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End Times 3 – Saints Triumphant

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 – I Believe in the Resurrection of the Dead

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*I believe in the resurrection of the dead.* We confess it every week in the Apostle's or the Nicene Creed. It's a pillar of our faith; it's what makes Christianity different from any other religion; and it's what we look for in the life of the world to come. We say every week that we believe that the dead in Christ will rise and will live forever, body and soul together... But do we always reflect that in our lives, or do we sometimes just give lip service to those words, while our hearts feel something else?

You know, people who don't know Jesus, they have a lot of ways that they try to deal with the death of a loved one... They might try to ease the pain with alcohol or drugs. They might try to just forget because it hurts too much not to. They might get angry and blame God for doing them wrong, for taking that person away while they still needed them and making their life that much worse because of it. They yearn for comfort, but they don't find any because they look in all the wrong places.

Now maybe you haven't done or thought those things, but have you ever said something like, "They're going to miss out on going to prom, or having kids, or on us growing old together"? Now don't get me wrong, I totally get that those are sad things to miss out on. But sometimes thinking that way can really just make us focus more on the pain of their loss, rather than taking God at his promises that something so much better awaits for them and for all of us. If we say we believe in the resurrection of the dead but our Savior and our hope are out of focus, we can become just the same as everyone else, like we have no hope at all. We can act like this life – and the end of this life – is all there is.

That's what the Thessalonians were struggling with. They were a young congregation full of new converts that the apostle Paul had brought into the faith over about only a month's time. He taught them everything he could about Christianity while he was with them, until persecution forced him to leave town. You know as well as I do that we can spend years learning about our faith and still not know all the ins and outs of it, so it shouldn't be a surprise that they had some blind spots and struggled particularly with this, since it's so far outside of what we know and experience in this world. For the Thessalonians, the resurrection of the dead was something they undoubtedly believed and confessed – but they didn't know how to translate that practically into their lives. What does that mean for us right now?

See, when their loved ones died in the faith, they had real questions. Questions about whether they would see their loved ones again, or whether they would even be able to take part in the resurrection on the Last Day. As Paul told them, they were ignorant of the truth, and that ignorance was destroying their faith. It was making them grieve like people with no hope at all for the resurrection of the dead.

And my friends, that's NOT the way Jesus wants his people to live. He doesn't want us to grieve like those who have no hope, because we *do* have hope – and it is a great and beautiful hope. So Paul wrote this letter to correct their misunderstandings and fill in the gaps. He began by saying, "*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.*" What Paul is saying here is that he doesn't want us to be ignorant of the hope we have. He wants us to be able to grieve – just not the same way that unbelievers do. It's okay for a Christian to mourn the loss of a loved one; it is not as if Christianity and grieving over death are mutually exclusive, as if all mourning is out of place for us. Christ took away the sting of death when he died for us on the cross, but death still hurts here and now – because the way Jesus took away death's sting was by assuring us of the resurrection *to come*.

I mean, Jesus himself wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and he even knew that he was about to raise him back up again! God's promise to one day wipe away all our tears wouldn't be nearly so meaningful if we weren't supposed to have any in this life. Grieving is the price we pay in this sinful world for the privilege to love and to be loved, and grieving makes us long for heaven that much more. It's sad to miss out on our dearly departed while we're still here and they're in heaven with Jesus already, and dealing with the struggles of this life can be much harder without the people we were so close to for support. That's true of everybody.

But here's the difference: that mourning, that sadness, that emptiness is all the people of this world have. But not us. Paul wants to make us absolutely sure of that. Unbelievers may have no hope, but we do. We have real hope for something so much more that comes from Jesus who promised us, "*Because I live, you also will live.*"

Paul says, "*We believe that Jesus died and rose again.*" That's the simplest summary of what we believe about our Savior. That's the central truth of our faith, the crown jewel of Christianity, and everything hinges on it. Jesus died to defeat death. Jesus gave himself over to death so we never have to. In his death there was victory, for him and for all of us, and his resurrection made that a certainty. And Paul says that now the resurrection of believers goes hand-in-hand with Jesus' resurrection. Just as surely as Christ is risen, just as surely as our Savior Jesus left his tomb empty on Easter Sunday, we and all our Christian loved ones are going to come out of our graves one day, too.

That's why Jesus and Paul could take death, that thing that we naturally most fear, and talk about it like something that we want, something that we need, a *precious blessing* that we even long for because in it we're not losing anything – we're gaining everything. Jesus and Paul took death and talked about it like that children's bedtime prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep." Because of what Jesus did for us, now death for a Christian is like walking through your front door, you're finally home after a long, hard day, and all you want to do is climb into your warm, soft bed. See, in death, just like sleep, we have rest, peace, and security in the loving arms of our Savior, and we have the sure promise of a future awakening to a bright, new day and something so much better in heaven.

Yes, we live by faith and not by sight. Despite what our eyes tell us when we sit around someone's deathbed or close someone's casket, despite how ugly and final death looks to us, Jesus' promise stands firm and victorious over it: "*Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*" We have that unique hope that one day we too will rise and be reunited with our loved ones, not just in spirit or sentiment or ideal, but in a real flesh-and-blood existence. We'll not only be able to see grandma and grandpa again, but we'll be able to walk up to them and put our arms around them. We'll be able to hug and kiss our parents and siblings and spouses, and hold our children that we can't in this life.

And the best part? When we rise on that day, Jesus is going to give us new, glorified bodies that won't ever be subject to sin or any of its effects – they won't ever be subject to disease, breakdown, or anything that hurts now or that took those loved ones away in the first place, and we won't have to worry about letting them go ever again. We'll be able to run and jump and laugh and play and do all the things we love that time and injury and age eventually take away from us here, and we are never going to grow frail or weary.

And not only that, but we'll finally be with our Savior who made all this possible. When Jesus blows that final trumpet and sends out his angels to the four winds to gather all the Faithful, all our sorrows and worries, all our doubts and fears will finally be at an end. We'll all live together with Jesus in a perfect new heaven and earth that he's going to create just for us, just like he always wanted it to be. We'll never have to feel that alone-ness or separation ever again, neither from our loved ones nor from our Lord.

"*And so we will be with the Lord forever,*" Paul says. That is the climax of our Christian hope. Perfect unity, perfect fellowship, perfect peace and rest and joy with everyone we want to spend eternity with and never let go of.

That's pretty cool, isn't it? Can't wait for that!... But that's just what our Savior asks us to do for now. Until Jesus comes again, those tears might keep rolling down our cheeks and our hearts might continue to ache. But that's not our only lot in life. That's not the end of it, because we know Jesus is coming, and he promises he's coming soon. He's coming to wipe away our tears, hopeful though they be; and he's coming to take us home, to bring us redemption and the reunion that we have so longed for.

So with trust in that promise, we wait with hope and an eye toward heaven, looking and longing for our Savior's return. Jesus calls us to wait for him with ready hearts, so we can go into the Lamb's heavenly banquet feast together, because with it comes joy and togetherness that will never end and that will be greater than anything we can ever imagine.

And don't overlook the beauty of some of Paul's simplest words: "we," "with," "them." "*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.*" We wait with hope for Jesus to come, because with him he's going to bring all those loved ones we've ever had to say good-bye to. Then our joy is going to be so great that it'll drown out all the sorrow we once knew and it'll be like they never left, and they'll never have to again. That is our certain hope.

And that's the difference between us and the unbelievers – when they shut a casket and put it in the ground, as far as they're concerned, that person's gone forever. But not for us. At a Christian funeral – a Christian Victory Celebration! – it's like we tuck that person into bed and wait for Jesus to wake them up. When morning comes and they open their eyes, the darkness is past and gone and never coming back, and they'll be with Jesus forever.

And my brothers and sisters, whether Jesus comes to us or he brings us to him, know that there's also a place set just for you at the marriage feast of the Lamb. Even now your loved ones that Jesus took home are looking forward to that reunion just like you are. We wait in hope to always be together with Jesus and all the Faithful, when finally he will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more sin or death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.

"I'm just sorry that they'll never get to..." You fill in the blank. But we don't have to think like that anymore, because we know now that they're saints triumphant. For their sake, let's rejoice. They just got to go to the party a little early – and believe me, *they're* not sorry about anything. Right now, they're before the throne of God and they would echo Paul's words: grieve, but hope. And then wait. Wait for it, because it *is* coming, and soon, and your Savior Jesus promises that one day it'll all be worth it. Yes, *I believe in the resurrection of the dead.* Amen.