

# 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Intro July 15, 2007 Trampling the Terror of Death

Linda Burnett was visiting her in-laws in Arkansas, and while there went to a nearby supermarket to pick up some groceries. Several people noticed her sitting in her car with the windows rolled up, her eyes closed and both hands behind the back of her head. One customer became concerned and walked over to the car. He noticed that Linda's eyes were now open, and she looked very strange. He asked her if she was okay, and Linda replied that she'd been shot in the back of the head, and had been holding her brains in for over an hour. The man called the paramedics, who broke into the car because the doors were locked and Linda refused to remove her hands from her head. When they finally got in, they found that Linda had a wad of bread dough on the back of her head. A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded from the heat, making a loud noise that sounded like a gunshot, and the wad of dough hit her in the back of her head. When she reached back to find out what it was, she felt the dough and thought it was her brains. She initially passed out, but quickly recovered and tried to hold her brains in for over an hour until someone noticed and came to her aid.

The story may sound familiar to some of you, in fact I used it in the past, but in my preparations dug deeper only to discover this is a time honored urban legend and was never published by the AP.<sup>1</sup> But as a legend, it resonates with our innate fear of death, we are terrorized with what happens when a loved one dies or we must face our demise. As Christians we struggle with what to say to a friend who loses a loved one, we stammer to speak to our own parents or children about the inevitability of our departure. Death frightens us.

We can identify with what Woody Allen said about death:

“It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

We are terrorized by transition, the separation from what we know and going to what we don't know. This fear was common in the ancient world and it remains in our time as well.

The Greek poet Theocritus said “Hopes are for the living, the dead are without hope.”

Other cultures likewise consider death as the end. Philip Yancey in his book, *Where is God When it Hurts?* describes a unique funeral custom conducted by African Muslims. Close family and friends circle the casket and quietly gaze at the corpse. No singing. No flowers. No tears.

A peppermint candy is passed to everyone. At a signal, each one puts the candy in his or her mouth. When the candy is gone, each participant is reminded that life for this person is over. They believe life simply dissolves.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout history and across cultures hopelessness is pervasive when it comes to death, that fear of dying causes so many to grasp at life, as though death renders our accomplishments as meaningless.

Believers 2000 years ago likewise felt uncertain as to what happened to loved ones at death. Paul writes to young Christians in Thessalonica to inform them so that they would have hope, removing their terror on the basis of Christ's own resurrection from the dead. It appears as though they thought Jesus was going to return so soon, that none would die, that if death was defeated, to die was a sign of being forgotten by God. So Paul comforts those remaining that God will not leave those who have trusted in Christ and have died in their tombs. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 we see that death is no longer a terror to us because Christ will raise us from the dead; he will raise us powerfully, publicly, and personally. READ

**CHRIST WILL RAISE US POWERFULLY** 4:13-15

**The power of Christ's death means we sleep**

Paul's choice of words communicates the power of what has taken place, of why the terror of death is gone. Paul speaks of death as sleep, but not because he fears death and uses a euphemism. Rather because the terror of death is taken from us, for Christ died (v14), we sleep (vv13,15).

Koimao was a common word for sleep, often used as a euphemism for death, but the Greeks and Romans saw the sleep of death as never ending. The Latin poet Catullus said: Suns may set and rise again. When once our brief light has set, one unbroken night of sleep remains.

For this reason, even if people spoke politely of death as merely sleep, they did so with inconsolable grief. Not so for believers, for while there is grief when a loved one dies, it is not for their termination, but our separation. When Paul instructs his readers that they should not fear as others do, he is not calling for a rigid stoicism, a stiff upper lip attitude toward death. Rather our grief, real as it is, is qualitatively different from others, for we

face death, fears and all, with hope. Issue is not grieving vs. non-grieving, but grieving with and without hope.

When Paul speaks of the death of believers he calls it sleep, but that term is never used of Jesus. He died, therefore we sleep. He suffered the horrors of eternal torment so that we might rest until the final resurrection. Sleep is not the absence of awareness. There is no sense here of what some call soul sleep, that is, we are unconscious in death. Rather the emphasis is on rest. This is why early Christians took the Greek word for a bedroom and applied it to the place of burial, a cemetery, a place of rest.

But we must be careful; the term is never used of those who do not know Christ, who are not united to Christ by faith. There is no rest for those whose sins are not forgiven. For them, torment, not rest, marks their time in death.

### **The power of Christ's resurrection means we will be raised**

In the same way, because Jesus rose from the dead, we will also be raised. All this is because of our union with Christ. But what will this resurrection be like? And how does it encourage us?

Paul begins with the foundation for our hope in the face of death: Christ's resurrection. Just as Jesus died and rose again, we too will be raised. Our union with Christ means that not only do we have a present spiritual resurrection, but that we have hope of a physical, material new life at the end of time. While we are not told what eternity will be like after the resurrection, we are told what our resurrection should give us hope. There is a now and a not yet to the end.

To understand what this passage refers to, we must see this connection. The event to which Paul refers is the resurrection of the dead, which we confessed earlier in the Nicene Creed.

Our resurrection to new life is through Jesus (14), our union with him, based on the past event 2000 years ago is the foretaste of what is coming in the future. We sleep because he has spared us the necessity of dying, of being cut off from the presence of God - our death has been swallowed up in his victory (1 Cor 15:54). Thus the resurrection of believers is not a separate event, but they participate in Jesus' resurrection: they will be raised up "with Jesus" (2 Cor 4:14).

For us to have hope, we must begin with Christ's resurrection. V14 makes this clear.

Paul roots our hope in the historical fact of Christ was raised from the dead. Because God acted like this in the past, we have confidence for the future. Our hope rests not on baseless speculation, nor on religious myth, but on an event in time and space.

In the ruins of ancient Rome, you can see the magnificent tombs of pagans, with gloomy inscriptions on them. One of them reads: I was not; I became; I am not; I care not. Or you can visit the murky catacombs and read glorious inscriptions. A common Christian epitaphs was In Peace, quoting Psalm 4:8: *I will both lie down in peace and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*

This is our starting point – the historical event of Christ's resurrection. The empty tomb is where we go to have hope, to find relief in grief. Certainly we miss those who have died, but for those in Christ, we have the certainty that as Christ's tomb is empty, so shall ours be when the Father will raise us who are His.

The resurrection of the dead will precede those who are alive. Paul declares this "by the word of the Lord"; he states it with authority. You will not get to heaven and wonder where your mother is, your husband, your child or friend.

## **CHRIST WILL RAISE US PUBLICALLY 4:16**

### **Our public resurrection declares God's authority**

This authoritative word (v15) gives an authoritative order, telling us that an authority comes for us. V16 makes it clear that no representative will come for this work, but the Lord himself. With emphasis, Paul makes it clear that we have a reason to hope, even in the face of death.

This is what the disciples were told in Acts 1 when Christ ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection. He was lifted up, a cloud took him out of their sight and the angels who stood with the men reminded them that he will come in the same way as he went.

His second coming will be unlike his first. No longer a helpless babe unnoticed by the world, when he returns it will be with authority, as Mark 13:24-27 tells us (read).

His first advent was hidden and secret except for a few who were privately told. His second coming will be with great fanfare. None will miss it. With majesty and power, he will come again with all those who are his. The authority of his public coming for us is seen in the terms used.

- Christ will descend with a cry of command, a military word describing what we read in John 5:28-29 as his voice raises the dead.
- The voice of the archangel, as we read a moment ago in Mark 13:26-27, will gather the elect from the four corners of the earth.
- The trumpet of God, likewise issues the call to advance, which is what we read in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. This describes the same situation, in which the dead will be raised, the dead of all the ages. To describe this situation further, Paul turns to Isaiah 25:8 as the Scripture is fulfilled. Paul's description here is the same as that seen elsewhere when he describes Christ's return. His public return, with authority, brings about the end of the age and ushers us into eternity.

### **Our public resurrection declares Christ's victory**

In the ancient world, when a king gained victory, upon his return he would receive a triumphal entry in the capital city of his country. Heralds and trumpeters would announce his arrival and the people would leave the city to meet the king with his victorious army outside the city to give him a glorious entry. After this entry, they feast to celebrate the victory. A victorious army would never silently enter the city. This is what the people of Judah blamed David for after the victory gained on Absalom. There should indeed be a glorious entry, whenever the king with his army gained victory.

Three times Paul makes it clear that Christ's coming here is with divine announcements.

Contrary to a recent and popular notion of a secret removal of God's people from the earth, this passage teaches that Christ returns but just once and then in open view. This command, voice and trumpet are not akin to a cosmic dog whistle only for believers. Christ will come for us, raising the dead first and then taken those still alive and we all will see the great consummation of the ages.

As Christ's return is public and victorious, which is designed to give hope to the grieving in our passage, we should be encouraged that there is nothing secret about Christ's return. Scripture tells us that the timing is a secret; his coming is as a thief who comes with stealth. But Christ returns but once and when he comes, it will be a surprise and known by one and all.

The encouragement is that there is nothing secret or hidden about Christ's coming. We need not read the newspapers like tealeaves or know a special Bible code to know when Christ will return. Those who have died as well as those who are still alive will know it.

### **CHRIST WILL RAISE US PERSONALLY 4:17-18**

More and more people today are resigned to the notion that when they die, that is the end of their existence. Marcus Aurelius, for example, once said, "When a man dies, all that's left is dust and ashes and bones and stench." In our day - brilliant people, successful people, scientists, theologians - many have assumed that someday they will die like a dog. Life for them has no meaning beyond the grave. Even many church members seem more tied to the grim present than to the glorious future!

Pierre and Marie Curie were the co-discoverers of radium, together receiving the Nobel prize for physics in 1903. In the book entitled *Madam Curie*, Eve Curie tells how her mother responded when her husband Pierre died in 1906. Eve says her mother clung to his body. She kissed the face of the corpse time and time again. She wrote about her deceased husband in her diary every day. One entry said, "Your coffin was closed and I could see you no more. We saw you go down into a deep hole. They filled the grave and put flowers on it. Everything is over. It's the end of everything, everything, everything!"

What terrorizes us the most in facing death is the anonymity of death, the loss of loved ones, the realization that we will be forgotten. But this passage encourages us that just as those who die will not be forgotten at the final resurrection, neither will we who are left behind. Christ's return has a very personal component, it is very applicable to each of us.

When the day comes, he will come for us. Like the bride who walks down the aisle to be joined to her beloved, she expects to see no one else, other than the groom. No man would send a delegate to stand in his place, as if he had better things to do.

What about those who, in v17 are still alive, who are left as they have not yet died? They will be caught up, harpazoo, a word in the Latin Vulgate translated as rapture. This is the passage that some believers come to speak of a secret removal of believers from the earth in preparation of a seven year tribulation. But as we've already shown this is far from secret and is not some other not a partial coming in the clouds where he whisks away the Christians, but his second coming.

The reference to the clouds reminds us of Christ's ascension. What is more, clouds throughout Scripture speak of God's glory and majesty. This is where we will meet the Lord as he makes his return to the earth. The term used for this meeting is a word used to welcome dignitary.

A delegation honored the visitor by going outside the city and meeting him and his entourage. Together the entire party would then proceed back into the city with great pomp and fanfare. The word would not make sense that we ascend and then go on to heaven, but rather, we ascend to join his processional to earth for the last judgment.

The Greek word for "meet" (*apantesis*) is used this way twice in the New Testament.

Luke used the word this way in Acts 28:14-16; the people went out to meet Paul only to return right back to Rome with him.

This passage is written for our comfort in the face of death, yet we often read it light of a contemporary theological debate. Christ's return for his people is a personal return, one which is not just a step in a series of end time events, but the culmination of the ages.

What pains us most as we face death is the idea of separation. No longer are we able to share a laugh or enjoy the tender touch of the loved one. For this reason Paul reminds us that Christ's coming, our resurrection from the dead and being joined with all those who are in Christ, that we will be with Christ for all eternity. No more separation, no more goodbyes.

People still live in the terror of death, not knowing the personal nature of Christ's resurrection. So people look to create their own hope, imagining they can communicate with those who have gone over to the other side or want to leave this world with a bang. They want a personal touch by which they will be remembered.

Gordon Bergin funeral arrangements were part of an July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration. To the delight of the crowd gathered for the show in St. Croix, Minnesota, Bergin's ashes traveled several hundred feet into the air and exploded "in a fiery display of post-mortem pyrotechnics.

"Far from being an unusual event, the president of the Pyrotechnics Guild International reports "requests for such displays has increased significantly over the last decade."

Funeral planning is beginning to rival wedding planning. Tributes, a company that provides elaborate "life celebrations" for the dearly departed, charges as much as \$200,000 for their services. These planners provide help with securing speakers, catering, creating videos, building appropriate sets for the funeral, and supplying just about any creative element the client requests.

Sally Anderson, one of the owners of Tributes, promotes her services by stating, "It's allowing us to have more of an afterlife."<sup>3</sup>

But we do not seek our greatest comfort by the efforts of our own hands, but we are to comfort each other with what Christ has done for us.

For those in Christ, we should not only be encouraged by what we see here, but are called to encourage one another with these words.

As believing parents pass away, as friends become sick and die, even as our children tragically die, the terror of death does not touch us. The tomb is empty, Christ has risen and he shall return for us. The dead will proceed and we will follow, having been taken home to be with Christ forever.

When you walk into a cemetery and consider that one day the dead shall rise from their graves, some to everlasting life and others to eternal torment, remember, those buried bodies will rise. Like seeds they are sown. Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/b/biscuithostage.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Zondervan, 1997

<sup>3</sup> "Heaven Sent: Posthumous Ride Awaits Fireworks-Loving Minister," USA Today online (7-3-05); Craig Wilson, "Planners: Hey, It's Your Funeral," USA Today online (7-5-05)