

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Time to Wake Up!

1. How to think about dead Christians

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (13). Have you ever thought what it will be like to die? As a teenager I convinced myself that there was no God. At that time I believed that if I died I would just cease to exist. What will happen to you when you die? Will you just dissolve into nothingness? The Bible is quite clear on this. Your body will die and decay, but your yourself will most certainly continue to exist. Forget about those unhelpful and misleading accounts Helen Kubler Ross made famous about people who had "near death" experiences and spoke of experiencing great joy and seeing a wonderful, bright light. Whatever such people experienced it was **not** the same as the finality of death itself. The Bible teaches that if you die without knowing Christ then you will enter a state of unmitigated horror. Paul talks about dead Christians as being *"those who are asleep."* In the ancient world, many non-Christians also used the metaphor of sleep to describe the state of death. Catallus wrote, *"Suns may set and rise again but we, when once our brief light goes down, must sleep an endless night."* Aeschylus spoke of *"one unbroken night of sleep."* To die without Christ is indeed to enter a never ending night, to enter dreadful darkness. But you will not be unconscious as those are who sleep. Your worst nightmares will be realised. An archaeological team dug up a first-century graveyard in Thessalonica. Among the pagan tombstones they found one which was inscribed in Greek with these words: *"No Hope."* That is your future without Christ - no hope.

If you are a true Christian, if you have a genuine relationship with Christ, then what will happen to you if you die today? You will fall asleep until it is time to wake up. That's how Paul describes Christians in verse 13, as *"those who have fallen asleep."* You will remember that when Jesus' friend Lazarus died Jesus told his disciples, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him"* (Jn 11:11). All those Christians who have died are now sleeping. What Jesus did for Lazarus was by way of underlining the fact that Jesus is *"the resurrection and the life."* When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead he was telling all who believe in him that one day he will wake them from their sleep as well.

Some animals, like the black bear, the chipmunk and the squirrel, hibernate over the winter, going into a very deep sleep. Hibernating animals usually retreat to a den, a burrow, or a hollow log for protection and shelter. During "true hibernation," the animal's body temperature drops, and its rate of breathing slows down. Hibernating animals can be so quiet that they actually appear to be dead. These hibernating animals are very difficult to awaken. Those who die in Christ are somewhat like animals entering a state of hibernation. They may look dead but they are really only asleep. During this state it is impossible to awaken them. But as in hibernation the state of sleep only lasts during the cold season of death prior to the glorious awakening that will occur when they receive new life.

We have to be careful, however, not to over-read the language of falling asleep. One man has quipped, "People who say they sleep like a baby usually don't have one." No! To say that dead Christians are asleep means they are in a state of settled rest. But when we think of dying and falling asleep we should not think that we will be in a comatose state while we wait for the time to wake up, the time when Jesus will come to raise all dead believers to life. If you die today then your body will sleep until that day but you yourself will be with Jesus. You will remember what Paul said in Philippians 1:23: *"My desire is to depart and be with Christ."* Paul fully appreciated that if his present imprisonment ended in his execution then his greatest desire would be realised, for he would then be with Christ, enjoying the presence of Christ. So if you die today as a true Christian then your body falls asleep, as it were, till it is awakened at the coming of Christ to receive a new

body. But when you die you will not enter a state of unconsciousness. You will enjoy being with Jesus. It is we who remain alive who view those Christians who have died as those who are asleep, as those whose bodies sleep, as it were, till the time comes to wake up.

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that he does not want them to be *uninformed* about those who are asleep. That is, he does not want them to have a false understanding about the state of dead Christians that would cause them to grieve like those who have no hope, that would cause them to mourn for deceased believers like those who are non Christians. I remember when my wife's brother was killed in a tragic car accident in his twenties. At the funeral my wife and her father grieved greatly at this terrible loss. However, they did not grieve as those who have no hope because they had been informed by biblical teaching about what will happen to their loved ones who die in Christ. My wife's brother, Peter, was a Christian and they were convinced that he had gone to be with Jesus and that one day he, like Lazarus, would hear Jesus' cry of command and wake from the dead.

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." When I was just an 11 year old boy my life was turned upside down. The person who meant more to me than any person on earth was tragically taken from me. My father was killed in a factory accident. My parents were not Christians. I had no church background, yet night after night I got down on my knees and cried out to God, "Why, God, why?" As I looked into the future I saw only misery and emptiness. I was grieving like those who have no hope. But it is one thing for me to have no hope about my own future. It is another thing to have no hope about the eternal future of a loved one who dies. My stepfather died 3 years ago of lung cancer. He almost certainly died an unbeliever. I have no hope for him. I am not uninformed about the eternal destiny of those who do not die in Christ.

We will all suffer the loss of loved ones. This is inescapable. We must face inevitable loss as those who are properly informed. It is wonderful to know that death is not the end.

Paul continues, *"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep"* (v14). It is impossible to genuinely believe that dead Christians will be physically raised from the dead if we do not believe that Jesus himself was physically raised from the dead.

2. What to Expect When Christ Comes

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons, prophesied that Jesus would return in 1890. The founder of the Seventh-Day Adventists, William Miller claimed that the second coming of Christ would occur between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. One of the founding members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell declared that the invisible return of Christ had occurred in 1874. Clearly, Joseph Smith, William Miller and Charles Taze Russell are false prophets. We do not know when Jesus will return. Jesus himself, when he walked among us, told us that he did not know the day or the hour. But though we do not know *when* he will return we do know *what* will happen. What Paul has to tell us is not in any way comparable to the rubbish spouted by these false prophets. What Paul describes will happen in the future is absolutely certain because, as Paul says, *"...we declare to you by a word from the Lord"* (v15a). Paul claims that the Lord himself has told him what will happen when Jesus returns. We are dealing here with the Word of God, with divine revelation. We are dealing here not with wishful thinking, not with opinions, but with certainties. What is this word from the Lord? *"...that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we*

who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (v15b-17).

The day Jesus returns is the Time to Wake Up. It is the Day of Resurrection. Because the bodily resurrection of Jesus is of such fundamental importance, the first thing Jesus will do, in gathering his people, is to wake up those Christians who are asleep, to raise dead believers to life eternal. That is the significance of the "cry of command, the voice of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God." We are dealing here with sounds that wake the dead.

As a young man I once shared housing with a fella named Steve. Steve was a very deep sleeper. It was almost impossible to wake Steve up. You could pull off his bed covers, shake him, shout in his ear, but he would still sleep on and on. But then, with all my authority, I couldn't match Jesus' cry of command. Just as Jesus' cry of command to Lazarus resulted in Lazarus waking from the sleep of death and walking out of his tomb, so Jesus will come with a cry of command that all the dead in Christ will instantaneously obey. Hibernating animals have a kind of internal clock that tells them when it is the right time to wake up. But dead Christians have no internal clock. Resurrection has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with us or how we are put together. Resurrection has all to do with Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who raises the dead and he does it with immense authority, with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel (the highest being in the universe urging us to listen to Jesus) and with the sound of the trumpet of God which, just as it caused the gathering of God's people at Mount Sinai, and as the trumpet was used to gather Israelites for the Old Testament festivals, always rallies the true people of God together.

In many ways this passage recalls what happened to Israel on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19 the Lord descends on Mount Sinai. The Israelites were told, "*When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.*" We are told that there was a thick cloud on the mountain. We are told that God called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses, representing all of God's people, went up the mountain meeting with the Lord in the cloud in the air, as it were. The coming of Jesus on the Day of Resurrection is deliberately described so as to recall what happened to Israel on Mount Sinai. But this time it will not just be a representative of the people who meets with the Lord in the cloud. The Old Testament era has been and gone. Because of all Jesus has done, and especially because of his resurrection, when the Lord descends on this last great day with a cry of command and the sound of the trumpet of God, not just a representative of God's people, but the entire congregation of God's people will ascend, just as Jesus himself ascended in the clouds, to meet the Lord, beginning with those whom Jesus raises from the dead and followed by those Christians alive at the time Jesus returns.

It was at Mount Sinai that God descended to bring life to his people, through the giving of his gracious law. But the Jewish people spurned that gift and experienced the wrath of God. However, as 1 Thessalonians 1:10 puts it, we "*wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath of God.*" When Jesus descends as the Lord descended on Mount Sinai he will truly give us as his people eternal life. We do not need to fear that there will be a rerun of Israel's tragic experience.

At Mount Sinai it was God who descended. On the Day of Resurrection it will be Jesus who descends as Lord, a clear indication that Jesus is fully God. When God descended on Mount Sinai it was with the intent that his people enjoy his presence. Their disobedience and idolatry robbed them of this privilege. However, when Jesus descends we as his people will always be with the Lord. Nothing can damage our relationship with the Lord.

3. Grounds for Encouragement

The Lord's descent on Mount Sinai did not encourage Israel. It caused them to so dread being in the Lord's presence that they asked Moses to deal directly with God and spare them this kind of a relationship with God. However, the prospect of Jesus descending on the Day of Resurrection deeply encourages us and fills us with joy. How very different our relationship with Jesus is compared to the relationship Israel had with God.

Paul speaks of us being "caught up" or "snatched" or "taken away" along with those who have been raised with the dead. Some Christians, and this view is especially favoured in the US and in Brethren and charismatic circles, take this word to indicate there will be a rapture of Christians followed by a period of great tribulation or suffering on earth. They believe that people will be riding in a bus and suddenly the Christians on the bus will vanish, or in a plane and the Christians vanish - bad news if the bus driver or pilot happens to be a Christian. In my opinion, there is no biblical foundation for this view and this passage provides absolutely no support for this theory. It is true that when the time comes for us to be with Jesus then Jesus will not muck around. When he comes to claim us he will take us to himself decisively and conclusively. That is the force of the verb used.

When Paul speaks of "the coming of the Lord" in verse 15 he uses a special word, *parousia*. When he describes us being caught up, along with all those Christians raised from the dead, to meet the Lord in the air, he has in mind the idea of a king's *parousia*, or coming. In the Greek speaking world if a king came to a city it was the custom for citizens to go out of the city, before the royal visitor arrived, to welcome him and joyfully bring him into the city. Some Christians have once again read things into the text of Scripture that are not expressed. Some Christians think that when Christians meet the Lord in the air it is so that they can accompany him back to earth. The text merely says that "*we will always be with the Lord.*" It does not say whether, having welcomed King Jesus we will accompany him to earth or to heaven. Because it speaks of Jesus "descending" many, especially American and Brethren Christians think Jesus must be coming to earth. However, look at 3:13: "*so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*" That is, Jesus will come to bring all his saints, all his people, and present them to his Father. So, Jesus descends merely to collect his people who join him in the clouds in the air precisely because we, like him, will then ascend into the presence of the Father.

To sum up, Christians grieve the death of their lost ones, but not without hope, because they know that when we die we enter a state of settled rest till Jesus returns and awakens us all. At the time something far more wonderful than what happened at Mount Sinai will occur. For the Lord Jesus will descend to give all his people new bodies. We will all be gathered to meet our great King and live in his presence for ever. One of the greatest ways in which we can encourage each other is by reminding one another how wonderful it will be when Jesus returns and we rise to meet him face to face.