

November 15 – Saints Triumphant

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

<sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For 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.

<sup>15</sup> According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede 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 the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

There is a city on the other side of the world from which you can see the highest mountain peak in the world, if the smog clears. The city itself is no beauty. The traffic is chaotic. The rivers running through the city are like sewers. Near the edge of town there is a Hindu shrine where dying people wait for their last moment on earth while they smell the burning of dead bodies, whose ashes are dropped into a nearby river. Hindus believe they will be reincarnated, that they will come back either in a higher form of life, or a lower form depending on how they lived. It's a tragic, hopeless place, where the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ is not proclaimed.

Further west in one of the many mountain valleys a generation ago, a young child of a Hindu priest was revered by the villagers. They'd wash the child's feet and then drink the water, thinking this child was special because his father was at the highest level or caste in their community. Then the priest and his wife died, leaving the young child an orphan. His older brother took him in. Hindus believed there was something wrong with the child. He had bad fortune. Now he was no longer revered; he became an outcast. Somehow, he had displeased the millions of Hindu gods; and they were punishing him.

Now a teenager, the child thought about suicide. Then a classmate told him about Jesus Christ. He learned John 3:16. He learned that God did not ask him to sacrifice his life to gain God's favor but that the eternal Son of God had given his life to save him. The teenager became a Christian.

The former son of a Hindu priest now travels the mountains and valleys of his country telling people about Jesus Christ. He is proclaiming the gospel to help people **rest assured in Jesus**.

This is the Apostle Paul's message to you in the words we just read this morning. He tells you to **rest assured in Jesus** because...

Death is but a sleep (13-14)

Those who believe in reincarnation can never be sure their lives were good enough to earn a higher station in life. Their faith is based on experience and stories their ancestors handed down through the ages; it does not rest on historical facts and the inspired Word of God. The Holy Spirit works faith through the Scriptures, not through Hindu experiences and stories.

There is no guesswork for those who die believing in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "*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*" (vv 13-14). Because you know what Jesus did for you, you might think it's unnecessary to hear his promises repeated. But we need repetition, because the sorrows and disappointments, we experience so often, can easily lead us to forget those promises.

Listen again to Jesus: "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 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 14:1-3).

After her brother Lazarus died and lay in an enclosed tomb, Jesus visited Martha and said, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:23-27).

Lazarus’ sisters, Martha and Mary, needed to hear those words from Jesus because they were facing the grim ugliness of death. They missed their brother. They had to go on living without him. Because of sin, life is hard; even Jesus wept over the sadness and misery his close friends endured because of sin.

Grieving, like Jesus’ weeping, is not in itself an indication that faith is lost. We miss a loved one who has departed this life. It is hard to adjust to loss.

When tears well up in our eyes, when we grow anxious and afraid, hang onto Jesus’ words: ““I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).

Christians came to express that conviction by burying their loved ones in cemeteries, which means sleeping place. A cemetery is a dormitory, where bodies lie sleeping and waiting for the resurrection. Christians also wanted their bodies to rest near the place where they heard the message that the Savior had conquered sin and death. That would be the “graveyard” which was part of the “churchyard.”

This does not mean that cremation is wrong. We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the way we are buried. My younger brother died believing in Jesus Christ. His body was cremated for practical reasons, so that his ashes could be transported easily from Texas to his home state where a memorial service could be held for family and friends six months later. My older brother lost his wife some years ago. Her body was cremated because she wanted to reduce funeral expenses and give an offering to proclaim the gospel in other countries.

Over time, a decaying body turns to dust and ashes just as Scripture reminds us; cremation merely hastens the process. Many Christians have died in war at sea or their bodies were destroyed by exploding shells. These circumstances do not undo our Savior’s promise and the power of the resurrection.

Whatever the circumstances of our death before Christ comes again, the Apostle Paul promises that...

A reunion is coming (15-17)

On the last day of this world when our Savior comes again, those who already died will be reunited with those who are alive to meet him “in the air” as the Apostle says. The details here in Thessalonians plus other information in 1 Corinthians and from Jesus himself in the gospels and Revelation give a general picture of what will happen. We don’t know all the details, nor can we fully understand them, as we read in 1 Corinthians: “Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Here is what we “know in part”:

- *“The dead in Christ will rise first”* (v 16). Jesus said: “A time is coming ... when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out” (John 5:25,28-29).
- This includes not only the believers, but the unbelievers also, as Jesus said: “Those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29).
- Then those who are still alive *“will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”* (v 17).

This is the “rapture” that so many Christians talk about. That word “rapture” comes from the Latin translation of the Bible. “We will be caught up” appears as “rapiemur” in Latin. The rapture is not a silent, quiet disappearance of believer with planes crashing because Christian pilots are suddenly raptured to heaven. Instead, the rapture occurs on the Last Day, when Christ comes to raise all people from the dead and judge the living and the dead. The “rapture” will happen with *“with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God”* (v 16).

- All this—the raising of the dead from their graves and the rapture of them and those who are still living—will take place “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” as the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians in that famous chapter about the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52).
- All people will *“meet the Lord in the air.”* What will hold us up as we meet the Lord in the air? We’ll find out when it happens, but the Apostle adds this vital information about our risen bodies. They will be “sown” in the ground “a natural body; they are “raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). Our bodies will be like Jesus after he rose from the dead. “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:49).
- Why meet the Lord in the air rather than on solid ground? God tells us through the Apostle Peter that “the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire” (2 Peter 3:10). God will remove us from earth before he destroys it.

- After this earth is burned up “we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:13).

There will be no thousand-year reign on earth before the Last Day comes, but heaven itself is described in the book of Revelation as a new heaven and a new earth, that will last forever.

This is tremendous, heart-warming good news, but our sinful nature also needs to be forewarned. The distressing events in our country and the disruption we experience in our lives—sickness, job-loss, death of a loved one, divorce, new jobs, losing a home, moving to a new location—can distract us from Christ. Trouble can turn us inward, cause despair, provoke anger and create disillusionment. These reactions would make us unprepared for the end of our earthly lives.

Therefore, go to the foot of the cross. See there what Jesus suffered for you so that your sins are forgiven. Hear his promise that you will be with him in paradise. Understand that the day you leave this earth your soul will be with him, the day he comes again your soul will be rejoined to your recreated and glorified body. You will be with the Lord forever. “Therefore, **[rest assured in Jesus and]** encourage each other with these words” (v 18). Amen.