

“The Comfort of the Resurrection”
(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

I think it’s needless to say that we have all been affected in some way by the passing of our dear sister Colleen. Some of us were closer to her than others, but all of us knew her and loved her, and we all miss her. I’m also sure that in one way or another we have all been thinking about where she is now, and what she must be doing. It’s only natural that we would, especially since one day we will go through exactly the same thing. It’s inevitable that one day we will die. But what does the Bible say will happen to the believer after death?

Well thankfully we aren’t the first group of Christians who have ever thought about this. As a matter of fact, the Lord made sure that other churches would be concerned about it, during the time when He was still giving His precious revelation, so that we would know what would happen next: especially the churches at Thessalonica and Corinth. From what Paul writes to the Thessalonians here, it appears as though they thought the believers who died prior to the Lord’s Second Coming had somehow perished and were lost forever. He says in verse 13, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.” Apparently, their ignorance led them to suffer in the same way those do who have no hope of life after death. They didn’t know what happened to their loved ones in Christ after they died. This appears to be the same reason Paul wrote his fifteenth chapter in 1 Corinthians regarding the resurrection. There were some there who were claiming that there was no resurrection of the dead (v. 12). If that was true, “Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (v. 18). What a miserable prospect. But to correct this false and depressing belief, Paul tells them about the resurrection of Christ. He writes to the Corinthians, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (v. 20). And he writes to the Thessalonians, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thes. 4:14). Why did Jesus die, after all? As we saw this morning, it was to take away the guilt of our sin and to free us from the just punishment of our sins. And why was Jesus raised from the dead? It was to overcome the grave for us, to guarantee our resurrection. What Jesus did, He did for us. His resurrection guarantees our resurrection. It was this that Paul needed to tell them so that they wouldn’t grieve, as the rest do who don’t have this hope. Now notice that he didn’t say this truth would take away all of their grief. It still hurts when you lose someone you care deeply about. But it doesn’t hurt as much when you know that you will see them again, and that in the meantime, they are very happy. This is what I want us to consider this evening from our passage. As Christians we should be comforted over the loss of our loved ones in the Lord because the resurrection of Christ guarantees that the grave will not have the final victory over them. Now to experience this comfort, we need to see two things: 1) First, even though the resurrection doesn’t guarantee that those close to us won’t die, it does guarantee that they will ultimately overcome death, and 2) that the resurrection also assures us that when our loved ones in Christ die, they immediately go to be with Him in heaven.

First, and of course most painfully obvious, the resurrection does not guarantee that our loved ones, won't die. The Christians at Thessalonica were grieving the loss of their loved ones in Christ. When Jesus told Martha in John 11:26, "Everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die," He wasn't referring to physical death. With only two exceptions, everyone who has ever been born has had to die. It is one of the consequences of the Fall. Our bodies grow old or get sick or become injured, and we die. It has been argued that even those two exceptions – Enoch and Elijah – still died. Even those who will one day be raptured by the Lord at His return will die some kind of death. The kind of life they were living will cease, and they will begin a new kind of life. Death is a part of life. It is inevitable. Even Jesus had to die, in order to ultimately overcome its effects on us. One day our souls will be separated from our bodies. That's the bad news.

But the good news is that the resurrection of Christ guarantees that it will not continue forever. It guarantees that one day we will overcome death. Even though we will die, our bodies will not remain in the grave. Far from the worst being true, as the Thessalonians suspected, that those who had fallen asleep in Christ had perished; when Christ returns on that day "the dead in Christ shall rise first" (v. 16). Their bodies will be raised from the dust, and reunited with their souls, and they shall go up to meet the Lord as He is descending. Once this has taken place, then "We who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (v. 17). Paul appears to be saying that the whole church will congregate in the clouds – the resurrected saints first and then those who were translated – and then we will all meet the Lord together as He descends for judgment. That will be a glorious day when we are all reunited and when we finally get to see the One who died for our souls face to face – the Lord Jesus Christ. You can see what a comfort this is to us. Far from losing our loved ones in Christ forever, we will gain them forever, along with Christ. We haven't lost our sister Colleen. Her body won't remain in the dust of the ground. Our Lord Jesus Christ is coming again one day to raise it up again, to transform it into His own glorious likeness, to reunite her soul with it, and to take her to live with Him forever in heaven. The resurrection doesn't guarantee that we won't die, but it does guarantee that one day we will overcome death. This alone brings a tremendous amount of comfort to us in our grief.

But there is one more thing in this passage that we need to see, and that is where the souls of our loved ones are after their death and before the resurrection – they are with Christ. Notice that the saints are said to "have fallen asleep in Jesus" (v. 14). Notice also that it is these that "God will bring with Him [that is, Jesus]," when Jesus returns. When a saint dies, as I said this morning, he doesn't stop living, but only moves his residence from earth to heaven. He goes to be with Christ. We might say that far from dying, he actually begins to live for the first time in his life. The Christian doesn't enter into something called "soul sleep." The soul is not still in union with the body, only in an unconscious state. If that were the case, then how could God be said to bring those who had fallen asleep in Jesus with Him at His Second Coming, when at the same time He is coming to raise their dead bodies from the ground? No, their souls are very much awake and very active after death. They are with the Lord. The author to the Hebrews says that they are "the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23). They are living on Mount Zion, in heaven, in the presence of the Lord. They not only see the One who died

for their souls, but they also see God, face to face. They don't see Him as a man sees Him, since they no longer have their bodily eyes, but they see Him as the angels see Him, through the eyes of their souls. And how do the saints feel about this? Are they happy to be there? You had better believe they are. Far from being sad or grieved at leaving behind the world and their loved ones, they are perfectly happy for the first time in their lives. Why? It's because everything that they enjoyed the most on this earth, they now have a full portion of in heaven. Jonathan Edwards wrote this about the death of the saints in his personal notebook, "When a saint dies, he has no cause at all to grieve because he leaves his friends and relations whom he dearly loves. For he does not properly leave them, he enjoys them still in Christ, because everything that they [the saints] love in them, and love them for, is in Christ in an infinite degree, whether it be nearness of relation, or any perfection and good received, or love in us, or a likeness in dispositions, or whatever is a rational ground of love." What he was saying was that whatever is down here below in our loved ones that is worthy of our love, that we love them for, is in it's infinite perfection in Christ. How can the saint who sees Christ grieve, when everything he really loves is standing right in front of him? How can he be anything but perfectly happy? The point is they can't. They are perfectly happy and perfectly content. There is nothing you could use to tempt them or to bribe them to return to earth, even if that was possible. They now have everything they have ever wanted or would ever want to have. They are perfectly blessed. They are as full of the love and joy of the Lord as they can possibly be.

Brethren, what this means is that our sister Colleen has never been happier. What she is experiencing now is far more glorious and wonderful than anything she has ever experienced on earth, even in the days of her best health. At most she had on earth only a glimpse of the heavenly glory that awaited her in heaven. She had just the down payment of heavenly joy which the Spirit gives. Now she has it in its fullness. And if this is true of her compared to the days of her health, how much more true is it compared to the days of her sickness. We don't need to grieve for our sister Colleen, but for ourselves. We're the ones still down here below, struggling with our sins and with the sins of those around us. We're the ones still suffering sickness and loss. We're the ones still laboring and toiling to provide for our needs. But Colleen is free from sin, free from sickness, free from care, and full of everlasting joy in the Holy Spirit. May the Lord use these words to comfort our hearts this evening, so that we would not grieve as the rest who have no hope. Yes, we do miss our sister, but it will be only a very short time before we see her again. So don't despair, but continue to follow Jesus to the end of your pilgrimage here, so that you too might enter into that realm of eternal joy. Amen.