

"Be alert!" 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Advent Midweek 2 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During my years as a computer system engineer, I often had to travel away from home in order to supervise the installation and testing of systems that I had designed. Most of the time my travels were set up by the corporate travel agent and things went well. Occasionally, however, something happened to my travel plans. Weather delays, mechanical difficulties, and other problems sometimes caused me to change my travel plans at the last minute. It was then that I found myself stuck in an airport at the mercy of the ticket agent. Even though I was in possession of a perfectly good business class ticket, I found myself travelling on standby.

When you travel on standby, you must be at a heightened state of alert. You must pay attention. If the ticket agent calls and you don't respond, your seat goes to the next person in line. Worse yet, you don't even know if you have a seat. You must wait until all the passengers with reservations for that particular flight have been seated and then the ticket agent will fill the remaining seats with standby fliers. You don't know if you will soon be winging your way home or if you will wait for hours until the next plane departs for your destination.

The Apostle Paul was writing about much more important reservations in the epistle reading for this evening. He was talking

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about the final journey we all must make ... the journey that leaves this life. He was assuring those who heard his words that there was a blessed, holy place for them when they had to make their final journey.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words to the Thessalonians. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 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.

The Thessalonians were not only worried about their own departure on the Last Day, but they also wondered what would happen to those who died before the Lord returned. Would they miss out on the Return of Christ because they were dead?

Paul assured the Thessalonians that those who are still alive on the Last Day will not precede those who have died. Paul even compares death to sleep. On the Last Day, Jesus will raise the dead just as easily as a parent wakes a child at the beginning of a new day. Here Paul follows the example of Jesus Himself who refers to death as sleep. The Holy Spirit also inspired Luke to describe Stephen's death using the

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word "sleep." The Apostle Paul repeatedly referred to death as sleep in his epistles. In this evening's epistle, he repeated the word "sleep" three times.

When the Word of God informs us that there is life after death, it is very natural to have questions. If someone dies before the Lord returns, what happens? How does the sleep of death work?

At the time of temporal death, the spirit leaves the body. Our body stays here on this earth. But our spirit goes to be with the Lord. Jesus said as much when he said to the thief, [Luke 23:43] "Today you will be with me in paradise." Paul talked about it when he described temporal death as being "Away from the body and at home with the Lord." He also said, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." When believers die their spirits go to be with the Lord in heaven. And they sleep. But not forever.

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. The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. It's going to be quite a day! Those who are asleep will wake up! They will be raised with transformed bodies. Meaning what? There will be

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no such thing as standby on the Last Day. Those who die in the Lord have reservations.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle to write that the dead in Christ will rise first. Jesus Himself said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Because Jesus lives, we shall also live again.

So those who die will awaken just as though they had been asleep, but what about those who live to see the Last Day? The inspired words of the apostle say, "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."

Many families have a regular family reunion. Reunions are wonderful opportunities to see people you love. But even the best, most wonderful reunion you have ever attended will pale in comparison to this last reunion. People's bodies being reunited with their spirits for eternity. Family members seeing each other for the first time in years as they rise to meet Jesus Christ. It's part of an incredible reunion.

This experience tops everything. I can look at every one of you and say with confidence that the most exciting experience in your life

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has not happened yet. That means no matter what you're going through, you have something to look forward to as a believer in Jesus. Nothing can take that away from you. Nothing can steal that from you. There will be no such thing as standby on the Last Day. By God's grace in Christ Jesus, your reservation is already in place.

Amen