

The Waking of the Dead in Christ

By Rev. Joe Holstege

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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Grace Protestant Reformed Church

O-11225 8th Ave NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49534

Website: www.graceprc.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/graceprc

Our scripture reading tonight is from the book of 1 Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians 4. We often like to do on Easter is to preach on the historical account of the resurrection of Jesus in the morning, and then in the evening to see what that means for us, if Christ is risen then what is the implication for all those who are in Christ, and that brings us to the topic of heaven and the resurrection of all who belong to Christ at the end, and that is the topic of the text that I will call your attention to which is verses 13 through 18. So we're not going to read that twice, we're just going to read that the one time so pay attention to verses 13 to the end of the chapter but let's read this chapter from the word of God. 1 Thessalonians 4,

1 Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. 2 For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: 4 That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; 5 Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: 6 That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. 7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. 8 He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. 9 But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. 10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; 11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; 12 That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing.

Now the rest of the chapter is the text tonight,

13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. 16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God is forever.

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, anyone who has ever seen a dead body knows the difference between somebody who is asleep and somebody who is dead. You do not have to take a dead person by the shoulders and shake him in order to know that he's not going to wake up; you can tell just by looking at the stillness and the hollowness in the face. It's quite amazing, then, that the word of God says to us tonight of the Christian who dies that he is only sleeping.

It's interesting that our word "cemetery" comes from a Latin word that means "dormitory." The Christians long ago who called the burial yard a cemetery were probably looking at the text that we have read tonight which speaks of the dead as those who sleep in Jesus, and the wonderful thing about sleep, of course, is that after a while you wake up and you wake up not only but you wake up refreshed and renewed and ready for a new day, and that is the idea behind the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead on the last day. When Jesus comes to raise his people from the dead, he will come simply to wake those who are sleeping. Whether that sleeping was for a thousand years or whether that sleeping was only for five minutes, the important thing is they sleep in Jesus and if they are sleeping in Jesus then they will wake up.

So I call your attention tonight to "The Waking of the Dead in Christ," and that's the theme. First, we will consider the event, this is an event that has not happened yet, it is a future event that the apostles describes in this text at the end of the world. Secondly, we will note what that event or how that event comforts us today, and then finally the ground of that comfort or what that comfort is based on. The waking of the dead in Christ: the event, the comfort, and the ground.

The text views this event from the point of view of the church still living on earth at the last day. That's clear in verse 15, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." And verse 17 also speaks of, "we which are alive and remain." Paul includes himself among those who are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord. He says "we." Obviously Paul is long dead and gone since he wrote those words so Paul will not personally be among those who are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord but since Paul was still living when he wrote those words and since he did not know exactly when the Lord would return he says "we," but his point is about the church that is still alive and

still remaining when the Lord comes on the last day. Perhaps that's you. Perhaps that's our children. We don't know.

Those Christians who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will have witnessed some very terrible and difficult things. They will have heard of wars and rumors of wars. They will have experienced famines and pestilences and other troubles and disasters. They will have heard the message of the false prophets and the false christs and seen their lying wonders that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 24. They will have seen the Antichrist rise and the whole world brought under his seducing power. They will have seen the blood of the martyrs shed for Jesus' sake. They, themselves, those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will in all likelihood be a small and hunted minority, a few scatterings of God's people left after the institutional church is largely done away with. When you remember that in Noah's day there were only eight souls remaining, that gives you an idea of how few they will be who remain in our life at the coming of the Lord.

So don't imagine that it will be a walk in the park for those who remain until the end. When I was a child and maybe children sitting here today might get the idea that it would be great to be among those Christians who are alive when Jesus returns because, well, if I'm alive when Jesus returns, then that means that I don't ever have to die and that's true, physically those who are alive at the coming of the Lord will never die and will never be buried, nevertheless those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will pass through the darkest part of the valley of the shadow of death. They will live right under the shadow of the Antichrist himself. They will be hated. They will be dismissed. They will be marginalized. They will be cast aside as the lowest of humanity. They will see their brothers and their sisters put to death, or worse than that, they will see those who were with them who they thought were brothers and sisters leaving the church, becoming enemies of the church who follow the lies of Antichrist rather than the truth of God, all of which will be very painful. So, yes, those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will not physically die but they more than anybody else will understand what Jesus was talking about when he said this in Matthew 16:24, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." It will be a dark time yet this will be the incentive for them, this will be the hope that will enable them to endure through that darkest part of night. They will have the amazing privilege to witness that event that the text speaks of which is the climax of God's purpose in time and history when the Lord returns.

So there will come a day when we who are alive and remain will hear a shout. Paul speaks of that in verse 16 of our text. There will be a shout and this will be a shout unlike any shout you have ever heard. This will be a shout that reverberates throughout all of creation. Not a single ear on the earth will fail to hear the sound of this shout at this time. It will be a shout that makes the stars fall from heaven. It will be a shout that makes the moon turn to blood. It will be a shout that breaks down the laws of physics so that the heavens are rent like a garment.

Going along with this shout, there will be the sound of the voice of the archangel, the apostle says. The archangel means the chief angel. There's one individual in scripture who is described as an archangel whose name is Michael. There may be other archangels but Michael is the only one who is mentioned by name. So Michael seems to be the chief of all of the archangels and therefore the chief of all of the angels. So adding to this great shout will be the sound of Michael and his angels and one imagines behind Michael the sound of all of the angels who are at his command.

Then in addition to the shout and the sound of the archangel there will be the sound of the trump of God. Don't think of a brass cornet or trumpet like you see in a marching band, think of the deep and guttural sound of the Middle Eastern shofar made of the ram's horn, the kind of trumpet that Gideon and his 300 soldiers would have blown on in the battle against the Midianites. It might be interesting for your children to look that up on YouTube and listen to the sound of the shofar, that's the trump in the scripture. Here the trump is not so much a call to battle like it was when Gideon and the 300 soldiers blew the trumpets going into battle against the Midianites, but here the sound of the trump is the sound of a victory already won. I've never been in a battle. I imagine it was exhilarating to rush into battle at the sound of the trumpet, but if that was exhilarating to rush into battle with the sound of the trumpet, how much better and how much more wonderful is the sound of that trumpet that announces the battle is over, "The victory is won. Lay down your arms. It's time to stop the fight. It's time to celebrate." That's the kind of trumpet that's going to sound on that day.

Amidst the shouting of Michael and the archangel and all of his host of angels, well, neither the trumpet nor the shout of the archangel will outstrip the sound of that initial shout for that initial shout is the shout that comes out of the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. That's what verse 16 says, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God." The shout of the Lord is the focus and it is a shout of command. It is a shout that comes out with a ring and the note of authority. Think of a captain amidst the battle shouting orders to his troops above the other noise of the battle so that they can hear his voice.

Now when you hear a great noise like that, you want to know where it came from so those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will look for the source of the shout and the sound of the trumpet and the sound of the archangel, and that will make them look up and when they look up what will they find? They will see the Lord Jesus Christ coming. He will come down from heaven. He will descend as verse 16 states. Remember at Jesus' ascension the disciples were looking up at the clouds watching because they just saw Jesus disappear into the heavens, and the angels then were standing beside them and they said, "Why are you looking into the heaven? Don't you know he's going to come back one day just like he came?" That's what this is describing, the return of the Lord in the clouds, just like he went up in the clouds so he shall return in the clouds.

And as a result of that coming down from heaven in the clouds, he will be seen visibly and bodily. It will not be an invisible or secret return of Jesus as dispensationalism

teaches when it talks about a secret rapture, but it will be a public visible event, a public visible return of the King. What those who are alive and remain will see, along with everybody else who's in the world that day, all the wicked and the Antichrist himself, what they will all see is the glorified Son of Man Jesus Christ above them in the heavens coming down upon them to meet them in the earth, and behind him will be ten thousands of his saints. We read of that in Jude's epistle. In verse 14 of Jude it says speaking of Enoch, "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment."

The Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints and that's not just talking about the angelic saints such as Michael and his angels but that's talking about the saints who lived and died on the earth who used to dwell here below but whose life was spent on the earth and they went up into heaven in their souls. It's talking about Abel. It's talking about Enoch. It's talking about Noah, Abraham, David, Peter, Paul. It's talking about our fathers and our mothers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers, our children who have been taken from us in a tragic accident. It's talking about all of those who at this moment sleep in Jesus. God will bring them with Jesus when he comes. That's what the text says in verse 14, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

There are different possible ways to interpret that phrase in verse 14, "even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him," but I believe it's referring to the souls of the departed saints whom the Lord will bring with him at his return. And those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will see all of this happening from the vantage point of the earth. Can you imagine standing there in the earth seeing these things happen. Stop whatever it is that you're doing. Are you hiding in a cave somewhere in fear for your life because you're part of the persecuted church that has no place in the world under the Antichrist? Are you about to be fed to the lions as the ungodly antichristian world cheers on? Are you sitting in the darkness of a prison cell? Are you working in a field? Are you busy with the concerns of ordinary life? None of that matters anymore. He's coming. The Lord himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God. He's coming. Stop whatever it is that you're doing. Look up.

And then the best part, that shout of command that comes from the mouth of the returning Jesus will have an effect on the bodies of those who sleep in Jesus. That's what that shout is, that shout where we described before as a shout that reverberates throughout all creation and makes the stars fall from the heaven and the moon turn to blood. It is a shout of awakening. This is the primary content of what Jesus will say when he shouts in the midst of his return, "Wake up! Wake up! Rise and shine, the time of sleeping is at an end. The time of wakefulness in heart, mind, soul and body has come. Wake up."

And I know that that's a call that the Lord Jesus Christ will issue generally that all the dead will hear, even the wicked will be called out of their sleep unto the resurrection of damnation but all of God's people will hear that shout but you must think of that as a personal call as well. It's a personal call. It's a call that Jesus will make to each of his

people by name. Think of Jesus standing outside the tomb of Lazarus his friend, and how does he call Lazarus out of the tomb? He calls him by name, "Lazarus! Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus hears the voice of the Lord calling to him. His dead ears embalmed in the garments of death come alive at the sound of the shout of the Lord and he sits up and he walks out of the tomb. A personal call, a call by name. Will that be the name that we answer to today, the name that our parents gave us, the name that is more or less a label that was given to us? Perhaps or perhaps there will be a new name. Perhaps there will be a name that the Lord himself gives to us, a name that describes us at the very core of our being, a name that we will answer to for all eternity that will describe our individuality and our particular place in God's covenant and larger purpose. But he will call you, he will shout to you, "My son, my daughter, person, sheep for whom I gave my life, wake up! Arise and sleep no more!" And the dead in Christ will obey.

Those souls of the saints who came with the Lord whom the Lord brought with him will find those dusty old skeletons buried somewhere in the earth and they will be reunited to them so that bone returns to bone, and skin and sinew is weaved together once again. Bodies will rise out of the sea, we read in Revelation 20, and all of the parts, these are the questions that we worry about and wonder about, all of the parts, even the little bits, the Lord knows where they all are and he will assemble the bodies of his saints through the power of the voice of Christ who shouts at his return. And the dead in Christ shall rise first, ascending to meet the Lord in the air. Now not just a soul but soul and body together in resurrection life that resembles the resurrection life of Jesus himself.

And again, we who are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord will witness all of this. Can you imagine seeing this happen? After all of the pain, all of the heartbreak of watching many of these saints being cast out by an antichristian world and persecuted and killed, after shedding tears by the gravesides of loved ones lost through natural causes, old age, sickness, troubles, accidents, now to stand here in the earth and see them alive, not only alive but better than they've ever been, glorified, rising to meet the Lord in the air. If you're ever tempted to become despairing over how dark the world is becoming and the troubles that come and touch our lives on account of death, let the thought of being here and witnessing that event carry you on and give you hope.

The dead in Christ shall rise but that's not quite the end of the story. Then we who are alive and remain will ourselves be caught up together with them in the clouds. We will not be left on earth to perish along with the wicked. The Lord will not have forgotten us who remain unto the coming of the Lord, or the sorrows that we have borne. He will reach down and catch us up to himself, verse 17, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." There's the Reformed rapture, beloved. It's not an invisible secret event that comes without warning so that somebody who is driving down the highway is suddenly vacant from the car but it's a public visible work of the glorified Lord who catches his people up to himself at the very moment that he himself descends. And in that moment that he catches them up to himself or raptures them up to himself, they are changed. 1 Corinthians 6:15 talks about that, changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, fit now to stand in the

presence of the risen Savior and to participate in the celebration of all the glorified saints, and that, beloved, will be the entry point into everlasting glory.

Only with our eyes will we see the destruction that the Lord brings upon the wicked world. There will be destruction that the Lord brings upon the wicked world, fire and intense heat, melting of the elements with a fervent heat but then out of the ashes God makes all things new. Then we will come down from the clouds just like that holy city New Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven, and we will live in a new heavens and a new earth, and as the text says, so shall we ever be with the Lord and that is the ultimate climax of our salvation and that is the ultimate glory to be with the Lord.

That brings us to the second point which is how this event that the scripture speaks of, we've been talking about something that hasn't happened yet but the scripture describes it as an event. This is something that is certain to happen and the word of God declares it so. What comfort do we take from this? Well, to understand the comfort you have to understand the big concern that the Apostle Paul has when he's writing these words to the Thessalonian Christians and the concern that the Apostle Paul has with the Thessalonian Christians has to do with their misunderstanding about their fellow Christians who are dying. It seems especially in the church of Thessalonica that there was this expectation that Jesus was going to return not only but that he was going to return soon, and when I say soon I mean like tomorrow soon or two days from now or a week from now, but certainly within my lifetime.

Paul addresses this concern more directly in the next epistle, actually, in 2 Thessalonians. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1 he says, "we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand." So he's addressing this feeling among the Thessalonian Christians that Jesus is going to come tomorrow or he's going to come next week. Not so, certain things must happen before Jesus will come back such as the coming of the Antichrist, and there may be some period of waiting until those events begin to unfold. So a Christian is not called to give up his job, a Christian is not called to spend his time as a busybody just waiting around for Jesus to return as if he's going to show up tomorrow, the Christian should be busy. He should be engaged in work. He should be watching for the signs. Martin Luther even said that if he knew that Jesus was coming tomorrow he would still plant a tree today.

But the point is the Thessalonians have this expectation that Jesus is returning very soon and that made them troubled when their fellow Christians were dying. Some of their fellows, their fellow Christians in the church at Thessalonica may have been killed on account of persecution. We know that Thessalonica was a place that experienced some pretty intense persecution. The Apostle Paul experienced stiff resistance from the Jews. It was not a friendly environment for the small Christian church that Paul had established there. But there were also Christians dying from natural causes, old age, sickness, accidents, and the Thessalonian Christians are thinking this, "Our dying brothers and sisters are going to miss out on the return of Jesus. Jesus is coming soon. He's coming

today or tomorrow and this brother or sister just died and he's going to miss out." And that discouraging thought was affecting the way that they were mourning at their funerals, and the way that they were viewing death. They were sorrowing as those who have no hope and Paul sees this is a big problem.

Now notice the problem is not that the Thessalonians are mourning the death of their loved ones or their brothers and sisters in the church, of course they have sorrow when their brothers and sisters die; death is a terrible thing, I think we appreciate that here on this day; Jesus knew that death is a terrible thing, that's why when he was standing outside the tomb of Lazarus knowing full well what he's going to do, "I'm going to call him out of the grave and he's going to be living in a moment from now," and yet he was dead in the tomb for a few days and Jesus wept. Sorrow at death is natural, it's proper, it's human, it's not something to feel bad about or guilty about or ashamed of, it's something that we should experience, and death is a terrible thing but the problem with the Thessalonian Christians is that they were sorrowing as those who have no hope according to verse 13, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." There was no discernible difference between the funerals of these Christians in the church at Thessalonica and the funerals of unbelievers; even though the unbelievers think that their dead are lost, maybe they go to a dark underworld somewhere where they never come back or they simply cease to exist, but they have no hope and their sorrowing shows that. There is no expectation of a resurrection. There is no expectation of a better place for this loved one who has now died. Apparently the Thessalonians were sorrowing in the same way, in fact, the despair that these Thessalonian Christians had may have been even worse for they imagined that these brothers and sisters did have hope at one point, they had hope before but now they've died, now they're going to miss out.

So it's with this in mind that Paul corrects the misconception of the Thessalonian Christians about those who sleep in Jesus, and notice right off the bat how he talks about them, not dead, although they were dead, but sleeping, sleeping which means waiting to be waked out of sleep. "Brothers, I would not have you to be ignorant concerning them which are asleep in Jesus." Does the gospel have nothing to say about them? Does the hope of the return of Christ mean nothing for them? Well, of course it does. That's why Jesus is coming. That's why he's going to return on the last day with that great shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trump of God, to wake them out of their sleep, to raise them up from the dead. In fact, we who are alive and remain on the earth will not even prevent them, he says in verse 15, which means we will not go before them. They're going to be first in line and then we will go after them.

So sorrow not, brothers, as those who have no hope but sorrow as those who expect to see these same loved ones in glory one day. The apostle's instruction here has implications for the way that we look at death and the way we experience death, does it not? And now it's true and we have to be clear that this hope only applies to those who sleep in Jesus. There is a much different sort of sorrow that comes when someone we know dies without knowing the Lord. That's a different kind of sorrow. That's a dreadful sorrow. The Bible talks about that too. It's the kind of sorrow that David had when his

son Absalom died in rebellion not only against him and the kingdom but against God himself. "O Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son." What can we say to comfort a Christian father who mourns a son who has perished outside of Jesus? We're like Aaron standing before the deaths of his sons Nadab and Abihu whom the Lord smote because they offered strange fire that with Aaron we would put our hands over our mouths and we'd say, "I know that the Lord is good. I know it. I may not feel it but I know it."

The thought of those who perish outside of Jesus ought to bring urgency to our prayers for our children who backslide, for our acquaintances who backslide. It should motivate us to speak of Christ to our neighbors with the prayer that the Lord would touch their hearts so that they are no longer outside of Jesus but are ingrafted into him by a true and living faith. Only those who sleep in Jesus will be awakened by him to the resurrection of life on the last day but for our brothers and sisters who sleep in Jesus, we have hope, we have great hope. Hope is not such a flimsy concept that it doesn't account for the fact that we sorrow. Yes, we sorrow, we sorrow, "I'm no longer going to be able to talk to him. My dad who was always there like a rock in my life is gone and his absence I feel like a big black hole." There's sorrow, sorrow in looking at the grave and what feels like the finality of the grave where it's hard to imagine that the body we are laying there is just being tucked in for a nap, for sleep. We sorrow but we sorrow not as those who have no hope, we sorrow as those who have hope, we sorrow as those who understand that this loved one who we see go into that black hole is not missing out on anything, he's already in the presence of the Lord whose experience today right now is the experience of everlasting glory, drinking in the face of the Savior, the glorified and risen Jesus Christ, and those who sleep in Jesus will ever be with him. That is the experience from now to eternity.

And if you are one of the few who are still alive and remaining at the coming of the Lord, you will be here to witness that person coming out of the grave just like a seed that sprouts out and becomes a blooming flower and the apostle says, "Comfort one another with these words. Comfort one another with this hope." But then notice it's not only hope for those who sleep in Jesus but the apostle also is concerned to give comfort to those who are alive and who remain and I think this is really important. Living when we do right now, I think it's a bit of a challenge to think hopefully about the future. We look at the Thessalonians being enthusiastic as if the Lord is going to come tomorrow or next week and they're looking forward to the end of the world, we look at that almost like that's a bit naive and childlike, "Don't you understand, you Thessalonians, what's going to happen before the end of the world? Don't you understand what the Bible speaks of and prophecies. It's going to be awful. There's going to be lying wonders. There's going to be deception. There's going to be the man of sin who is revealed which means Satan is going to have dominance and power over the whole world and you want to be there?"

I think sometimes we say to ourselves and maybe to one another, "I think I'd rather just sleep in Jesus. I'd rather just die and wake up when it's all over and not have to experience that." And maybe that's a bit of a symptom of the fact that we're a bit accustomed to a Christianity that's often relatively easy. It's fairly easy in our world. There has been easy in our world in our time and place to have both God and mammon if

we want, and that makes it frightening, then, to look at the world and look at the future of the world and see massive sudden changes in our society and all of a sudden it's not a good thing to be a Christian, not a good thing at all, and people speak evil of you because you believe these things that the Bible teaches and before the end comes, the Bible does make clear it's going to be the worst that it's ever been. If you are a Christian living at that time, all of your senses are going to be telling you, "Just give up. Why should I press on in the name of Christ when to do so is to become the worm of society? Why not just deny him? Why not just enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season?" It would be so much easier. And the answer of the word of God to that is this: because it will be worth it. It will be worth it.

Now that's not to minimize the suffering that God's people will endure in the last days. They will suffer, how they will suffer. And it's probably not even good for us to try to imagine what that's going to be like. There's going to be great tribulation, Jesus says, but it will be worth it. It will be worth it if only for this reason, just think about this, it will be worth it if only for this reason: to be standing there on the earth and see the look on the face of the man of sin and the ungodly world when suddenly is heard in the heavens the sound of that shout and the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, and everybody in the whole world together in unison, those who are wicked, who are persecuting the church, and the saints who are suffering that persecution look up together in unison and all see him coming, the Lord Jesus Christ with ten thousands of his saints and the host of the angels behind him. All of the suffering, all of the trials, all of the persecution will be worth it to be standing here on the earth at that moment and to see that transpire.

So as far as the gospel is concerned, it really is a win/win. It really is a win/win. There is no loss for those who sleep in Jesus. They will awake. They will see him in his glory. They will not miss out. And so also all those who are suffering and who are alive and who remain unto the coming of the Lord, they will be rewarded as they bear witness to the climax of the Lord's glory and the general resurrection of the dead, and then they themselves after beholding all of that are changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. So sorrow but let not your sorrow be as those who have no hope but comfort one another with these words, and know that this comfort is not something that comes out of thin air but it is a comfort that has a sure ground and a sure basis, and the ground of this comfort is that it rests on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The importance of having a ground like that is that when we think about what the Bible is saying here and we try to visualize it in our minds, it almost seems like it's too good to be true. This has to be too much to hope for. There is something so final about the grave. That dead body so cold, so stiff, so still, what our senses tell us is this person cannot live again, he will not live again. How could he live again? How could he come out of that hole in the ground? And the world will confirm that to us. The world will tell us it's ridiculous if we think anybody is ever going to come out of the grave. And then there's the almost absurdly too good to be true promise of the return of Jesus. "Really, a shout that the whole world will hear at once? Ten thousand angels pouring in from the heavens? A new heaven and a new earth, a place where there's no pain, no sorrow, no more death, where the lion lays down with the lamb? Isn't that a bit idealistic?" The

temptation to think of it that way will especially be there for those who are living and who remain before the coming of the Lord when they see almost everybody who was a Christian abandoning the Christian faith in apostasy, and they see Antichrist on the throne, and they see what appears to be the triumph of evil. Isn't it too good to be true? Isn't it too much to hope for?

So we need a sure ground and that ground has to be more than just this, that we really really really want it to happen. No, it has to be based in fact. It has to be based in history. That's exactly what the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is. Verse 14, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." And the assumption behind that statement is, "You believe that Jesus died and rose again, don't you? You believe that that's a historic fact, don't you?" Of course you do, you're a Christian. That's what a Christian is. A Christian is a man, a woman, a young person, a child, who believes that Jesus died and rose again on the third day, that that's a historic fact reflecting a work of God. Well, he did not die and rise again so that all those who belong to him can stay in the grave. He died to pay for our sins. He died so that death would have no more hold over us, and then he rose again as the proof that God accepted his sacrifice, received him as the righteous Son, and that therefore all who are in Jesus are justified in him and righteous in him and therefore have the right to life and are heirs of eternal life.

Do you believe that Jesus rose again from the dead? Well, then you must also believe that all who sleep in Jesus will also rise again from the dead. The one implies and is the sure ground and basis for the other. You cannot believe that Jesus rose from the dead and not believe that those who sleep in Jesus will not rise again. And that tells us something about the importance of the resurrection that we commemorate and think of on Easter Sunday. You'd hardly be a Christian if you deny that Jesus rose again from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that he was dead but he rose again on the third day, that fact is the hinge on which all Christian truth swings.

So don't doubt that. Don't doubt that he is risen. Your hope depends on that. But what this also tells us is how we will hold onto hope when we are looking in the grave, or when we are sitting in a prison cell on the last days. How will we hold onto hope? We're not going to hold onto hope by looking at our difficult circumstances. We're not going to hold onto hope simply even by thinking positively about what God's word says about the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead in general that's going to happen on the last day, even though we need to know that. But if you want to hold onto hope, if you want to live hopefully, then you cling firmly to this event that has taken place in the past that Jesus died and rose again certainly. And if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then we must believe that he will come back again and he will call all those who sleep in him out of their graves and he will raise them, and he will catch us all up together to be with him in the air and we will live forever with him in the new heavens and the new earth, and the Lord will spread his tabernacle over us and he will say, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and I shall be their God and they shall be my people." And there will be no more death. And there will be no more sorrow. And there will be no more crying.

You believe that Jesus rose again from the dead, do you not? Then believe also the truth concerning those who sleep in Jesus, that they also will be waked out of their sleep. Amen.

Let's pray.

Our Father who art in heaven, we thank thee for giving us thy Son Jesus Christ to die and then to rise again. And we thank thee for convincing us and convicting us of that truth by the testimony of scripture so that we may live hopefully as we look to the future, and we may have a sure and certain expectation that there is future good. How we need this hope and how we need the ground of that hope as we look in the grave, as we look to the end of our own lives one day knowing that one day we ourselves will likely die unless we are those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord. We thank thee for giving us the sure ground of that hope and we pray that thou would use it to sustain us every day of our life until the Lord comes to call our name and to take us into that heavenly life. We pray be with us now as we leave thy house, that what we have heard and meditated upon and sung here will carry us through the coming days and the coming weeks and months and years, and that as we hear thy word and feed upon it that we will be strengthened unto eternal life. Hear our prayer for Jesus' sake. Amen.