

24th Sunday after Pentecost
“What about the resurrection?”
(1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)
November 12, 2023
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost is from our epistle reading – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.

“13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

So far the text...

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians to encourage these new converts in the midst of persecution, to teach them and guide them in the Christian faith. In the opening verses of chapter one Paul wrote:

“you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. 8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. 9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Thessalonica had a lot of bad influences and Paul was very joyful that God had saved them and they were shining lights to their countrymen. Quickly, here's some background about the Thessalonians.

Paul and Silas came to them on his second missionary journey after he had spent time with Lydia, and then the jailor in Philippi. Paul's time with the Thessalonians was short-lived though. From Acts 17 we hear about how he only spent about three

weeks with them, teaching in their synagogues. Listen to the opening verses of Acts 17.

“they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.”

What happened? There was an uprising and the unbelieving Jews sought out Paul and Silas. So the brethren sent Paul and Silas at night to Berea. Those same Jews, when they heard that Paul was preaching there, followed them and stirred up the crowds against them. So, Paul had to keep moving.

The new converts in Thessalonica were surrounded by heathen practices and violent Jews. Paul feared that they might be tempted to fall away from the faith or give up the faith because of the unbelieving Jews. So, he sent Timothy back to them to continue their instruction in the faith. Timothy reports back to Paul some good news that they are continuing strong in the faith. But there is confusion about a very important subject – what happens after death?

Paul didn't them to be uniformed. The New King James Version uses the word “ignorant”. This word basically means “lacking knowledge”, “uneducated”. Sometimes it can be used as a pejorative or put down when a person should have a basic understanding but doesn't. Paul is not putting them down, but simply saying that they are literally “without knowledge”. The Greek word Paul uses is “agnosis”.

In English, you can see where the word “agnostic” comes from.

Agnosticism is the view or belief that the existence of God, of the divine or the supernatural is unknown or unknowable - that "human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist."

The English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley coined the word agnostic in 1869. Huxley believed that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe."

Yes, science cannot give any knowledge about what happens after death other than the person ceases to exist. Annihilation. End of life. End of story. Hopeless. But what Greek wisdom or modern agnostics cannot teach, God alone teaches through His Word – **“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, (and we do) even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”**

Paul reminds the Thessalonians and all believers that God brings with Him those who die. Where God is, that is where the soul of the believer in Jesus is. So Paul tells the Thessalonians in Chapter 2:

“we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

And the Word of God has a lot to say about what happens after death! We know Psalm 23 so well.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

“Jesus, our Good Shepherd, the One who laid down His life for the sheep, is our companion on the dark, winding road that leads through the valley of the shadow of death. The journey is not optional. Sooner or later each of us, no matter how old or young, will walk that path. This will happen until that day when Jesus comes again—when, at the last trumpet, the faithful will be changed in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor.15:51–52). (What About Death and Dying – Dr. Alvin Barry)

Why is death not fearful for the Christian? Because he or she is never alone. God is with you at every moment. Paul, like Jesus call death a “sleep”. The body sleeps to be awakened. That is what Jesus taught in the today’s parable of the 10 virgins. The bridegroom, Jesus, delayed in coming. Some people will die before Jesus finally returns in judgement. But, as Paul says in the next chapter which we will hear next week:

“9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.”

When Lazarus was sick, Jesus delayed in coming and Lazarus died. Yet, what does Jesus tell His disciples?

“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” (John 11:11)

And that is what Jesus did. For Jesus has the power over death, having conquered death by His death and resurrection. For that reason, He can tell Martha, **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”**

The soul never dies.

“The Scriptures teach that death is the separation of our eternal soul from our mortal bodies. Our bodies rest in the grave, awaiting the final day when soul and body shall be reunited. At the moment of death, our souls, and the souls of all those who die in faith, immediately are in the presence of Christ, and will enjoy His presence, peace and joy until the great day of the resurrection of all flesh.” (What about Death and Dying? – Dr. Alvin Barry)

What about the souls of the unbelievers. Scripture is very clear. ‘For unbelievers, there is the “second death” (Rev. 20:14) in which their souls are immediately in the presence of Satan and immediately begin to suffer the torment of eternal punishment in hell, from which there is no possibility of escape. On the day of judgment, their bodies join their souls in hell.’ (What about Death and Dying? – Dr. Alvin Barry)

The 5 foolish virgins in our Gospel reading died without faith. They died with extinguished lamps. And on judgement day, Jesus explains that there is no time to get oil for their lamps. They are left outside the wedding hall of heaven pleading to come in and receive the answer from Jesus that He doesn’t know them.

Their resurrected bodies join their souls for an eternity in hell. And that is why it is so important to not be without knowledge of the resurrection – Jesus’ resurrection and yours through faith in Him! That is why it is so important to keep your lamps filled with oil of His Word and Sacraments so that you do not fall away in temptation or persecution. How do you keep your lamps filled? By hearing the Word of God in His house and receiving His very body and blood in with and under the bread and wine for your forgiveness.

How is Christ’s body really present? We can’t explain it by science any more than we can explain what happens after death by science. But Jesus says it is so. “This is My body and blood”. And He gives it to us to forgive us and keep us strong in the faith until His coming. Why would you not want to keep your oil lamp full? Why would you not want to receive the Lord’s Supper often as the early Christians did and our fathers of the Reformation did on every Lord’s Day? Why would you not want to go to battle each and every week strengthened by His Word and Sacrament so that you too, like the Thessalonians would be a bold shining light in our area? That you too would be ready and willing to teach the uninformed and the unknowing about what truly happens after death.

And Paul does just that, doesn’t he? He tells us the word of the Lord that we can absolutely trust!

“5 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” What a joy awaits you believer in Jesus!
“A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14:19)

What should you do with these words of life and resurrection?

18 Therefore comfort one another with these words. Amen.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)