

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 *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.* ¹⁴ *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.* ¹⁵ *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.* ¹⁶ *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* ¹⁷ *After that, 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.* ¹⁸ *Therefore encourage each other with these words.*

Dear friends in our Savior,

You've heard the phrase: "Knowledge is power". This means the one who is in the know holds certain power over those who are not. Having knowledge about a given subject can give you an advantage over others in certain situations who do not have that knowledge. This is true in the process of negotiating a price or a contract. If you have knowledge about the situation the other doesn't, you have an advantage in the negotiation. Having more knowledge than your competitor gives you an edge in this very competitive business climate that we live in today. It may not be what you know but who you know that can give you a big jump on landing a job.

It is this concept of knowledge is power that Paul applies to the subject of death today in our text. Today, the church celebrates "Saints Triumphant." When we are standing at the casket of a loved one, when that casket is shut, when it is lowered into the grave, when the vault cover is placed over it and dirt on top of it—this hardly seems like a triumphant moment. It certainly doesn't lead the average person to hold a celebration party or to rejoice in triumph. Perhaps more fitting of the situation would be words like: despair, helpless, hopeless, sorrow, final. When we are held to know only what our 5 senses tell us about death, we find only overwhelming grief and helpless despair.

But knowledge is power. We can't escape death. As uncomfortable as it is for us to talk about or think about, we still can't avoid it. So better to educate ourselves with knowledge about death to help us better face it. What brings hope when it comes to death is knowledge. The knowledge from God about death that only Jesus can bring to us lifts us out of the despair of ignorance and encourages and builds us up. Today, we have a great opportunity to be built up and encouraged with the knowledge of our God without the emotional strains or trauma of a funeral or the death of a loved one. Today, God seeks to influence our view of death by seeing it through his eyes and the sacrifice of Jesus. This is what brings us hope. This is what gives us power over grief and despair and builds us up as the people of God. **Knowledge is Power.**

How many people in our world have no hope when it comes to death! To many people who are wandering around in ignorance, death is it. There is nothing after death. The soul ceases to exist and that person is gone forever. Some may talk about a nebulous place called heaven. Some may hope or wish for that kind of a place. But so many people stand at the casket of their loved ones with no solid knowledge or certainty of the future. The only hope to which so many hold is to have a big extravagant funeral to "honor the dead." They spend loads of money on fancy caskets and tons of flowers claiming to honor the dead and internally they are simply trying to ease their consciences and soothe their grief. Their only source of comfort is to hold a long service where person after person gets up to tell funny and personal stories about the deceased, hoping that these stories will help the loved one to be with them longer. But what hope does that truly give? This gives no hope for the future. It helps in the short term. People can laugh together as they remember the good times. They can treasure the good things that were done or the legacies that were left. But no matter how great or how many great things were done, in the end the family and friends must still face the reality that their loved one is gone. If the only knowledge and hope that you have are the memories that are left, that brings nothing but grief and pain. It can't cover the big black hole that is left in your heart and life. It can't cure the sadness and despair and helplessness that is felt. That lack of knowledge brings only ongoing sadness.

This is what the Christians in Thessalonica were facing. These young Christians seemed to have a difficult time discarding some of the old heathen concepts concerning the dismal pagan funerals they were used to and the hopeless heathen thoughts about death and the future. These Christians dearly hoped to see the return of Christ on the last day and when they instead saw their loved ones dying before this happened, they were deeply disturbed. They thought that those who had died already would miss Christ when he came in all his glory. You can imagine the type of distress and sadness that ignorance was causing them.

So Paul shared with them the knowledge that God gives concerning death to encourage and build them up. "*We don't want you to be ignorant,*" Paul said and then went on to enlighten them. Jesus wasn't going to leave behind those for whom he had died. Those who had fallen asleep in him were going to be brought with Jesus when he comes. All of what Paul describes will happen in a flash, the twinkling of an eye. It will be almost simultaneous: the dead in Christ will rise first to be reunited with their souls and stand before the Lord with those who are living at the time. Those who lived in Christ will be found righteous before God through the sacrifice of Jesus and will be taken to live with the Lord forever! What comfort this knowledge must have brought to the Thessalonian Christians. Now they had power over their grief. Their despair was all for naught. They had no reason to worry. They could grieve, but now do so with hope. Whether dead or alive, those

who believe in Jesus as their Savior will participate in the glorious and triumphant return of Christ on the last day.

This is the triumph of the saints! While death may seem to have won and seem to have conquered, it did not. On the last day the dead will be raised. The bodies that were buried as perishable in Jesus will be raised imperishable. The body that once was subject to death will never be subject to death again. Death has no victory over the Christian because it has already been conquered in Christ. Today, God again shares this knowledge with us to encourage and strengthen us as we face the reality of death in our world.

Death is tough for us. Deep down we know that everyone will face death one day and that all of us will one day die. Yet we live under the facade that it will happen to everyone but us or our loved ones. But death comes. It is tough because we know what brings death and what we deserve at death. Death isn't a natural thing, in other words, God didn't intend death from the beginning. Death came into the world because of sin. Death is a punishment and a consequence of sin. We fear death because we know it comes only to those who sin. And we know that what we deserve for sin is not just physical death, but eternal death. This is what makes death so frightening. The greatest consequence of Adam and Eve's sin is death—separation not just of the soul from the body, but of the soul from God. The Bible tells us that by nature, all people know this. We all know that there is a god and that we have sinned against this god and deserve punishment. But if that is all we know, our lack of any further knowledge brings fear, hopelessness and despair—as it does to so many in our world.

God's revelation of Jesus to us in Scripture gives us a totally different view of death. No longer is death a punishment—Jesus was punished for our sins. Now death is a triumph. As Paul describes death in our text, he calls it a sleep—and he's not just trying to soft peddle something. Death for the Christian is really just a sleep, where we close our eyes to this earth and open them to heaven. Luther once wrote about this new perspective about death: "One must look upon a Christian death with different eyes, not the way a cow stares at a new gate...but by learning to speak and think of it as the Scriptures do and not considering deceased Christians to be dead and buried people. To the five senses that is the way it appears. As far as they can lead us, it brings only woe. Therefore go beyond them and listen to what St. Paul says here, that they are sleeping in Christ and God will bring them with Christ." Here's the foundation of our hope: Jesus died and rose again and he promised that he will bring with him all those who have fallen asleep in him. This is where we find our solid and sure certainty. Death doesn't mean that we miss out on the triumph of Jesus. At the end, all believers will see, hear and participate in the joy and glory of his blessed event.

Think about the implications of this knowledge! Think of the power we now hold over fear when it comes to death! We don't need to fear putting our heads down on the pillow of death and falling asleep. Jesus will wake us up to a glorious and eternal day! We don't need to worry or fear as we stand at the casket or grave of a loved one. Our good-bye is not final. We are only saying, "I'll see you later at the resurrection!" Not only is our loved one's soul living with Jesus, but they have Jesus' guarantee to participate in the resurrection triumph on the last day. Paul isn't telling us, "Don't grieve." Rather he is saying, "Don't grieve like the rest of men. Grieve with hope!"

That's what we have as Christians as we face death, and it doesn't matter if it is our own death, the tragic and sudden death of a friend or loved one, or the death of an aged Christian. What better way is there for us to encourage our fellow Christians at the death of their loved ones than to share with them the knowledge that Jesus reveals about death for a Christian. Too often we don't know what to say so we just say, "I'm sorry." Even the pagans say that. That won't help to give them power over their grief or sorrow. How about sharing with them the hope you have in the great triumph of the saints won and given through Jesus? How much better to say, "I know that this hurts, but what a great promise Jesus makes that your loved one will rise with him one day and you will see them again at a blessed reunion with God in heaven." Or, "how great the promises of God that since he died and rose he promised that your love one will one day rise to live with him also. "

Ignorance about death and dying brings only helplessness and despair. This knowledge from God gives us power over grief and sadness and ultimately over death and us brings hope, comfort and encouragement. The saints will triumph, even in death. Be encouraged with these words from our God. Use them to encourage each other. Be watchful as you wait for the triumph that will come. Indeed, knowledge is power. Amen.