

Dear Fellow Redeemed by the blood of God's own Son,

All of us have lost the earthly presence of a close Christian relative or friend through death. But suppose someone told you that those who have already died in Christ will not be taken to heaven when He returns in judgment. Or suppose you had begun to believe that those dear Christians who have already died will not be raised from the dead until long after the living Christians have gone to heaven? This was the painful "**ignorance**" of the Christians in the area of Thessalonica in northern Greece around the year 52 A.D.

Because some were spreading errors about the resurrection of the dead, the Thessalonians were lacking the comfort and peace God wanted them to have. Can there be such ignorance in this modern age? Oh yes, for no matter how "smart" modern man thinks he is, we live in an increasingly confused and disbelieving world. A confused and disbelieving world can rub off on us at times, especially in regard to spiritual matters.

That's why, according to Ephesians chapter 4, our gracious Lord has given apostles, pastors and teachers to His Church – for the "**upbuilding**" of the church so that we may not be tossed back and forth by every wind of false doctrine. So, I invite you all to consider the subject that Paul presents to the Thessalonians. It's about

## **GRIEVING FOR THOSE WHO SLEEP IN JESUS.**

### **I.**

First, be careful how you grieve. Tears and sorrow at the death of our fellow believers is a natural thing, a good thing. If it is the right kind of sorrow, it reveals our love for the one who has died and shows how much we shall miss him or her. Jesus wept when He came to the tomb of Lazarus, because He loved His dear friend.

But the apostle Paul is concerned about the wrong kind of grief. He doesn't want the Thessalonians to "**sorrow as others do, who have no hope.**" Paul says, "You Christians are separate and different from the rest of mankind." The Gospel of Christ creates an invisible, spiritual body of Christ that is healthy and well in the middle of a visible, spiritually-diseased, dead and dying world! This Gospel-created difference shows itself in the way we live and speak, especially in the face of death.

Why did the heathen in Thessalonica go crazy with sorrow when their loved ones died? Why did they hire men to play mournful tunes on a horn, or women to howl and groan with great sadness? Why did they beat their chests and tear their clothing, throw dust on their heads, sit down in ashes, or even kill themselves? Why do people all over the world do similar things when their loved ones die? Because without the Gospel of Christ there is no hope in the face of death!

The very idea of a bodily resurrection from the dead is still foolishness to the world apart from Christ – or, it is only wishful thinking.

So the wife, son, daughter, or friend who is brought to the dust of death is gone forever! The unbeliever who buries his loved ones is haunted by the thought that he will never see them again! Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to really comfort an unbelieving friend or relative when their unbelieving loved one dies?

We Christians are different from the unbelievers because of the Gospel of Christ which has given us real HOPE! Therefore our grieving should not be like that of the unbelieving world. We don't want to use sentimental funeral hymns that bring more grieving tears than victory cheers! We don't want to appear to be without hope, or as if we are ignorant concerning the blessedness of those who die in the Lord Jesus.

Neither do we want to make it more difficult for our loved ones to go on after our death. For example, what kind of funeral sermon do you want for yourself? Do you want the pastor to praise you for your accomplishments, your kindness and service to others the way the world does it? Do you want your loved ones to be overcome with grief because of what they and the world have lost by your death? NO! You want their sorrow to be removed, not increased!

You want a message that speaks of your hope in the crucified and risen Savior from sin, death, and hell. You want your loved ones to share this hope with you so that they may carry with them just two thoughts as they stand over your grave: 1) My loved one is perfectly happy with the Lord Jesus in heaven; and 2) By faith in Jesus I shall be rejoined with my loved one in heaven when my Savior wills!. . .

## **II.**

So, be careful how you grieve; and remember what you believe. What do you believe in your heart, dear friends? In the unchanging Word

of Christ's evangelists and apostles God has proclaimed that **Christ was delivered up because of our offenses, and raised again because of our having been declared righteous.**" (Rom. 4:25) Now Paul says in our text: **"If we believe Jesus died and rose again (as we surely do), even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus."**

The resurrection of the Christ-believer must certainly follow the resurrection of the Christ. Does not a car follow its wheels? Where the wheels go, so goes the car that they are carrying! Are not the first-fruits of the harvest followed by the last fruits? Or, as one of our favorite Easter hymns says: "Could the Head rise and leave its members dead!" IMPOSSIBLE!

Jesus said: **"Because I live, you shall live also."** Remember what you believe about the resurrection of Christ! Remember what Jesus said to Martha before He raised Lazarus from the dead: **"I AM the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whosoever live and believes in Me shall never die."** (Jn. 11:25-26) **"Whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."** How are we to understand this when we are looking upon the lifeless bodies of our loved ones who are said to **"die in the Lord."**

Well, did not our Lord Himself reassure Jairus and his wife that their daughter was not dead, but only sleeping"? (Lk. 8:52) So also Paul says in v. 14 that, on the Last Day, God will bring with Jesus **"those who sleep in Jesus."** Notice that Paul says **"in Jesus,"** NOT in Allah, or in Buddha, or in any other belief system.

"Fallen asleep" is the Bible's favorite way of speaking of the Christian's death. My Bible has a note at the bottom of this page of Thessalonians, which says that "sleep" is a "euphemism" for death. But a "euphemism" is a word that is used to mask or cover up the harshness or terribleness of something. The word "sleep" is NOT a euphemism used by the Holy Spirit to soften death! Sleep is a literal explanation of death for the Christian!

Death is a sleep for the Christian because his death is only a temporary condition of his body. At the moment of death, a person's spirit or life-principle **"returns to God Who gave it,"** the Bible says in Ecclesiastes 12. At that moment a person passes from this created time

into the timelessness of eternity, and Judgment Day arrives.

For the Christ-believer this means that immediately after the separation of his soul from his body in time, his soul is reunited with his body in the resurrection unto life eternal. When Christians fall asleep in Jesus they not do see what is happening on earth. Neither is there a "realm of the dead" or a place where the soul "sleeps." There is simply NO TIME for any of that!

The Christian's death is also a "**sleep**" because it is a restful state. Our Christian loved ones do not now sleep IN pain, or IN the fires of purgatory, or IN the gloom of nothingness, or any such thing! Paul says they sleep IN Jesus – They lie peacefully as Jesus did in the tomb – entirely free from pain and sorrow!

And in the moment of the glorious resurrection it will seem to them and to us as if we had never been separated for any time at all! As the following verses of our text declare: **"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. 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 so we shall always be with the Lord."** (1Thess. 4:16-17) **Comfort one another with these words!** Amen.