

Resting . . .In Light of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

My father was strangely attracted to graveyards. As a boy, I would meet him at the train station on cold winter evenings and walk home with him. Our route took us by the local graveyard, and my father always insisted on walking through it on the way home. As we walked, he would tell me stories of goblins, demons and ghosts. One night when we saw what seemed to be a glow coming from behind one of the tombstones he told me that a group of ghosts were engaged in counting out and sharing the bones of the dearly departed! My father's love of graveyards has so affected me that even today I rarely go by one without visiting it. In Paris last year a friend and I toured a magnificent 16th century graveyard where many of the great authors and artists of France are buried. It was wonderful to see the artistically sculpted tombstones and death masks. We had a great time doing so, and I savored so many memories of my own father. I even thought to myself, "Dad, look where I am! Can you believe I'd ever get to visit such a great cemetery?"

My father's delight in taking me through graveyards has left me with one tendency I would rather not have, however. Not only am I drawn to death and graveyards, paradoxically, even as a Christian, I have long feared death. Many times through the years I have woken up at night, fearfully contemplating death. I have argued with God on those occasions, reminding him that I didn't ask to be born in the first place, and now that I felt I was about to die I didn't appreciate that one bit.

Death, of course, is one thing we all will eventually have to face. (All of us, that is, except some fortunate ones who will not have to, as we will see.) I have seen two of my good friends die, the first a couple of years ago, the second this year. While I was standing at the bedside of my first friend just before he died, he said to me, "I wish you could see what I see. It's so beautiful." I almost wanted to crawl into bed with him and share his experience. My other friend who died a few months ago told me once that he too felt anger well up inside when he thought of his own death. This man had a zest for life. He was a godly Christian who really savored life. When I visited him in his home a short time before he died, he was at rest. He had a sense of quietness about him. I asked him how he felt, and he replied, "Wonderful." Considering his view of death which he had shared with me earlier in his life, I found it hard to relate to what he said.

As I studied this passage from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, however, I became so excited over what it has to say about life and death that I found myself saying to God, "I'm willing to try death. Your Scripture has so changed my heart about life and death, I'm willing to try it." If you have struggled with death and dying, be encouraged, because the word of God has much encouragement for you. Today we will talk about resting in light of Christ's second coming; not fearfully anticipating death, but resting in the knowledge that through the power of his resurrection we too will inherit eternal life and rest in his presence forever.

Paul, who was accompanied by Silas and Timothy, wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians from the city of Corinth, which he visited during his second missionary journey. The Thessalonians were suffering much persecution and affliction because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But Paul's word to them was "we speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith amidst all the persecutions and afflictions which you endure." He encouraged them by saying it was only right for God to repay with affliction those who were afflicting them, and in turn to bless them, the afflicted, "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire."

The key to the second letter to the Thessalonians lies in the first two verses of chapter 2:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure

or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Verse I speaks of two separate events: first, "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ 'and secondly, "our gathering together to Him." Stage one is called in Scripture "the day of Christ 'as it has to do with events concerning Christ's spiritual children. In this event, the Lord will appear to believers only (he will not be seen by the unbelieving world). This is when Christ will return to gather all the saints who have died in him, together with all living Christians who are on the earth. "In the twinkling of an eye," Christians will receive their glorified bodies and join Jesus for his second visible return to earth.

The second stage is what Scripture calls "the day of the Lord ' referred to by Paul in this letter as "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is when the whole world will see Jesus returning to earth, together with his saints and his "mighty angels in flaming fire." Every eye shall see him as he comes to judge the nations and establish his divine rule on earth.

Today I want to look at a section of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (verses 13 through 18 of chapter 4), so as to discover further insight into what the apostle means by the words "our gathering together to Him," in the key verse we have already quoted. It appears that the new Christians in Thessalonica were wondering what would be the fate of their believing family members who had already died when the Lord Jesus returned again for 'our gathering together to Him." They wondered if they would miss his glorious return to earth, and the privilege of reigning with him in righteousness.

Paul therefore takes up these questions in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica. Seeking to calm their restlessness over this issue, he encourages them by saying,

1. We Are Resting in Our Resurrected Lord 4:13, 14

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Paul highlights four things in these verses. First, he says, Christians will not always sleep. This word "sleep" must be taken to symbolize physical death. It speaks of the mortal body_but not the spirit and soul_of a child of God finally at rest following his earthly journey. We find references to this word in both the Old and New Testament. In a time of trouble the psalmist wrote, "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God. Enlighten my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death." Daniel said, ". . . and many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awaken, these to eternal life" (Daniel 12:1). Paul preached to the Jews, "David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid among his fathers" (Acts 13:31). In death, it seems as if the dead person has fallen asleep. He is oblivious of activity, conversation, etc. But the spirit does not die. Christians and non-Christians alike inherit eternal life. In physical death, the spirit and soul depart out of time and enter eternity.

The second thing the apostle points out is that Christians have no need to grieve over the loss of their believing loved ones. While they are free to weep over the death of their loved ones in Christ they should not mourn in despair that they will never see them again. Non-Christians, on the other hand, face an eternity of separation and alienation from God. Lord Byron, who early in life abandoned himself to the pursuit of pleasure, wrote a year before his death at the age of 36:

**My days are in the yellow leaf.
The flowers and fruit of love are gone.
The worm, the canker and the grief
Are mine alone.**

The third thing the apostle points out is that Christians are not without hope as are "the rest:' a term he uses for non-believers. While Christians" exult in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2), non-Christians live lives of anxiety and uncertainty. Describing the Gentiles of his day to the church at Ephesus, Paul said, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to

the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in th, world" (Ephesians 2:12). Words written on the tombstones of "strangers to the covenant" are sometimes very revealing. An epitaph on an ancient tomb in the catacombs of Rome reads, "No Hope:' Another from the first century says, "I was not. I became. I am not. I care notl," Catullus, the first century B.C. poet wrote, "When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep."

But Christians, Paul says, are very much different. They have a living hope. Take verse 14: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again . . ." The resurrection of Jesus forms the basis of the certain hope of Christians. "He died for our sins according to the Scriptures:' the Bible says. and he was buried, according to the Scriptures, and he rose again from the dead. That is the gospel, the good news of Christianity, Paul's message to the Jews was, "We preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, "Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee" (Acts 13:32, 33). Writing to the Romans, the apostle said, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord. and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved . . ." Truly, the resurrection of Christ is the basis of the Christian hope. That is what Peter wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3).

Along these lines, writing about death in a recent book, Billy Graham says,

The torturing, tormenting fear of death is a condition that is perfectly normal for anyone who has never come to Christ. Death is an experience from which people instinctively shrink. Yet for the Christian the fear is removed. He has the assurance that the sins for which he would be judged have been dealt with, whereas the non-Christian has no such assurance. I do not look forward to the prospect of dying, but I do look forward to death itself. It will be a glorious release. It will be the fulfillment of everything I have ever longed for. The Scripture says, "In Thy presence is fullness of joy. At Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11).

Finally, Paul goes on to say in verse 14, " . . . even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." God the Father sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins (John 3:16). God the Father raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 3:15, 4:10). And God the Father will be the one who will raise from the dead all who have died placing their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and bring them with his Son at the second visible coming of Jesus. Remember that two different resurrections are spoken of in Scripture. The resurrection of the righteous will take place at our Lord's invisible presence (I Cor. 15:53), while the resurrection of the wicked will take place following the millennium (the great white throne of judgment) (Rev. 20:11-15).

Until that day when Jesus returns, Christians should be resting in the knowledge of their own resurrection, which will come to pass because he first was resurrected. If we are resting, we may be assured that,

2. We Will Rest in His Eternal Presence 4:15-18

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, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. 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 .Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Here Paul amplifies what he has said in the preceding verses, offering comfort to the Thessalonians who have suffered the loss of loved ones, and saying that they will not miss out on the glory and the joy of the return of Christ and his millennial reign.

In I Corinthians 15, a companion passage to this section in I Thessalonians, Paul gives the sequence, what we might call the order of the resurrection. He says, ". . . Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep . . . For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own

order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at his coming, then comes the end . . . " Christ is, in Paul's words, "the first fruits:' this is a reference to the feasts of the Jews. All first fruits, whether they were children, animals, wheat, grapes, honey, whatever, were sacred to the Lord. Jeremiah referred to Israel in symbolic fashion as the first fruits of God's harvest. Paul called believing Jews the first fruits of the Jewish people. James referred to Christians as the first fruits of God's creation. John in Revelation called followers of the Lamb of God the first fruits of God. And, as we have seen in I Corinthians. Christ is the "first fruits" of those who sleep, and thus the guarantee of the coming harvest of the resurrection, which includes you and me. Because he rose from the dead, we can be confident that we too will rise from the dead. Through the ages, many people have been raised from the dead only to die again. But here Paul is talking about resurrection from the dead to glorification, when one will receive his new body. Jesus Christ, therefore, is the first to be raised from the dead, the "first fruits."

Paul then goes on to deal with two groups, "those who have fallen asleep in Jesus," and those who are alive at the coming of our Lord. Here is what Jesus said about the first group: "Truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and those who hear shall live . . . Do not marvel at this for an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice and shall come forth, those who did good deeds to a resurrection of life, and those who committed evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." The apostle Paul describes this event in I Corinthians 15, "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and this mortal man must put on immortality" (15:51-53).

When a Christian dies, of course, what dies is his body. but he receives something far greater in return_a glorified body, like our Lord's. But that new body will in some very significant way identify with his physical body. When Jesus was resurrected, he had a glorified body, yet he retained the physical scars of the crucifixion on his person. He taught his disciples, ate with them, appeared and disappeared at will, etc. As Paul says, "this mortal man must put on immortality." In some way, we glorify God in our bodies, and it seems he desires to use part of us in the new glorified state.

The question remains, however, "Where are those who have fallen asleep in Jesus?" The physical bodies had been put into the ground, buried at sea, or scattered to the four winds. Their souls and spirits were not captured in some form of soul- sleep, waiting for Christ's return.

Jesus himself was pointing up the truth of this when he said. "Regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' [although these men had lived hundreds of years earlier!. He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. . . " Those who have "fallen asleep in Christ" are in the presence of God. That is why Moses and Elijah could appear in physical form together with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. As we have already noted, Jesus himself appeared and disappeared at will following his resurrection from the dead. He was always present but not always visible. Finally, of course, we have Paul's wonderful promise, ". . . to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Thus when a Christian "falls asleep," he passes from the realm of time and space into the realm of pure spirit. We remember Steven's wonderful words just before he died, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The Christian passes out of time into the realm of timelessness, the eternal "now," into the very presence of God, the eternal "I Am." What a comfort are the wonderful words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die."

Arthur Custance, who recently "fell asleep" in Christ, has written extensively on this concept of time and eternity. Here is part of what he wrote in his essay, "Time Contrasted with Eternity in Scripture":

As each child of God passes into glory, he therefore experiences no death nor the slightest pause in consciousness, nor even any sense of departure from the loved ones who remain. For him, the time that must elapse till they too "follow" is completely absent. They depart

with him. Is it any wonder that men can die joyfully in the Lord and show no sadness in "leaving their loved ones behind"?

Now, this can be carried a little further. The experience of each saint is shared by all other saints, by those who have preceded and those who are to follow. For them all, all history, all intervening time between death and the Lord's return, is suddenly annihilated so that each one finds to his amazement that Adam, too, is just dying and joining him on his way to meet the Lord: and Abraham and David, Isaiah and the Beloved John, Paul and Augustine, Hudson Taylor and you and I—all in one wonderful experience meeting the Lord in a single instant together, without precedence and without the slightest consciousness of delay, none being late and none too early.

What a glorious hope the Christian has! And what a comfort the words of Paul were to the Thessalonians in that first century day, as they are to us today, "that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope."

Thus we discover that Christ is the "first fruits" of the resurrection, and he is followed by those who are "asleep" in Jesus. Now we come to the group "who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord." Verse 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.

The key word here is the word "caught up." It means to be seized, to be snatched away by force, to be helpless to resist. We have an example of this kind of thing in the case of Philip the evangelist when he witnessed to the Ethiopian in the desert. After Philip had shared the gospel with this man and baptized him, Acts records, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away." That is what will happen to those who are alive when Christ returns, when he descends but does not touch the earth. The dead in Christ together with Christians remaining on earth will be "caught up together . . . to meet the Lord in the air." Notice there is no mention of Jesus coming to the earth in judgment, nor is there any mention of the resurrection of the wicked. That will come later. Meanwhile, in this invisible return, Jesus will be coming for his own. In Paul's wonderful description, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . ." . . . and thus we shall always be with the Lord."

Revelation gives us the answer as to where we shall be going "in the twinkling of an eye." Rev. 21:1-7:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them,

and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

And He said to me, "It is done.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.

"He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son."

Further insight is given us in Rev 22 1-5:

And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was

the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bondservants shall serve Him; And they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever.

In light of this, how fitting is Paul's final word to the Thessalonians on this subject, 'Therefore comfort one another with these words.'

Yes Jesus is coming again. Will we be found resting in the hope of our own resurrection because of His? If we are resting in Him now we shall rest forever in His presence.

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2 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Third Message
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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