

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

The Distant Triumph Song

1. Death is only a sleep for believers
2. The dead will rise
3. We will join in the Jesus rally

We can try to describe the feeling of standing by the coffin of a person we've loved. But words can't fully express the pain in our heart. Death rips our hearts out. It stops our lives. It brings us sadness. We lose so much when a loved one dies. We lose their companionship. We lose their encouragement. We lose their conversation. We lose all that made them the unique and special person that we loved.

If death were the end, if death were good-bye for good and forever, how terrible it would be. But in Jesus we have a promise that death is not the end for believers. And in these verses of our text today we have the vision of what we can look forward to. In these verses we hear the distant triumph song.

The Thessalonian Christians were confused about death. If Jesus said – and he did – that “whoever believes in him will never die”, what does that say about our loved ones who die before he returns? Were they not believers after all? Are they lost and gone forever? Are they going to miss out on the glory of the last day?

First of all, they needed the right perspective about death. Paul called death a sleep for the believer. *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.* He said they sleep. Not the soul. The soul goes to heaven to be with Jesus at death. Remember that Jesus told the criminal on the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43) The soul goes to heaven while the body sleeps in death. Early Christians called the places where the bodies lay *koimatarion*, from which we get the word, *cemetery*. A *koimatarion* was the barracks of the Roman soldiers, the place where they slept. They were confessing their faith that the bodies of believers were asleep in death and on the last day they would wake to life.

Imagine it's late at night. Your spouse has fallen asleep but you are having trouble getting to sleep. Sooner or later you fall asleep too. Will you see your spouse in the morning? Of course, you will when you both wake up. That is the promise God is giving us in this lesson.

Death for a Christian means falling asleep in the arms of Jesus. Children aren't afraid to fall asleep in the arms of their parents, are they? No. They prefer it. And why shouldn't they? In their parents' arms they find warmth and protection. In the same way a Christian doesn't need to be afraid of dying because it's like falling asleep in Dad's arms at grandma's house and then waking up in your warm comfy bed at home.

Why? *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.* Death comes to us all. Death is the tyrant that holds us all in fear. Why? For all have sinned and the wages of sin is death. We all sin; we all die. You will die. Whether suddenly in a car accident or quickly from a heart attack or slowly with cancer. You will die. Your loved ones will die. And you will grieve.

But grief itself is an act of faith. It's a recognition that death isn't normal and that God didn't design this world so that children should bury their parents or, more heartbreaking yet, that parents should bury their children. In Eden, marriage didn't include, “til death do us part.” Suffering and death were brought into this world through sin. When Christians grieve loss, it isn't a weakness in their faith; it's a faithful recognition that suffering and death are unnatural tragedies.

Yes, we grieve, but in our grief, we have hope. At recess, one group of boys and girls like to play football. A teacher would come out after a little while and ask, “Whose losing?” Then he would join the losing team. His appearance

changed the whole game. He could pass straighter and farther. He could run faster. He turned the losers into winners. That's what Jesus has done for us. He joined our team, became one of us, took our place in the game and suffered our loss. He died our death, our hell and rose again to prove that the game was won. That is the basis of our hope.

In baptism, God put his name on them and his stamp of approval on them. Death has become God's postbox. He drops them in the grave so that their souls are delivered to him. Therefore, we grieve with hope.

A mother whose son had just died tried to explain to her 5-year-old daughter that brother went to be with Jesus. Later the little girl heard mom crying with a friend saying, "I've lost my son, I've lost my son." The confused little girl asked, "Mommy, is somebody lost if we know where they are?" Those who have died in Jesus are not lost. We know where they are: they are with Jesus. And we know we will see them again. It is never good-bye, just "See you later."

Paul reminds us here that we are going to be with our fellow Christians in heaven. That encouragement is directed not only to our thoughts of the future but also to those of our daily lives. What are we doing to help those closest to us on their journey to heaven? That's the question we need to keep asking ourselves. What are we doing to help ourselves and those around us make the journey to heaven? How are we helping each other look forward to Jesus' return?

Here's what will happen: *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* ¹⁷ *Then we who are still 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.* The "shout" here is a battle cry, a "Charge." It is a word full of authority and urgency.

Along with the shout will be a trumpet blast. The barracks on a military post are hastily emptied when the bugler sounds the call to assembly. So it will be on that day. One command, one shout from the archangel, one blast from the trumpet and Jesus in person will come down from heaven.

Have you ever been jolted by a noise that you didn't expect? When Jesus returns, the world, including you and me, will have to drop everything we are doing. At that moment, whatever you are doing will no longer matter. All the noise of life will come to a screeching halt as the internet goes down, the cable goes down, everything goes down at the trumpet call of God.

When that trumpet sounds, the first thing to happen is that the dead will rise. Every person who has died from Abel on will rise. Every grave in every cemetery will give up those buried in them. And then the believers who are still alive when Jesus returns will be snatched up from the earth. Like a hawk snatching a mouse in its talons, we will be snatched up immediately into the air to meet Christ. Paul said it would happen in a flash, the twinkling of an eye.

When the President comes to a city, the local officials and important people all show up to greet him. They wouldn't think of not having some kind of welcome for such an important person. That is what Paul is describing here. All of us will join together to welcome Jesus as he descends in the clouds *and so we will always be with the Lord.*

Forty some years ago John Lennon wrote the song, "Imagine." Do you know it? "Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky, Imagine all the people, Living for today . . ." He dreamed of a world where we would be free from religion because, he thought, then we could all live in peace.

Well, imagine . . .

Your x-rays have just come back, and the doctor says you have a spot in your lung that indicates cancer. Imagine there's no heaven.

After 25 years of marriage, your husband says, "I don't love you anymore. I've found someone else." Imagine there's no heaven.

You have slaved to make your business go only to discover that your partner secretly stole a fortune from the company, part of which was your retirement. Imagine there's no heaven.

Your dreams have all been shattered. You're stuck in a job you hate. Your family life is depressing at best. You know you should want to go on, but you can't find a very good reason. Imagine there's no heaven.

No, don't. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. You are heaven bound because Jesus died and rose again.

Imagine there's no heaven? No. Imagine heaven. Imagine what it will be like in the presence of God. You will be surrounded by everything that is good and pure and perfect. And you will not only be able to experience that goodness, purity and perfection, but you'll be able to respond to it as God intends. That means you will be able to love God without reservation. You will be able to love people without competing or comparing. And you will have fun and joy and glory – for all eternity.

Imagine it. Believe it. Keep singing that distant triumph song.