

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Hope

Key Idea:

Because Jesus died and rose again, death cannot separate believers from Him — their spirits are immediately with Christ at death, their bodies will be raised when He returns, and nothing in life or death or eternity can break their union with the Lord.

Key Text:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 ESV)

Key Points:

- **This passage addresses one specific question: what happens to believers who die before Jesus returns?** The Thessalonians were not asking abstract eschatological questions — they were grieving. People they loved had died, and they were troubled about whether those believers had somehow missed out or fallen behind. Paul writes to address that pastoral crisis directly, not to map prophetic timelines or answer every end-times question. The word “asleep” appears three times in the passage (vv. 13, 14, 15) and is a common first-century euphemism for death — used by pagans, Jews, and Christians alike — though for believers it carries a particular meaning: the body rests until the resurrection. The focus throughout is on “those who are asleep in Christ” — not all the dead, but believers who have died.
- **Christian hope is not positive thinking — it is a holy hope anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** Paul’s argument begins in v. 14 with the resurrection: “since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.” Everything that follows depends on that historical fact. Our hope is not a coping mechanism or a comforting idea; it is a conclusion drawn from evidence — the resurrection of Christ is the first installment and guarantee of

ours. Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 15: if Christ has not been raised, we are of all people most to be pitied. But since He has been raised — the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep — our hope is as solid as His empty tomb. We grieve, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

- **When a believer dies, their spirit is immediately in the presence of Jesus — with Him, seeing Him, and experiencing what they have longed for all their lives.** Paul says God will “bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (v. 14) — they are already with Jesus before the resurrection. This is the intermediate state: the body sleeps, but the spirit is with the Lord. Paul is even clearer in 2 Corinthians 5:6–8, where he says that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord, living by sight rather than faith. When someone we love dies in Christ, they are not lost, not waiting in darkness — they are with Jesus in paradise, experiencing His presence in a way never fully available in this life. This truth is meant to transform the way we grieve.
- **At the return of Christ, the dead in Christ will rise first — far from being disadvantaged, they will precede the living into their resurrection glory.** The Thessalonians feared their dead loved ones had missed out. Paul turns that fear on its head: when the Lord descends with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God, “the dead in Christ will rise first” (v. 16). Only after that are those who are still alive caught up together with them. The dead in Christ do not lag behind — they lead the way. The ultimate Christian hope is not disembodied existence after death, but the resurrection of the body — glorified, imperishable, fitted for eternity — which is the gift Christ’s own resurrection has secured for all who are united with Him.
- **This passage is given to encourage — to be spoken and received as a living word against grief, despair, and the fear of death.** Paul closes with a command: “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (v. 18). The truth of the passage is not merely to be believed privately but spoken aloud into the lives of those who mourn, those who struggle, and those who face their own death. It addresses three specific griefs: the death of someone we love (our grief is real, but it does not overwhelm us — we will see them again); the hardness of life in a broken world (Christ’s resurrection means all that is sad is coming untrue); and the prospect of our own death (these truths fan the flames of hope to burn away fear). Holy hope is not passive — it is something we must speak into one another.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened with his grandchildren’s encounter with death — through J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter stories and the death of a relative — and the challenge of helping them wrestle with grief and hope. How did the adults in your life first help you think about death? What did they say — or not say — and what difference did it make?
- Paul is writing to address a specific pastoral crisis: the Thessalonians were grieving and troubled about fellow believers who had died before Jesus returned. Have you ever

experienced that kind of uncertainty or fear about what happens to those who die in Christ? What questions have you carried?

- Paul says we do not grieve “as others do who have no hope” — but he does not say we do not grieve. What is the difference between Christian grief and the grief of those without hope? Have you experienced that difference — either in yourself or in watching others grieve?
- The entire argument of this passage rests on v. 14: “since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.” How much does the resurrection of Jesus actually function as a living anchor for your hope day to day — not just as a doctrinal belief but as a present comfort? What gets in the way of it doing so?
- The teaching distinguished between the intermediate state (the believer’s spirit immediately with Christ at death) and the final resurrection (the body raised at His return). Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that to be away from the body is to be “at home with the Lord.” Does it change the way you think about the death of a believer to know that they are not waiting in darkness but are with Jesus, seeing Him, and experiencing His presence fully? How?
- Paul tells the Thessalonians that the dead in Christ will not be disadvantaged at the return — they will rise first, leading the way into resurrection glory rather than lagging behind. Their fear was that their loved ones had missed out. How does Paul’s answer invert that fear? What does it mean that union with Christ cannot be broken even by death?
- The outline emphasizes that the ultimate Christian hope is not a disembodied existence after death but the resurrection of the body — glorified, imperishable, fitted for eternity. Is that the shape of hope you actually live with? How does having a bodily hope change the way you think about your physical life, your suffering, and the aging of your body right now?
- Bret identified three griefs this passage is meant to address: the death of someone we love, the hardness of life in a broken world, and the fear of our own death. Which of those three do you most need to hear this passage speak into right now? What would it look like for these truths to actually function as comfort rather than just as doctrine?
- Paul closes with a command: “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Holy hope is not meant to be carried privately — it is meant to be spoken. Is there someone in your life right now who is grieving a death, struggling with despair, or afraid of dying? What would it look like to speak these specific words of hope to them this week?

For Further Study:

- For Paul’s fullest treatment of the resurrection, read 1 Corinthians 15 in its entirety. Pay particular attention to vv. 12–28 (what is lost if there is no resurrection), vv. 35–49 (the nature of the resurrection body), and vv. 50–58 (the triumph of the resurrection over sin and death).
- For the intermediate state — the believer’s experience between death and resurrection — read 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 and Philippians 1:21–23 alongside this week’s passage. Both passages make clear that to depart is to be with Christ, which is “far better.”

- Watch this week's episode of [After Hours](#) (available on Tuesday) for a deeper discussion of the intermediate state, and a second episode on the resurrection body and the new creation.
- For a meditation on hope in the face of death from the Psalms, read Psalms 16, 23, and 73 — each of which moves from fear or confusion through faith to confident hope in God's presence, now and after death.
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [death](#); [hope](#); [resurrection](#); [eschatology](#); [second coming](#); and the [intermediate state](#).