

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

GOD'S TRIUMPHANT YES!

In my first church, we had an organist, who was a member of a Seventh Day Adventist church, which worked out great for all of us. Linda played the organ in her church on Saturdays, and then was able to play for our worship service every Sunday. One Wednesday night after choir practice, Linda's car wouldn't start so I took her home. As we rode together, I asked Linda what was the major difference that she saw between Seventh Day Adventists and Presbyterians.

She said, "Well, besides the fact that we worship on Saturday and you worship on Sundays, I guess the biggest difference is the belief about what happens to us when we die." She continued, saying, "Having played for some funerals at your church, I get the sense that, at the time of death, you believe a Christian person goes to be with the Lord in the heavenly kingdom." "However," she said, "the Seventh Day Adventists believe that a follower of Jesus Christ sleeps in the grave until Christ returns; then, the dead will rise and be with Christ forever."

I responded, "While I understand what you are saying, and there is good scriptural proof to back up that perspective, I find it hard to fathom that the Lord God, who loves us and wants to be in a loving relationship with us in this life and the next, would then put us *on hold* for a couple of thousand years or more until Christ returns. I find great comfort in knowing that, on the cross, Jesus told the one thief, 'Today, you shall be with me in Paradise.'" We listened to and respected each other's outlook but we didn't change our theological positions.

The scripture lesson for this morning seems to support Linda's understanding that the dead in Christ sleep in the grave until the Lord comes again. The context for the Apostle Paul's words found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 was that a first generation of Christians was passing away, and yet, Jesus had still not returned. Christians in the Thessalonica church wondered,

“What would happen to those believers, who had already died before the promised second coming of Christ? Would they be left out of the resurrection because they had not lived until the return of Christ? Would they be lost?”

The Apostle Paul’s response served to calm their fears and provided them with both comfort and hope for the future. Paul recognized the ever-present reality of grief, which is a natural and a necessary reaction to the death of a loved one, but he didn’t want them to stop there and settle for grieving as others do who have no hope. What was the difference between the two groups - those who grieved without hope and those who grieved yet did so with hope? The difference was based solely on the fact that the latter group believed that Jesus died and rose again, and that God will bring with him those who have died. Their faith in God and what God had done – through the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead – made all the difference in this world and the next!

This is what the Apostle Paul believed would happen when Christ reappears. In the words of Eugene Peterson: “When the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they’ll be ahead of us... He’ll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise – they’ll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master... And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master.” (*The Message*, pages 2155-2156)

So, it would appear that Linda was right after all – the dead in Christ, according to St. Paul, remain in the grave until the Lord Jesus comes again. However, that still doesn’t sound right or feel right to me. It’s not that I am unwilling to concede the point. It’s just that it doesn’t match up with what I believe and know to be true.

When our son, Andrew, was dying, he was surrounded in the hospital by his wife Sarah, her parents, his siblings Laura and Dan, Monica, and me. As we watched him take his final breath, I had the distinct feeling that he moved from this circle of those, who knew him the best and loved him the most here on earth, and, in the next moment, he was welcomed home into the heavenly kingdom by the Lord; his grandparents and other loved ones, who had preceded him in death and in resurrection; and by all the saints within the Church triumphant. That thought sustains and comforts me still and gives me the peace that passes all understanding.

And yet, my assurance is informed by more than just wishful thinking. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome some time later than his first epistle to the Thessalonians. After another five or six years had passed by and still Christ had not returned, the Apostle Paul wrote: “For I am convinced that *neither death*, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, *will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39).

Did the Apostle change his mind about the dead in Christ as time passed by? Did Paul receive a new revelation that deepened and expanded his thinking and his hope about the resurrection? I don't know, for sure.

However, I think the Apostle Paul and I would agree on three things. First, we can't know, we don't fully understand the ways of God. Our finite, human minds simply cannot comprehend all of God's will and ways, which are shrouded in mystery. We don't have the complete picture. Our journey to God will take place, not in ways we understand, but in ways known to God.

Second, we trust God and we have hope for our future because of our past and present experiences with God. Our hope in the resurrection isn't based on a sense of reward for our

believing or our behavior. Our hope is based solely upon Christ Jesus, who lived for us, died for us, and rose again for us. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, God shall also raise those who have died in Christ. What God did for Jesus, God shall extend to us. This we know for sure: God longs to be with us, will do almost anything to be near us, will go to any lengths to have us. When Jesus was resurrected, what was the first thing he did after he was raised? He came back to his disciples who had betrayed him. That is the basis of our hope.

We are confident that the God, who has gone to such extraordinary lengths to be close to us in life, shall not cease those efforts in death. Therefore, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We believe that the same God, who pursued us, reached out to us, and sought us throughout our lives, shall not cease to pursue us, reach out to us, and seek us even in death. The end of it all is not death. The end of it all is God's triumphant Yes rooted in the resurrected Lord, who gives us new, abundant, and eternal life on both sides of the grave!

This is the third thing the Apostle Paul and I can agree on: as we prepare to give the Roll Call of the Saints and then come to the table of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we can certainly "encourage one another with these words!" Thanks be to God. Amen.

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