

Look at the body in the casket the next time you're at a funeral. I mean really look at it. Could you mistake the dead for the sleeping? You've heard people say things like that. "She looks so peaceful." "He looks the same." "She looks like she's sleeping." I've had enough experience with death to know those things aren't true at all. I looked at both my grandmas in their coffins and neither one looked peaceful. They weren't asleep. They were gone. That empty feeling I felt at the sight of their dead bodies wasn't reassuring.

What happens when someone dies? That question is an ancient one. Death is almost certainly something you've dealt. If not, it will be soon enough. When you do you'll come face to face with that question just like the Thessalonians, what happens after death? The world has plenty of what it believes are answers. Nothing happens, the person is buried and gone for good, everyone goes to heaven, or they've gone to some holding place waiting to go to the place where they're going. None of those seems overly pleasant. The world is simply grasping, using reason to guess.

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians guessing. This congregation had their own ideas about the members who most recently died. None of them were good. Was it possible these relatives and friends were gone and they would completely miss the resurrection? Could it be that the resurrection already happened and the living missed it? Paul addresses each of these questions and answers for our benefit when he makes the point...

**Saints triumphant sleep till the end
Awaiting the resurrection with us
Looking ahead to eternity with them**

Until you're faced with the unthinkable moment it's difficult to say what your reaction will be. Death strikes without warning. Survivors are left to make arrangements, pick flowers, and attend the funeral. Each brings different emotions, emotions you won't know until you're in the moment. I've seen families straight faced. I've seen spouses shedding tears without stopping. I've seen smiles on relatives' faces too. Grieving takes many different forms. But imagine the grief of knowing when the casket closes that's the last time you'll see your loved one again. No hope, no future, just memories. That might lead to more than a few tears and maybe some uncontrollable crying.

Paul never says the Christian can't grieve another's death at all. **"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."** Grieving will happen, it has to happen. But it's different. For the believer death is truly sleep. We look forward to sleep, we're unaware of our surroundings but we know we'll wake up. We're not afraid of sleep. Death is something we avoid, it seems final, and most of the time we're afraid of it. Christians however will wake from their death. The Thessalonians could expect a resurrection of their loved ones. Grieving wasn't without hope. Death was not the end. It was sleep and the resurrection was like morning.

One last look. That's what one family wanted at the funeral of their mother. The casket was closed, the funeral was over, the comforting words had already been spoken during the service. Everyone was ready to go the cemetery. They insisted the casket be opened. They wanted to see mom one more time. This time they would say their final final goodbyes. I didn't agree but I didn't argue. It was just sad. Mom was gone, but their grieving gave the impression she was gone for good. To look one more time silently said they weren't too sure about a resurrection. Their grieving seemed to be without hope.

That family needed to remember and hear the words of Paul to the Thessalonians. **"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."** Jesus died and rose again. That's saying it short and sweet. The one who died lived a perfect life. When he cried out **"It is finished"** from the cross he indicated the death of every believer would accomplish nothing. Everything already was accomplished. Sin was paid for, judgment was over, and guilt was removed. Jesus died! Jesus lives! His resurrection from the dead means Dad's resurrection. It means Grandma's resurrection. It means your resurrection. We believe in a Savior who died and rose again. Our loved ones aren't dead and gone never to be seen again. They're awaiting the resurrection with us in the triumphant sleep of death till the end.

People want to know what to say at funerals. Going through two this summer I can tell you plenty gets said that shouldn't be. "I'm so sorry for your loss." "She was a great woman who lived a great life." "I'll always remember..." Perfectly understandable but not helping at all. We don't like thinking about death or even what to say around death. But we should. People with no hope talk about how great a life the dead person lived. That offers no support. What can we give? We grieve as ones who have the hope of a resurrection. So direct the next grieving person you see to Christ's resurrection. Share with them that hope. Maybe something like, "I rejoice with you in the resurrection of our Savior Jesus." Or "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Those phrases give hope because they share a reality. Our loved ones who have died await the resurrection with us.

Do kids miss the commanding voice of their father yelling at them when they're doing something wrong? Do you miss the beginning of the concert when the brass section starts with full force? These are impossible to miss. The Thessalonians had the false notion they had maybe missed the coming of Jesus. But Paul says, **"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."** The coming of the Lord is something Paul says they couldn't miss. There'll be loud commanding shouts, the voice of the archangel, and a divine trumpet louder and more powerful than any middle school trumpet player could blast. The Thessalonians hadn't missed it and neither have we. We're still looking ahead to an eternity with all believers.

You may have heard of teaching about a rapture listening to TV or other churches. Because the timeline of the Last Day isn't always detailed, with some details left out, some get confused. Those who believe in a rapture believe Jesus will come secretly to whisk all believers to heaven and leave everyone else behind. Planes suddenly might have no pilots, cars without drivers, and classrooms suddenly empty. Those left behind will hopefully be led to turn to God. Then Jesus would come a third time. It's basically a second chance. This horrible false teaching is dangerous to your faith. If you've heard it, or if you believe it it's time to be warned. This sinful teaching leads people away from the truth of the Bible. It destroys faith.

We didn't miss the Last Day. We didn't miss any coming of Jesus. We didn't miss the resurrection of all people. We're only waiting on one second coming of Christ. All will see him at the same time. And we won't be getting to eternity any sooner than anybody else. **"According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep."** The souls of those who have died in Christ are already in heaven. But things are not complete. All believers will enter heaven together as God intended believers to be with him, both body and soul.

The greatest joy won't be the reunions with family members as joyful as those will be. It won't be seeing friends or historic figures. **"The dead in Christ will rise first. 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."** No one goes first or second. All believers go to heaven together both body and soul. Most importantly **"we will be with the Lord forever."** This is God's promise to you; you look forward to a heaven in which you'll be in his presence for eternity.

Most days you know when sleep is coming. You sleep for a while then wake up. Death is like sleep for a believer but it doesn't come at a time we know. So be ready. God promises you won't be left behind but you need to be ready. Christ could return before the end of the day so be ready. You could die anytime today so be ready. We're saints of God, forgiven in Christ, but still living in the church militant. Here there's war, war with Satan, war with our sins. This past year three of our brothers in Christ were transferred to the church triumphant. They are saints triumphant. They're battle is over, the victory is secure. They wait for the resurrection with us. They wait for eternity to start with us. They wait as saints triumphant in the sleep of death till the end when we too will be made saints triumphant and enter into glory together forever with Christ.