

8. The Dead in Christ (3Q 2012—1 and 2 Thessalonians)

Biblical material: 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Acts 17:3; 1 Cor. 15:20–23, 51–58; John 5:28, 29; Rev. 20:4–6.

Quotes

- Every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection. *Arthur Schopenhauer*
- It is not easy to convey a sense of wonder, let alone resurrection wonder, to another. It's the very nature of wonder to catch us off guard, to circumvent expectations and assumptions. Wonder can't be packaged, and it can't be worked up. It requires some sense of being there and some sense of engagement. *Eugene H. Peterson*
- The resurrection completes the inauguration of God's kingdom. . . . It is the decisive event demonstrating that God's kingdom really has been launched on earth as it is in heaven. . . ."The message of Easter is that God's new world has been unveiled in Jesus Christ and that you're now invited to belong to it. *N.T. Wright*
- What we have at the moment isn't as the old liturgies used to say, 'the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead,' but a vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things may work out in the end. *N.T. Wright*
- The resurrection gives my life meaning and direction and the opportunity to start over no matter what my circumstances. *Robert Flatt*

Questions

Why did Paul have to emphasize the truth about the resurrection? What is the heart of the blessed hope? How are we truly Adventists and not Exitists? Why is hope so important, and how does it fit into the whole scheme of the great controversy? How do we encourage one another with these words?

Bible summary

1 Thess. 4: 13-18 vividly spells out the Christian hope. Firstly, you've got to *know*: this subject is crucial to an understanding of God, His plans for you, and the future. We have a *hope*. (v.13). Next, this hope is based on what we already know: Jesus death and resurrection—so we can be totally assured that we shall have a part in the resurrection when Jesus comes. The whole plan of God's saving man would fail otherwise. (v.14)

To answer the worries of the Thessalonians, Paul makes it clear that there is no special place or favoritism: those who remain and are still alive are not specially privileged—for the dead in Christ will rise first. God wants all his friends to be there together! (v.15/16)

We are caught up in the clouds to meet our gracious God in the air. What a reunion—like parted lovers we shall meet the one we love the most and greet him in fullest joy! And we shall never be parted again—we will be forever with our Lord. Not alone, but with all those who are God's friends—united with God. (v.17)

And so, we are to trust God, for he will do it. We are to encourage one another with this promise. Don't act as those who are hopeless and see no future, for our future is with the God we have got to know as our own personal friend. Now isn't that something to shout about? (v.18)

Acts 17:3 shows Paul emphasizing the resurrection. In 1 Cor. 15:20-23, 51-58, Paul tells the Corinthians that all who belong to Christ will share in this resurrection. Jesus himself speaks of the resurrection of the good and the wicked (John 5:28,29), while Rev. 20:4-6 explains the two different resurrections.

Comment

The title of this lesson really misses the point. It's not just about "the dead in Christ." It's about Jesus and his return for his friends! These words found in 1 Thess. 4:13-18 may be familiar words, but they are so important. Let's think about them:

God doesn't want us to be ignorant. He wants us to understand him and his actions as trustworthy friends. He wants an intelligent faith. What happens when people die? The Bible is completely consistent—they fall asleep. Think how much damage the Devil has done with misunderstandings and ignorance on this topic. We have a vital message here, for we do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope).

Most of all, as it says in verse 14, *we believe*. Can you say this? Because of Jesus' resurrection, we have the assurance of resurrection. Then it says, "God will bring with Jesus." Some Christians think this means that the righteous dead return with Christ from heaven. But that's not what the text means. I remember reading a scholarly article on this very verse, entitled "Which Way Are We Going?" In other words, up or down! The author pointed out that the Greek showed that we were going up, not coming down with Jesus!

Most importantly for the confused Thessalonians, those alive at Jesus' return do not precede (KJV old word "prevent") those who have fallen asleep. We shall *all* be translated and meet the Lord in the air. What a reunion that will be! What a day of rejoicing!

For who is coming? *The Lord himself*. Why? Why does Jesus come back himself? Why doesn't he just transport us to heaven? Why doesn't he send an angel to do the job? Because he wants to come personally. Like a parent coming to the school gates, he wants to personally take us home. The very action of God in coming to us shows us who he is.

Does he come quietly and secretly? No: with a shout!! A loud command. With the voice of the archangel Michael, and with the trumpet call of God. Nobody will miss it! What will be like to see the recreation of the dead in Christ, rising to meet their loving Lord?

Then "we who are alive and remain" are caught up together with them, defying gravity as we soar heavenwards to greet our Savior who has done all this so we might live with him forever. What a loving Lord! What a fantastic Friend! What a glorious God!

And so we will be with the Lord forever. That's the promise!

Ellen White Comments

The Lord is soon coming. Talk it, pray it, believe it. Make it a part of the life. {7T 237}

Our personal identity is preserved in the resurrection, though not the same particles of matter or material substance as went into the grave... The spirit, the character of man, is returned to God, there to be preserved. In the resurrection every man will have his own character. {Mar 301}

Prepared March 25, 2012 © Jonathan Gallagher 2012