

5. What happens to Christians when they die?

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[0 : 00] Well, just in case you happen to have shut your Bible, our passage is on page 987 in our Visitor's Bibles, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

And the title I want to give for tonight's study is, well, it's a question, what happens to Christians when they die? In North London, there's a large cemetery called Highgate Cemetery.

It's a rather unusual kind of place. It's a very large cemetery, and it's set on a fairly steep hill overlooking much of central London. And it's full of unusual and rather eccentric monuments, enormous monuments, some of them.

Karl Marx is buried at Highgate Cemetery, and a lot of actors and actresses are buried there. But plenty of ordinary London people are buried there too. And it's a cemetery which is rather odd because the vegetation has been allowed to run wild.

In most cemeteries, if you get a little sapling sycamore or ash tree, somebody comes along and snips it off. But these ones have been allowed to grow. So as you walk through the cemetery, it's more like walking through a forest than through a graveyard.

[1 : 22] Anyway, I was there at Highgate Cemetery on a winter's afternoon early in 1993. I was standing at the head of an open grave, and with me there were 40 or 50 other people, most of them good friends or relatives.

We were burying my father's body. And when the officiating minister had finished his prayers, I bent down, picked up a handful of loose soil that was lying there by the grave, and dropped it on top of the coffin.

A final action, symbolic action. And then I looked around at my friends and family, and I said, let's go home and have a cup of tea, which we did.

Now, many of you folks have been in exactly that position. You have faced the awesome and almost overwhelming experience of burying your dead.

There is nothing quite like it. Is there anything that can prepare us for that kind of experience?

Modern secular society finds the subject so difficult that it really has nothing helpful to say.

[2 : 32] It has often been pointed out, it's really a cliché, but I think a good one, that the Victorians had a lot to say about death, but they couldn't mention sex.

Whereas modern people are always talking about sex, but don't know what to say about death. So it's rather ironic that the Apostle Paul deals with both of these subjects in this one chapter, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

And he's not in the least bit embarrassed to teach the Thessalonian Christians about either of them. It's so refreshing that he's not afraid to say, in verse 3, abstain from sexual immorality, and he's not afraid to tackle questions about death head on in the final paragraph of this chapter.

And if we will take Paul's teaching firmly on board, we shall have the same kind of confidence and clarity of understanding that he has, both about sexual morality and about what happens to Christians when they die, which is what this little paragraph at the end of the chapter is all about.

Now why should Paul the Apostle include this paragraph at this point? We noticed last week that chapters 1, 2, and 3 are about Paul's concern for the Thessalonian church.

[3 : 46] His anxiety, particularly, that it might have run into the ground in his absence. And then his great relief after he'd sent Timothy up to Thessalonica to encourage them, and then Timothy had returned with the good, good news that the church was standing firm and was surviving persecution very well.

And it's when he gets to the end of chapter 3, and he's got all that off his chest, that he's able to turn rather more serenely to a number of paragraphs in which he teaches the young Christians how to live the Christian life.

Now we don't get an exhaustive treatment of Christian ethics in chapters 4 and 5, not at all. He only deals with a few aspects of practical Christian living. But the first verse of chapter 4 really sets the agenda for the final two chapters.

Let me read that verse again. Chapter 4, verse 1. Finally then, brothers, finally in the sense of, I've got through the rest of the stuff and I'm coming to my final section of the letter. Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

In other words, what follows now is instruction on how you ought to live the Christian life in a God-pleasing way. So friends, don't you think it's rather lovely that the Lord's instructions on how to live also includes a section on how to grieve and how to understand what happens to believers when they die?

[5 : 15] Isn't it kind of the Lord to have ensured that Paul included this paragraph? Now we expect ethical instruction to be about money and sex and work and relationships and so on.

But it's rather surprising to have Paul include verses 13 to 18 in his how to live the Christian life section. But the fact is that learning to cope with death and to understand the big future is a very important part of Christian living.

After all, almost all of us will be standing at the grave of a loved one in the years to come. And once we've buried our dead and we've got over the immediate hurdle there, we need help in how to go on from there.

How to live in the light of the gospel. So here is a lovely piece of help for us. And if we can get this instruction into our systems, it will greatly strengthen us when we have to face these big, big things. Now do let's be clear that Paul is talking here about those who die as Christians. He's not talking here about the death of unbelievers. That's a quite different subject and one that has no happy outcome.

[6 : 25] But it's not what Paul is talking about here. Why then should he have included this section in this letter? Well, there are two possible reasons.

The first is that you'll remember his initial visit, well his only visit up to this point to Thessalonica with Silas and Timothy had been a very brief visit. They'd spent four, five, six weeks, something like that up in Thessalonica.

And Paul would have loved to have stayed longer and taken the time to instruct the church much better, but he and his friends had to leave. They were up against the civic authorities in a big way. And it may be that he simply had not had time to cover this particular subject while he was with them.

And it's very important. So he slips a little bit in here just to give them a taster of this teaching. He's hoping to go back and see them. No doubt he would cover it more fully if he were able to get back. But that may be one reason. But then secondly, it is possible that when Timothy had made his journey up to Thessalonica and then had returned to Paul, he may have conveyed the news that there were certain folk in the church, Christians, who had died just in the intervening few months.

[7 : 34] And their relatives, their loved ones, were very upset because they'd died and they didn't quite know how to cope with it. So Paul may have been responding to the particular need of certain individuals in the church who had lost their loved ones.

All right, well, let's apply our eyes to the text. Let's bore our eyes like gimlets into the words. And let's first notice briefly Paul's aims in writing this paragraph. His aims first and then we'll get into the meat of the paragraph.

I think we can detect three aims. First, Paul aims to dispel ignorance. Look at those first few words of verse 13. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep.

It's a lovely, simple introduction. He wants to replace ignorance with understanding. Now, Paul is not attempting to answer all the questions that we might have about what happens to Christians when they die.

For example, think of some of those questions. At home, I've been asked questions like this. Daddy, will there be killer whales in heaven? And if there are, will we be able to pat them and to ride on them?

[8 : 46] Well, I've had to answer something like, I'm very sorry, sweetheart, but the Bible doesn't tell us anything about killer whales. There is a famous passage in the prophet Isaiah that tells us that in the Messiah's kingdom, wolves will get on extremely well with lambs and the flesh-eating lion will become a herbivore and will start eating straw like an ox.

So the Bible is not entirely silent about the new creation and the place of animals in it. But it doesn't answer all our questions about the great eternal future. What it does do, however, is give us plenty of information in terms of what we need to know for our comfort and our assurance.

So not all our curious questions are answered, but the Lord does give us wonderfully satisfying answers to the big questions. So Paul is replacing our natural ignorance with God-given understanding about what happens to Christians when we die.

Paul's second aim is that Christians should not grieve like non-Christians. And we need to look rather carefully at the way verse 13 is worded to see exactly what Paul is saying.

His purpose, do you see, is that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. Now he's not saying, brothers, we do not want you to grieve when Christians die.

[10:06] He's not for a moment saying that grief is an inappropriate response to the death of Christian loved ones. What he's saying is that he doesn't want Christians to grieve like those who are not Christians, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Now Paul is frankly acknowledging there that the grief of non-Christians when they lose their loved ones is truly dreadful. It is no hope grief.

But when Christians lose their loved ones who are Christians, they grieve, but it's a different kind of grief. It's a grief which is transformed by the hope, the promise, the assurance of heaven.

Christian ministers who take funeral services are very familiar with the difference between Christian grief and unbelieving grief. Handkerchiefs and tears are seen just as much at the funerals of Christians as they are at the funerals of unbelievers.

But the eyes that shed the tears have a rather different look about them. The tearful eyes of Christians have a gentle light and joy in them which reflects their conviction about the resurrection.

[11:15] But the tearful eyes of unbelievers are filled with unrelieved sorrow. As Paul puts it here in verse 13, there is no hope in their grief. So Christians grieve at the death of our believing loved ones who die.

Of course we do. We grieve because death is ugly, horrible. The process of dying is ugly. None of us looks forward to that. And we don't want to be separated from those that we love and have known for many years.

But our grief when we grieve is not about their eternal future. It's about our earthly future. So Paul is not telling us that grief is inappropriate for Christians.

He's telling us that we have no need to grieve with the hopeless grief of the unbeliever. So Paul's first aim is to dispel ignorance. His second aim is to dispel grief like that of unbelievers.

And his third aim, which he expresses in verse 18, is that the Thessalonians should encourage one another with these words. That's an interestingly expressed verse.

[12:23] I want you, says Paul, to encourage each other with these words, with this teaching. So when Dimitri, imagine a Christian up in Thessalonica called Dimitri, when his Christian mother dies up there in Thessalonica, Dimitri's dear friend, Christian friend, Marcos, comes to visit him.

And he finds Dimitri absolutely devastated by his mother's death. And he says to Dimitri, have you read this letter that the Apostle Paul has just sent to us? No, says Dimitri.

Well, I've got a copy here in my back pocket. Look at this bit. It's about Christians who've died. Let's read it together. And as they read it, Dimitri is hugely comforted, still upset, still missing his mother dreadfully, but reassured about her future, about where she is and who she's with.

Well, there are Paul's three aims in writing this small but weighty paragraph. So let's turn now to look at what you might call the meat of the actual teaching here, which is set out in verses 14 to 17. And I want to take it in three sections. First, when Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who have died as Christians.

[13:37] When Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who have died as Christians. This is verse 14. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Now, this is quite a tricky verse. So, friends, be like Popeye and swallow a can of virtual spinach to give you some mental energy for the next few minutes. Okay? Now, you might expect Paul to write, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we too will die and rise again.

Just a simple parallel between his experience and ours. But that's not really what he says. Paul says something rather different. So let's work it through. The first clause of the verse, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, it looks pretty straightforward on the surface.

Jesus died and he rose and we believe both facts about him. But there's a hidden depth to this. You remember how in his letters, Paul the Apostle frequently teaches that when people become Christians, they are united with Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

Let me give you a classic example from Romans, Romans 6 verse 5. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

[15:03] Now, what Paul means is the moment that you and I become Christian believers, we become incorporated into Jesus' very body and being.

And his experience of crucifixion and death and then resurrection becomes something in which we have a profound share.

In Paul's teaching, we are crucified with Christ and also raised with Christ. Now, in one sense, of course, our death and resurrection has not happened yet.

Our death lies at some future point in time. And obviously, our resurrection lies beyond that. But in another sense, because our identification with Jesus is so complete from the moment we become believers, our death and resurrection have already happened.

And we, to use Paul's phrase, have been crucified with Christ. Just turn back one page to Colossians chapter 3, if you will. Colossians 3.

[16:07] I want to read the first four verses of that chapter. And they are very startling when you see the tenses that Paul uses. So notice the tenses. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

So the identification of Christians with Christ is already so complete that Paul can tell the Colossians and us that already we have died with Christ and already we have been raised with him. And look at that final verse there, Colossians 3 verse 4. When Christ appears at his return, then you also will appear with him in glory. Now just turn back then to 1 Thessalonians.

Doesn't that help us to understand chapter 4 verse 14? We believe that Jesus died and rose again, incorporating in his dying and rising all who believe and trust in him.

[17:23] Where then are those Christians who have already died? Their souls are already with Jesus in glory, united with him. And so much are they united with him, so indissolubly are they joined to him, that when he returns, where will they be?

Well, they'll be with him, of course. He's not going to leave them behind somewhere. They're part of him forever. Nothing can separate them from him. So the logic of 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 14 runs like this.

Jesus died and rose again. And because all believers are united with him in his death and resurrection, those who have already died, whose souls are with Jesus in heaven, will come with him when he returns.

They are bonded to him indissolubly. Nothing can separate them from him. So when he appears at his glorious return, they will appear with him. Are you with the Apostle so far?

I hope so, because things are going to get even better. So take another can of virtual spinach for mental energy, and off we go again. Second point. When Jesus returns, Christians who have already died will be raised first, and then Christians who are still living will be caught up with them.

[18:46] That's the gist of verses 15 to 17. I'll read 15 to 17 again. For this we declare to you, by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

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. Then, we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

And so we will always be with the Lord. And let's try and trace through exactly what Paul is teaching here. The first thing he says is, this we declare to you by a word from the Lord.

Now that phrase, the Lord, in Paul's letters, always refers to Jesus. You'll see that he speaks of the Lord five times, just in verses 15 to 17.

And it's Jesus that he means every time. So here at the start of verse 15, Paul tells us that what he's about to say comes from the Lord Jesus' own word.

[19 : 55] Now Paul doesn't tell us exactly how the Lord Jesus communicated this particular revelation to him. But the point is that this information carries the full weight of Jesus' own authority.

So what has Jesus revealed to Paul? Well, the revelation, verse 15, is that Christians who are still alive at the moment the Lord returns will not have greater privileges than Christians who have already died.

And verses 16 and 17 lay out the time sequence of these stupendous events. The first thing, from verse 16, is that the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven to the earth.

As he does so, there will be a loud cry of command. Now that won't be the only thing we shall hear, because we will also hear the voice of an archangel and the sound of God's trumpet, which will back up the loud command and give it weight and majesty.

Paul doesn't tell us who will give the loud command. I think it must be God the Father or Jesus, but I'm inclined to think it's the Lord Jesus, because he says himself in John chapter 5, I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

[21 : 14] And do you remember how shortly afterwards in John's Gospel at chapter 11, Lazarus, who's been dead and buried for four days, hears Jesus' voice, Lazarus, come out!

and he does so pretty promptly. Who can resist the voice that wakes the dead? And the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of the great resurrection of believers at the Lord's return.

Now back to our passage in verse 16. The command rings out, the command to rise from the grave. And who rises first? Well, the dead in Christ, Paul tells us at the end of verse 16.

Now, you might be thinking, but just hang on, didn't verse 14 tell us that those who have died as Christians will come to earth from heaven with Jesus when he returns?

So, if they're returning with Jesus to the earth, how can they also be waiting in their graves for his command to rise? Do you see the question I'm putting? Well, I think the answer is quite straightforward.

[22 : 21] When a Christian dies, the body obviously becomes lifeless and is separated at the point of death from the soul or the spirit which goes immediately to be with God and the Lord Jesus.

Just to give a well-known Bible example, remember how Jesus is hanging on the cross and he turns to the thief who is dying next to him, who expresses a real trust in him, and he says to this thief, today, you will be with me in paradise.

Not in a few thousand years from now, but today, as soon as your body dies, your soul will be with me, enjoying paradise. So, at the death of the Christian, the soul goes immediately to be with the Lord.

The body, now dead, is buried or cremated. When the Lord returns, he will bring with him the souls of all who have died as believers and then when he commands the dead to rise, their bodies will be resurrected and will be reunited with their living souls which have come back with Jesus.

Therefore, I don't think it's correct to say, as some Christians have suggested, that after our death, we have a long period of knowing nothing at all, oblivion, until the Lord returns.

[23 : 39] No. Today, you will be with me in paradise, not after millennia of unconsciousness. So, the living, conscious soul goes straight to be with the Lord, separated from the now dead body.

And yet, the dead body only remains dead temporarily until the Lord Jesus returns and commands it to rise up from the grave. And it's because the death of the body is temporary that Paul uses this phrase fallen asleep in verses 14 and 15.

It was the same with Lazarus. He says to his friends, Lazarus has fallen asleep but we go now to wake him from sleep. Now, Paul is not implying that the soul falls asleep. It's the body that falls asleep.

And that phrase fallen asleep implies that it's going to wake up again. That's an interesting linguistic fact that the word cemetery means a dormitory.

Cemetery comes from the Greek word meaning sleep. So the word cemetery very well expresses Paul's doctrine here. Just think of some of the big cemeteries that there are around here and think of all those who were buried there as Christian believers.

[24 : 54] Their souls, blissfully conscious, are with the Lord in heaven. Their bodies are temporarily asleep until the Lord returns and wakes them with the command that they cannot resist.

and then with their souls and their resurrection bodies reunited they will live forever with the Lord in the new creation. It's a very wonderful thing, isn't it?

And it's very different from the vague, I would call them semi-Christian notions that I was certainly brought up with and possibly some of you were as well. I suspect that many of us grew up with the idea that after a Christian dies his soul goes to heaven and his body is buried or cremated and that is the end of bodily existence.

Full stop. But then we've looked at the Apostles' Creed which includes this rather odd phrase I believe in the resurrection of the body. And we've been rather perplexed because the Apostles' Creed doesn't seem to tally with our vague idea that the soul goes to heaven but the body disappears and that's the end of the body.

Well the truth as Paul teaches is different and it's very wonderful. Yes the soul goes straight to heaven to be with the Lord but the Christian is not finished with bodily existence.

[26 : 13] His dead body, her dead body will experience what Lazarus' body experienced and even more so it will be wakened out of sleep and reunited with his soul.

So the eternal future for Christians in the new creation is a physical embodied existence. existence. The human body has a central place in God's great purposes.

So significant is it that when God first created it in the person of Adam and then of Eve he tells us that men and women display his own image in their persons in their bodies.

So the first man and the first woman reflected the image and glory of God not just in their mind or soul but in their body. the human body only became subject to decay and disease and aging and death after the fall.

It was God's judgment and curse announced in Genesis 3 that made our bodies mortal and decaying. And then again when the Son of God so much longer came to earth he came in human form bodily a real physical man.

[27 : 25] So just in case we had begun to think that the human body was no longer central to God's purposes God reminded us of the truth by sending Jesus the second Adam the second man in human form but in a form of human physicality like ours subject to weariness and wounds and death.

But when Jesus was raised from the dead as the prototype of the new order his body was different still physical but no longer subject to decay and death stronger he was able to walk through a door wasn't he?

A closed door death has no more dominion over him and the New Testament teaching is that our bodies when raised up from the dormitory will be like his still physical but no longer subject to arthritis and heart disease and all the other horrors that will eventually grip us and bring our physical life to an end.

As the Apostle John says in 1 John chapter 3 we know that when he appears we shall be like him like him. So friend if you're a Christian and if you're feeling increasingly saggy and baggy and lumpy and bumpy and wrinkly and crinkly then brother or sister you have something to look forward to something much better than this.

Now third and last the consequence is the consequence of all this the end of verse 17 is that we will always be with the Lord.

[29 : 03] Just look at those last few words in verse 17. Now why should Paul say this at the end of this little piece of instruction? I think it's easy to overlook those six or seven words at the end of verse 17 because our minds get so excited and interested as we try to understand and unravel what's going on in verses 14, 15 and 16.

But that conclusion there is the joyful high point it's the climax of what Paul is teaching the Thessalonians. Because of the Lord's return he says because of our deep personal unity with him because of his voice that will command the dead to rise because believers living and dead will be taken up to meet the Lord in the air the consequence is that we will always be with him and to be with him always is the fulfilment of the covenant.

It's the fulfilment of the gospel. It's the fulfilment of the whole Bible. Think of it in the covenant God says to his people I will be their God and they will be my people and I will dwell with them.

The gospel too that's the promise that all those who trust in Jesus will receive everlasting life in his presence accepted forgiven adopted redeemed ransomed.

And the Bible it's about the fall of man leading to man's agonised and yet deserved separation from God and then the Bible from Genesis 3 onwards is about God putting right that broken relationship with him.

[30 : 38] So that little phrase at the end of verse 17 describes the culmination the crowning glory of everything that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Now now we're not with him in the sense of real physical presence but then we shall be with him we shall be always with him.

So let me ask is that what we really want to be with him. Understandably we ask all sorts of questions about the world to come and about the new creation.

Will we see our Christian loved ones there? Will we be reunited with them? Will we see beloved grandparents and parents and relatives and friends who've gone to be with the Lord before us? Now there's every reason to think that we will. the multitudes of heaven surely relate to each other with joyful and perfect love in relationships which are unsullied by the things which so often can spoil relationships here on earth.

All the best features of the old world will be in the new world but a thousand times better and there'll be nothing to cause hurt or pain. We'll be in the realm where death and mourning and tears are all past.

[32 : 01] but the great emphasis of the New Testament is that Christians will be with the Lord never to be separated from him again.

All eyes there in that great realm will surely be upon him. A little bit like well we know that it's described as the wedding feast in the book of Revelation.

Think of a wedding such as we celebrate from time to time. When the bride and groom appear all eyes are upon the bride and groom aren't they? Every eye is drawn to the dazzling couple as they walk in.

At that moment you forget all about dear Aunt Agatha don't you? And about Cousin Doris and little Angus who's pouring Coca-Cola into his mother's wedding hat. You forget all that because your eyes are drawn to them.

How much more will it be when we're with the Lord Jesus from whom we have been so long separated? Shall we not love to see him? And when we gaze upon him finally we shall gaze upon him not in his humiliation but in his glory.

[33 : 05] As he prays in John's Gospel chapter 17 Father I desire that they also whom you have given to me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

When we see him finally in his glory we shall know that that is the very thing that we were made for. When finally we gaze upon him we shall know that we have the fulfillment of everything that we have desired.

We were made to be with him to love him to be loved by him. So Paul is assuring his Thessalonian friends that after the Lord's return the dead in Christ and the living in Christ will be finally and fully rescued by him and will be with him forever.

But these words were not only written for the Thessalonians they were written for us too twenty centuries later because we too see our Christian loved ones die and we too ask all these questions about the great future.

So here is Paul our apostle our teacher and he addresses this passage to us and he concludes it by saying therefore encourage one another with these words.

[34 : 33] Let us pray together. Dear God our Father we are so thrilled with the prospect of these things we perceive them very dimly from our present position but we look forward with great longing to the return of the Lord so that we shall be with him and with him never to be parted again to know that our sins are forgiven that our relationship with him and indeed with you is utterly restored that we are loved and are able to love in return.

So we pray dear Father that you will fill our hearts today with fresh trust in the truth of the gospel and a fresh appreciation of all that you have finally prepared for us.

We dare to believe these things and we rejoice in them together. Thank you so much and we pray in Jesus name Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.