

INTRODUCTION

We're coming to a passage of scripture that is one of my favorites in the entire Bible. It is the most important section of the Bible that gives us details about the second coming of Jesus. We're going to camp out here in this passage for the next few weeks.

June 30: "Faith of our Fathers" (I Love America celebration)

July 7: "Will We See Our Loved Ones Again?"

July 14: "Are you Ready for the Rapture?"

July 21: "Like a Thief in the Night"

You may not know this about me, but I'm a big Twilight fan. I'm not talking about the silly Twilight movies about vampires and werewolves. I'm talking about the real Twilight show, "The Twilight Zone." The original Twilight Zone series ran from 1959 to 1964. It was one of my favorite shows as a boy, but I can only remember the plot of one episode. It was called "A Most Unusual Camera." A husband-and-wife team robbed a curio shop and one of the things they stole was a camera. But the camera produced pictures from about five minutes in the future. So they went to the racetrack and took a picture of the betting board before the race began. They made thousands of dollars by betting on the winning horses. But there is no honor among thieves and another crook showed up and in the process of arguing over the camera, they fell out the upstairs window, but when the wife took their picture, she was also lying on the ground—sure enough, a crooked waiter from the hotel pushed her out.

People are fascinated with the future. But you don't need a magic camera or a horoscope to learn about the future. The Bible gives us fully developed pictures of what's going to happen in the future. And in this passage, God gives us a snapshot of what happens when a Christian dies, and what's going to happen when Jesus returns.

To fully appreciate this passage, you must understand the setting. Paul had preached in Thessalonica that Jesus was going to return soon, and all those who placed their faith in Jesus would be taken to be with the Lord when He returned. Everyone was excited about that until some of the believers started dying. Their family members scratched their heads wondering, "What's going to happen to them? They died before Jesus returned." It is in this context in which Paul writes these words describing the future.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. "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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Skip ahead to 1 Thessalonians 5:11 where Paul ends his section on the return of Christ. He wrote, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." The truth about the return of Christ shouldn't scare you or cause you to be confused.

Do you remember the first funeral you ever attended? I grew up without having any of my close relatives die. My grandfather died when I was young, but I was too young to go to the funeral. So, I made it through college and even seminary without attending a funeral. When I was pastoring my first church out of seminary a member of the church died, and I was asked to lead the funeral service. So the very first funeral I ever preached was also the first funeral I attended. I really didn't know what to do, but the owner of the funeral home was a kind man who coached me through that first service.

Since that first funeral I've attended and preached hundreds. I've stood at the grave of my mother and father. I've stood at the grave of many of my Christian friends. And I'm here to say that because of Jesus Christ, I stood there with a sense of hope. I knew that it wasn't the last time I would see my parents, or my friends. I knew that I wasn't saying goodbye forever. I was simply saying, "I'll see you soon."

For those of us who know Christ, that's what we have that the world doesn't have, HOPE at the graveside. In this passage, we can discover four hopeful truths about what happens when a Christian dies.

I. WE CAN KNOW WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH

Paul wrote, "... We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep..." All people want to know what happens after someone dies. A little boy wrote a letter to God that said, "Dear God, what is it like when a person dies? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know, I don't want to DO it. Your friend, Mike."

If you ask some people, "What happens after you die?" They'll tell you, "Nobody can know for certain what happens after you die." But Paul insists you CAN know. Paul even was bold enough to say, "By the Lord's own words." In other words, this was a special revelation God gave to Paul about death and the second coming. So you can't plead ignorance about life after death. Someone once said, "Ignorance is bliss." But when it comes to the subject of death, ignorance is NOT bliss; it's unnecessary.

Have you noticed how many people don't even want to talk about death? It's the ultimate elephant in the room. Try this the next time you're sharing a meal with friends, "Hey, what do you think about death? Let's talk about what happens when a person dies." See what kind of reaction you get. Chances are someone will change the subject as soon as they can.

One point of confusion is that people have difficulty distinguishing between time and eternity. They aren't the same thing. Here on earth, we are prisoners of time. We have to live our lives chronologically. But in God's eternity, there is no sense of time, as we know it. If you ask me how old I am, I'll tell you I'm sixty. If you ask my wife how old she is she'll tell you it's none of your business. But if you asked an angel how old he is he wouldn't even understand the question.

Time comes and passes. Watch out here it comes. See it? It's a moment, there it is. Now it's gone.

Time has sequences: past, present, and future. But eternity has only one dimension: now forever. I know that may be blowing your mind, so let me say it again. Time has three dimensions, past, present, and future, but eternity has only one dimension—now forever.

It's your body that will die, but your soul and spirit will live on. The book of Ecclesiastes says God has placed eternity in our hearts, but we choose to live in the restraints of chronological time.

People talk about inventing a time machine, but you already have one. It's called your mind. But it only goes in one direction, backwards. If you don't believe it, let's conduct a little experiment. For those of you over thirty, let's play a time travel game. You can close your eyes, or keep them open, but I want you to think back to...when you were in the first grade. Now think about when you got your driver's license. Think back to when you got married. In an instant, you were at another time in your mind. That's what eternity is like, except it's all right NOW.

Now wouldn't it be really cool, if you could project your mind into the future just as easily as you can the past? You see ahead in eternity because there's no difference between past, future, and present. Because we are creatures bound by time and space, we have a hard time getting a grip on eternal events like the return of Christ.

II. FOR BELIEVERS, DEATH IS LIKE FALLING ASLEEP

Paul wrote, "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." Three times in this passage, he refers to the death of a believer as "sleep." The Romans and the Greeks thought of the place of burial as a scary place full of departed spirits. But the Christians were the ones who changed the whole idea of the grave being a scary place. They started calling the name of a graveyard a *koimeterion*, from which we get our English word "cemetery." It was the same word used for army barracks. The only thing soldiers do in the barracks is sleep. They go to sleep to the sound of taps and wake up to reveille. Even so, the body of a believer goes to sleep at death, when taps is played. But you can be certain when the angel blows his trumpet they'll come out of the grave. That's why the second coming of Christ has been called, "That great gettin'-up morning."

Winston Churchill planned his own funeral. There were thousands of dignitaries packed into St. Paul's Cathedral. At the end of the service, a bugler in the top of the dome played a solemn rendition of taps. But as soon as he finished, another bugler positioned at the other side of the dome played a spirited version of reveille. Churchill wanted people to know that he believed he would wake from death.

Now, this isn't soul sleep as the Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults teach. This refers to the body only. Because Paul says "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Aren't you glad that the Bible calls our death sleep? There's nothing scary about sleep. In fact, when you get tired you need to sleep. And some bodies get so old and worn out that they need to die. But the person living inside that body goes to be with the Lord. Jesus even called death sleep. And He demonstrated the power to wake up the dead.

In John 11 we read that Jesus' friend Lazarus is sick and dying. His sisters, Martha and Mary send for Jesus, but He doesn't come immediately. He waited four days. Then Jesus told the disciples, "Our friend, Lazarus, is sleeping." The disciples said, "That's good. Then he'll wake up feeling better." But Jesus wasn't talking about snoozing; He was talking about death. So Jesus had to say plainly to the disciples, "Lazarus is dead."

Jesus went to Bethany and went to Lazarus' tomb. He said, "Lazarus, come forth!" And the Bible says Lazarus came out of the grave wrapped in grave clothes.

Jesus broke up every funeral he ever attended, including His own! If you're ever in London, and visit the National Gallery you can see this painting by the Italian artist, Sebastiano del Piombo. It pictures the raising of Lazarus. Sebastiano captured a lot of action in this one screen. All twelve of the disciples can be seen around Jesus. You can see Mary at the feet of Jesus, and Martha leaning away—after all she was the one who warned Jesus that Lazarus had been dead for four days. And as Martha said in the King James Version, "But Lord, he stinketh." But the most interesting thing about this painting is that Sebastiano was a rival of Michelangelo, and Michelangelo had criticized Sebastiano's work. So many believe he painted Lazarus' face as an ugly caricature of Michelangelo.



The Raising of Lazarus
Sebastiano del Piombo
Oil on Canvas
c. 1517-1519

Please note that the Bible refers to the death of a believer as sleep, but that phrase is never used for a non-believer. For a Christian, death means sweet dreams, but for a person who doesn't know Jesus, death is more like a nightmare.

III. DEATH IS A SAFE PLACE BECAUSE JESUS HAS BEEN THERE

There are a few words in this text that most New Testament scholars recognize as an early Christian creed. Remember, these Christians didn't have the New Testament yet. So they would often repeat creeds that embodied their beliefs. The most famous creed is called the Apostles' Creed. This creed is still repeated or read in some churches today.

A creed usually begins with the words, "We believe..." Baptists are known as a non-creedal group. In other words, we claim our only creed is the Bible. But right in the middle of this

passage, we find what scholars claim to be the earliest Christian creed. This creed is only eight words in English. It is: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again." Repeat it several times. Do you believe this?

The basis for our belief about life after death is bound up in that creed. We believe Jesus died. That's very important. Jesus was God in the flesh, and yet He tasted death. You probably know Muslims revere Jesus as a great prophet. They call him Isa. I address this in greater detail in my latest book, *The Cloud Strike Prophecy*. Muslims believe Jesus was born of a virgin, and lived a sinless life. They believe He performed miracles, but they don't believe He died. They claim the person who was crucified only looked like Jesus, but he wasn't really Jesus. They teach that Jesus was taken into heaven and will come again someday. It's important for us to believe that Jesus died. He really died. Because if He didn't die, the second part of the creed has no meaning. He rose from the dead.

Jesus died. And we can relate to that because we've all had loved ones and friends who died. And we know that unless Jesus returns, we're all going to die. But just as He died, He rose from the dead. And the Resurrection of Jesus only makes sense if He really did die.

Have you ever attended an event where the President or the First Lady is going to speak? Secret service agents and law enforcement personnel arrive several days early and perform a security audit. They sweep the facility to make sure there is no threat against the President or his wife.

A few years ago when Representative Louie Gohmert was running for Congress the first time, Vice-President Dick Cheney came to Longview to speak at an event on behalf of Mr. Gohmert. I was the D.P., the designated pray-er. We were at the Cobb Convention Center and Louie and I had been escorted to the stage by Secret Service agents to see where we were supposed to stand. We were walking back through the underground garage area when the Secret Service agents started saying, "Angler is arriving." That was Dick Cheney's code name. Louie and I were halfway across this huge empty garage. The Secret Service agent turned to us and said, "Clear the area, NOW!" We started walking fast, and he said, "RUN, don't walk." So imagine this, your pastor and future Congressman, both in suits running across the garage to clear the area before the Vice President arrived. It was their job to arrive early, scout out the place and make sure it is swept of any threats. They made sure the place was safe.

That's what Jesus has done for us in regard to death. David wrote, "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me." Jesus has already walked through the valley of the shadow of death. And he emerged on the other side alive forevermore. So even though death may seem like a dark place, and a mysterious place, it is a safe place because Jesus has already been there. Like those secret service agents, He has swept it clean from anything scary or harmful.

IV. A BELIEVER'S GRIEF IS INFUSED WITH HOPE

We all grieve, but Paul wrote that we don't have "... to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."

The vast majority of funerals I've attended or have led have been for believers. Most of these have been a wonderful celebration of lives lived well for Christ. But, like every pastor, there have been some funerals I've led where I suspected the person who died never demonstrated any evidence of a walk with God. Those are tough experiences.

Ray Stedman makes this observation: "I have stood at gravesides with families who knew only the stuff of this life. They cared little for the news of the next. And it showed in their grief. There was a hardness, a harshness, a hopelessness to the whole thing. Without a future to look to, the grief easily turns to anger and frustration with one another. Grief without hope is never a pretty picture...But I have stood at other gravesides where the tears were tinted with hope. Friends and family wept. But a light shined in the darkness. They confidently talked of a future reunion."

I'll be talking more about this hope in the coming messages, but let me give you three reasons why we can have hope at the graveside.

A. Living hope: Resurrection or Rapture

Paul wrote that when Jesus returns, "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." If you know Jesus, you will live on after death, either through resurrection or rapture. Your loved ones who died in Christ are alive right now. They are with Jesus, and when Jesus comes back He will bring their soul and spirit, and when He resurrects their bodies, they'll have an eternal body like His. For those of us who are alive when Jesus returns, we'll never have a funeral. We'll be changed in an instant to be like Jesus. It's wise to pre-arrange your funeral to make it easier on your family if you die. But to tell you the truth, I'm not looking for the undertaker. I'm looking for the upper-taker!

B. Loving hope: Reunion

It will not only be a time of resurrection and rapture. It will be the moment of reunion. Paul wrote that when Jesus returns the dead in Christ will be raised first—after all, they have six feet further to go. Then those of us who are alive will be "...caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air..."

I love the words, "Together with them." Do you have loved ones in heaven like I do? How have you imagined your reunion? Did you think you'd walk into heaven and see them come running up to you? Well, if you're alive when Jesus returns, this happy reunion will take place in the clouds at the moment of the rapture.

C. Lasting hope: Relationship

And this speaks about our relationship with Jesus. Paul wrote, "...we will be with the Lord forever." Spiritually speaking, we know the Lord is here now. He said He would be present where two or three are gathered in His name. But the Bible also says that when we try to visualize Jesus now, it's like looking at a fogged up mirror. The image isn't clear. But then we will see Him face-to-face.

Fanny Crosby is probably my favorite hymn writer. She was blinded as an infant, and never saw another face. But her blindness gave her an amazing spiritual vision. Once a pastor said to her, "I think it a great pity that the Master, when He showered so many gifts upon you, did not give you sight." Fanny Crosby responded, "Do you know, if at birth I had been able to make one petition to my Creator, it would have been that I should be born blind." The pastor was surprised and asked why. She said, "Because when I get to heaven, the first sight that shall ever gladden my eyes will be that of the Savior."

CONCLUSION

As followers of Jesus, we have hope at the graveside, because the Bible says when we meet the Lord either by death, or by rapture, He'll take us home. The Bible says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:8)

One of the greatest ministries we have is our Sunday morning television broadcast. It's not a substitute for attending church if you're physically able to attend church. But there are many sick and shut-in people who watch us every week, and we're glad we can provide this ministry to them.

A few years ago, my assistant, Arlene, got a phone call from one of our television viewers from up near Hawkins. She said her mother was terminally ill and lived with her and watched us every week. She said her mother was troubled about dying and if would call her and speak to her. Instead I offered to drive up and visit with her mother personally.

When I arrived, the grown daughter showed me to the back patio where her mother was sitting. She gave me a glass of iced tea and I spent a delightful time speaking to her mother. I asked her a few questions about her faith, and I could tell from her clear testimony that she knew and loved the Lord. So I assured her that when her time came to die, she would be with the Lord.

But I could tell she was still troubled. I asked her what she was concerned about. She told me she knew she was going to heaven, but she was just afraid of what death was going to be like: She was scared to die.

After silently asking God to give me wisdom I told her. "When I was just a little boy, my family often drove to Florida to visit my grandparents on the weekend. It was a drive of about 90 minutes, and we usually got back to our house after dark. On many of those drives back I would fall asleep. This was long before seat belts and child seats, so I might fall asleep on the back seat, in the floorboard. When we got home, I wouldn't even wake up, but my dad would take me in his arms and carry me inside and put me in my bed. And the next morning I'd wake up in my bed. Because of my dad's loving arms, I went to sleep in the car and woke up in my own bed." And I said to this lady, "And that's what death is like for a Christian. You go to sleep here and because of your Father's loving arms, you'll wake up in your heavenly home."

A tear slid down her cheek as she smiled and said, "Thank you. That helps." Several weeks later her daughter called my office and said, "Mother went home last night."

Most of us have stood a graveside before. And chances are we'll stand there again. But if that person put their faith in Jesus, they just fell asleep in the arms of Jesus, and they woke up in their heavenly home. And that truth gives us hope at the graveside. Do you have that hope?

OUTLINE

I. WE CAN KNOW WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH

II. FOR BELIEVERS, DEATH IS LIKE FALLING ASLEEP

III. DEATH IS A SAFE PLACE BECAUSE JESUS HAS BEEN THERE

Our creed: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again."

IV. A BELIEVER'S GRIEF IS INFUSED WITH HOPE

A. Living hope: Resurrection or Rapture

"God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."

B. Loving hope: Reunion

"...caught up together with them in the clouds..."

C. Lasting hope: Relationship

"...we will be with the Lord forever."

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes