



THAT GREAT GETTIN' UP MORNING

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 1 Thess 4:13-18
 Sixth Message
 Gary Vanderet
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Benjamin Franklin said that there are two certainties in life, death and taxes. While it may be possible to dodge the IRS, no one evades the Grim Reaper. No one gets out of this life alive. George Bernard Shaw noted, "the statistics on death are very impressive: one out of every one people dies."

We have but two choices in this matter of death: face it or try to forget it. Some who think about death do so only superficially. A certain young woman once told the wife of C. S. Lewis that she did not worry about death, because by the time she got old, she said, science would have done something about it. But that, of course, is merely an effort to evade reality. Science has not and will not do anything about death. Death is a certainty that we have to face up to.

Pascal once compared the human race to a group of people in a room who have been condemned to death. Every day one person is executed in the presence of the others, reminding everyone that their time would come. That is the terror we face when tragedy brings death close to us. One of these days, our own time will come. Yet, we are so preoccupied with our health that we act as if we aren't going to die. But we are. We can jog and avoid cholesterol and do all the things that count for good health, but the only result is that we will end up healthy looking corpses!

A related problem is the death of our loved ones. My father died when I was 11 months old. My mother died shortly before Kathy became pregnant with our first child, around 17 years ago. We have experienced a number of deaths in this body in recent years. Some of you have lost your spouses, some of you your children. You have found yourselves asking, "What has happened to them? Are they all right? Will we see them again?"

This is the issue that Paul deals with in the passage which we will look at from 1 Thessalonians this morning. The Thessalonians had a theological question for Paul, too. Evidently he had taught them that the Lord Jesus was going to reappear and take his people home to himself. They seemed to think that event was so imminent that some of them had given up their jobs (this is why Paul wrote what he did in verses 11-12 of chapter 4), while others were totally unprepared for the experience of mourning and bereavement. Relatives or friends of theirs had died before Jesus came back. They had not anticipated this; it took them by surprise and greatly disturbed them. Their questions were along

these lines: How would the Christian dead fare when Jesus came for his own? Would they be at a disadvantage? Would they miss the blessing of the second coming? Was it possible they were lost?

These are the concerns that Paul addresses in this passage, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 4,

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13-18, NASB)

The text opens with this striking statement: "that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope." Christians do not grieve like those "who have no hope." Christians are not stoics. We don't believe we can suppress all our longings and heartaches. Our Lord wept when he took on our humanity. He was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," as Isaiah put it. He wept unashamedly at the tomb of Lazarus. If the perfect Man could not walk through this life without being deeply touched by our infirmities, how can we expect to go through life without being hurt? We will grieve. George MacDonald said that sometimes "tears are the only cure for weeping." It's all right to cry. It's all right to have our hearts broken. It's not non-Christian. Larry Crabb said, "An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of realism." We were created to live in a better world than this, and until that better world comes along we will groan for what we do not have.

What Paul forbids is not grief, but hopeless grief, not all mourning, but mourning like the rest of men "who have no hope." Faith is always the cure for a troubled heart. When we get anxious and troubled, Jesus' response is, "Believe in me." But he did not leave it there. We have to have something to believe in, something to

count on. So what follows are the things we should believe to keep our hearts from being troubled. Paul says there are a number of unassailable facts that are just as certain as our death, and it is those that give us hope. Verse 14,

For if [that could be translated "since." It is not really a contingency as we know it] we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (4:14)

The first fact is that Jesus died and rose again. The evidence for his resurrection is as good as for any event in history that no one questions. Because the historical data is so good, no one questions today the fact that Jesus lived. And no one questions the fact that he died, or how he died. The other night, my son Stephen was doing his history homework, and on the page was a timeline, with a cross marking Jesus' crucifixion. Nobody questions that fact. But people do question the resurrection. And it is not because the evidence is bad. They dismiss the resurrection simply because they have an anti-supernatural bias. It is a philosophical or a moral problem for them. It has nothing to do with history. The evidence for Jesus' death and resurrection is extremely good.

Paul wrote this letter around AD 50. Jesus died sometime around AD 30. Twenty years after it was reported that Jesus rose from the dead, Paul is saying that the resurrection happened. If the opponents of the gospel wanted to put an end to the notion that Jesus rose from the dead, they could have done it immediately. They could have produced the body. They could have produced people who had seen him placed in the grave and kept there. They could have stopped this rumor. As a matter of fact, they tried to, but they couldn't. The facts were unassailable. Jesus rose from the dead.

Elvis Presley died about twenty years ago, yet there are rumors circulating all the time that he is alive. Producing his body, however, would soon put a stop to that.

Paul said he knew more than five hundred people who saw Jesus walking around. They spoke to him. Their stories could be checked out. The evidence was unimpeachable.

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith. According to Paul, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then "our preaching is useless and our faith is in vain, and we are to be pitied above all men." We might as well give up our Christian faith. Let's just shut down the church buildings and make museums of them. Let's give our pastors pink slips and get on with the business of making money and going for all the gusto, because this is all there is. But Paul says in a number of places that Jesus did rise from the dead. The point he is making is that there is a connection between Jesus' death and resurrection and ours. If God did not abandon Jesus to death, he will not abandon the Christian dead either. He will raise them as he raised him.

The second fact (it is in that same verse that Paul alludes to) is that since Jesus did rise from the dead, believers who have died have fallen asleep: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

Paul refers to death in this passage as "sleeping." In fact, in three successive verses he refers to people who have died as having "fallen asleep." This is not a new idea. Sleep as a euphemism for death is embedded in the Old Testament from the beginning. The authors write about the patriarchs "lying down with their fathers." Daniel, referring to those who sleep in the ground, said they will rise. One of the most helpful stories in the Scriptures is the incident in which Jairus implored Jesus to save his daughter's life. By the time the Lord got to the little girl's house she was dead. Luke, who was a physician, writes that her "spirit had left her." She was dead. When Jesus walked into the room, the professional wailers were gathered around the bed, carrying on. Jesus said, "She's just asleep." But they laughed at him. He made them all leave the room, and then he said to the girl, "*Talitha kum!*" which is Aramaic for, "Little girl, get up," And she got up! Luke says her spirit came back into her and she got up.

This is a little picture of what the Lord is going to do in a big way when he comes back. He is going to say, "Get up! Get up!" and everyone in Christ is going to get up. Jesus will come back with a loud command. That's the word Paul uses here. It is a military term for "to call to attention." The angel is going to play "Reveille," and everyone is going to get up. Death for those in Christ is just like falling sleep. One of these days our Lord is going to come back and say, "It's time to get up," and those who are dead in Christ will get up.

The word that is used here for sleep is the word from which we get our term for cemetery. It is the word "koi-meo," which means "to lie down." A cemetery is a "koi-meterion," a place where people lie down. The word for resurrection is "anastasis." "Stasis" means "stand," and "ana" is "up." Stand up!

This text raises a number of questions about what happens to the body when we die, since the New Testament makes it clear that when that happens, the first person we will see is the Lord Jesus. What happens to the body? What happens to the soul? Is the soul immediately in God's presence? Since Paul says nobody wants to be a disembodied spirit, and we can't imagine ourselves walking around heaven in a kind of presence without a body, what is going to happen? People have all kinds of theories as to how this is worked out. Does the soul sleep for a period and then wake up? Perhaps the soul goes to be with the Lord. But is there is an intermediate body, a spare body that you wear until you get your other body, like the temporary spare tire that comes with your car? I confess I don't know how the Lord is going to accomplish all of this. When Paul talks about sleep, he is referring to the body sleeping. It is the body that rests; the spirit goes immediately into the

Lord's presence. How he is going to work this out I leave with him.

Lambert Dolphin, who for many years was a physicist with Stanford Research Institute, is a brilliant man. (Usually I don't understand half of what he says!) I have heard him talk about the relativity and elasticity of time. He says that most people think of eternity as an endless sequence of time, but that isn't so. Physicists know that time is simply matter in motion. And since there is no matter in a spiritual state, there can be no time; there is a total absence of time; everything is "now." Therefore, when you die, for you the second coming occurs at that moment. Adam and Eve will be just getting there. And Paul, too. Everyone is united at once, because everything is happening "now."

Now I don't pretend to understand all of this. All I can say is that God lives outside of time, and I trust him. He will take care of the details. Whether the soul sleeps or there is an intermediate body, I'll leave that up to him. What I do know is that one of these days, all of us who love the Lord Jesus are going to be joined together in him.

The third fact is that when Jesus comes back, he is going to bring his loved ones with him. Chapter 4, verse 15,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (4:15-17)

As we said earlier, one of the questions which the Thessalonians raised had to do with those who had already died and gone to be with the Lord. They were concerned about what had happened to them. Paul assures them they had never been separated from Christ. It was not a possibility. They sleep in him, they will rise with him, and they will come with him as well. Christ and his people belong to each other, inseparably, indissolubly. This would be new, encouraging information to these believers. Such confidence had they in the imminent return of Christ, they thought he might come back in their lifetime. And Paul included himself in that group. Paul has died, of course, and many generations have passed, but the fact of the Lord's coming is no less certain. There may well be some of us alive when the Lord comes back. No matter, we can be assured that neither the Christian dead nor the Christian living will be excluded or disadvantaged in any way.

Paul says that those who have preceded us in death,

those who have gone on to be with the Lord, will come back with Jesus, and they will be given their resurrected bodies. "Then those who are alive shall be caught up" [the word actually means "to snatch."] We will be snatched up to meet them in the air.

And then finally, the fourth fact is that we will all be together forever. We will be with the Lord and our loved ones. Family reunions here on earth are often disappointing affairs. That is because of the presence of sin—but there will be no sin in heaven. How tremendously encouraging, that we will be spend eternity with our believing spouses who have died, and our children who have perished, our grandparents and parents who prayed for us. We will be with them forever. All of our aspirations for loving relationships here on earth will be fulfilled in heaven. That is why Jesus said that going to heaven is like going to our father's house. Oftentimes here on earth, going home is not quite what we would like it to be. But one day we will finally go home in a state of sinlessness, and there will be a perfect reunion. We will be our Lord and the people we love forever.

One of these days, we are going to be in the Father's house. That is the Christian's certain destiny. We are going to be together forever. We will see, in their redeemed bodies, our loved ones who have gone on before us. One day we are going to step into eternity, like Enoch did, and pass from this life to the next. Death, the thing that we dread so much, will be a mere transition. And the Lord will be there to greet us and gather us into the Father's house, where there is warmth and security and nothing to fear.

C. S. Lewis, in his final children's book, *The Last Battle*, describes it this way:

"There was a railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the shadowlands—dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia have only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter one of the Great story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

That is why Paul concludes this passage with these words, in verse 18:

"Therefore comfort one another with these words."

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