

A Reunion of the Faithful

Call to Worship: Revelation 19:11-16

Hymn #168- *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

1st Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15

Hymn #147- *O Come, O Come, Emanuel*

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Hymn #727- *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder*

Introduction:

One of the most difficult realities, which all people must face in life, is the loss of loved ones. And while dealing with the loss of an unsaved loved one can seem unbearable, even parting with a loved one, who is a believer, can be painful, simply for the fact that you will not see them again on this side of glory. And if that redeemed loved one happened to be killed/martyred for his/her faith, the pain would probably be intensified, when pondering the fact that their precious lives were unexpectedly and unrighteously cut short, at the hands of the ungodly.

It is very likely that this was the case for some in Thessalonica, as they were facing ongoing, intense persecution, and in light of the Apostle's relevant words of encouragement, given here in our main text for this morning. Whatever the case might be, this morning, we will ponder these very encouraging words, which offer great hope and encouragement to those, who have lost redeemed loved ones to the unnatural, separation of death.

I. A Reunion of the Faithful

Paul begins by stating that he doesn't want the Thessalonians to be ignorant, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest they sorrow as others who have no hope. He wants them to understand; to be certain of significant facts that relate to the present and future condition of those who have died in Christ. And right off the bat, we can make two important observations about this statement, before moving even a step further:

1) The Apostle labels those who have died in Christ, as those who have "fallen asleep." And this language is used in other places in the New Testament, to describe those who have died in Christ. And the language, in itself, is meant to convey a significant fact about the death of Christians. And what is that fact? That in truth, they have not died in any permanent sense,

whatsoever. Their bodies "sleep," as it were. Death may seem to have prevailed for a time, but in reality, they will have the last laugh and ultimate victory.

Now, it's important to recognize, brethren, that this is in no way affirming the heretical doctrine of "soul sleep." Paul is not speaking about the unseen reality of the soul, which is very well alive and awake, and in the presence of Christ ("To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord"-- 1 Cor. 15. "Today, you will be with me in paradise."). Rather, it speaks with reference to the visible substance of the body. The body sleeps now, until it is awakened again at the return of Christ, when it will be perfectly glorified and reunited to the soul again. You see, death, for the Christian, is merely a separation of the soul from the body, for a limited time, until the return of Christ. And so, for now, the body is buried, and the body sleeps and deteriorates. But God will raise it up, even as He raised Christ up, as we will see in a few moments. For now, simply recognize that the whole concept of having "fallen asleep," which Paul uses here, in itself, conveys the idea of what Paul will be seeking to get across in the whole of this passage, namely, that death for the Christian is not the end. It is temporary. It is a temporal state of sleep for the body, which assumes that at some point, it will awaken again.

2) Paul's opening statement here, also presumes that there are two types of sorrows, a healthy, natural sorrow, and an unhealthy, uninformed, unnatural sorrow. "I don't want you to be ignorant (uninformed) about something concerning those who have fallen sleep, lest you sorrow as others do, who have no hope."

The very clear implication here is that there is a legitimate, justified sorrow, which Christians can and ought to have, even when they lose a Christian loved one. It's okay and natural to weep and to grieve when loved ones die. For one, you will certainly miss them in this life. You recognize that you will part for a time. And secondly, death is itself unnatural. There is nothing beautiful or enjoyable about the whole notion of death, itself. Death is a consequence of the fall. It is a terrible reality, and even though it also serves as a portal unto our perfect sanctification in Christ, the portal itself is nothing to rejoice over. And so, there is a healthy place for sorrow and mourning, even as all Israel mourned over the loss of the godly Patriarchs and over all who passed on into eternity. Indeed, Jesus Himself, wept with the mourners, who mourned over the death of Lazarus, and that, just before He would raise Lazarus up!

And so, the issue is not sorrow or mourning here. It is a sorrow and mourning "like others who have no hope." It is a hopeless, crippling, despairing sorrow; a sorrow like unto the world, which sees this world as everything, and therefore, death as a permanent parting from loved ones. It is a hopeless sorrow, that doesn't see beyond this life, and takes no account of the Gospel and the power of God exercised by means of all that has been accomplished in the Christ of the Gospel. And so, that is what Paul is concerned about here. He wants to remind the Thessalonians of the eternal benefits that are theirs, by way of the Gospel, which they have embraced, and which has brought them to embrace the very sufferings that have separated them from some of their loved ones. The investment has been made and it will bring its full reward, in due time.

And so, right from the outset, these two assumptions can be brought out of what Paul states in verse 13. And then, he elaborates; he opens this up further with the detailed confirmation and description of why this is so. The Thessalonians might ask, "Why should we not mourn as those who have no hope, Paul? And so, Paul elaborates, beginning in verse 14,

"FOR if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus."

Paul gives the Thessalonians a sure, rock solid reference point here, doesn't he? He points them to Christ, as the reference point for their hope, concerning all who sleep in Jesus (that is, concerning all who have died, united to Jesus by faith). "You see," Paul states, "If, in the very Gospel, which you have embraced with a settled conviction, and which is the provocation for the present persecutions and tribulations you are facing; if, in this very Gospel, you have embraced a Christ, who has Himself died, and yet, has risen again, be certain, that all who sleep in this Jesus, will return with Him when He comes!" You see, Paul brings the glorious "tie-in," to the forefront of the Thessalonians. When you rejoice in the victory of Jesus, who died and was raised again on behalf of sinners, don't lose sight of the "tie-in," which all of His people have, to His death and resurrection. Spiritually, we who are in Christ, have already died and were raised again, and this is pictured in our baptism. But, don't forget the physical connection as well. Christ was raised in a physical body, as the first fruits of a large, large, harvest! All, who sleep in Jesus, having been united to Him by faith, will also return with Him, and in doing

so, the great resurrection of all bodies will take place. When Christ returns, He will come with them, and He will usher them unto their final, glorious resurrection, bringing about the ultimate and complete defeat of death, itself. Such is the perfection and completeness of Christ's victory on the cross!

Paul elaborates further toward this end in verses 15-17, "FOR this we say to you by the Word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep." ["Those who are alive when the Lord Jesus Christ returns, will not enter into their final state of glory before those who have fallen asleep."].

Again, the emphasis here is on the bodily resurrection and the glorification of the body into its perfect and completed state. And so, even though there will be some who are still living in the body, when Christ returns, they will not precede those whose bodies are sleeping, in obtaining that new glorified body. They will come into that final state of glory together.

Paul continues, "FOR the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first."

The Lord will return, and everyone will know it. It will be unto the immediate judgment of the living unbelievers, and a calling together of both sleeping and presently living believers. The trumpet serves both purposes. It pronounces final judgment on the world, and calls together all of God's elect, to reunite with Christ. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Those who have fallen asleep, will awaken. That is, there already awakened souls will be reunited to their sleeping bodies, and they will rise in their bodies...a complete man, perfected in every way, in Christ!

Continuing on, into verse 17a, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Those who are alive already, having their bodies already, will yet be changed at the same time. They will be transformed. Their decaying, wearing, pain stricken, broken bodies will be made perfect and complete, and they will join the others (those who were raised up) in the air, with Christ! There will be a glorious, bodily reunion of the faithful, at the return of Christ! [Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 again].

And best of all, Paul adds, in verse 17b of our text, "And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

What the disciples mourned over, when Christ had told them that He must leave them for a time, here, meets its joyous conclusion. He brings all of His people together, redeemed to the full in their glorified bodies, and He brings them home to their mansions in glory, where they will be with Him forever! And God will be their God, and they will be His people!

And so, Paul ends chapter four with the glorious charge, "Therefore (these things most certainly being the case---read vs. 15a), comfort one another with these words." Carry the bigger picture into your present, temporal, state of sorrow, suffering and mourning, and comfort each other with that reality. Make it your regular practice to tenderly and lovingly remind each other of these things, so that you do not fall into a hopeless state of despair, throughout these times of suffering, especially at the loss of loved ones.

II. Closing Thoughts and Applications

Having worked through our main text for this morning, brethren, let us now conclude our time, by considering a few, relevant, closing thoughts and applications:

1) Recognize the common reference point, which will help carry us through all of our sufferings, brethren, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself. Whether it's daily trials, deep suffering of any kind (physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological...etc), loss of redeemed loved ones or even the threat of losing our own lives for that matter, we can always stop and gaze upon that one glorious reference point, which gives us a rock solid hope that will keep us from despair. We may suffer, and we may experience great sorrows, but what keeps us getting out of bed each day; what keeps us trudging forward in the work of the kingdom, is the reality of our union with Christ. "Because He lives, we can face tomorrow! Because He lives, all fear is gone! Because we know who holds the future, life is worth the living, just because He lives!" Because He lives, we will live also...forever! We serve a risen Savior, and since death could not keep Him (who bore our sins) down, it cannot and will not keep us down! We will have the final victory! Joy; eternal joy will be our ultimate end, no matter what happens in this life! Remind yourself of this, daily. In the busyness of life, just stop...even for a few moments, and say, "My Savior died and

rose again! And therefore, I will be with Him soon...and that, forever and ever and ever!" And nothing whatsoever can ever change that! Death itself has died, in the death of Christ! Let us rejoice in this, and let us comfort one another with these truths!

2) Brethren, we have lost loved ones in this church, and we have lost loved ones in Christ. Certainly, we miss them. But understand two things. Remind yourself, regularly, of these two things. First, their souls have entered into the joy of their Lord. Every moment that passes, is a moment of inexpressible joy for them. As you remember them in their former suffering, remind yourself of their present, ongoing joy!

And secondly, recognize that you will see them again. And you will be changed forever, with them. You last saw each other in these dying, broken bodies, and you will have the blessed joy of seeing them again, in unbreakable, non-decomposing, glorified bodies! It's texts like this, brethren, that convince me all the more, that, while we will not favor them over others, we will see and recognize and rejoice in, those redeemed loved ones, whom we have parted with on this side of the grave. Is that not one of the great encouragements of this passage? "Don't be given over to a hopeless sorrow, because you will meet again, and you will one day be perfected together in the presence of Christ, whom we all will be with forever!

3) See the urgency, brethren, of striving to win our loved ones to Christ. There is nothing wrong with saying, "Mom, dad, bro, sis, son, daughter... I know, and am fully convinced of all that I am and will become in Christ, and yet, I grieve. Because I know that you still do not believe in truth. I want to see you and to rejoice with you, beyond the grave, forever! And because I love you, I plead with you, be reconciled to God, in Jesus Christ!

4) Oh unbelieving friend; some of you are in that very dreadful condition, as I speak right now. You enjoy the life that God has freely granted you, and yet, you enjoy it, as His enemy. And when you die, your death is final! Your body does not sleep in any peaceful sense. Rather, it will be joined to your soul again, as well, but only to embrace its eternal agony, at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is as close to heaven as you will ever get, if you die in your sins. Imagine that...you will never know the rest that is granted only to those, who find it in the risen Christ. When you die, it will be the beginning of an eternity of relentless torment.

Will you not, this day; here and now, flee to Christ by faith? Will you not, at this very moment, call upon the Lord in prayer, repenting of your sins, while grasping the hem of Christ's garment, as it were, by faith? Please, unbeliever, be saved, now, before it is too late! Join the city of the redeemed ones, who have found forgiveness and reconciliation with God; who have received full pardon, in Christ! Don't put it off! Today is the day of salvation! Not when you get older, not another day, not some day, not tomorrow..."Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." Increase our joy, by being saved, right here and now. [Speak with someone, if you have any questions or concerns...etc].

Amen!!!

Benediction: Revelation 21:1-8