

## Chapter Eleven

### 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

#### Comfort in Christ's Coming

I have been in Christian ministry for many years now. And I've officiated at a number of funerals and weddings. I love weddings! I have the best location in the ceremony. Funerals are difficult and sometimes strangely funny.

I did a grave side funeral for the mother of a young lady in our church. She was a new believer, but her family was anything but church people. I was at the grave site before the family arrived. There was a small hole in the ground because the mother had been cremated. And there was an ugly for sale sign over the hole. So I moved it and found a piece of fake grass and placed it over the hole.

The family arrived by car and walked to the grave site. It was obvious that a few of them had been drinking. I asked where the remains were. And two brothers looked at one another and one asked in a beer accent, "Where's mom?" "She's in the cooler with the beer in the trunk of the car." Then the one brother called the other an idiot and then some and they started beating on one another.

After calming them down they brought the whole cooler to the grave site and pulled mom out from the beer. Well, at this site one of the women there began to vomit. It was quite the scene! But at the end I was able to comfort the young lady from our church about what the Bible says about our hope of life after death. And that is the hope of resurrection when Christ returns.

When the apostle Paul was in Thessalonica he taught about the return of Jesus Christ. But he was only there for a short time and so there was still confusion. Some of the believers expected Christ to return soon and they were worried and concerned about believers who had died. Others thought they had missed the return of Christ, and the Day of the LORD, the time of God's wrath had come.

Many Christians today are confused about death and the return of Jesus Christ. Mark Twain once said, "The trouble with the world is not that people know too little, but that they know so many things that ain't so." So the apostle Paul

wrote to correct the error the Thessalonians had about the return of Christ. And as we read we can learn as well. So let's read what the Word of God teaches.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.  
(1 Thessalonians 4:13)

The Word of God says to us, "I do not want you to be ignorant." And sadly ignorance about the state of the dead and the return of Christ is widespread, even in Christianity. But we do not have to stay ignorant.

A common misconception that comes from pagan philosophy is that the dead are alive somewhere. This pagan philosophy, however, speculated that only certain people had an immortal soul. The Bible teaches that the soul is simply you, an alive living person. But for the most part pagan philosophy believed that death was the end. And so they grieved without hope.

How painful is a hopeless grief. How gut wrenching must be the tears of those who sob beside the grave thinking all is lost. The Word of God says to us I don't want you to be ignorant so that you grieve without hope. When someone dies we sorrow, but we are not in despair. So let's talk about death for a moment.

The Bible in 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that death is an enemy. It is not a friend that ushers us into heaven. Death came into our world when Adam sinned. It is a punishment. It robs us of our loved ones. It robs us of fellowship with God. But death is also called sleep throughout Scripture. We are often told that so and so dies and slept or rested with his or her fathers. Death, according to the Bible, is like a state of unconscious sleep. In Daniel 12 an angel spoke to the prophet about those who sleep in the dust of the earth. They will awake in the resurrection.

In Ecclesiastes 9:10 we read that there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave. Psalm 115:17 tells us that the dead do not praise God. Psalm 6:5 states in death "there is no remembrance" of God. And Psalm 146:4 declares that at death we return to the earth "in that very day" our thoughts "perish."

Let's read what Jesus said in John 11. Lazarus was very sick and his sisters, Mary and Martha sent to Jesus to come and heal their brother. But Christ did not rush to heal Lazarus and so he died. Here is what our Lord said.

These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."<sup>12</sup> Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well."<sup>13</sup> However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. (John 11:11-14)

We all know the rest of the story. Jesus wept at the grave site because death is horrible and sorrowful. But then Christ called Lazarus out of the sleep of death and into life. This is what will happen to every believer who has died. And we may cry and grieve about a loved one who has died. But we are not without hope in Christ.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14)

We do not need to be in despair about death and here is the reason why. The fact that Jesus died is indisputable. And it is also indisputable that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. And the fact that Jesus died and came back to life, an indestructible, immortal, glorified life is crucial to understanding our future. If we believe Jesus died and was raised to life then those who sleep in Jesus will be made alive again.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ

all shall be made alive.  
23 But each one in his own  
order: Christ the firstfruits,  
afterward those who are  
Christ's at His coming.  
(1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of the harvest to everlasting life. His resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of every believer. Our confidence soars above the defeat of sin at the cross, to the conquering of death by the resurrection of Christ. When Christ returns believers will gain everlasting life. But when will this happen? Let's read what our Lord said in Matthew 24.

A common belief and misconception is that our Lord can return at anytime. This is not what the Word of God teaches. In Matthew 24 Jesus talked about the last days of this age. And he spoke about the abomination of desolation or the final Antichrist, the man of sin.

During the reign of terror of the Antichrist there will be a time of great tribulation for God's people. This time of tribulation will be cut short by the return of Jesus Christ to gather and resurrect God's people. And then the Day of the LORD, the time of God's wrath on the wicked will begin. Here is what Jesus said about his return.

Immediately after the tribulation  
of those days the sun will be  
darkened, and the moon will  
not give its light; the stars will  
fall from heaven, and the  
powers of the heavens will be  
shaken. 30 Then the sign of the  
Son of Man will appear in heaven,  
and then all the tribes of the earth  
will mourn, and they will see the  
Son of Man coming on the clouds  
of heaven with power and great  
glory. 31 And He will send His  
angels with a great sound of a  
trumpet, and they will gather  
together His [d]elect from the  
four winds, from one end of  
heaven to the other.  
(Matthew 24:29-31)

Immediately after the tribulation there will be signs in the heavens showing that the Day of the LORD is near. After the tribulation and before God's wrath on the wicked, the angels will gather all of God's people, those who are alive and those who have died. They will be resurrected. This timing of "after the tribulation" never changes in the rest of the New Testament. Though there will be signs showing when Christ returns, no one knows the exact day or hour.

Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer *is* near. <sup>33</sup> So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near— at the doors!

<sup>34</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

<sup>36</sup> "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of <sup>☩</sup>heaven, but My Father only. <sup>37</sup> But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>38</sup> For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>40</sup> Then two *men* will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two *women* will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. <sup>42</sup> Watch

therefore, for you do not know  
what hour your Lord is coming.  
(Matthew 24:32-42)

Noah was rescued before God's wrath fell on the wicked. And we shall be gathered together after the tribulation and before the Day of the LORD, the time of God's wrath.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> 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 will by no means precede those who are asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout,  
(1 Thessalonians 4:13-16a)

When Christ returns living believers will have no advantage over believers who have died. And it will be the Lord Jesus Christ himself who will descend from heaven. His return will be personal and visible. In Acts 1:11 the angels told the disciples that the same Jesus they saw ascend into heaven will so come in like manner. But there will also be signs in the heavens and a trumpet blast. And the whole earth will see Christ coming in glory. This is not describing a secret and silent rapture. In Matthew 24:30 Jesus said all the earth will see him coming on the clouds.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> 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. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Some believers will be alive when Christ returns. Others will have died. But we all shall be changed.

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. <sup>51</sup> Behold, I tell you a mmystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

<sup>53</sup> For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

<sup>55</sup> "O Death, where *is* your sting? O Hades, where *is* your victory?"

<sup>56</sup> The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law.

<sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>58</sup> Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor

is not in vain in the Lord.  
(1 Corinthians 15:50-58)

We have the ultimate victory over death, because of the grace and mercy and power of God given to us in Jesus Christ. And we are to comfort one another with these words—the words of Scripture. We do not comfort one another with the lie that the dead are alive now.

The last flower on the casket is not a final goodbye. It is a gesture of love for those asleep in Christ until they awake at his return.