

## Sleeping in Jesus

1 Kings 2:1–4, 10–12; Daniel 12:1–3, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Our text this morning mentions what is known as the rapture of the church: being caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air! There is a lot of speculation about this event. Much of that is unscriptural and drawn from human opinion, not the solid teaching of God’s word. We are going to look more at the rapture next week, but we don’t want to skip over what our text reveals about the death of a Christian. There is much to learn here. We have three points this morning: (1) We must know Christian doctrine; (2) For the Christian, death is like sleep; and (3) We shall rise when Christ comes again. First,

### 1. We must know Christian doctrine.

Paul writes, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep.” The word translated “to be ignorant” means *not to know*. “Not to know” what happens to the dead when they die—or to believe a lie that may sound appealing but is contrary to God’s word—is a serious matter. When the apostle says, “I do not want you to be ignorant,” he is telling us that it is God’s will for us his people to *know* true Christian doctrine.

To understand this, we need to figure out who Paul is writing to. He is writing to the church at Thessalonica. He is writing to *all* the members: the officers, including ministers, elders and deacons that God has called to special service; as well as the common people. He is writing to the whole church, and he says, “I do not want you to be ignorant.” All people—not just the clergy—are to be informed and be taught God’s truth. God’s truth is for all the saints, not just for those who hold special office. God raises up servant leaders in his church—men who love Christ and sincerely want him to receive all the glory. If pastors, evangelists, teachers, ruling elders and deacons seek glory for *themselves*, they are committing a grievous sin. They are not reflecting the Lord himself, who came “not to be served, but to *serve*, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Those who seek glory for themselves are robbing God of the glory that is due to him alone. Officers in the church must never be tyrannical, seeking to hold power over the laity. The godly leader says with Paul, “I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren.” On the other hand, power-hungry rulers fear that the common people might become informed—ignorant people are easier to control.

Some churches discourage Bible reading. They say the Bible is too complicated; the common people cannot understand it, they are likely to draw the wrong conclusions; the common people are not to be trusted with the Bible.

In society at large, would-be gatekeepers want to manage the information that people can access. Opinions that differ from the official narrative are labeled *disinformation*. Yesterday I tried to find an article that I had previously read. When I clicked on the link, it did not work. I waited for a moment, but nothing happened.

It was weird. I tried several search engines and got the same result. Finally, I tried a different browser and was able to access the article. I had accessed that article earlier in the week without any problem, but when I searched for it yesterday I had a lot of difficulty accessing it. Apparently, the powers that be do not want that article accessed.

In a lot of countries in the world public officials do not want their people to learn about Christianity. They are afraid that if people learn the truth about Christianity, they will give up their false religions and become Christians. There are governments that prohibit their people from learning about Christianity. Christianity is considered a threat. That tells us some thing about the power of the truth. Tyrants do not allow the free circulation of opinions.

Jesus said, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” He does not want his people to be ignorant!

Dear people, Almighty God is not threatened by people learning the truth about Christianity. There are no truths in the Bible that need to be concealed from the common man. “Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?”<sup>1</sup> God is not worried that if people learn about election and predestination, they will refuse to become Christians. It is true, as our Confession states, that “the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care,”<sup>2</sup> but that is emphasizing that preachers must teach it accurately. It is not arguing that the laity have no business learning about it. The only way that anyone will ever convert to Christianity and become a lover of God’s truth is by the regenerating action of the Holy Spirit of God. When God the Holy Spirit moves in a person’s heart, he moves that person to love God and love his truth.

Do you love God? Do you love his truth? Do you long to know it better? If so, then use every means within your power to learn it accurately. How can we tell if a teaching accurately reflects the teaching of the Bible? “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>3</sup> If a purported teaching contradicts Scripture at any point, then it is error, not truth, and no preacher has any business preaching it.

Some false teachings are so dangerous that the Bible calls them “damnable heresies”<sup>4</sup> (older translations used this phrase, but newer ones generally say, “destructive heresies”). *Damnable* heresies are falsehoods, that if believed, will

---

<sup>1</sup> Jer. 23:29

<sup>2</sup> WCF 3.2, <https://opc.org/documents/CFLayout.pdf#page=16>

<sup>3</sup> WCF 1.9, <https://opc.org/documents/CFLayout.pdf#page=7>

<sup>4</sup> 2 Pet. 2:1 KJV

damn a person and keep out of heaven. A few examples: to deny the deity of Christ—that the Lord Jesus is God in human flesh; to believe that there are other ways of salvation than through Christ; or to believe that man is basically good and does not need a Savior. These are damnable heresies that, if believed, will keep a man from heaven. Satan the great deceiver desperately wants men and women to swallow these lies.

Paul says, “I do not want you to be ignorant.” Putting it another way, all God’s people must *know* Christian doctrine. You and I must know Christian doctrine (“doctrine” is a fancy word for *teaching*). Knowing Christian doctrine is not just for ministers, elders and deacons. It is for all of us. God wants his people to learn his truth and be educated in the faith. One of the purposes of the church is to teach. God’s people must be taught. It is the *truth* that sets us free. The Bible says that those who long sat in darkness have now seen a great light with the coming of Christ. Christ is the light of the world. Let us each purpose to learn the doctrines of the faith accurately and with conviction.

What Christian doctrine do *you* need to learn better? Talk it over with a knowledgeable Christian brother or one of our elders. Ask if they can recommend resources to help you understand that doctrine better. Let’s each one dedicate ourselves to learn God’s word accurately to the best of our ability. Let each of us—men, women, and children—take advantage of opportunities this church provides: morning and afternoon services, Sunday school, men’s and women’s Bible studies, and periodic Psalm sings, as well as private discipleship training—to learn more about the Christian faith. Our church offers live-streamed services. How many of these do you tune in to? Our website has archived audio and video recordings, as well as sermon manuscripts that can be read and studied. There is also a daily Bible reading calendar—familiarity with the text of Scripture itself will enable you to understand specific doctrines better. On the OPC website there are back issues of *New Horizons* and *Ordained Servant* that are trustworthy and highly recommended. Let us defeat ignorance! Let us teach our own family the truth of God’s word. Second, consider,

## **2. For the Christian, death is like sleep.**

Notice how our text begins: “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep.” In this part of his letter the apostle Paul gives inspired teaching on the subject of death. He refers to death, using the common biblical metaphor of *sleep*. When the believer dies, it is as though his body goes to sleep.

We had it in our 1 Kings text: “So David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David.” The King James Version is more literal here: “So David *slept* with his fathers.” The ESV also has “Then David *slept* with his fathers.” Our Daniel 12 text stated: “Many of those who *sleep* in the dust of the earth shall

awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Our New Testament text uses the metaphor of sleep three times: “concerning those who have fallen *asleep*; . . . those who *sleep* in Jesus; . . . will by no means precede those who are *asleep*.”

The most striking use of this metaphor is in verse 14: “those who *sleep* in Jesus.” Notice the little word “in.” What does it mean “to sleep *in* Jesus”? Calvin explains that it is “*to retain in death the connection that we have with Christ.*”<sup>5</sup> This is an illuminating insight. As Paul writes elsewhere in Romans 6:5, “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.” If you belong to Christ, then, by the Spirit’s power you have been united with him in his death. Again in Romans 8 Paul says, “For I am persuaded, that *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” By the marvelous love of Almighty God you who believe in him have been united to Jesus Christ. Even physical death cannot destroy the connection you have to Jesus. Death cannot separate you from Christ!

Human beings do not like to think about death. It makes us feel uncomfortable. We think that if we use softer expressions to refer to death, it will take away part of the pain. But death is painful. Separation is unpleasant. Even when the deceased was a faithful Christian, he is plainly no longer with us. We miss him! We miss her! We know that Christ promises eternal life. That promise is undoubtedly true. But we miss our loved one! We feel alone. There is a nagging void in our lives. It comforts us that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. Jesus understands our sorrows. He is the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He became man in order to experience death on behalf of his people. The Son of God knows what it is like to live in a world affected by sin. He saw firsthand the effects of the fall. We must be honest: we live in a beautiful world, yet death can never be beautiful. It is intrinsically ugly. There was no death in the Garden of Eden until Adam ate of the forbidden fruit. When Adam sinned, death entered the world. Yet the Bible tells us the words that Jesus will utter at the last day: “Behold, I make all things new!” That is an amazing statement! When Jesus utters those words, there will be no more death, nor sorrow nor crying. There will be no more pain. There will be no more sin. There will be only everlasting *joy*—joy in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has conquered death and brought in life and immortality through the gospel.

Death is mysterious, unknown. None of us have ever died before, so there is naturally a bit of mystery and even hesitation: *Do I really want to do this or not?*

---

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, commentary on 1 Thess. 4:14 (Logos Bible Software)

But the Bible is very clear that “it is appointed unto man once to die.” All of us have an appointment with death—an appointment that we will certainly keep. When we are young, death seems so far away. But even children die. All of us need to be prepared to die. Our text this morning teaches some important truths about death.

People frequently uses euphemisms for death. I took note of some of these in recent obituaries: he or she “passed away,” “went home with the Lord,” “passed away peacefully,” “went to be with her Lord,” “departed this world,” “departed this life to be with her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven,” “went home to claim his eternal reward,” “completed her earthly adventure,” “was called home,” “was called home by his heavenly Father.” These are euphemisms, mild and pleasant words substituted for those that seem harsh or blunt when referring to the unpleasantness of death.

The biblical record is accurate and straightforward: “And he died.” We encounter this phrase eight times in the first genealogy (Gen. 5): “and he died . . . and he died . . . and he died.” The Bible doesn’t attempt to soft-pedal death. It can speak this way because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has conquered death! He died and rose again, to die no more. Because he lives, we too can live. Jesus promised his followers, “Because I live, ye shall live also.”<sup>6</sup> He wasn’t just trying to make us feel better; he was speaking the truth.

But the Bible does use this one word, “sleep,” that seems at first glance to be a euphemism. The phrase “slept with his fathers” is used many times in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles to refer to the deaths of kings. David “slept with his fathers”; so did Solomon, Jeroboam, Rehoboam, Abijam, Asa, Baasha, Omri, Ahab, Jehoshaphat, Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, Joash, Jehoash, Jeroboam, Azariah, Menahem, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh and Jehoiakim—22 kings in all. The word is applied both to those who did what was right in the sight of the LORD (like David, Solomon, Joash and Hezekiah) and to those who did evil in the sight of the LORD (like Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh). It is applied both to those who loved God and those who hated him, to those who faithfully worshipped God and to those who worshipped idols.

When a person dies, it is as though the life goes out of him, and he falls asleep. He is not active anymore. He is not walking around anymore. His body lies there, apparently asleep. All of us will one day experience this, but only those who fall asleep “in Jesus” will return with Christ when he returns to this earth. All others will arise to everlasting torment. The wicked false prophet Balaam, who was hired to curse Israel, said, “Let me die the death of the righteous” (Num. 23:10). But because he never put his trust in the God of Israel, he died without Christ and will

---

<sup>6</sup> John 14:19

spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. Though for one moment he thought, “Let me die the death of the righteous,” he did not seek the God of Israel, and he died in his sins. God, being a righteous God who cannot allow sin into his holy presence, sent Balaam to hell. God remembered his sins, since they were not atoned for by Christ. The book of Revelation observes that Balaam “taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.” At the final day this damning record will be publicly read before God the heavenly judge, and it will be undeniable. Every mouth will be stopped. There will be no excuse. God’s eternal judgment will be perfectly just. The sentence will be read: “Depart from me, cursed one, into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Balaam and all the other cursed dead—including Judas Iscariot, who had the unspeakable privilege of being in the intimate circle of Christ’s apostles, traveling with our Lord day and night for three and a half years, listening to his inspired teaching, observing the mighty miracles which he did, even being allowed to preach his holy gospel—will hear the sentence of doom, “Depart from me,” and will go into everlasting punishment. There will be no second chance. If God were to change his mind and let the wicked into heaven, he would cease to be God—something that can never be.

You and I are sinners and have no hope of heaven in our own strength. We have broken God’s holy law. We have failed to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We are selfish and have failed to love our neighbor as God requires. We have lived selfish, self-centered lives. We have lived for pleasure, in disregard of God. Yet when we were without strength, God the Father sent his eternal Son into the world to take on our human nature and go to the cross to die for his people. He lived a perfect life. In him alone God the Father is well pleased. The religious leaders did not receive him. They considered him a threat. The Son of God endured the cruel taunts and mocking of his tormenters. He went to the cross and died for us, his people. By looking to him in true faith and sincere repentance we are saved. If we confess him with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we shall be saved. We do not need to go to hell. God has provided a way of escape. Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you know that you have no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Then commit yourself to him today. “What must I do to be saved?” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” That is the good news of Christ. It is your only hope. Amen.

Thirdly,

### **3. We shall rise when Christ comes again.**

Our text clearly states that “the dead in Christ will rise first.” The Bible teaches that those who “sleep in Jesus” will awake to life everlasting. This is no euphemism. It is a factual descriptions of what happens when the Christian dies. When Christ returns at the final day, those who sleep in Jesus will awake to life

everlasting, never to die again. Clearly, this is not something that the sinner accomplishes in his own power. When your cold, lifeless body lies in a casket, you are not going to be able to do anything in your own power. The time for acting and doing will have passed. The dead in Christ rise only by the power of God.

At a Christian funeral there are no excessive, immoderate displays of grief. We do not sorrow as others who have no hope. Yes, there are tears. We miss our loved one. But we have hope—hope not in ourselves, but in Christ. We rest in the confidence that God raises the dead. We who sleep in Jesus shall rise to everlasting joy when Christ comes again. That is the gospel. Amen!