

# When Believers Die

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[ 0 : 00 ] But I want to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to Clarence, Lyndon, Tim, and Sean before kindly carrying the preaching responsibilities for the past six weeks since my mom's passing.

I Me and my family over the past several weeks. We are grateful for your care. I was scheduled to go back to the series that we're in for the book of James. We have two more sermons in that before we finish that series.

But I felt impressed of the Lord to preach a different sermon this morning. One that I believe could be helpful to us because it's the kind of message that we need to hear in an ongoing way that teaches us how we are to respond when believers die.

As I reflect back on my mother's death, one of the things I find is that my greatest moments of grief were when I was forgetting what I should have been remembering.

And there are some things that we need to remember as believers in death when fellow believers die that will not remove the grief, but it will lessen the grief and will put hope in the grief.

[ 1 : 50 ] And since death is a reality for all of us, we live long enough, we are going to lose loved ones. And I thought this would serve us because this is the time that we want to hear a sermon like this.

In death, we don't hear a whole lot. In death, we remember faces. We hardly remember voices. Remember those we see.

And we may even remember somebody calling, but we tend not to remember what they say. And in death is not the kind of time that we want to be hearing these truths.

We want to hear these truths now, put them on the shelf of our lives, and by the grace of God, hopefully we take them down off the shelf when the time of death comes. But what we find in the passage that we are considering this morning in 1 Thessalonians 4, 13 through 18, please turn there if you have not yet done so.

What we find is that the Thessalonians were forgetting what they should have been remembering. The Thessalonians, in the midst of overwhelming grief about the death of fellow believers, were forgetting something that they should have been remembering.

[ 3 : 17 ] And the Apostle Paul writes to them in their grief. And he writes to us as well. He writes to us as people who believe in Christ and who will lose loved ones who also believe in Christ.

And so please follow along as I read 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 13 through 18. Paul writes, I 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. Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Please pray with me.

[ 5 : 10 ] Father, how grateful we are this morning to have your word. And in particular, Lord, how grateful we are to have these words.

In times of loss, when we mourn over believing loved ones. Lord, there is not one of us who is present by accident this morning.

We are here because of the sovereign will of the sovereign God who brought us to this place. And so, Lord, I pray that you would help us all to attentively listen, knowing that it's not happenstance that we're here today.

I pray for your grace and anointing to enable me to be faithful to bring your word to these who are assembled today.

[ 6 : 16 ] And again, Lord, would you cost you all of our hearts to hear and to respond to your word. Be glorified in the preaching of your word today.

We ask in Christ's name. Amen. In this passage that we just read a moment ago, in the midst of grief over brothers and sisters who had died in Christ, the Apostle Paul reminds the church of the Thessalonians of an important truth that they were forgetting.

And that truth is this. The death of believers is their temporary separation from us that will one day end with our permanent reunion with them.

That's a faithful summary of what Paul has written in these verses. The death of believers is their temporary separation from us that will one day end with our permanent reunion with them.

The Thessalonians had forgotten this truth. They were not mindful of this truth and the result was overwhelming grief. And so the Apostle Paul thought it necessary to write to them about it.

[ 7 : 46 ] But again, God's word is for us this morning because like them, we forget. And God would have us to be reminded whenever we forget.

This morning, I have two very simple truths from this passage that we need to remember when believers die. And the first truth is this. We must remember that death is a temporary separation. separation. Yet this truth when others die could easily escape us. We can be blind to it.

We can be so overwhelmed by grief that we do not remember this truth that death is a temporary separation. The Apostle Paul in caring for the Thessalonians was wise in his choice of words.

As he tried to assure them that death is a temporary separation, Paul intentionally three times chooses to refer to death as being asleep. Three times.

[ 8 : 58 ] In verses 13, 14, and 15, he refers to believers who had died as being asleep. And his point is clear.

Death is not permanent. It's not a permanent loss. And Jesus did the same thing in John 11 when he was referring to Lazarus. He said, Lazarus is asleep.

But remembering that the death of believers is a temporary separation from us is not the greatest comfort that we can have in the midst of the death of believing loved ones.

That's not the greatest comfort. The greatest comfort that we can have in the midst of death of believing loved ones is to remember that though they are separated from us, they are with the Lord. It's the greatest comfort. That is the absolute greatest comfort that we can have when we face the death of believing loved ones.

[ 10 : 03 ] Remembering, yes, they are separated from us, but they are with the Lord. Notice how Paul says this in verse 14. He writes, For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

It's easy to read over what Paul says here. But notice what he says. He says, God is going to bring them with Jesus. Why is he going to bring them with Jesus? Because they are with Jesus.

He's going to bring them with him. They are with him. Those who have fallen asleep, they are with Jesus.

Yes, their bodies are in the grave or in the sea or wherever they were deposited. But they themselves, the persons who lived in these earthly tents that we walk around in, they leave it on the earth and they go to be with the Lord.

This is the amazing, comforting truth that the Apostle Paul commends. He says, they're not lost in nothingness. They're absent from you, but they are present with the Lord.

[ 11 : 20 ] God is going to bring them with Jesus. And Jesus returns. But again, we forget this so easily in the midst of death, like the Thessalonians were forgetting.

But it's in those moments when we remember it, it brings great comfort in remembering that they are with the Lord.

I remember this would have been maybe two days after my mom's death, early one morning. I have preached at funerals, I have talked about being absent from the body, present with the Lord.

But I said to Alexei, it dawned on me for the very first time, the Bible says, believers are, when they die, they're absent from the body, present with the Lord.

My father died in 2000, absent from his body, present with the Lord. Then my mom died, absent from her body, present with the Lord. And it dawned on me, if they are present with the Lord, they are present with one another.

[ 12 : 35 ] And that brought such joy to my soul that morning as I just thought about that very practical reality that if both are with the Lord, they are with one another, and the joy of them being

together just really flooded my heart.

And you know what? As much as our loved ones love us, if they had the opportunity to return to this earth, you know what? They wouldn't come.

They wouldn't come. As much as they love us, it is better to be with the Lord. And we really, if we're thinking straight, if we're thinking clearly about life the way we should, if we're thinking clearly about being with the Lord the way we should, we should really recognize why they wouldn't want to come back.

Because this is a broken, fallen world filled with sin, filled with suffering, filled with sickness, and that's the earth that they have left, and they are now with the Lord, and so they have no desire to come back to this earth even if they wanted to do so.

Paul was saying to the Thessalonians, the fact that they are separated from you is one thing, but they are with the Lord, and that should bring you some comfort. Now, what's the basis for us believing this?

[14:07] Again, Paul tells this in verse 14, he says, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

And see, brothers and sisters, this is when our theology, our doctrine in believing in the resurrection really comes to bear and bring comfort for us.

The only basis we have to believe that our loved ones who are with the Lord will one day be brought back is the resurrection of Jesus himself.

If Jesus himself was not raised, then we would not be raised, and we couldn't expect them to be raised. What Paul says, he says, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

that's our basis for believing that when believers die, they are only temporarily separated from us. As Christ was resurrected, they too will be resurrected.

[15:24] Paul is pointing to the future resurrection in verse 14. But again, if we don't believe in Christ's resurrection, then we have no basis to believe in the resurrection of our loved ones who die in Christ.

Notice in verses 15 and 16 that Paul goes on to tell us about the certainty of the resurrection. He says it this way, for this we declare to you by a word from the Lord.

This is not some idea of Paul. This is not something you just came up with, how you may tell people some story to make them feel better. No, Paul says, what I'm telling you is 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 fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself, not going to send an angel, the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first.

In these two verses, Paul is referring to what is commonly called the rapture of the church. It's the moment in history when the Lord Jesus Christ will return as he has promised to receive to himself his redeemed people.

[16:54] And the apostle Paul is making the point that the redeemed people of God are comprised in two groups. Those who have died in the Lord and gone on and those who will be alive at the time that the Lord returns.

And he's making the point about the order in which they will be caught up with the Lord. And he makes the point that it is the dead in Christ who are going to rise first.

first. Now Paul says two very important things about believers who have died that I want us to see and not miss. The first thing he says in verse 14 again, the Lord is going to bring them with him.

And then in verse 16, he tells us that their bodies are going to be raised. So two things are happening. God is going to bring the spirits of those, the real person with him.

And their bodies, wherever they may be, in the sea, in the earth, wherever they are, they are going to resurrect. They're going to become resurrected bodies and their spirits are going to re-inhabit their bodies.

[18:09] They're going to be caught up with the Lord. Then Paul says, those who are alive, then you will meet them in the air. So they actually, the dead in Christ first, are the ones who are going to experience this amazing transformation of their bodies.

They're going to re-inhabit not the old bodies, they're going to re-inhabit resurrected bodies. This is a glorious truth, brothers and sisters.

It's a glorious truth that we can easily pass over very, very quickly. When we think of believers who have died, some of them, they left behind bodies that have been ravaged by sickness, tired, and broken, and weary from life in this fallen world, and one day, God is going to bring them back.

God is going to raise up those bodies. They will be resurrected bodies, not the old bodies they left on this earth. They'll be new bodies.

I remembered the day that we sat in the hospital and heard the news that my mother had passed. I remembered the overwhelming grief that we all experienced, those of us who were there.

[ 19 : 39 ] And I remember the nurse saying to us, she said, we're going to allow you to see your mother before she is taken away. And my head began to spin because I couldn't imagine what it was going to be like to see my mother after having heard the news that she had passed and the way I was overwhelmed by grief.

But in the province of the Lord, something happened, and the nurse came back and she said, we had an emergency, we'll come back for you when we're done. And so she left, and it was maybe about 45 minutes before she came back, and by that time, I think we had settled a little bit, and she invited us to go, two at a time, to go see my mother.

And I was still, again, bracing myself to do that. And what happened was, when I walked into that cubicle, and I saw my mother laying there, the first time, I saw a weary, tired body.

It was almost like, I remember my mother telling me about growing up on the island, how they worked, and how they worked hard, and I saw my mother work hard for many, many years. And it was almost in that moment, I saw all of the tiredness, all of the weariness laying on that bed, and I just couldn't read.

And I was content to know my mother has gone from labor to reward. She no longer has to walk in this tired body.

[ 21 : 22 ] I remember my mother saying at times, she would have been preparing to come to church. And just ailments with the hip replacement surgery that she had had, and other things going on, she had to abandon it, just because the body was just weary and tired.

But she left that body, and scripture promises, God himself promises, that one day he is going to return, he is going to bring her back, and she is going to re-inhabit a resurrected body, a new body, that is not going to know tiredness and the ravages of this sinful and broken world.

Listen to how the apostle Paul writes it in Philippians chapter 3, 20 and 21, he writes, but our citizenship, writing to believers, our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.

This is the word of God, brothers and sisters. God's God's body, the bodies that believers will get is a body that is like the Lord's glorious body.

He is going to transform it by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. That's the next event that awaits all those who have died in Christ.

[ 22 : 59 ] Christ. They're going to re-inhabit resurrected bodies that are like the Lord's glorious body, and we have the accounts of the resurrection, the kind of body that Jesus had.

And that's the kind of body that scripture says those who die in Christ will also have. And that also awaits those of us who may be alive when the Lord returns.

And this brings you to my second and final point. While the death of believers is a temporary separation from us, in verse 17 Paul tells us that the resurrection of believers will be a permanent reunion with us.

Look at how he says that in verse 17. He says, 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.

Paul is saying that believers who are alive at the Lord's return will be caught up together with resurrected believers to meet the Lord in the air.

[ 24 : 19 ] And notice the final clause in verse 17. And so we will always be with the Lord. No more death, no more separation, no more grief.

Paul's point is that death represents a temporary separation, but the resurrection of believers represents a permanent reunion that will take place with all believers, never to be separated again.

So we will always be with the Lord. And so brothers and sisters, this is our greatest hope in the midst of death when we grieve the loss of believing loved ones. It is the ultimate hope and the ultimate answer to death. And so the Apostle Paul says to us, you shouldn't grieve the way others grieve who have no hope. Because death is a temporary separation, but the resurrection will be a permanent reunion with all loved ones who have died in Christ.

[ 25 : 39 ] Now I think it's important to notice that the Apostle Paul is not trying to make a case against crying and grieving when we lose loved ones.

He was not and I certainly am not. It saddens me when I go to funerals and I hear people call them celebrations and tell the bereaved that they are to rejoice and friends, funerals are not celebrations. and the last thing we should do to those who mourn is to cause them to put on a performance, to act other than they really feel.

The Bible says death is an enemy. 1 Corinthians 15, 26, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. And so funerals and death, they are occasions for mourning, they are occasions for grieving. grieving. But the Apostle Paul says when you grieve as believers, when you grieve over dead believers, do it informed by the fact that their death is not final.

[ 26 : 48 ] Their death is but a temporary separation from you that will one day climax with a permanent reunion through the resurrection.

So we grieve but it is a hopeful grieving. We grieve but it's not an overwhelming grieving when we remember they're separated from us but they're with the Lord and one day this temporary separation is going to end and we will be together permanently.

This passage of Scripture is a well of comfort for believers. It is a well that we should come back to and we should drink from to draw comfort and to be reminded when we can easily forget these truths.

But so many believers come to this passage of Scripture and they see it primarily about studying the end times and studying when Jesus is going to come back as opposed to drawing comfort because that's the purpose that the Apostle Paul gave it.

Notice in verse 18, therefore encourage one another with these words. That's what it's there for. Listen to these words from Professor Jane Green and he insightfully wrote about this practice about misusing this particular passage in our Bibles.

[ 28 : 14 ] Here's what he writes about 1 Thessalonians 4, 13-18 in his commentary on this book. He writes, the previous passage has suffered much ill as it has been mined to provide clues concerning the timing of the rapture of the church.

Will this great event occur before the seven years of tribulation in the middle of this period or the very end? In the haste to answer this question, the real purpose of 1 Thessalonians 4, 13-18 is overlooked.

This teaching was presented to comfort those in grief by connecting the confession of the creed Jesus died and rose again with the reality of the resurrection of the dead in Christ.

This is not the stuff of speculative prophecies or bestsellers on the end times. The text is located at the funeral home, the memorial service, and the graveside.

It is placed in the hands of each believer to comfort others in their time of greatest sorrow. The decidedly bizarre pictures of airplanes dropping out of the sky and cars careening out of control as the rapture happens detract from the hope that this passage is designed to teach.

[ 29 : 41 ] Brothers and sisters, let us receive from God the comfort that he has designed that we should get out of this passage, and let us not misuse it for another purpose that God did not intend.

And so brothers and sisters, when believers die in Christ, death is a temporary separation and the resurrection will be a permanent reunion.

and as I remember these truths, our griefs won't automatically go away, but they will lessen and they will be a hopeful grief.

They will be a grief that is laced with the hope of a better future. as I studied this passage, I was aware that although it is designed to bring comfort to us when believing loved ones die, naturally it raises the issue about unbelieving loved ones.

Paul does not address it. He doesn't address it. He only addresses believing loved ones because he was addressing the Thessalonians. But yet they are in view and the sorrow of the hearts of those left behind when a loved one has died and has left no evidence that we can see that he or

she has put their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 28 ] And friends, the only thing we can do about that, the only thing we can do about that, is allow this reality to motivate our hearts to share the gospel with brothers and sisters and loved ones and friends and all those in our sphere of relationships who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let that gripping reality prod us to share the gospel. God The greater sorrow in the moment of mourning over a loved one who left no evidence of having trusted in Jesus Christ is the sorrow of realizing that we who have the gospel were not faithful to share the gospel.

That is our responsibility. Our responsibility is to be faithful to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, that he saves. That he saves to the outermost those who come to him.

And it matters not what they have done. It matters not who they are. If they put their faith in him, if they come to Christ, he receives without turning away.

For this morning, I want to end this sermon by asking a very personal question. And the question is this. Based on your spiritual condition, based on where you stand at this moment, what would be the result of your death, in particular for you to die right at this moment?

[ 33 : 08 ] Will your death result in a hopeful grief for brothers and sisters who are left behind because they believe by the evidence you have left behind, the life that you have lived, the faith you profess in Christ, that they can have assurance that you are absent from your body but present with the Lord.

And they can hold on to this truth that you are only temporarily separated from them in death. But there's coming a day when in the resurrection you will be reunited with them in all eternity.

What would it be for you? Would it be hopeful grief? Or would it be hopeless grief? I pray that all of us this morning would be able to say it would be hopeful grief.

But if you are here this morning and you know in your heart of hearts, for you it would not be hopeful grief. For you it would be grief upon grief because there is no hope for those who die outside of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The practice of churches praying for the dead is just that. It's a practice. It's not a biblical reality.

And remembering that you're not here this morning by any accident.

[ 34 : 33 ] You are here by the divine providence of the Lord who stirred your heart to be here today. I say to you, come to Jesus.

Come to the only one who can give this hope that is beyond the grave. Come to the only one who can pardon sin and reconcile us to God.

Come to Jesus. And you will find in him a Savior who is quick to pardon all of our sins no matter what they are.

This is not a subject we like to talk about. We don't like to talk about death. But friends, death is a reality and we ignore it to our own peril. We ignore it to our own peril.

Every single one of us is on a march to death if the Lord does not come sooner. We are on a road to death and every moment of every day that goes by we come that much closer to the day of our death.

[ 35 : 48 ] And the way to prepare for death is to be found in Christ. And to be found in Christ is a work that he does. He is the one who transforms us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear son.

If you have put your trust in Jesus this morning there's much to rejoice about. We can rejoice that absent from our bodies we will be present with the Lord. We can rejoice that loved ones we leave behind can mourn with hope.

If that's not your situation this morning I say to you come to the Lord Jesus. and I pray you would do that today. If you want to talk to me about this after the service if you have questions about anything I'd be happy to talk with you happy to pray with you.

But I say to you if you don't know Jesus Christ hear the word of God today come to Jesus. Put your trust in him. Let's pray. Lord thank you for the priceless promise that those who die in Christ are only temporarily separated and that one day they would be permanently reunited with those they love and with all believers.

I pray today Lord that you would cause all who have put their trust in Christ to have a blessed assurance of their salvation today. And Lord I pray that those who do not will come under the conviction of your spirit and I pray that they would come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 37 : 44 ] Would you do your work in every heart this morning we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Let's stand for our closing song. Amen.