

# What Happens When We Die?

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of July 2000.

The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled, What Happens When We Die? And is from 1 Thessalonians 4.13-5.28 Heavenly Father, we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds, help us to understand your word, what it means to live in the light, and to look forward to your return.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're looking at those verses that Beverly read to us from 1 Thessalonians this morning on page 960.

So open your Bibles if you have one to that page. Death is a hot topic in our Western culture. There are still many people who try to ignore the universality of death, but it seems there are more and more people fascinated with life after death in recent times, though.

There's a steadily increasing number of books appearing on the bookshelves these days that deal with dying, death, and the afterlife. Books that claim to offer a glimpse of what happens after death, or that describe walking in the light.

[ 1 : 34 ] You've heard those sorts of notions talked about, haven't you? The media and the arts now regularly deal with the topic of death. Movies such as Flatliners in the recent past talk about death.

Flatliners was a movie about a group of young doctors who try to explore the other side of death to see what happens when you die, or something like that. And there are other movies which try to tell you about death in their own style, so we can come away with all these weird thinkings about what happens.

Behind all this hype and interest about death and its aftermath, in our culture lies, I suspect, an even more intense personal concern.

What will happen to me at death? What will happen to me? It should come as no surprise that people's interest in death turns out to be intensely personal, for as I just said a few moments ago, death is one of the few things universal to the human experience.

It's an age-old problem that people have been seeking answers to for as long as people can remember. Now it seems that these Thessalonian Christians had concerns and questions about death too.

[ 2 : 53 ] The general concern seems to be a question like this. What about those who have died before Jesus returns? Now if this question is right, and I have to be honest here and say that that is only speculation that that might be the question they asked, but if that is the question that they did ask, then it seems to hide a more personal question.

What will happen to me if I die before Jesus returns? Now in these verses from chapters 4 and 5, Paul now deals with the subject of death, answering their concerns about those Christians who have died before Jesus returns, and in turn, Paul deals with their own concerns, their own personal concerns about death as well.

And he begins by saying in verse 13, we do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters about those who died, so that you may not grieve as others who do have no hope.

Or another word for hope is certainty, if you like. Now Paul isn't saying that the Thessalonians shouldn't grieve about those Christians who have died, but that they should not grieve in the same way or even to the same extent as those without hope grieve.

Now sometimes we as clergy get to do funerals for people who it seems quite clear to us have not been Christians. Now I had a conversation with someone some weeks ago, and I don't know who it was.

[ 4 : 33 ] I thought it was someone else, but it wasn't. Anyway, I thought it was someone else, but it wasn't. But I'd had a conversation with someone, and they had done a funeral for a person who was an agnostic down at Springvale, at the crematorium in Springvale.

And when they did this funeral, it was done in the chapel, and the family insisted that the cross that was in the chapel be covered with a cloth. And the family member who did the eulogy, which I think was the wife, finished with the words to the effect that the person was gone.

That was about it. The person had lived his life, and now he is gone. And then she sat down. Pretty chilling, isn't it?

There was no hope. There was no Christian hope in the words that were said in that eulogy, at least to that point. In contrast, though, to a situation of no hope, a funeral for a practising Christian is one full of hope and can be a time of real witness to those who are mourning.

I have to say, I wasn't sure whether to say this or not, but having done a few funerals in the past few weeks for Christians has actually been a great joy.

[ 6 : 01 ] It's been a great privilege to be involved in it and to actually be able to offer hope to the grieving family as well as to the people who come to grieve to that situation.

There's such a contrast to those funerals you do where there isn't hope as opposed to a Christian funeral. Now, Christians and non-Christians alike will grieve at the loss of a family member or a friend.

Now, that's only natural and I think it's a healthy thing to do. But for Christians, there is this sure and certain hope beyond the physical death of a person and that gives us great hope and confidence.

So what is our hope as Christians? The answer to that is seen here in verse 14 where Paul reminds the Thessalonians what it is we believe. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For Paul, so close is the connection between Jesus and those who believe in him that belief in his resurrection, the Son of God who died, belief in his resurrection, the one who rose to life, carries with it belief in the resurrection of his followers, whether or not they have passed away.

[ 7 : 32 ] 1 Corinthians 15 says this in verse 20, it says, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who died. He's the first fruits of those who died.

Those who follow in his way will rise as well. In other words, what we're seeing here is a fundamental and decisive difference between a typical agnostic and a Christian attitude toward death.

Whereas for the agnostic, death means a permanent end to life or something like that, for the Christian, death is a transition to an even better mode of existence, and that is life in the presence of Jesus.

Paul says elsewhere in the book of Philippians, apparently at 8 o'clock I said in the book of the Philippines, but he says in the book of the Philippians, to live is Christ, to die is gain.

So Paul takes it for granted that these Thessalonian Christians, as in fact all Christians, should face death with, not with despair, as their unbelieving neighbours and people whom they are living with in the city of Thessalonica, they shouldn't face it with despair, but they should face it with a hope, a hope in what God will do based on what he has already done.

[ 8 : 53 ] Now think about it. What has God done? He sent his son, as promised in the scriptures. He's brought about a solution to death, which is the result of sin, as the Bible tells us.

And through faith and trust in his son, Jesus Christ, the son of God, we have the promise of eternal life, a life that goes on forever and ever with him in heaven.

Now the issue these Thessalonians are concerned about is those who have already died. What happens to them when they die?

Do they miss out on Jesus' return and therefore the benefits of eternal life? Do they miss out on that? Well, Paul spells that out again in verses 15 to 17 by describing what will happen to all Christians, dead or alive, when Jesus returns to earth as he's promised.

And in doing so, he answers their question as well as anyone else's concern about what happens to them if they are alive when Jesus returns. So let's look at verses 15 to 17.

[ 10 : 04 ] He says, For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord. Now it seems that Paul here has some teaching from Jesus that he's about to offer which we actually don't have.

But he's declaring the word of the Lord. I think we can trust Paul's words here. And he goes on to say that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, and the we that he talks about there, Paul doesn't necessarily expect to be alive when Christ returns.

Nevertheless, he goes on and he says that we who are alive, well nevertheless, Christians who are alive when Christ returns, will by no means precede those who have died.

I'm trying to give them some comfort here. In other words, those who have died will not miss Christ's return, nor will they be disadvantaged in any way. If anything, those who have died before Christ's return will have a slight advantage.

And he goes on, he says, For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, it is God who is in control here.

[ 11 : 12 ] The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, we don't know who the archangel is, but we're told here there's an archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise.

In Revelation, we talk about the dead in Christ rising. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, talks about the dead in Christ rising.

The dead in Christ will rise. After the dead have risen, Paul writes in verse 17, Then we who are alive, we who are left, will be caught up in the clouds.

Now the clouds, in the Bible, are full of symbolic presence, or symbolism. It symbolises God's presence. In the Exodus, when the Hebrews were wandering around the desert, God's presence was noted there with a cloud.

In the dedication of the temple, at Solomon's temple, God's presence there is noted with the symbol of the cloud. At the transfiguration, God's presence is noted with a cloud.

[ 12 : 28 ] Similarly, with Jesus' ascension in Acts 1, God's presence is noted with a cloud. So to Christians who are alive physically when Christ's return, they will be caught up together with the risen Lord to meet the Lord in the air, as he goes on to say.

And so we'll be with the Lord forever. Christians, dead or alive, will rise and be caught up there and with the Lord forever.

Now those verses are full of rich Old Testament language, trying to give us an image of the sort of emphatic victory that God will have when he returns.

The swans had an emphatic victory last night over North Melbourne, but the emphatic sort of victory that God will have when he returns is far greater than any football match.

Paul's emphasis here in these verses in 16 and 17 is not so much on the sequence or the details of his return, nor even on the direction that he will return, which so many people get caught up with and hung up about.

[ 13 : 43 ] But rather, its focus is on the outcome of his return and the result of his return. And people often, as I said, get caught up and mixed up in the detail of Jesus, how Jesus will return, and they neglect the result his return has for all who believe and trust in him as Lord.

As indeed, it will have for those who don't believe, which we'll look at in just a minute. But all who believe in Jesus, whether alive or whether they've passed away, at the time of Jesus' return, will be with the Lord forever.

Not even death, a stumbling block for these Thessalonians, for these people who have no hope, for these non-Christians in Thessalonica. not even death, for Christians, and indeed many people today, will separate us from being in God's presence.

The final destiny for all believers is resurrection life with the Lord forever. Now in sharing this information about death and the future with the Thessalonians, Paul then urges them to encourage one another with these words.

and so it ought to encourage us. Knowledge of what happens when we die, that is we have resurrection life with Jesus, and of the future, knowledge of the future, ought to shape and influence how we as Christians live in the present, live in the present, even in the presence of death.

[ 15 : 18 ] And it's on this basis that Paul goes on to encourage the Thessalonians. In view then of God's resurrection of Jesus, the death of a Christian should not be viewed as an end to life, but rather as a transition to an even better experience of living life in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King eloquently expressed this in a sermon at the funeral of four young girls who had been killed by a racist bomb in the early 60s.

He writes, or he said, I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance.

Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great, invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days.

Don't we, as Christians, have great words of truth and hope to offer to those who have no hope and no certainty about the future?

[ 16 : 49 ] Don't we have great words to offer? Now, having dealt with what happens to those who have died, those Christians who have died before Jesus returns, Paul now deals with the attitude of the living who await Christ's return.

In other words, what will happen to them? And in chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, Paul seems to be dealing with another question that may have been asked by these Thessalonians about the times and seasons that Christ will return.

Now, I'm sure he spoke about this with them in person when he was there some time prior. And here, Paul reminds them about the day of the Lord.

Again, an Old Testament expression that refers to the day when God will intervene in history to bring this present evil age to an end. And how will it happen?

Paul adds nothing more to what Jesus himself has taught about it. That is, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Have a look at Matthew chapter 24 and Luke chapter 12.

[ 18 : 03 ] The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. That is, it is an unexpected event for all people. And the unexpectedness of Christ's return for those who are unprepared will also be a time of judgment.

Now, Paul develops this in verse 3. He writes, When they say there is peace and security, in other words, when all appears well, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman and there will be no escape.

Now, when a woman goes into labour, there is nothing they can do about it except get the baby out, is there? And it is a time of suffering and agony for those who take no pain relief.

But labour pains do eventually come to an end. And eventually, assuming all has gone well, there is great joy and relief for the mother and for the father. And Paul says here of those who are unprepared, when Christ returns, that is for those who aren't Christians, there is no escape.

There is no relief. There is no joy. There is only destruction and separation from God. And that is the fate of unbelievers.

[ 19 : 28 ] The good news, though, for those who are believers is that we should not be surprised when Christ's return happens. Because Jesus himself has said that he is coming back.

He said, I am going to the father and I will come back. As to when he comes back, nobody knows the day or the hour. Not even Jesus knows the day or the hour. And this doesn't mean that as Christians we should be complacent.

Nor should we live lives that don't reflect Jesus. Lives that don't reflect Jesus are described in this passage as people who live in night or darkness.

And a characteristic of one who lives in darkness is one who is ignorant to whom Jesus is. They are drunk or they are not self-controlled.

Rather, as Christians who await the return of Jesus, we should live, as he writes on a little bit further, we should live as children of light and children of day.

[ 20 : 30 ] In John's Gospel we read that Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world. And it is his path. Jesus is the trailblazer.

He has lit up the path for us to follow and so we should follow. And as we saw last week, we should live lives that are holy and which bring honour to God and to others.

These lives of holiness and honour are lived out of grateful thanks for what Jesus has done for us because in his dying on the cross, God has brought about salvation for those who turn to him, for those who follow him.

And we should live lives as Christians that reflect Jesus every day as if every day is our last. To this end, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in verse 11 to do this as well as to continue to build one another up as in fact they are doing.

Well, just as Paul has put to rest concerns about what happens to those Christians who have died, Paul has now put to rest concerns about the return of Jesus.

[ 21 : 40 ] When Jesus returns is a secondary issue to the fact that he will one day return as he has promised. None of us know when Jesus will return but we can all be prepared for his return by following and believing and trusting in Jesus.

Now, you don't have to look too far to see people who have become consumed in times and dates about the return of Jesus. It seems that there was a problem perhaps back in Thessalonica as well.

There is no time in church history is that right? There is no time in church history that is free from people who have attempted to predict when his return will be.

And there also seems to be points throughout history that have been plagued by it more than others. For example, the year 1000 brought about turmoil, allegedly, for those people in Europe.

They thought that was the time he was going to return. In the 14th century, widespread plagues and famines led many to believe that the end was near or was about to happen.

[ 22 : 55 ] The origins of Jehovah's Witnesses and I think Seventh-day Adventists can be traced back to people in the 19th century who were setting dates for Jesus' return.

Look at all the fuss that was made about the millennium. It had its own set of date setters. Date setters that said on the 1st of January 2000, the Lord will return.

And then there is also date setters that say, well, it's actually the true millennium is the 1st of January 2001. There are websites devoted, no doubt, to the return of Jesus and what the future holds as well.

What can we learn about people who try to set dates and seasons for Jesus' return return and those who will try to do so in the future? We can learn this.

We can confidently conclude that they have no idea about the date that Jesus returns. They've all been wrong and they will always be wrong and if they ever get it right, it's just a fluke.

[ 24 : 03 ] All they are doing here is drawing attention to themselves and trying to scare people. And furthermore, it is to ignore the basic meaning of this passage which is that Christ will one day return.

We don't know when, but he will one day return. And for Christians, the day of the Lord, when he returns, is a cause of anticipation and not apprehension.

And there may be some of you that are apprehensive about Christ's return because you associate it with wrath, destruction and judgment. But for Christians, Paul emphasizes that it really ought to be a cause of anticipation.

The reason being, a few reasons, that Christians will be with the Lord forever. We enter into a relationship now with the risen Jesus when we turn, trust and follow him.

And it becomes reality either when we die or when he returns as he has promised that he will. Another cause of anticipation that ought to be for us as Christians is that even though wrath will be one aspect of the return of Jesus, God has promised those in Jesus salvation rather than wrath and so on, as verse nine points out.

[ 25 : 33 ] Now, if you look back to chapter one in verse ten, we see there that God's wrath is the very thing from which Jesus has rescued us.

So if we turn to Jesus, we will be rescued from that. The last cause, well there's probably other causes of anticipation but the last thing I've written here for us to anticipate Christ's return is seen from Romans chapter eight where Paul writes to the Roman Christians and he says these words, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we're in Christ nothing, nothing can separate us from it, from him. Whether you are alive when Jesus returns or whether you have passed away, are you prepared to meet him on that day?

Let's pray. Lord, we do look to your return where you will be seen for who you really are. Where we are feeling apprehensive about the future, may your Holy Spirit give us a sure and certain hope and peace.

We thank you for your promise that those who die knowing you are known by you. And we pray that this knowledge will turn our sorrow into joy.

[ 27 : 24 ] joy. And finally, we pray that you would restore, O Lord, the honour of your name. In works of sovereign power, come shake the earth again, that all will see and come with reverent fear to you, O living God, whose kingdom will outlast the years.

please hold refused. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.