

What happens when you die?

Today we're going to talk about "death". It's a topic that some of us probably don't like talking about. We're even reluctant to use the language of death, and so we come up with all sorts of euphemisms.

- passed away;
- gone;
- pushing up daisies;
- kicked the bucket;
- succumbed to / lost their battle with... ;
- gave up the ghost;
- shuffled off his mortal coil;
- bought the farm...

I had to put our German Shepherd down last year, and someone said to me (a couple of months later), "Did you lose Grube?", and I said, "No, I didn't lose her. I'm pretty sure she's right where I buried her." ...

Not many people are comfortable talking about death. And the reluctance to talk about death, causes all sorts of problems for the families who have to sort out an estate after their loved-one has died... simply because they didn't want to think about their death ahead of time.

And when it comes to death, some folk really worry about it – it scares them... But then, there's others, where it doesn't seem to worry them at all.

And I **wish** I could say, "It's the Christians who **don't** fear death, and everybody else does..." But that's not always true.

It was Covid that really brought it home for me... There were Christians (particularly elderly Christians), who all of a sudden, were faced with the possibility that they might die a lot sooner than they thought they would... People in their 70's who expected to have another good 10-20 years left, were all of a sudden faced with the reality that "If I catch this new virus, I could be dead in a week" ...

And some folk I came across, were dreadfully afraid... And it wasn't only the older folk. There were younger ones who were terrified that the vaccine might kill them...

And for me, none of this made sense: for Christians to be so terrified of death?

Why **do** some Christians have the fear of death???

Well, we find the answer to that, in today's Bible reading. And it basically boils down to "what we don't know". Christians fear death most, when we do not know what death holds. Or even if we do know it (in our heads), if our faith isn't shaped by what we know, that's when we fear...

Sadly, the church is sometimes, of little help in this area, because nobody wants to talk about death. I mean, who wants to come to church and get all morbid & drear because the Pastor brought up the topic of death????

We want to:

- come and be happy;
- be rejoicing;
- thinking nice thoughts;

- create an atmosphere of life and vibrancy – an atmosphere where a first-time-visitor wants to come back again, next week...

and the jolly preacher upsets the apple-cart by talking about “death”...

Well, the plan for today (my cunning plan), is we’re going to talk about death, but there’s nothing morbid or drear about death (at least for a Christian, that is...)... And so, my plan today, is to share with you, the **joy** that death is, for a Christian...

Christians fear death most, when we do not know what death holds. And so, Paul says: ¹³ ... **we do not want you to be uninformed** about this.

And rather than making a euphemism for death, he makes a **contrast**. He makes a contrast, of what death means for a Christian, as opposed for what it means for a person, who is **not** a Christian. He makes a contrast between **Christian hope**, and pagan despair...

Essentially what he says, is: “I’m going to tell you about what death means for those who are in Christ, because we do not want you to **grieve as others do who have no hope**”

As Christians, we have a joyful, expectant hope.

Now, the Biblical concept of “hope” is **nothing** like “I hope I’m going to win the Gold Lotto today”, *because do you know*

what your chances of winning Gold Lotto are? 1 in 8,145,060 (Div1). The odds aren't that great, are they... But those odds are a bit better than PowerBall. The odds of winning 1st division in PowerBall is 1 in 134,490,400ⁱ.

So, if you hope to win Gold Lotto / PowerBall, all I can say is "Good luck with that" ...

But our **Christian** hope – the odds of our Christian hope, is 1:1...

If your hope is in Jesus Christ – if we bank on it – if we surrender our whole life to Jesus, we cannot lose... The hope that a Christian has, is sure and certain.

So, what is the hope we have?

Well, Paul refers to Christians who have died, as “**those who are asleep**”. Now, I don't think he's using another euphemism. He's telling us something important about death.

For a Christian, death isn't something to be afraid of, and death isn't permanent. For a Christian, the experience of death should be as relaxed as falling asleep and waking up again.

When I go to bed at night, I'm not terrified of what it's going to be like when I wake up. It is natural and it is easy. (In fact, it annoys my wife how quickly and how easily I do go to sleep). I go to sleep. And I wake up in the morning. I do that every night. Nothing to fear.

Now, does this mean that death is **like** sleep – that in death, there is no conscious existence... And so when I die, it's like going to sleep, and then I won't know anything else until after the resurrection? Is that what it's like?

I don't think so. When it comes to death, we're not given all the information. I think God wants it to be a bit of a surprise for us (but for a Christian, it's going to be a good surprise).

But in the Scripture, there are hints, that we **will** have a conscious existence, and that as soon as I die, I'll be taken straight to the arms of Jesus. (What an encouragement that is).

- Jesus said to the thief on the cross **“Luke 23:43 today you will be with me in paradise”**.
- When Jesus was dead, He wasn't unconscious – He was busy. We're told that he spent some of that time preaching to spirits in prison from the days of Noah. 1Peter 3:19.
- Jesus said that God is not the *God of the dead but of the living.* **Matthew 22:32**
- One time, He told a parable to illustrate a point, about a rich man, and a poor man (Lazarus) who both died, and in death, Lazarus found comfort, and the rich man pain.
- V17 of today's reading, it's telling us that **we will always be with the Lord.**

These are all indicators that, for those who are in Christ, as soon as we die, we're taken straight to the arms of Jesus...

Why would we fear death??? And we will know that we are with Him. And we will glory in His presence.

The **act** of dying will be like falling asleep. Nothing to fear. When I die, to those who are left behind, Michael will be as dead as a door-nail, but in the presence of Christ I live.

So, what does Paul base this on? Well, if we are “in Christ”, it’s all based on the death and the resurrection of Jesus. He refers to Christians as “falling asleep”, but **Jesus** went through the full trauma of **death**. Jesus went through the trauma of death, so that it would be different for those He came to save.

For a Christian, the whole concept/experience of death, has been transformed. And the contrast that he paints here, is quite blunt.

“Christians do **not** grieve”.... No, he doesn’t say that. We **do** grieve,, but we grieve differently. We grieve for ourselves, because we’re not going to see our loved ones for a while... He says **that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope**.

In Christ, we grieve differently, because we have a hope. We have a hope, that an unbeliever does **not** have.

When I left my job and went to Bible College, to train to be a minister, I was sometimes asked, “What’s your biggest fear about going into the ministry?” And my answer then is the same as today “Being asked to take a funeral of someone who

I know is not a Christian. How can I bring the family a word of hope when there is no hope?

*And without exception, when I meet with a family of a person who had no faith, and who outright rejected God, they try to **create** a hope for themselves. They want to tell me, “He was really a good man – he wasn’t that bad – he’ll be right. God will let him in...” And all I can do in the funeral is:*

- care for the family, and love them; and
- to commit the person into God’s hands;
- give thanks that **I** am not their judge; and then

- take the opportunity to preach a gospel message.
To present the saving grace of Jesus that brings eternal life, for those who **do** believe in Him... And I pray that those who hear, will respond to Jesus and be saved, so that when their day comes, **they** will have hope.

But a funeral of a **Christian** is a very different matter. When my Grandfather died. *I was privileged to visit him a few days before he died. And, as he lay on his death bed, he and I planned his funeral together. And he was joyful. And I said “Grandad you seem to be ok about dying”. And he said “Oh Michael, how could I not be... I’m bound for glory.”*

You see, when a Christian dies:

- yes, we will grieve;
- yes, we will miss that person terribly.

But we do not grieve as others do who have no hope.

When:

- the final prayer is said; and

- the dirt has been sprinkled; and
- the mourners have paid their respects and driven away to the wake

- When the little tip-truck (filled with the excavated soil) backs up, and tips the dirt on top of the coffin,

we know:

- that no timber box;
- no depth of soil;
- no power of death

will hold them down.

And “goodbye” is not forever.

we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Now, at this point, we realise that Paul isn't really writing about death. He's writing about something much bigger than that:– the return of Jesus. And he's addressing a concern that those who have died, might miss out on the return of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians, is one of the earliest books of the Bible to be written... And nobody knew, how long it would be until Jesus returned. The teaching of Jesus, is to be ready. He could come at any moment. And Paul doesn't say that the coming of Jesus was imminent, but like all Christians, he was hoping it was. In every age, those who love Jesus, live as if He could return at any moment (and we fervently hope that He does)... And at this point, it's nearly 2000 years.

But for the early church, as Christians began to get older and die; and some of them were martyred / murdered for following Jesus... And I suspect there might have been a bit of FOMO setting in....

Do you know what FOMO is? Fear Of Missing Out... What about those who have already died? Are they going to miss out on the return of Jesus?

No way. They're not going to miss out. They're going to have a front-row seat. **through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.**

And what Paul repeats here, is the teaching of Jesus. **Some** of it is recorded in Matthew 24, but there's a lot of Jesus' teaching that never got written down in the Gospels. I think it was John who said, "If we wrote down everything Jesus said, all the books in the world wouldn't contain it."....

But this is what he says: Those who are still alive when Jesus returns, aren't going to be only ones there for Jesus' return. He says: **the dead in Christ will rise first.**

V16, I've heard described as "the noisiest verse in the Bible".

¹⁶ 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.

It's going to be noisy alright. It's going to be a **cry; command; voice of an archangel** (not just any angel – an **archangel** (a big powerful one)); **with the sound of the trumpet of God**. All trumpets are loud. Imagine how loud God's trumpet is.

It'll be loud enough to wake the dead. And it will.

I don't know where people get the idea of a "secret rapture" from... Coming out of the US, there is a relatively new teaching, and because it's come out of the US, in some spheres, it's becoming the most popular teaching, (It's something that appeals to the flesh). It's called the "Pre-Tribulation Rapture". It's the belief that before the big trouble/persecutions begin, Jesus is going to secretly snatch all the Christians out of the world, and everybody else is going to be wondering, "Oh, I wonder where all those Christians are gone... Must be a convention somewhere."

I don't know how anyone can read a passage like this, and believe that Jesus is going to suck all the Christians out of the world, and things are going to keep going...

Everything happens together and **quickly**. The Lord **descends** (this is the return of Jesus). And in V17, we're given an image of the force and the suddenness of the irresistible power of God. The Greek word (that I'm not going to try to pronounce) (because I can't), means to firmly and quickly, to **seize/snatch away**...

At the sound of the cry & the trumpet, those who are alive, will be snatched away **with** the ones who are raised. **will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air**

God is supreme. He is undefeated. And when God decides to bring this age to a close, He will.

And so, we will always be with the Lord. Is that an encouragement for you? Paul says: **V¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.**

Have we been doing that? Have we been reminding one another about:

- the return of Jesus?
- even if we die, we go to be with Him; and
- we won't miss out on the coming of Jesus;
- we will be raised, and
- together with the living, we will be with Christ, forever.

What a wonderful encouragement.

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

For Christians, the whole concept of death, has been transformed. We do not grieve (in the way that people of the world grieve), because we have a **hope** that they do not have.

And so, we are **not** fearful of death. Jesus died and rose again, to conquer death.

And even if we die before Jesus returns, there is no FOMO. There is no Fear Of Missing Out. Because the dead will rise first, and all of us together, will be snatched-up to meet our Lord, Who has descended from Heaven.

But I need to highlight 2 very important words here. They come in V16. “in Christ” Those are in Christ will rise...

Do you remember the way Paul addressed this letter? To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

What a joy; What a peace; What an encouragement...

But the joy I have as I consider the return of Jesus, is also accompanied with a level of sadness. It's a sadness:

- for those who are not in Christ;
- for those who have no hope;
- because I know that the very next chapter, is about the Day of Judgment.

When Jesus returns, there **is** great joy for those who are in Christ, but it will also be a Day of wrath for those who reject Jesus...

And so, we are greatly encouraged by the grace and peace we have because we are in Christ... Stand firm in your faith, and have no fear of death...

But because we love our neighbour, we want them to know Jesus too...

Paul, Silas and Timothy, risked their lives every day, to proclaim the message of Grace and peace, in the Name of Jesus... And this is **our** calling.

Passionate Disciples of Jesus are not content to sit back, confident in our **own** blessed assurance. We strive to introduce others to Jesus, so they also, share this same glorious hope.

we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.qld.gov.au/community/getting-support-health-social-issue/gambling-harm-support/gambling-winning-odds>