

Of Those Who Fall Asleep

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

In the name of Jesus, dear fellow redeemed:

We've made significant strides during the course of this summer's "green season." Matthew has led us along by way of dusty roads, mountain sermons, seashore encounters, and turbulent boat rides. Along with Matthew are the other Eleven and Jesus at the head. The parables the Master teaches are of special interest to us. He's not done. There are a few more pearls Jesus wishes to cast before the Church Year draws to a close. Of special interest to us today are the words St. Paul delivers over to the church meeting at Thessalonica. They remind us that Jesus has a different viewpoint when it comes to death, a viewpoint each of us ought to henceforth adopt looking forward.

Jesus is not indifferent to those moved by death. You might say He knows far more about life and death than any of us. In His own day, that is, when He walked the dusty roads of Palestine, preached from mountaintops, fed multitudes in desolate places, and calmed storms, Jesus was not oblivious to the finality of death. He rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and mourned with those who mourned. Still, when ministering to the grieving like Jairus and Mary and Martha who are devastated at the loss of loved ones, our Lord gives hope beyond all measure. First, He identifies the dead as sleeping. Next, Jesus resuscitates and raises them from this sleep of death. Finally, our Lord reunites and restores the family.

In an effort to inform those uninformed, Paul delivers a valuable lesson designed to shore up the waning faith of his brothers. While others grieve in hopeless desperation, with no comfort and no resolution to their sadness, you are not like these others. What separates you from others is that you believe. Faith allows us a significant vantage point that the others do not have. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. That's nothing new for us. We confess that in the Creed without recognizing the big difference it makes.

You get out of bed in the morning and eat breakfast. The others in your neighborhood and around the block do the same. You head out the door to run your errands, go to work, drop off your kids at school, and what have you. So do your unbelieving friends. Much of what you do looks and feels the same as what they do. You believe that Jesus died and rose again, and they don't. Your faith doesn't guarantee you'll perform better at your job, on the basketball court, in the classroom, or in the bowling alley. You live your day to day life in much the same way your unbelieving neighbor does. The big difference is only seen after the bottom drops out. In death, the unbeliever grieves apart from hope because all he/she sees is a dead body. But what does a Christian behold when there's a death in the family? A sleeper. Sleepers rest for a time only to get up and fight another day. A sleeper by definition is one who eventually awakens.

The Creed is important to Christians because the words we confess we believe, and what we believe is Jesus died and rose again. That's what gives you the advantage. Jesus doesn't guarantee you success in everything, but He does provide you with hope. God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. The dead are left behind dead (although, they too shall one day rise). Jesus identifies the death of His saints not as permanent death, but rather as a long dirt nap. What's most significant to us is that our death is intertwined with that of our Lord, and His resurrection is our hope of resurrection too. This faith in this life has implications for your death and a future beyond that death. The fallen asleep ones, your brothers and sisters in Christ who sleep quietly in the grave, won't stay sleeping forever. They go away from us in rest, but return alive at the coming of Jesus.

And take notice of where the apostle gets this teaching. As he informs his brothers, he declares to them this doctrine as a word from the Lord. That makes it binding and true for us. It's not one man's opinion or another's speculation for your careful consideration. A word from the Lord is that which you believe. You hold to it for dear life because God's voice declares it far beyond all your human reason. You are so certain of it, so sure of it, so entirely convinced of it that you stake your life on it and place your hope in it. When you fall asleep in death, it will be like going to bed at night. How does that little ditty go?

Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.

Teach me to die that so I may
Rise glorious at the awe-full day. (LSB 883.3)

The faithless neighbor sinks in his heels, goes to bed kicking and screaming like an overtired child. The voice of the archangel and trumpet sound of God strikes terror and a hellish nightmare of cataclysmic proportions awaits. Amos is right on the money when he describes the horrifying day of the Lord. "It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him" (Amos 5:18b, 19). No matter what he does or where he turns, disaster strikes. No matter what calamity he escapes, another meets him straight away. This is what life looks like for those live without a creed. It is a life void of God, except that God catches up in death. Remember that the next time you see the fleeing success of your proud neighbor you envy and seek to out perform. The Lord will provide for you who believe. He will make a way through, O you of little faith.

"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep, (verse 14) and so we will always be with the Lord (verse 17b). That is the hope we profess, the hope we claim as vantage point over and above others who mourn and grieve apart from us. Along with Matthew, the other Eleven, and Jesus as our Head we have traveled down these summer Sundays of dusty roads, seashore adventures, over stormy seas, and into safe havens of calm waters. Again and again we have seen and heard the Word of the Lord that produces faith, a faith grounded in hope. "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings (even those that are manifest in death), knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us" (Romans 5:3-5 NKV).

Let us close in prayer:

Oh, may my soul in Thee repose,
And may sweet sleep mine eyelids close,
Sleep that shall me more vigorous make
To serve my God when I awake! Amen. (LSB 883.4)

The peace of God that passes all human ability to grant understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.