

I.N.I.

14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 18, 2011
I Thess. 4:13-14

In Christ Jesus, in Whom is our confidence of a blessed resurrection from the dead, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last week we heard of the background to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. We mentioned that Paul spent three Sabbaths reasoning from the Scriptures about Jesus being the Messiah, the Christ. We don't know that he stayed any longer than that. He may have, but probably not much longer, because of the disturbance and opposition of the unbelieving Jews. In three weeks it would be impossible to cover every important doctrine of Scripture, every important truth from God's Word. Evidently when Timothy returned to Corinth with his good news of the faithfulness of this little group, there also were some questions they had. One of them seems to be about those who died. Would they miss out on the glorious return of the Savior? What would happen to their dead friends and loved ones who had believed in Jesus?

Paul begins this section by writing **BUT I DO NOT WANT YOU TO BE IGNORANT, BRETHREN, CONCERNING THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP.**

BRETHREN--all that Paul has to say to them in his letter is said in the spirit of love and a brotherly bond. He knows that they are ignorant on this issue and wants them to know the truth so they would no longer be disturbed. Paul does not lord over these people the fact of his being an apostle, but he shares with them a loving relationship of being brothers and sisters and in his calling, he really is the servant who serves them with God's Word.

In the same way, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and as your called Pastor or shepherd, I too am your servant, to serve you with God's Word. And this morning God's Word describes for us

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A BELIEVING LOVED ONE DIES?

First of all the Lord through Paul tells us that

I: HE FALLS ASLEEP IN CHRIST

I'm sure you have heard the old saying "what you don't know won't hurt you." That's not true in this case. What these Thessalonian Christians didn't know about death and the resurrection certainly hurt. They were lacking the comfort and peace from God and His Word because they were spiritually ignorant.

Many people like it that way. They don't want to know anymore than they think they know. They don't want revealed to them what God says and what God wants. They think they know it all. How **SAD!** Look what they miss in regard to the one experience we will all have to face--**DEATH!** What folly, what stupidity to remain ignorant of and therefore unprepared for the end of one's life when everyone will have to face it sometime.

What a comfort, what a blessing to hear the Lord call death a **SLEEP**. Sleep was something they knew, something they experienced everyday---death was unknown. Sleep is something that is often longed for---death was dreaded. Sleep offers soothing and much needed rest---death brings unspoken fears. A person wakes from sleep, but as far as they knew there was no end to death, no awaking.

By the use of these words **THOSE WHO SLEEP IN JESUS**, Paul is beginning to counteract the devastating effects of grief and sorrow that death can bring. Paul is echoing the words of our Savior when Jesus reassured Jairus and his wife about their daughter---**SHE IS NOT DEAD, BUT**

SLEEPING. Jesus spoke the same way when He said of Lazarus after he had died, **OUR FRIEND LAZARUS SLEEPS, BUT I GO THAT I MAY WAKE HIM UP.** On Good Friday we know that many believers were resurrected from their graves. Scripture speaks of it this way, **AND THE GRAVES WERE OPENED; AND MANY BODIES OF THE SAINTS WHO HAD FALLEN ASLEEP WERE RAISED...** Paul in his sermon to the Jews in Antioch said this about David, **FOR DAVID, AFTER HE HAD SERVED HIS OWN GENERATION BY THE WILL OF GOD, FELL ASLEEP, WAS BURIED WITH HIS FATHERS...** In Paul's great resurrection chapter of I Cor. 15 he calls death a sleep twice, **BUT NOW CHRIST IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD, AND HAS BECOME THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP (vs. 20)...BEHOLD, I TELL YOU A MYSTERY; WE SHALL NOT ALL SLEEP, BUT WE SHALL ALL BE CHANGED--...(vs. 51)**

Sleep is not a euphemism for "death," by using this word Jesus is not trying to water down the scariness and finality of death; rather it is God's description of what death really is like for the Christian. It is like when you went to sleep last night and were completely unaware of anything around you, until you woke up this morning. We aren't afraid to put our head down on a pillow at night and go to sleep. We know that, God willing, we'll wake up again to a new day. That's how death is. We need not fear putting our head down on the pillow of death and falling asleep in Jesus, for Jesus **WILL, WILL** wake us up to a glorious new and eternal day at the Judgment.

People without this sure and certain hope will, when their loved one's die; grieve in a way that shows they have no comfort or assurance of the future. For most, all there is, is fond memories of the loved one, or they try to deny and deaden the pain, fear, anger and sorrow by having a grand funeral with an ornate casket and dozens and dozens of flowers and saying only grand and glorious things about the deceased. Or they curse death and turn to alcohol, drugs, work or a multitude of other "aspirins" to take away their loneliness, grief and pain. Or in an empty hope they deny the existence of an afterlife with punishment for the sinner and say God is love therefore everyone is in a better place when they die.

It is very important to note here that Paul is not saying that we should not sorrow or that we should not grieve when loved ones die. Christians also grieve and cry. Grieving is a God-given emotion and outlet. Jesus cried when He stood at the grave of Lazarus. There is sorrow at death. We cannot even part for a short time from our loved ones without some sad feelings. Tears and sadness come, a feeling of loneliness and emptiness arises. But we should not grieve in utter despair. A Christian does not sorrow **"AS OTHERS WHO HAVE NO HOPE."**

Why? Paul tells us in the second point of this morning's text that

WHEN A BELIEVING LOVED ONE DIES...

2) HE FOLLOWS IN CHRIST'S PATH.

We read the first part of vs. 14 **FOR IF WE BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN...** Paul in one short half-verse sums up God's plan of salvation. If we believe this--and Paul knows that these Thessalonian Christians did--then we are assured of our own resurrection. For the same crucified Savior promised that His resurrection means that we too will rise. He said, **BECAUSE I LIVE, YOU WILL LIVE ALSO....I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME, THOUGH HE MAY DIE, HE SHALL LIVE.**

That's what God's Word does. It prepares us. First it gives us the knowledge of what life and death is all about so that we are not spiritually ignorant. Then the Gospel creates faith to believe in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, salvation and everlasting life. It continues to instruct us day by day and week by week so that we too will not fear the day of our death, but rather look forward to it as the day of freedom, real freedom from the cares, concerns, sins, sufferings, and sorrows of this life. Many a brother and sister in

Christ have longed for that day because they had this message of Paul and the Good News of Jesus in their heart.

Do you believe that Jesus died and rose again for you? Than you too, will follow in Christ's path. This will happen when He returns and resurrects our dead bodies.

The third truth that Paul lays on our hearts this morning is this:

WHEN A BELIEVING LOVED ONE DIES...

3) HE FINALLY WILL RETURN WITH CHRIST

We read vs. 14b **EVEN SO GOD WILL BRING WITH HIM THOSE WHO SLEEP IN JESUS.** On Judgment Day the souls of all believers who have died will come with the Lord Jesus and be reunited with their resurrected bodies and will be forever with the Lord in eternal heavenly bliss. Therefore, both our resurrected bodies and our souls will live forever in heavenly glory.

Our text stops here but Paul's thought does not. He continues for 4 more verses. Let these verses fill your heart with comfort, confidence and joy to look forward to your passing from this life into eternal life. We read I Thess. 4:15-18: **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. 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. 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. THEREFORE COMFORT ONE ANOTHER WITH THESE WORDS.**

In these verses, Paul puts to rest all of the fears and concerns that Christians have about death. Since these words were written, Christians of all ages and of all times have turned to these verses again and again and again for comfort, hope and strength. I have read these words at every funeral service that I have conducted and I will continue to do so at every Christian funeral victory service of life over death.

Some day we will be facing death. I take that back, every day we face death! Some day, if our Savior does not come first, we will all be laying in a casket. Does that scare us? Are we ignorant of what life and death is all about? Do we grieve over death as the lost unbelievers of this world? We need not. For **IF WE BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN, EVEN SO GOD WILL BRING WITH HIM THOSE WHO SLEEP IN JESUS.**

**ASLEEP IN JESUS! BLESSED SLEEP, FROM WHICH NONE EVER WAKES TO WEEP;
A CALM AND UNDISTURBED REPOSE, UNBROKEN BY THE LAST OF FOES.**

ASLEEP IN JESUS! OH, FOR ME MAY SUCH A BLISSFUL REFUGE BE!

SECURELY SHALL MY ASHES LIE AND WAIT THE SUMMONS FROM ON HIGH.

May that be our comfort and our confidence today and everyday, when our loved ones die who believe in Jesus and when death comes calling for us and the Lord removes us from this earthly life to be with Him, in heaven. As Paul also wrote to the Romans: **FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN!**

Amen.