

When Fellow Christians Die

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[0 : 00] Amen. You may be seated. Kids, you're excused to your King's Kids class.! But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, sisters, about those who are asleep, Christians who have died before the coming of Jesus.

That you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not proceed 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.

[1 : 38] Therefore, encourage one another with these words. May God bless the hearing of His word. There is a very good chance that we will be attending each other's funerals.

Have you ever thought about that? You might be thinking now, Mike, you're just considering your own mortality given in your bike accident recently.

Well, there's some of that. But part of together following Jesus, we'll be walking through death together. When a fellow Christian dies, how must we respond?

Imagine a brother in Christ, Stan, from our church who dies, widowing his wife, Charlotte, of 50 plus years. She too is a Christian who loves the Lord deeply, but his death has left her grieving.

Grief is the sting of someone's absence. You attend Stan's funeral here in the sanctuary. And after the funeral, you go downstairs to the fellowship hall for a luncheon.

[2 : 55] There's a lack of chairs. So you go into the side room to find some chairs. And there you find Charlotte. You're alone with her. She's quietly weeping.

What do you do? What do you say? Oops. So sorry. And you take your leave. Or you nod and you say, Stan will be missed.

You grab some chairs. You put your hand on Charlotte's shoulder and you say, God is working all things out for the good. Now I've got to grab these chairs.

Or maybe you say something like this. You know, Charlotte, Stan is in a better place. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5.8. Which is true. What would you do if you encountered a newly minted widow in a side room after her husband's funeral?

The apostle Paul, in writing 1 Thessalonians, is writing a fledgling church. They had just been established. And this fledgling church is also a church in grieving.

[4 : 21] We pick it up in verse 13. Brothers, sisters, about those who are asleep. About those Christians who were church members of yours who have died. They've been to the funeral services of a number of their members.

And they've been thrown by it. A number of their church members have died. They're grieving.

They've been rattled. Because they don't know how to make sense of their fellow Christians who have died in Christ's return.

They don't have the information. They're lacking information. So Paul attends to it head on. In verses 13 through 18, he addresses this in three moves.

The first move is in verse 13. He addresses their hopelessly uninformed situation. Hopelessly uninformed. And then the second move, he gives hopeful instruction.

It's going to be the bulk of the sermon. And then the third move, he closes with a hope-spreading exhortation. Now here's the claim of this passage.

[5 : 36] When fellow Christians die, we encourage one another with the hope of Christ's return. Not just they're in the presence of the Lord.

But we go beyond that by pointing people, grieving brothers and sisters in Christ, to what will happen when Jesus comes back. So, let's look at this first move where Paul addresses these hopelessly uninformed Christians in verse 13.

And just to remind you, Paul loves this church. If you just flip back in your Bibles to chapter 2, verses 19 and 20, listen to what he says of this church.

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

Now those are words of affection, of delight. And this church came into being under very difficult circumstances.

[6 : 50] In fact, if you want to read about it, you can read about it at the beginning of Acts 17, where Paul, Silas, and Timothy, they got a split Philippi. They show up in Thessalonica.

They start preaching Christ, and there is this response. But there's also a response, not of faith and repentance, but of violence, and of things getting out of hand in Thessalonica.

I mean, just read. You can read about the thoroughness of their conversion, of those who heard the gospel in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Not only were they delivered from their sin, they were looking forward to Christ's return. These Christians were thoroughly, thoroughly converted.

And then, because things started getting out of hand, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, they had to cut out of Thessalonica under the cover of night.

[8 : 05] Now, could you imagine how this affected Paul? He leaves this fledgling church in the midst of very difficult circumstances. And so you can imagine, as the weeks and the months are going by, he's just wondering, what is going on in Thessalonica?

What's happening in this church? No word. So what Paul eventually does, you can see it in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2. Paul sends Timothy back to the church in Thessalonica to see what's going on. And then Timothy brings back a report. And to the great relief of everybody, he comes back with a very encouraging report. Chapter 3, verses 6 through 9.

You want to get a taste of what's going on? Look at chapter 4, verse 1. Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

The only reason why he knew that is Timothy's report. That they are following Jesus together. Look at chapter 4, verse 9. Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.

[9 : 23] They are loving each other. They are walking by faith. And Paul is like, excel still more, brothers and sisters. Press in. Keep going.

They seem to be doing really well. In chapter 5, verses 1-2. Now concerning the times and the seasons of Christ's return, brothers and sisters, you have no need to have anything written to you, for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord, the coming of Christ, will come like a thief in the night.

So they're well instructed. Look at verse 11 of chapter 5. Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. They're already talking to each other about the return of Christ.

This would have been a very encouraging report. But this church was lacking something. You pick up on it. In chapter 3, verse 10.

Paul is praying for them, as we pray most earnestly night and day, that wait, we may see you face to face, and supply what is lacking in your faith. Despite all these good things going on, Paul was aware that they were missing something.

[10 : 43] They were missing some information. And what was that information? They knew what Christ had done, death, resurrection.

They knew that Christ was coming back. But given these recent deaths of their fellow Christians, something got exposed in them. They did not know what to think about what would happen to these Christians who had died before Christ's return.

What's going to happen? They were, verse 13, uninformed. Do you see that? But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters.

That's not being misled. That's not being mistaught. That is their missing information about those who are asleep.

That little phrase, asleep, shows up a few times in this passage. We see it in verse 13, that you may not grieve as others do over those who are asleep.

[11 : 54] Look at verse 14. It shows up again. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have, say it, fallen asleep.

Look at verse 15. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have, say it, fallen asleep.

So those who have fallen asleep, who are they? Well, we're told in verse 16, Scripture interprets Scripture, right? Look at verse 16.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Those who have fallen asleep are the dead in Christ. Those Christians who have died before the coming of the Lord, that's those who have fallen asleep.

[12 : 56] So Paul not only addresses this issue, what about those who have fallen asleep? He'll get there in a second, but he also addresses the effect, the effect on this Thessalonian church of not knowing this information.

He doesn't want them to grieve like those who do not have hope, like non-Christians who do not have hope in the face of death.

He wants to put hope in their hearts. He doesn't want them to get pulled away in their hopelessness of not knowing what will happen to their Christian brothers and sisters who have died.

You see, their lack of knowing what would happen to them was tempting them to a hopelessness.

They were missing information. They were uninformed, and it was having an unhealthy effect.

They were being tempted to hopelessness. Grief is the sting of someone's absence, and it can take over.

[14 : 15] When grief is not tempered by faith, it can take over. It can rule you. And so Paul here is not forbidding grief.

What Paul is doing is he's addressing an uninformed grief that results in hopelessness. So the first move we see here is the Apostle Paul addressing these hopelessly uninformed Christians.

He knows their situation. He's opening their hearts to receive what he's about to tell them. And that's the second move. Paul gives them hopeful instruction.

He just doesn't let them kind of just wallow in the mire of not knowing. He addresses their situation with hopeful instruction.

Has anybody seen a video? This is point two. Hopeful instruction. Has anybody seen a video of like a hurricane or a tornado that sweeps in and it just picks up everything around it and hurls it wherever it may go?

[15 : 35] Just imagine like a trampoline in Oklahoma and a tornado. It just kind of scoops that baby up and hurls it. You know what I'm talking about? Have you seen those videos? Grief can be like a hurricane.

Grief can be like a tornado. It can just pick you up and hurl you. It can take over. And that's why if you have trampoline in Oklahoma you've got to anchor it down.

And that's why the apostle Paul in verses 14 through 17 gives very hopeful instruction that is anchoring this grief stricken church into God's word.

and he does this in three ways. The first way he anchors this grieving church with hopeful instruction is in verse 14.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. What we have here is called a gospel promise. It's a since then argument.

[16 : 51] Since this is true then this is true. Let me give you an example. Since Jordan Love is better than Aaron Rodgers then the Packers beat the Steelers.

Do I have an amen? It's a since then argument. Here's the since then argument in verse 14. Since Jesus died and rose.

Gospel. Since that's true in everything that comes with it too like his return since Jesus died and rose and will return someday and we believe that to be true since that's true then then in verse 14 even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Since we believe that Jesus rose from the dead and he's going to return then we also believe that when Jesus returns he's going to bring back with him those whom he died and rose for.

When he returns just as we believe the gospel we believe this promise that he's bringing these people back with him. These are those who have died and are now in God's presence.

[18:11] They are disembodied souls in the very presence of the Lord Jesus. This is what the apostle Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 5 when he talks about being absent from the body but being in the presence of the Lord or in Philippians chapter 1 where he says you know what would be better for me if I were absent you know away from my body in the presence of the Lord.

It's this idea that when a Christian dies their soul goes to be in the presence of the Lord. These disembodied souls are in the presence of the Lord now and when Jesus returns he's bringing them back with him.

And so what Paul is doing here is he's anchoring grief into God's truth a gospel promise. Here's another way to think about it.

These Thessalonians are like what's going to happen to our brothers and sisters in Christ who have died when Jesus returns? Paul's like it's not like Jesus will forget to bring those whom he's died and raised him for.

Those whom fallen asleep he's bringing them back with him. And so this this first hopeful piece of hopeful instruction is that the Apostle Paul God is grounding grief it's anchoring grief in this gospel promise.

[19:35] The second anchor is in verse 15. And it comes by way of a word from the Lord.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord. Now it's possible that this reference to a word from the Lord could be a reference to something that Jesus said that we we have no record of. It's possible that's the case. But I think it's it's much more likely that what Paul is referring to is a prophetic word that the risen Christ spoke to him or Silas another prophet New Testament prophet. And it has to do with the sequencing the procedural sequencing of Christ's return and those who have died. We see it in verse 15.

for this we declare to you by a word from the Lord that we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord in other words those who will be alive when Christ returns those of us who will see Jesus upon his return on earth we will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

[20:52] We will not go before in procedural sequence those who have died in Christ before his return. And so what we're being told here this word from the Lord is Paul saying the risen Lord told me apostolic authority we're to interpret this with Christ's full authoritative word that when Christ returns those of us who are alive at his coming we're not going to go before those who have died before his coming.

It's a very simple simple point and the specificity of it the detail of it the texture of it it anchors us in it.

It's truth for us to anchor our hearts when we are affected by the grief of someone who has died a Christian who has died this word of the Lord Paul's talking about two groups of Christians those who are alive who are left until the coming of Christ and those who have fallen asleep and he's saying here there's a sequence when Christ comes back there's a procedure now I want to point out too in 1 Corinthians 15 the parallel passage to this passage in your New Testament Paul says this in verse 51 he says behold I tell you a mystery that's revelation talk that is making something known that has been kind of not revealed this is prophetic in that sense behold I tell you a mystery we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye the last trumpet for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we who are alive at the coming of Christ shall be changed and so what we have here this word of the Lord is the second anchor by which we're being anchored to truth which gives us hope the third anchor is in verses 16 and 17 it's the third anchor of this hopeful instruction and it's actually an expansion of verse 15 but it expands it by way of description it expands it by way of prophetic vision it helps you to see something check it out for the

Lord himself will descend I hope that you're seeing that in your mind 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 when Jesus comes back it's going to be a cacophony it's going to be noisy and you might read three things there cry of command voice of an archangel sound of the trumpet but there's actually two things the cry of command is the voice of the archangel in Matthew 24 31 when Jesus talks about his return when he comes back all of his angels are going to be sent out to the four winds of the earth to gather all of his blood bought and that sending forth of angels tied to this passage will go by way of a cry of command from an archangel the only archangel named in your bible is Michael doesn't mean he's the only archangel but he's referenced in Jude 9 something is going to happen when Jesus comes back there is going to be loud noise it's going to be an announcement a cry of command and there's going to be the trumpet of God that blares not just announcing

Christ's return but announcing the resurrection of the dead it's going to be a holy cacophony of noise and you are to be visualizing this you this is a sensory experience right now we're to be anticipating this and then we learn of the order of the sequence and the dead in Christ will rise first the disembodied souls coming back with Christ they will be reunited with a resurrection body that will happen first and then verse 17 then we who are alive who are left the same language as in verse 15 we who are alive who are left will be caught up together will be raptured will be raptured with them those who have received resurrection bodies who died before the coming of the Lord will be raptured with them in the clouds just as

[26 : 20] Jesus went up Acts 1 9 he's going to come back on the clouds the son of man returning in glory to meet the Lord in the air here's what this last prophetic vision adds to all of these anchors it's a picture of a mid-air reunion all of those Christians that you miss right now who have died you will be reunited with them at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ if he comes in our lifetimes and we'll be reunited with them in the air all of us being radically transformed with resurrection bodies but there's no question the dead in Christ are raised first they have the priority they will not be forgotten and we will meet them we will meet them in the air now there's a number of different positions

Christians holds regarding the rapture of the church I personally do not believe in a secret rapture of the church I believe that when Jesus comes back he's coming back he's going to set up shop with all of his blood bought and that's why regardless of what position you hold in terms of Christ's rapturing of his church that little phrase and so we will always be with the Lord that should put great courage and joy into your heart when he comes back from then on out we together all of the blood bought who have been given resurrection bodies we will be with the Lord together in his presence so we will always be with him three anchors here's a grieving church fledgling church they're missing some information they're hopelessly uninformed and here is

Paul giving hopeful instruction to them three anchors a gospel promise Christ will not forget those who have fallen asleep he died and was raised for them there's the word from the Lord there's this procedural sequence those who are alive will not precede those who are dead and then we have this prophetic picture this vision of a mid air reunion all of that together what that does is Paul anchors grief into the truth of God's word resulting in hope hope hope in light of those Christians who have died when a fellow Christian dies we encourage one another with the hope of Christ's return did you notice how all of these anchors they have Christ's return central to them it's not just saying hey he or she is in the presence of the

Lord it's that and he's coming back and when he does we will be reunited hopelessly uninformed to this hopeful instruction point two and now Paul doesn't leave it there he closes with a hope spreading exhortation these Thessalonian Christians they are they're under duress they're being persecuted they're suffering for Christ brothers and sisters in Christ had died and likely more were to die just as likely we will be attending one another's funerals and so Paul urges these Thessalonians and God through Paul us to keep these words these grief anchoring into truth hope giving words in front of us here's the exhortation therefore encourage one another with these words encourage one another with these words speak these words brothers and sisters anchor one another's grief into the truth resulting in hope speak these words in love to one another keep speaking these words this gospel promise this since

Jesus died raised and he's coming back then he is bringing back with them those who have died in the Lord this word of the Lord this sequence and this prophetic picture of a mid-air reunion don't be like a trampoline that's not anchored picked up and hurled about by the the gales of grief don't be

like that don't grieve as though you don't have hope no God is God's not forbidding grief he's exhorting us to be anchoring one another in these words of hope these truthful words of what will happen when Christ returns here's what this means when we walk with each other through death when we attend each other's funerals when we seek to comfort the spouses of those who die it means we've got something to say not only is this deceased

[32 : 15] Christian in the presence of the Lord if we are alive when Christ returns we will be reunited with them and Christ forever it's the greater hope when we all are encouraging one another with these words 14 through 17 we build one another up in Christian hope brothers and sisters you can do!

brothers and sisters you must do this when fellow Christians die we encourage one another with the hope of Christ's return so here you are alone with Charlotte in this side room with her gently weeping what do you do well here's some suggestions you say can I give you a hug and you hug her as long as she hugs you and if you start feeling the warm wet of her tears on your neck or working through your shirt you hang on until she lets you go you hug her and then you say into her ear Charlotte if we are alive when

Christ returns we will be reunited with Stan and Jesus! and after a moment when she finally lets you go you ask Charlotte Charlotte I know we need to get back to the luncheon but would you come over for dinner in a week or two we want to be with you we want you to be with us and when Charlotte finally comes over and you have a meal together maybe you don't even talk about Stan you walk her out to her car and you just say to Charlotte I just want to remind you that if we are alive when Christ returns we will be reunited with both Stan and Jesus just want to remind you and then a year later it Stan's death anniversary because you've written it down you've remembered you reach out you reach out to

Charlotte you bring her over again you say how are you doing and you say I just want to remind you if we're alive when Jesus returns we will be reunited with both Stan and Jesus it will be good that's what we do that's how we love one another that's how we grieve with those who grieve how we comfort with the hope the unique Christian hope now this is a comfort Christians have when a fellow Christian dies but it may raise the question with you what about when a non Christian dies what then there's no way around the sadness and the sobriety of realizing that this person who has died apart from Christ's death and resurrection they will experience

God's just wrath for eternity there is no way around that you can't reduce that you can't ignore that there is heartache in this life brothers and sisters the stakes are high so we preach Christ we preach Christ at a non Christian's funeral and at a Christian's funeral and we preach Christ to those non Christians who God gives life today that's how we respond to that Jesus Christ is the difference between hope and hopelessness in the face of death but when fellow Christians die we encourage one another with the hope of Christ return let's pray together Lord

[36 : 49] Jesus we're so grateful that you are risen reigning and radiant you are being worshipped by innumerable angels and by countless brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us and who are in your presence right now Lord Jesus we look forward to the day in Revelation 21 when you come back and you wipe away every tear from our eyes Lord Jesus you have promised I am coming soon and we say back to you come Lord Jesus come would you comfort us in our grief and would you make us bold in our evangelism we pray this in your name amen holy