

*1 Thessalonians 4:13-14*

## PREFACE

Two headlines at the conservative web site, *The Patriot Post*, this week illustrate the appalling level of ignorance in our society—in this case, Millennials (those roughly in their twenties to mid-thirties).

“32% of Millennials Think [George W.] Bush Killed More People Than Stalin”  
and  
“Millennials Pretty Cool With Socialism”

The root of this ignorance is, of course, the deplorable, politically correct education these poor souls have received. They are woefully ignorant of historical facts because they have been raised on a pack of lies—or essential facts have just been eliminated from their curriculum.

We often cite Hitler as the poster-boy for atrocities, but he couldn't hold a candle to Joseph Stalin, who was responsible—through intentional famine, forced relocation and political purges—for the death of tens of millions of his own people. And since the left has always had a fascination with socialism and communism, and since the left has been in charge of our education system for many decades, it is not surprising that this generation would be just fine with a dictator and government taking care of their every need as it rules over every aspect of their lives.

The Thessalonians, too, were ignorant about a few things. In our previous session we saw that they needed to be taught the facts of life—again—about “working with their own hands” (4:11) and taking responsibility for their own lives. In *this* session we have the apostle Paul addressing something else of which this church was ignorant: the systematic order of the last days.

## w13

**Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.**

Note: “uninformed” or “ignorant” is not necessarily synonymous with “stupid.” It has little to do with an inability to learn, but speaks more of a lack of knowledge.

**uninformed, ignorant** = *agnoeo* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and <G3539> (noieo); **not to know (through lack of information or intelligence)**; by implication to ignore (through disinclination) :- (be) ignorant (-ly), not know, not understand, unknown.

The Thessalonians simply did not know or understand the finer points of the *parousia*—the “presence” of and final judgment of Christ at His return. I dare say that none of us can throw stones at the Thessalonians on this topic; many of us as well are woefully ignorant of the details of this dramatic, literally cataclysmic series of events.

In his *first* epistle to this church, Paul mostly speaks about the coming of the Lord to call his people home to heaven. This is but the beginning, the first moment of the *parousia*—“the day of the Lord.” In his *second* epistle he broadens the discussion to include the judgment of Christ that will follow. And Paul's purpose in both letters is to inform the uninformed, to set them straight with the facts.

## *“Asleep”*

Let us pause for a moment on this word “asleep.” It is too thin to just conclude it is a polite euphemism for death. The finality of physical death is an *earthly* concept; from heaven’s perspective *all* things—at least pertaining to people—are eternal. Even those who are destined to suffer what God calls the “second death” will not ever sink into oblivion, or lose consciousness.

### **Read Matthew 25:41,46.**

There is no such thing as the earthly concept of death being nothingness—the absence of consciousness. The soul—for believers and unbelievers alike—is eternal and ever-conscious. The earthly grave does not hold the soul: the souls of believers go immediately into the presence of the Lord, while the souls of unbelievers go immediately into eternal punishment. For both, the *body* is simply “asleep,” awaiting its eventual wake-up call: resurrection.

## *Grief vs. Hope*

It is possible, perhaps likely, that these two areas of “ignorance” that Paul addresses in this letter—working to support themselves, and the status of the dead in Christ—stem from the same root. The apostle probably spoke to them of Christ’s return, and it is possible they construed from this that His return was *so* imminent that they need not concern themselves with work, wages, food, or the future in general. In the meantime, however, they worried about those who died prior to Christ’s return. Would those Christians miss out? Alexander Maclaren summarizes it nicely for us:

Some of the Thessalonians seem to have been troubled, not by questions about the Resurrection, as the Corinthians afterwards were, but by a curious difficulty, namely, whether the dead saints would not be worse off at Christ’s coming than the living, and to that one point Paul addresses himself. These verses are not a general revelation of the course of events at that coming, or of the final condition of the glorified saints, but an answer to the question, What is the relation between the two halves of the Church, the dead and the living, in regard to their participation in Christ’s glory when He comes again?

*so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.*

**grieve, sorrow**<sup>kjvs</sup> = *lypeo* = from <G3077> (lupe); **to distress**; reflexive or passive to be sad : - cause grief, grieve, **be in heaviness**, (be) sorrow (-ful), be (make) sorry.

Note that small, but important, clarifying word “as”. Paul is not saying that Christians do not, or are not to experience sorrow at the passing of a loved one. But we do not, or are not to grieve *as do those without Christ*.

Believers have no reason to grieve for a fellow believer who is now in “Paradise” (Luke 23:43) with Christ Jesus. We only feel sorrow for ourselves, over the loss of a loved one. Paul spoke of this personally, regarding what he might have experienced if the Lord had not shown mercy on his brother Epaphroditus.

### **Read Philippians 2:25-27.**

A common remark in this world, following any complaint about old age or the accompanying infirmities of that condition is, “But it’s better than the alternative”—meaning, death. But of course that is not true for the Christian.

In the film version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the wizard Gandolf and the hobbit Pippin are huddled together as the enemy forces are about to breach their last defense. Their doom seems certain. The diminutive hobbit, fearing death is near, says to Gandolf,

“I didn’t think it would end this way.”

“End?” Gandolf replies. “No, the journey doesn’t end here. Death is just another path—one that we all must take. The gray rain curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to soothing glass. And then you see it.”

“What, Gandolf? See what?” Pippin asks.

“White shores, and beyond, a far green country, into a swift sunrise.”

“Well, that isn’t so bad.”

“No. No, it isn’t.”

Christians are in possession of something alien to this world: hope. Not, of course hope as a wish, but hope as confident, assured expectation.

## v14

Paul is taking a gradual approach to answering the essential question, as Maclaren put it, *What is the relation between the two halves of the Church, the dead and the living, in regard to their participation in Christ’s glory when He comes again?*

- In v13 he speaks of death itself.
- In v14 he assures them of the general principle that those in the grave *will* experience not just the resurrection, but will return with Christ, same as those who are not “asleep.”
- Finally, in v15 Paul answers the specific question in the negative,
- and in vv16-17 he answers it, in detail, positively.

## Read v14. (“if” = since this is the case)

This is the basis and proof of our hope: the historic resurrection of Jesus. Even the ancient Job prophesied that he knew he would one day stand before God *in the flesh*, because he had a Redeemer who had once lived, lived now in heaven, and would bodily come again to earth. [Please turn to Job 19.](#)

“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,  
And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.  
Even after my skin is destroyed,  
Yet from my flesh I shall see God;  
Whom I myself shall behold,  
And whom my eyes will see and not another.  
My heart faints within me!”  
(Job 19:25-27)

Robert L. Thomas points out something we shouldn’t miss in the text. Notice that while Paul repeatedly refers to Christian death as “sleep” in this passage, he does not do the same when referring to what Christ experienced. **Jesus did not sleep; He died.** Jesus suffered literal separation from God the Father as a result of bearing our sins. There is no better definition for true death than that. “Because of His real death, Christian death has been transformed into sleep (Milligan).”

*even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.*

Notice, too, how Paul finishes this verse. We might expect him to write ...*Jesus died and rose again, even so God will raise us...* This is how the apostle put it to the Corinthians in his second letter to them.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 4:13-14**

But here he says it differently—for a reason.

...**Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (emphasis added)**

Our ultimate hope is not just to be raised from the grave. What if that was the end of the promise? What if Christian salvation meant just salvation *from the grave*? What would we have gained from that! To be brought back to life to just continue on living as we had before? No thank you.

The promise from God is that if we are in His Son—if our body *enters* the grave belonging to Christ—it will one day be raised *from* the grave to live with Him and the Father for all eternity. That is our hope; that is *real* salvation, as Jesus put it so eloquently in John's gospel. We can read this familiar passage now in a new light because of the Thessalonian letters.

### **Read John 14:1-6.**

*no one comes to the Father but through Me.*

Doesn't that last clause take on extra meaning in light of our passage in Thessalonians. We typically think of John 14:6 to mean that the only way to the Father is through *faith* in Christ—which is perfectly true. But it also means that in the day of resurrection, when Christ returns, the way upward to the Father for saints living and "asleep" will be *through Christ*. He will come to personally conduct us into the presence of our heavenly Father.

**I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.  
(John 14:3b)**

Let's close with what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said about this passage.

...sleep is a suspension of the faculties, but not a destruction of the body. When we see anyone naturally asleep, we believe that body will wake up again. We do not suppose that those eyes will be sealed up in perpetual darkness, that those bones and that flesh will lie dormant, never more to feel the consciousness of being, or stir with the impulse of life. No, we expect to see the functions of life resumed, the eyelids open to admit the cheering rays of light and the limbs to become again exercised with activity. So, when we bury our dead in their graves, we are taught to believe that they are asleep. Our faith, (which is warranted by the Word of God), discerns in the corruption of death a suspension of the powers of the body rather than an annihilation of the matter itself. The earthly house of this tabernacle must be dissolved, but it cannot be destroyed. Though the bones are scattered to the four winds of Heaven, yet at the call of the Lord God, they shall come together again, bone to bone. Though the eyes are first glazed and then devoured from their sockets, they shall be surely restored—that each saint in his own flesh may see God! In this confidence we deposit the body of each departed saint in the grave as in a bed. We doubt not that God will guard the dust of the precious sons and daughters of Zion. We believe that in the Resurrection there shall be a perfect identity of the body. You may call it unphilosophical if you please, but you cannot show me that it is unbiblical! Science cannot demonstrate it, you say. But then science cannot disprove it. Reason stands abashed while Revelation lifts her trumpet-tongue and exclaims, “Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.”

Once more, there is a very precious word in connection with this sleep which we must not overlook. At the 14th verse it says that they “sleep in Jesus.” Sweet thought! This teaches us that death does not dissolve the union which subsists between the Believer and Christ. When the body dies, it does not cease to be a part of Christ! “Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ?” said the Apostle to those who were still living in the world. And now, as to those whose earthly course is done, our departed friends “sleep in Jesus”—they are as much in Christ now as they were when upon earth! And their bodies, which were precious to the Lord and preserved as the apple of His eye, are as precious to Him now as they ever were! (from his sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13)