

### ***Those Who Have Fallen Asleep***

In the name of the Bridegroom whose coming we await with eager expectation, dear friends in Christ: Last week in our worship we observed the Commemoration of the Faithful the Departed. We remembered those people we knew and loved who have transferred their membership from the church militant to the church triumphant and who now rest from their labors. We thanked the Lord for their lives, the love and times we shared together with them, and chiefly for his having brought them to saving faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and for sustaining them in the same until the time they were taken from us. We also considered how best to think about our departed loved ones. We saw that it's not healthy to look back with forlorn longing for days gone by in a futile attempt to keep them with us somehow, as we are sometimes tempted to do; but rather, according to the Scriptures, the Lord would have us remember them by looking forward to that day in the future when all the faithful will be reunited with him in eternal glory. Our memories of our loved ones are to be cherished, yes; but we must never forget that the best and happiest times we will share with them are yet to come. When we think of them, that's where our focus should be.

But whenever the topic of those who have departed comes up, it leads to a number of questions. Where exactly are they? What are they doing? What is their state of existence? What do they know? Are they aware of us? Do they know what's going on in our lives? Are they able to affect or influence us in any way? Is there anything we can do for them? These are some of the common questions I run into.

And in general, it should be said that there are many broad misconceptions out there. Popular images picture the departed as semitransparent spirits sitting on clouds, strumming on harps. They usually have halos on their heads and wings like angels so they can flit about from place to place. This is all nonsense of course. But even faithful Christians will say things that have no basis in Scripture. For example, upon the death of a dearly loved friend, someone will say, "Bob is always with us as long as we remember him in our hearts." Or when a matron of a family dies, you'll hear someone saying to the younger members of the family, "Now Grandma is watching out over us." Or when someone loses a spouse they'll say, "I can still feel their presence with me". Or when a child dies we'll hear, "Now God has a new little angel." We can charitably assume that people who say such things mean well; but each of the statements is inaccurate, and the last thing people in mourning need is false hope and wrong-headed ideas.

Some wrong concepts about the departed are actually taught as church doctrines. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, teach that the dead simply cease to exist. They're gone. It's not resurrection they're waiting for, it's total re-creation. Some ostensibly Christian churches teach "soul sleep": the idea that the dead have no conscious existence. They're basically in a spiritual coma until the dawn of the Last Day. And then there's the doctrine of Purgatory taught by the Church of Rome. This is the notion that the spirits of the faithful dead must undergo suffering to pay the temporal penalty of sins committed in life that were not properly dealt with through the graces of the Church. Only after being purged of these sins through fiery torment are the souls ready to be received into glory. Needless to say, these teachings have no biblical basis and flatly contradict what Scriptures do say.

So, what does the Bible say? Writing to the only recently converted Christians at Thessalonica, Paul writes, "We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, that you may not grieve like others who have no hope." It's pretty clear: Paul

wants us to know the truth about our loved ones who have died – the truth that he knows will comfort and encourage us as we face the sorrow of our losses.

But a little background on these Thessalonian Christians will help us understand the misconceptions they were dealing with. Before coming to faith in Christ, the majority of them were pagan Greeks steeped deeply in Platonic philosophy. In simple terms it means they believed that spirit is good and perfect, and material things are inherently flawed and evil. And to a certain extent, we can understand why they thought this. After all, they connected everything that's unpleasant in life to their physical bodies: hunger, pain, sickness, weariness from toil – these were the things they wanted to escape from. They believed that death was that great escape. Then their souls would be free to return to realm of pure spirit and be subsumed into some kind of single cosmic consciousness in which they lost their own individual identities.

But then along come Paul and his companions teaching about Jesus, and how in him all things are to be restored. At the coming of Christ, the curse on the earth on account of mankind's sin will be reversed. No more pain, hunger, sickness, or lack of anything good: a physical reality in which everything is right and perfect. It was a totally new concept to them. It sounded wonderful. They wanted it.

Unfortunately, Paul and his fellow evangelists weren't able to stay long at Thessalonica. Paul's opponents, the enemies of the Gospel of Jesus, learned that the way to get at Paul was to persecute those who listened to him. Before, they tried attacking him directly, causing him a lot of trouble and pain. But that didn't stop him. Quite the opposite, Paul considered it a blessing to suffer for the sake of Christ. But he was more sensitive about the newly converted. He knew that they didn't yet have the firm ground of faith on which to stand in the face of persecution. And so, when his enemies started to attack the new converts at Thessalonica, Paul withdrew from there to get the heat off of them.

The result was that these new Christians weren't as well grounded in all the aspects of the faith as they should have been. They were sort of half-baked, if you will. To be sure, they had the essentials down. They knew that Jesus, true God and true man, gave his life as the sacrifice for their sins. They knew he rose again from the dead. And they knew that he was coming again to judge the earth and usher in the everlasting kingdom. In fact, Paul had so impressed them about the teaching of Christ's *imminent* return, that is, that he could come back at *any* time, that they thought it had to happen *immediately*; like if not next week, then for sure by the end of the year.

The issue they were dealing with is that in the time after Paul left, some of their number died. And again, superimposing their former misconceptions on their new found faith, they imagined that those who died had lost out. They weren't going to get to experience the wonderful restoration Paul told them about because their souls had already been subsumed into that vast cosmic consciousness. As individuals, they were gone – absorbed into the single spirit. It made them incredibly sad to think that their loved ones had missed out because they had the misfortune to die before Christ's return.

So, now, understanding their misapprehensions, Paul explains to them that those who die with faith in Christ haven't missed out on anything. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." They're not gone. Their spirits as individuals are with Christ, and are very much alive. Their bodies are sleeping. And it's important that Paul uses the word sleep for death in this context. He's emphasizing that the bodies we lay in the grave are going to wake up again. They will be

part of the restoration of all things – no matter how long they've been dead or how much they've deteriorated. For God who called creation into existence with a Word, the matter of raising the dead will be child's play.

Paul goes on to explain that those who have fallen asleep in death are at no disadvantage. "For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." Upon Christ's glorious return, the first order of business will be the grand Reveille, when the trumpet of God sounds and his voice commands those who sleep in the dust of the earth to stand at attention. They will be raised in bodies immortal and incorruptible. The living similarly will be changed. And then all the faithful, those just raised and those who are alive to watch them rise, will be caught up in the air with Christ, removed temporarily from the earth while it's being refurbished and restored to its original pristine state. And then all the saved will inherit the kingdom prepared for them by Christ with whom we will be united in fellowship forever. Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians, and us through them, to encourage each other with these truths. And so we do, for in them is great comfort and hope when we or others mourn the loss of loved ones.

What else can we say about those who have fallen asleep? We don't find it in this particular section of Scripture; but from other places we can piece together a bit more. We know that the souls of the departed are conscious and very much aware of their surroundings. Jesus told the faithful thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." And in his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that he's looking forward to departing this life and being with Christ, which is better by far. We also know that spirits of the dead are even now experiencing some foretaste of their eternal state; that is to say the unfaithful are confined to a place of torment, separated from the light and glory of God, while the faithful are in a place of rest and comfort. There is no indication that they are able to observe we who are living or intervene in our lives in any way. Really, to imagine that they can is to ascribe to them powers that are God's alone. And while I'm dispelling myths, I have to say that people do not become angels when they die. Angels are an entirely different order of being in God's Creation. You can't become an angel any more than you can become a cat or a dog. And to the perpetual question, "Will we know each other in the next life?" I can think of no better answer than the one I once heard from a seminary professor: "What makes you think you'll know less in the next life than you know now? Of course we'll know each other. We'll know each other better and more completely than ever before."

Finally, regarding those who have fallen asleep, one more thing needs to be said. And that is if Christ continues to tarry in order to allow more time for people to come to repentance and faith in his saving Gospel, then it's certain that some or all of us will one day join them. That is, like the ten virgins in today's Gospel lesson, we will fall asleep before the coming of the Bridegroom. Then the question will be, "Did you fall asleep as one who is wise? Or as one who is foolish?" The wise made their preparations before falling asleep. They made sure that oil of their Christian faith was well supplied and ready to burn brightly when the Bridegroom appeared. It means that in the day of grace, while they lived, they continued to feed their holy faith and trust in Christ by staying steadfast in Word and Sacrament and the fellowship of the Church. The foolish did not. They allowed their faith to die of starvation before they fell asleep. And when they woke at the Bridegroom's coming, it was too late. The door to the wedding feast was closed to them forever.

Therefore let us be wise, and let us encourage each other also to be wise, making faithful use of Christ's means of grace while we have the opportunity, sharing the Good News with our neighbors as well – that we and they may be well prepared whenever the Bridegroom comes to awaken those who have fallen asleep in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***