

THE DEAD IN CHRIST SHALL RISE FIRST
By Ron Harvey
(April 1, 2012)

TEXT: I THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:2

INTRODUCTION

One thing that we know for sure is that after winter comes the spring. It happens every year, year after year. Things die out in the winter. And then, in late March and early April everything comes to life.

Example: We have some tulips in our back yard and in the winter they die out and disappear. And you would think they were gone forever. There is no sign of them whatsoever. But then, one day you walk outside and you notice that they have sprouted out of the ground and are in full bloom again.

This is a great mystery. But God has designed his universe to teach us that there is a summer of vibrant life. Then there is an autumn of our life when we reach our maturity and then grow old and things are passing away. Then there is the death of winter. And for those who do not know Christ, it seems that there is no hope after winter. Loved ones die and there is great sorrow and mourning that goes on seemingly without end. Some people never recover from the sadness and sorrow of friends and loved ones who have passed away.

But our great God has taught us that there is a resurrection of the dead in the spring. And the spring comes very quickly. And there is new life because God in his mercy has made it so.

Many of us in our church are getting older. Summer has passed and it is autumn. And winter is approaching. But this passage this morning is designed to encourage us that we would not unduly sorrow over those who have passed on before us. It is designed to give us great comfort not only for them, but also for our own souls.

Now the message this morning will be twofold. We will consider first the nature of death itself as to the saints of God. And then, we will consider the resurrection of the saints. So let's take a look at our text and let me point out to you first of all that,

I. The physical death of the body is characterized as a sleep.

But I would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep. (v.1)

And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

I Cor. 15:17, 18

Now the fact that death is pictured as sleep tells us several things. First of all,

A. Physical death is a temporary condition.

When we lay down to go to sleep at night, we fully expect to rise again the next morning. We have done it over and over all of our lives. We sleep for a short time and then we get up from our sleep and we go on about life.

And this is another great picture which our God has given us. He has made his universe so that we live and work all day long, then we go to sleep for a while and then we wake up to a new day. And this has been our pattern year after year after year. And when Paul says that death is a sleep, he tells us that death is a temporary condition. God has been teaching us about death every day of our life. And he teaches us that death is not the end of all, rather it is a very temporary interlude.

When the body is lowered into the ground, it is a temporary lowering. We fully expect, no, we know for a certainty, that it will wake up in the morning – for God has taught us so and Paul has told us so, for Paul says that those who have died are asleep.

But also take note that,

B. Physical death is a rest.

Sleep is a most blessed thing. After a hard day of work, it is very wonderful to lay down at night and sleep. The Scriptures say,

The Lord giveth his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:2)

And when his saints are laid down for that final time in the grave, it is a time of rest for the body. And it is a very welcome rest. It is an undisturbed rest. They have retired out of a very troublesome world and they are resting from all their labors and sorrows and they are sleeping in Jesus. They are resting finally in the arms of Christ and they are under his special care and protection

And so we say, "Sleep on old saints of God." You have earned your rest. It is time for your tired body to lay down and be refreshed. It is time for those old bones to lay still for a while. It is time to go to sleep and to forget forever those old pains and sorrows.

Now of course the souls of the saints are immediately in his presence in heaven, but their bodies go to sleep for a while. But be sure, even their bodies are kept under his watchful eye. Even when their bodies turn to dust, nevertheless, they are still under the care and power of Christ, for they are only sleeping and He will cause them to get up one spring morning.

And that brings us to our second point this morning which is that,

II. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ will be raised up.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (v.16)

Now many people believe that the soul goes to heaven. But many deny the resurrection of the body. But the glorious truth of the Scripture is that our bodies will be raised. This is what is called the resurrection. We will not spend eternity as disembodied spirits, but our bodies will be raised from their sleep and will be reunited with our souls.

Now with respect to our bodies being raised, let's consider first,

A. The certainty of the resurrection.

And I would say that the resurrection of our bodies is confirmed and assured by a previous resurrection. If there had been no resurrection before, then we might still be unsure of such a possibility.

But there has been such a resurrection. Verse 14 says,

We believe that Jesus died and rose again.

And this is the surety. This confirms that resurrection is possible. And we believe our resurrection is certain, because Jesus rose from the dead. This is the down payment to insure our own resurrection.

Paul put it this way: If Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. Then look at verse 16. The dead in Christ shall rise.

Jesus has signed our contract of resurrection. And he signed it in his own blood and he sealed it with his own resurrection. Jesus has gone on before us. He has risen from the tomb.

Now what do we mean when we say he has risen from the tomb. We mean nothing less than his body has risen.

Now when Jesus died it is clear that his spirit went to paradise. He told the thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." But his body stayed behind. His body tarried in the place of the dead. When Jesus bowed his head and said, "It is finished," there was a separation of spirit and body. The soul passed into paradise and the body entered into what Paul called a sleep.

And when the spirit left, the beaten and bruised body of Jesus slept even while it hung on the cross. His body entered into a rest. It didn't hurt anymore. There was no more suffering. And it was winter for the body of Christ.

And they took down his body and they wrapped it in grave linens and they placed his sleeping body in a tomb. And there it lay. This body had trudged the hills around Jerusalem for 33 years. In the last few hours it had been scourged and mistreated. It had been nailed to a tree. It had born the sins of the world. And now, finally, it was a blessed time of rest and refreshing.

And the Scriptures say that on the third day, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and she found it empty. And the disciples also came and saw. And Jesus appeared to many after his resurrection and his resurrection was confirmed by many infallible proofs.

The body of Jesus was resurrected. His body had a very short sleep. And then it was raised incorruptible and his spirit was reunited with his body. And he walked the earth for 40 days to prove to his disciples and to many others that he had truly risen. Now our text says,

If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (v.14)

There is no doubt that our resurrection is just as sure as His resurrection. If Jesus rose again, then we shall rise again.

Our text puts it in a negative way, but you get the point.

For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

I Cor. 15:16-18

You see how our resurrection is contingent on his. The certainty of our resurrection is tied to the certainty of his resurrection. And this is seen first of all in that,

1. The same power that raised Christ from the dead will raise us from the dead.

But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

Romans 8:11

So our resurrection is certain first of all because the same power that raised Christ is in us. But secondly, our resurrection is certain, because,

2. Christ is said to be the first fruits of them that slept.

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

I Cor. 15:20

Now let me paint the picture for you. If you are going to have a harvest, then it is necessary of course to sow seed. The farmer takes dry, dead-looking seeds and casts them right and left and they fall into the earth and dirt is raked over them and they disappear.

So it is with us when we die. Some say our bodies are buried in the ground. But the Scriptures indicate that our bodies, like dry seeds, are sown in the ground.

Some say our bodies are dead. But the Scriptures say they sleep. And the seeds of those that sleep are cast in the field and the farmer waits until harvest.

Now let me ask you this. Does a farmer weep uncontrollably when he sows his seed? When the seed falls into the earth does he mourn as though all is lost? No. He casts his seed joyfully and he looks forward to a bountiful harvest.

Now under the Old Covenant, that Mosaic Covenant, there was a feast that they called the Feast of First Fruits. And when the harvest was ready to be reaped, they would go out into their harvest fields and harvest a token of their crop. And they would bring these first fruits in and they would wave them to and fro as an offering of thanksgiving. And they would heave them in the air in dedication to God. You see, these first fruits of the harvest, signified that there was a plentiful harvest to be gathered in.

And Jesus is our first fruits. He has risen from the grave. And if he has risen from the grave, then there is a great harvest of others to be raised.

Now I want you to understand that Christ was the first that ever permanently rose from the dead. Now there were a few others who were temporarily raised like Lazarus and several others. But they all died again. That was no permanent resurrection. There was no resurrection unto an incorruptible body. But Christ was the very first ever to be raised from the grave to die no more. That's why he is the first fruits.

He is the captain of our resurrection. He showed the way. He entered the grave and was the first ever to come out unto eternal life. And that is why the world over Jesus Christ is celebrated. This is why Jesus Christ is distinguished above all others. He is greater than any other celebrity of all time. He has done something that no other man could ever do. He has risen from the dead!

And he alone is the first fruits. He is the representative of the whole. He is the Captain, but there is a whole army of his saints who shall be resurrected.

And therefore we have seen that our resurrection is certain because Christ has risen from the dead. But we go on and we see now,

B. The grandeur of the resurrection.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (v.16)

Now the resurrection of Jesus Christ appears to have been attended by angels. There seems to have been at least two in Luke's account that appeared to the women who came to anoint the body of Jesus with spices. It could be that countless thousands of angels were in attendance when the body of Jesus was raised. I am sure it was a glorious event.

But the resurrection of the saints will be even more glorious if that is possible. For Jesus himself will descend from heaven. The bodies of the saints will be sleeping in their graves, and Jesus will come down.

We have already seen in Hebrews that Jesus is much greater than angels. And Jesus will personally attend our resurrection. Oh how he loves

us. He gives us sleep and rest for a while. And then he come down to raise us again.

Read Acts 1:9-11. Just as he ascended up into heaven, he shall come down from heaven again.

Behold, he commeth with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.

Revelation 1:7.

Now this will not be a secret coming. When Jesus came the first time, it was without fanfare. It was very quiet. Only a few ever knew of his birth. But when he comes the next time it will be with pomp and circumstance. It will be with great noise and it will be known worldwide.

1. He will descend from heaven.

This in itself will be quite a demonstration. He will descend from heaven. Wherever that place is that God dwells, Jesus will come down from there. And he will come through the universe. And he will come down into our atmosphere. And he will come down into the clouds. (See v.17, "in the clouds; in the air.")

And it says,

2. He will shout.

This will be the shout of the King. This will be a shout of authority. This will be the shout of a might conqueror. This will be the shout of God himself. Perhaps there has never been such a shout before and perhaps there will never be such a shout again. And Jesus will shout for all of his saints who have fallen asleep. And his voice will ring out into all the earth. And it will be heard in graves from one end of the earth to the other. And he will command sleeping bodies to wake up.

"Wake up," he will shout. "It is morning. You have rested for a while and now winter is over and it is spring."

And not only will Jesus shout, but,

3. The archangel will lift up his voice. It is likely that there will be a host of angels on this occasion. For this is the day of resurrection of the people of God. And the general of that angelic army will lift up his voice.

And there will be another sound. And it will be,

4. There will be a blast of the mighty trumpet of God.

For the trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Now Joshua marched his army around Jericho for seven days. And on the seventh day he marched around the city seven times. And then God told him to blow the trumpets. And when they blew the trumpets, the walls of the city fell down.

And when the trump sounds on that last day, the graves will be opened up and sleeping bodies will awaken and they will come out and they will meet the Lord in the air.

Now skeptics will say, "This is impossible. It is impossible for decayed and rotted bodies to be refashioned." Yes, if there is no God, it is impossible. But since there is a God and since God raised up Jesus, then he can and he will bring bodies out of the graves.

And these bodies will not be rotted but they will be raised incorruptible.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

I Cor. 15:52, 53

And then we see,

C. The Order of the Resurrection.

Now it says the dead in Christ shall rise first. When it says the dead shall rise first, it certainly means that they will not come behind those who are alive when Christ comes. And it seems to mean that here that they will

come first in time. They will precede those who are still alive when Jesus comes again. And in this way there is a special honor for those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. They will rise first. They will be the first to meet him in the air.

And then, those who are alive will be changed. We know very little about this mysterious change that will occur. But it is clear that the corruptible will put on incorruption and the mortal will put on immortality. And they will be caught up in the air to meet Jesus there.

D. The speed of the resurrection.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

I Cor. 15:52, 53

Now it would take man months and years to organize such a worldwide movement of humanity. But such is the greatness of our God that he can do it in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

E. The time of the resurrection.

Now we are all curious about what year Jesus will return and what year the resurrection will be. Many men have set dates and have led many to believe that Jesus is coming on such and such date.

But Paul told the Thessalonians that they had no need to know. (see 5:1)

Some things are not given unto men to know. And,

1. The time of the coming of Christ is not given to us to know.

The time of his coming is hidden in the knowledge of God alone.

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

Mark 13:32

Now this is a great mystery. But even Jesus, in his humanity, was not given to know the day of his own return. You see, Jesus surrendered his own knowledge into the hands of the Father. And Jesus was dependent on the Father as any other man. Whatever the Father revealed to Jesus in his humanity, Jesus knew. And not even the Son knew the day of his return and the day of the resurrection.

And we don't know.

2. He will come when the world is unsuspecting. (5:2)
3. He will come when the last of his elect is brought in.

There are God's elect in all ages. And he will not come until the very last one has been redeemed. Such is his great love.

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9