, and even held onto him. They had eaten with him. They listened to his final instructions, and they watched with their own eyes as he ascended into heaven. They saw all these things. They shared them with us, and we believe! We believe that Jesus rose again!

After walking us through those two truths, Paul laid out step by step what will happen at Jesus’ return to ease our worries and fears. **“In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first”** (1 Thessalonians 4:15–16 EHV).

Let’s look at it step by step. We don’t have to worry about loved ones who have died being left behind on the Last Day. We won’t precede them—we won’t go before them. The first thing that will happen? The Lord Jesus will come down from heaven. The angels who appeared to the disciples on the day Jesus ascended into heaven assured them: **“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”** (Acts 1:11 NIV84). Jesus will come, and we will see him!

When we see him, we’ll also get to hear him. He will come with a loud command: **“Come out!”** (John 11:43). At the same time we’ll hear the voice of the **“archangel.”** The Bible offers us two hints about his identity. Our Old Testament reading spoke about a heavenly prince named Michael who would come to protect God’s people on the Last Day. Jude 9 tells us that Michael is God’s archangel. Along with his voice, we will hear **“the trumpet call of God.”** Trumpets have been used for centuries to make important announcements. God’s trumpet will make sure no one will miss Jesus’ arrival.

In the middle of all this excitement and sound comes Jesus’ greatest miracle of all—the dead in Christ will rise first! Can you imagine? If we were standing outside of Memory Gardens

cemetery, we would see our fellow believers wake up and live. They will awake, not like zombies stumbling around looking for a meal, but to a new, perfect existence. It won't take much time for all of this to happen. Paul told the Corinthians that it will happen **"in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet"** (1 Corinthians 15:52 NIV84). **"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord"** (1 Thessalonians 4:17 EHV). We will fly away! The believers who first sang that song were right! We will fly away from the shackles of sin, away from the prisons of fear and depression, away from death itself into the arms of our loving Savior.

If all of that isn't beautiful enough, listen to this last promise: **"And so we will always be with the Lord"** (1 Thessalonians 4:17 EHV). It's even more beautiful and emphatic in Greek. Literally it says, **"and so...always...with the Lord...we will be."** Always. With the Lord. We will be.

Can there be any greater comfort when we mourn someone's death? Jesus, who cried at the tomb of his good friend Lazarus, stands by our side as we struggle through the numbing unreality of someone's death. Jesus' love soothes our anger that lashes out at family, friends, doctors, and even God himself when we want that loved one back. Jesus assures us that we don't need to bargain with him to get our loved one back—he is already in Jesus' arms, resting in glory that is better than anything we have here. Jesus walks with us through the depression that blankets the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus promises that whoever believes in him will live forever, and he helps us live with our loss knowing that one day we will be reunited in heaven!

Is there any greater gift that we can give to someone dying, or for those who mourn? **"Therefore encourage one another with these words"** (1 Thessalonians 4:18 EHV). Do you ever wonder what to say when you go to a funeral? Maybe you don't like to go, just because you don't know what to do or say. Use these words. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. We believe that we will too—we'll fly away to heaven forever! Paul doesn't tell us to stop grieving and crying. God made us to feel emotion, and when someone dies we almost feel those emotions too much. Jesus told his disciples, **"You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy"** (John 16:20 NIV84). We grieve. But we don't grieve like people who have no hope. You've heard people say, or you've said it yourself, "How do people make it through this without faith?" One day our grief will turn to joy because it will be our turn to fly away. We'll fly to the arms of our Savior. We'll look around and see people, so many people we won't be able to count from every nation, tribe, people, and language. We'll see our loved ones who believed Jesus died and rose again too. Best of all, we'll see Jesus and he will make our joy complete. ***Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away; To a land where joy shall never end, I'll fly away. I'll fly away, Oh Glory I'll fly away; in the morning. When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.*** Amen.

To God alone the glory!      Pastor Jon Brohn