

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope. ¹⁴ Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.

¹⁵ In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I was looking at a poll of what do people think about death. 42% of people who responded were afraid or very afraid of death. That is almost half of all people in this poll are afraid of dying. If you would have had to give an answer to this question, what would you have answered? Because death is so final and there is the fear of the unknown, there might be many of us that would have to admit that death is something to fear, especially if we are talking about the death of someone we love. If you feel that way you are not alone. The Christians in the city of Thessalonica had some of those same fears.

There is an old French proverb that states “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” And Solomon wrote that there is nothing new under the Sun. That’s certainly true in this case. Like the 21st century Americans in this poll, the first century Thessalonian Christians whom Paul addresses in our text also had their thoughts on the “death and dying.” In fact, they had lots of questions along these lines and had, apparently, even received some rather troubling misinformation about the end times. So Paul instructed them – and us – through the words we have before us today.

We are in the final weeks of the Christian Church Year when God’s people customarily reflect upon the “end times.” The theme for last Sunday was Last Judgment and today’s text is really a continuation of this subject matter. Today we are going to look again at Judgment Day using the theme:

Sermon Theme: God Puts Things In Perspective

- 1. Death is put in its proper perspective**
- 2. And so is life**

There is a football game in Green Bay this afternoon against the Seattle Seahawks. Suppose I had told you that someone bought tickets for every member of the congregation. How would you feel? Wouldn’t you be excited? That’s the good news. But there is some bad news. The bus left already and

you have been left behind. Now how would you feel? Sad, right? You aren't sad for the people who got to go. They'll have a great time. You are sad because you are left behind. You are missing out on the fun.

Now I'd ask you to look at our text for today. Who are the people who are left behind? What does our text say? Look at verse 15. **"In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord ..."** Then look at verse 17. **"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air."** Who are the people **"who are left"**? It is we who are still alive. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters have fallen asleep in Christ. They have died. And we are the ones who are left behind. Keep that thought in mind as we try to see Paul's words of encouragement.

Let's set these words in their context. It appears that some of the original members of the Thessalonian church had died since the time Paul was with them. The members of the congregation were concerned that because these Christians were not going to be alive at the time of Christ's return, they were somehow going to be lost or left behind – or at the very least, miss out on something. So Paul goes to work and lays out the facts. Notice his pastoral heart. He recognizes that the pain of separation through death causes grief for both the believer and the unbeliever alike. Anyone who has lost a loved one certainly knows what Paul is talking about. But he wants to make it clear that the grief we feel at the loss of a loved one is different than that of the unbeliever, whom he refers to as those **"who have no hope."**

What a sad observation. It is indeed sad to see how the unbeliever deals with death, either his own or the death of a loved one. What is it they look forward to? What is it they cling to? What gives them hope? Sadly, the answer to all three questions is the same: Nothing. As a result, death is something to be denied and avoided – which, of course, is impossible. But that doesn't stop people from trying. We see and hear of people doing truly strange things in their quest to beat death. We hear about people who make arrangements to freeze themselves after they die with the intention of being thawed out sometime in the future when science has discovered the key to immortality. We hear about people going through extensive and expensive medical rituals in an attempt to reverse the aging process.

But there is no fountain of youth. People die. Both Christians and non-Christians. However, here's the difference: When a Christian dies, there is the sure hope that death is not the end of the line. Paul tells us why we have this sure hope: **"We believe that Jesus died and rose again."** We sang last Sunday a hymn called "This Is the Threefold Truth." It said, "This is the threefold truth on which our faith depends; And with this joyful cry worship begins and ends: Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!"

Each element in this threefold truth is vital. Jesus died with our sins upon him, suffering the penalty for our disobedience and thereby opening heaven for us. Jesus rose, showing not only that our sins have been forgiven, but also that the One who raised himself from death has the power to raise us from death. And Jesus will come again. Paul writes some similar words, **"Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus."** He believes that Jesus rose so he will; raise us from the dead. So he speaks of God bringing all believers, together with Jesus, to heaven. This is our hope. This is what we confidently wait for through faith in Jesus.

Having this hope changes the way we look at the death of a Christian. We don't have to **"grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope."** Notice that Paul doesn't say we don't have to grieve.

Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone dear to us. Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. But our grief at the death of a Christian is not a despairing, hopeless grief. It's not the grief of those who don't know what's become of their loved ones or of those who think they'll never see their loved ones again. Jesus' death and resurrection and the reality of his return mean that we can refer to death as a sleep, like Paul does here. Dying as a believer is like falling asleep because we'll wake up again. It's temporary. Death will not have the last word. God will. With a loud command he'll wake the dead on the day that Jesus returns.

And that changes things. Death is no longer the Grim Reaper or "the end of the line." But let's be honest. How many of us actually are a little but worried about death and dying? Because we are sinful, we much like the people in the polls may wonder about the hour and manner of our death. We may even have some anxiety as we speculate on the dying process. But as to death itself, we know that because of Jesus Christ it is nothing less than the door to life in heaven. Or, as Paul refers to it in our text, a sleep from which we will awaken in glory.

Paul continues to address the Thessalonians' concerns. What about those believers who are still alive at the coming of the Lord? Will they have some advantage over those who have already died? None whatsoever. One group will not receive preferential treatment over the other. He then goes on to inform them and us how it will all take place: **"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord."** In approximately six weeks we will gather together to celebrate the coming of Jesus at his birth. He came to us first as the meek and mild Babe of Bethlehem. The second time around it will be completely different. The next time the world sees Jesus he will be announced by the voice of a high ranking angel accompanied by the piercing sound of a trumpet. It will be enough to literally wake the dead. And it will take place, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, **"in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye."** Meaning, the whole process should not be thought about in terms of hours or even minutes. It will be an instantaneous event.

As to the concern of the Thessalonians for those who had preceded them in death, Paul says they will rise from their graves first and join Christ **"in the air."** Following that the Christians who remain alive at the time of the Second Coming will be **"caught up in the clouds together with them."** The emphasis Paul makes is on our togetherness with Christ. There – in heaven – in glorified resurrection bodies eternally free from the consequences of sin we will be "with the Lord forever." And for all eternity we will be Saints Triumphant.

So, how do we use this information today? What practical value does all this have for our everyday life? Recall the final words of our text. Paul tells us to **"encourage one another with these words."** This information has been given to us for our personal and inter-personal encouragement. In the time we have left, let's address this. In doing so (and in recognition of Veterans Day last Thursday), allow me to introduce a couple of Latin phrases connected with different branches of the service. The motto for the U.S. Marine Corp is Semper Fidelis, which means "always faithful." The motto for the U.S. Coast Guard is Semper Paratus, which means "always prepared." Both of these phrases find a higher application to us as Christians. In view of the end times that we live in, our lives are to be marked by faithfulness to Christ now and preparation to meet Christ in the future.

A question that is useful and worth asking ourselves periodically is this: If each of us knew we were going to die tomorrow, or if we knew for sure that Christ would be returning today (which he may), how would you use your time? What would you feel absolutely necessary to deal with? Would it be necessary for you to call somebody and seek their forgiveness for a past grievance? Or on the other hand, would it be necessary for you to grant forgiveness to someone against whom you've held a longstanding grudge? Would you need to express your love and appreciation to someone – something you've always intended to do but never gotten around to? If you knew you only had a day or two left, what would you do? How would you use your time? Those are not questions to produce guilt. Those are questions to encourage personal faithfulness and preparation. Because we don't know when the end – either personally or cosmically – will come.

How about another Latin phrase. *Carpe Diem*. That means “seize the day.” As we live out our lives in the end times it is important that we seize the opportunities Christ gives us to grow closer to him and grow stronger in him through Word and Sacrament. It is also important that we seize the opportunities he has placed before us as individuals and as a congregation to be used by him for his purposes. We need to recognize that we are in the End Times which makes us aware more than ever of the importance of seizing the day, because we don't know how many days will be left. Therefore, let us be encouraged to spend ourselves and our resources and our time wisely and generously and purposefully for things that will make an everlasting difference. As we remember those fellow Christians who have preceded us to glory, on this Saints Triumphant Sunday let us ask that God will humbly use our efforts to create more Saints Triumphant.

We began this sermon by calling attention to a poll. People are concerned about death. They are concerned about things relating to the end. God in his grace has answered those questions for us. That gives us purpose for life. Now, in the days that remain and as we await our Lord's return, let us be *Semper Fidelis, Semper Paratus*, and willing to *Carpe Diem* so others may one day join us as Saints Triumphant. Amen.