

### Saints Triumphant – Where Are They Now?

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (NIV) <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. <sup>15</sup> According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In Christ Jesus, the Lord of the living and the dead, dear fellow redeemed,

Where are they now? It's the annoying question that pops up right in the middle of the online article that you're reading. We've all seen it: "Childhood Stars of the 80s – Where Are They Now?" If your curiosity persuades you to click on the link, you head down a rabbit hole of never-ending "then and now" photos of long forgotten sitcom stars.

But it isn't just the internet. "Where are they now?" is the nagging question that works its way down the rabbit hole of our brains when we experience the death of loved ones and dear friends. What has happened to them? Will we see them again? When and where will that be? Haunting questions like these were on the minds of the Christians in Thessalonica, some of whom were so consumed by grief that it was beginning to damage their faith in God. Word of their struggles reached the Apostle Paul who had spent no more than a few weeks in person with these new Christians, teaching them the basics of Christ's saving love. So now, by letter, he seeks to temper their grief with good news about those who have died trusting in Jesus as Savior from sin. This same good news is also meant for us. So, let's take a closer look at Paul's words with this theme in mind: Saints Triumphant – Where Are They Now? As we'll see, they are 1) asleep in Jesus; and they are 2) alive with Christ.

According to an old saying, "Ignorance is bliss." In other words, if you don't know about something, you won't worry about it. I suppose in some circumstances that may be true. But when it comes to death, we can't help but worry. That's because deep down inside of us, we know that death is not natural. Death was never supposed to exist. God made human beings to live forever, explaining that only one thing could ruin his plan for us, and that was sin. Sin's disobedience would bring death, not just to the original offenders, Adam and Eve, but through them to the whole human race. Every funeral serves as a powerful reminder of this very sad and frightening truth: **...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12).** Scripture tells us that death is the wages of sin, meaning, death is sin's punishment—the gateway to hell itself.

No wonder we humans have such an aversion to death. We instinctively fear it as something hopeless. But you need to know that, for us believers, this is not the case: **Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13).** Here Paul provides a partial answer to our important question: "Where are they now?" those Christians who have died? They are asleep. Paul says so. Jesus does too. In Mark 5 we read about a young girl who was

dying. Her father reached out to Jesus for help. But by the time Jesus got there, the girl had died. People were grieving, crying and wailing loudly. Jesus said to them: **“Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” (Mark 5:39).** Right then and there, those who has been crying started laughing at Jesus, but not for long. Jesus said to the little girl, **“Get up!” (Mark 5:42).** You know what happened next. She stood up and started walking around.

Had the girl really died? Oh yes, but to Jesus, death is no different than sleep. To him, death is a temporary state from which his people “arise” at the sound of his voice. Does knowing this do away with our grief? No, not altogether, but it changes our grief from hopeless to hopeful. Let me show you how that looks. Picture Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. You know what he’s about to do, right? He does too of course. But instead of approaching the tomb with a swagger as if to say: “Wait till you see this!”, **Jesus wept. (John 11:35).** That’s right – he grieved over what sin had done to the one he loved. Remember that the next time the tears are rolling down your face as you mourn the passing of the one you love. Jesus knows the feeling. He’s right there with you. He loves your spouse, your parent, your child, your friend even more than you do. But he doesn’t just commiserate with you. He transforms your grief by giving you hope – the same hope that was on full display when Jesus called in a loud voice, **“Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. (John 11:43).**

Why is that a cause for hope? Because on that very day, Jesus was just weeks away from taking Lazarus’ place in the tomb, and not his alone. Jesus took our place in the grave, suffering both death and hell’s punishment in our place. He has done this for all sinners of all time. This life-giving truth is at the very center of our Christian faith as Paul says: **For we believe that Jesus died and rose again... (1 Thessalonians 4:14).** This is the truth that tempers our grief. This is our great hope: Because Jesus lives, his people will live. Now remember, when the Bible speaks of “hope”, it doesn’t mean “wishful, cross your fingers, maybe this will happen” type hope. It means a one-hundred percent confidence that Jesus will awaken from their slumber of death all who died trusting in him. He will do this because he has taken their sin from them to himself and paid its wages in full. In God’s eyes, believers in Christ have no sin to their name. This is why we call them “saints.” And we call them “triumphant” because by their death, they have left behind this sin-ruined world. Their battle with sin-induced struggles is over once and for all. Their bodies, that were subject to sickness and accidents and the effects of aging are finished with all that. Now those bodies sleep peacefully in Jesus, awaiting the great resurrection that is sure to take place.

Again, listen to Paul proclaim our sure and certain hope: **For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (1 Thessalonians 4:14).** Did you hear that? Don’t miss it! Paul just gave us part two of his answer to our question: Where are they now – these saints triumphant? Do you know? They are with Jesus. In other words, they are alive with Christ. Paul is talking about their soul, their spirit. As we have been saying, the bodies of these saints are asleep. They are in a temporary state from which they will be raised to new life by Jesus. That’s true of the body. The souls of these believers are alive and well in the mansions of heaven. The believer’s soul never dies. Listen to how the Bible emphasizes this truth again and again.

Remember what Jesus said to the dying thief on the cross who put his trust in the Savior? **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43).** Remember the dying words of the martyr Stephen: **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (Acts 7:59).** And then there is Paul himself, who when contemplating his own death wrote: **We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8).**

I don't know about you, but my grief is often fueled by the thought that Christians who have died are somehow at a disadvantage. They are not here to celebrate births and baptisms, anniversaries, and holidays. By my way of thinking, they are missing out, and that makes me so sad. But the Bible tempers my sadness. It speaks comfort and encouragement into my grief. Those departed souls who mean so much to me are at no disadvantage at all, because they are with Jesus. Try to imagine what that must be like. To help us, the Apostle John gives us a peek into heaven and with it a glimpse of the joy our loved ones there are experiencing: **I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God...They [lived] and reigned with Christ...** (Revelation 20:4). The message is clear and simple: our loved ones in heaven are treated like royalty.

There's more! In Revelation 14:13, it is God himself who instructs John to write: **Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.** "Yes," says the Spirit, **"they will rest from their labor..."** (Revelation 14:13). They rest, not in the sense that they are unconscious, but that they are living free from sin. They have no worries or concerns, no troubles or heart aches. Instead, they gaze into the glory of our God. They live in the love of our Lord, knowing only peace and contentment beyond all measure. Simply put, they are at no disadvantage – not now and certainly not on the day of our Lord's return.

I say that, because Scripture holds before you and me the very real possibility that we may never experience physical death. Jesus may come back before that happens. And if that's the case, not even then will we have some advantage over the believers who have died. **For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.** <sup>17</sup> **After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).** These words also temper our grief. We long to see our loved ones who have died. Paul wants us to know that the day is coming. Maybe even yet today we will see them and take part in the greatest family reunion of them all – one that will never end, for as Paul is quick to add: **And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:17).**

When Jesus returns, he will bring with him the souls of the saints triumphant. At his command those souls will be placed in and give life to their resurrected bodies. In that same instant those risen saints will join us in the air for the final judgment at which Jesus will pronounce us not guilty of any sin by reason of the sacrifice he made as our Substitute. And then, we with all our loved ones in Christ will spend all eternity together in the warmth and wonders of God's amazing love. This is the promise of him who cannot lie or change his mind. **Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18).**

And so we will, my friends, not just at the funeral home and at the cemetery, but whenever we are struck by grief and sadness over the thought or a memory of a loved one who is no longer with us. We'll speak to each other of the saints triumphant. We'll remind each other of where they are now, their sleeping bodies awaiting the resurrection and their souls even now enjoying the heavenly home that will soon be ours too, for Jesus' sake. Amen.