Death and Christian Grief
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4
Code: BQ61411

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

Paul wrote this section of his epistle to alleviate the Thessalonians' grief and confusion. He was concerned that they **not … be uninformed … about those who are asleep** and thus **grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** Since their grief was based on ignorance, Paul comforted them by giving them knowledge.

The phrase **we do not want you to be uninformed** or its equivalent frequently introduces a new topic in Paul's epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:12; Col. 2:1). The conjunction **but** and the affectionate term **brethren** (cf. (vv. 1, 10; 1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25) emphasize the change in subject and call attention to the new topic's importance. In this case, Paul introduced not only a new subject but also new revelation he had received "by the word of the Lord" (v. 15).

Since it was their primary concern, Paul first addressed the question of **those who are asleep.** While *koimao* (**asleep**) can be used of normal sleep (Matt. 28:13; Luke 22:45; Acts 12:6), it more often refers to believers who have died (vv. 13–15; Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 2 Peter 3:4). In verse 14 **those who are asleep** are identified as "the dead in Christ." The present tense participle *koimomenon* (v. 13) refers to those who are continually falling **asleep** as a regular course of life in the church. They had grown increasingly concerned as their fellow believers continued to die.

It is important to remember that in the New Testament "sleep" applies only to the body, never to the soul. "Soul sleep," the false teaching that the souls of the dead are in a state of unconscious existence in the afterlife, is foreign to Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul wrote that he "prefer[red] rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord," while in Philippians 1:23 he expressed his "desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better." Those statements teach that believers go consciously into the Lord's presence at death, for how could unconsciousness be "very much better" than conscious communion with Jesus Christ in this life? Jesus promised the repentant thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise [heaven; cf. 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7]" (Luke 23:43). Moses' and Elijah's souls were not asleep, since they appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), nor are those of the Tribulation martyrs in Revelation

6:9–11, who will be awake and able to speak to God. After death the redeemed go consciously into the presence of the Lord, while the unsaved go into conscious punishment (Luke 16:19–31).

Paul related this information to the Thessalonians so that they would **not grieve.** There is a normal sorrow that accompanies the death of a loved one, caused by the pain of separation and loneliness. Jesus grieved over the death of Lazarus (John 11:33, 35), and Paul exhorted the Romans to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). However, the apostle did not have that kind of grief in mind here, but grief like **the rest who have no hope.** In Ephesians 2:12 Paul described unbelievers as “having no hope and without God in the world.” There is an awful, terrifying, hopeless finality for unbelievers when a loved one dies, a sorrow unmitigated by any hope of reunion. Even those pagans who believed in life after death did not have that hope confirmed by the Holy Spirit; they merely clung to it without affirmation from God. But Christians do not experience the hopeless grief of nonbelievers, for whom death marks the permanent severing of relationships. Unlike them, Christians never say a final farewell to each other; there will be a “gathering together [of all believers] to Him” (2 Thess. 2:1). Partings in this life are only temporary.

The Thessalonians’ ignorance about the Rapture caused them to grieve. It was to give them hope and to comfort them that Paul discussed that momentous event, giving a fourfold description of it: its pillars, participants, plan, and profit.

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