

We bow our hearts in prayer: Dear Jesus, we ask You to send Your Holy Spirit to us to comfort and encourage us with the Word of your salvation and the assurance of Your ever present gracious presence among Your people through Your Word and Sacraments. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

When it comes to death and life-after-death, our sinful human nature knows very little.

The conscience implanted in us recognizes that there will be a judgment after death.

(This is one of the reasons people want to feel confirmed that they have done more good than bad during their lifetime, and also why even "good" people fear death as it draws near.)

In our text this morning, St. Paul is writing to the Christians in Thessalonica

so that this new Christian congregation will know and take comfort in Jesus' resurrection and return in glory, as well as their own resurrection from the dead.

and be able to give comfort to others whose loved ones have died in Christ.

And so our Savior, Jesus Christ, would comfort and encourage you with these words as well.

Our text for meditation... .. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

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. For since 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. 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.* <sup>(John 17:17)</sup>

It might seem rather odd to us that this Christian congregation,

whom Paul praises so highly throughout the whole letter,

would be ignorant about something so central to the belief and hope of Christianity,

like the resurrection of the dead.

But looking at the timeline in Acts, we shouldn't be surprised that they needed more instruction in certain areas.

St. Paul's stay and teaching in Thessalonica might have been as short as 3 weeks.

Due to sharp persecution he, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy all had to leave quickly.

We should not think that the Thesalonians were poorly catechized; Paul frequently writes things like, "**you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia**" <sup>(1:7)</sup>

and concerning such and such "**you have no need to have anything written to you.**" <sup>(5:1)</sup>

But it would seem that their ignorance was one of lack of experience to this point.

While they believed in Christ's resurrection, the need for the application perhaps had not yet been felt.

Very likely none of the new Thessalonian Christians had died while Paul was with them for such a short time.

Perhaps now some had died or were nearing death.

Or maybe they were starting to think through their theology a little more and realized they didn't know what happened to the dead in Christ.

Or might it be that as they spoke to their heathen neighbors,

this question came up, and they realized that they had not as yet been fully instructed.

There were certainly lots of theories and beliefs out there, but they wanted the Truth, the one that came from Christ who knew both death and resurrection.

It might be good for us to ask ourselves their question:

“What does happen with those who die in Christ, before He returns?”

This is not just a Thessalonian question for 2,000 year ago; it is a relevant question today, especially as you consider the many theories out there even now, an even among those who claim to be Christian.

One church body preaches a middle realm called Purgatory, where believers go after death if they have sins that were not repented of or if satisfaction had not been done for those sins.

This is a place of suffering, as those sins are purged from you by fire, and only after they have been purged away, then you may enter heaven (God's gracious presence).

Some sects who think of themselves as Christian also speak about a “soul sleep,” believing a persons conscience existence ends until Christ's return in glory.

You simply don't exist after death... until the resurrection to glory.

And there are also those heathen that believe that there is no afterlife at all;

they hope that when we die, we simply stop existing, with no resurrection in sight.

You can see how this thought would be comforting for people whose consciences are not clear, or who simply don't want to answer to anyone regarding their conduct.

But none of these human thoughts are a real comfort to anyone, especially as they mourn a Christian's death.

nor do they leave you with a hope to carry you through this life.

The Thessalonians were right to seek this information from St. Paul who had received such instruction from the Lord Himself. [**For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord**]

He had received the promise that Jesus had given His apostles in our Gospel text,

that the Holy Spirit would come and **declared to them the things that are to come.** <sup>John16</sup>

And what a blessing they didn't feel foolish in asking such a question, as we sometimes do, for now we have another clear explanation from Scripture regarding what will happen with the Lord's people after death and when “*He comes to judge the living and the dead.*”

In St. Paul's letter, we can see the purpose of the teaching of the resurrection.

It is more than just knowing the Truth about the end.

That Truth is given ultimately for comfort, both in this life and in the life-after-death.

And the ultimate comfort is what St. Paul summarized so simply as:

**and so we will always be with the Lord.**

After a Christian's death, there is no lapse of time with Jesus' comforting presence.

There is no long wait of nothingness or suffering until Jesus reveals Himself to you. You go immediately to heaven to be with Him and His Father and the Holy Spirit, along with all the souls of those who have died in the Lord... and there you wait, in His blissful presence, comforted from all your afflictions, released from all pain and troubles of conscience.

There you wait until the great Day of Judgment when Jesus will return to the earth in glory. And, as St. Paul here says, you will come with Him in His glory and your body will be raised and your soul and body will be joined together, never to be separated again, complete and whole to enjoy eternity with the Lord and His saints and angels.

And for those Christians who remain alive until that last day, there is also comfort and hope, not only at the death of a Christian but also in and throughout this life.

because, as St. Paul pointed out, **we will always be with the Lord.**

As Jesus promised His apostles and His Church as He instituted Baptism,

**"I am with you always, to the end of the age."** Matthew 28:20

This is a comfort for us who remain in this present world of sin and distress.

That your Lord and Savior, though unseen, has not and will not forsake you.

He remains with you through all your storms and trials, through your joys and celebrations.

He remains with you to comfort you and to bless you, to strengthen you and give you hope.

This hope is given and realized as you consider how it is that it is yours;

when you hear that Jesus has already gone through death and come back to life again.

When you hear that Jesus has already suffered and died the death that your sins deserve,

judged as guilty, and condemned to hell - with a total cessation of God's gracious presence.

This thought is not a wonderful one, but as Pr. Obenberger preached last week,

Jesus rose to life again without your sins counted against Him any longer,

and so neither do you have those sins counted against you any longer.

He has made a full and complete payment for you... and all people.

So then you never have to fear, even through the scary events of this life,

even through the stinging pains of a guilty conscience,

even through the struggles as death draws near, that Jesus has left you to go it alone.

He is and will always be with you:

to give you strength to repent of your sins and to struggle against temptation,

to give you forgiveness for and comfort from your sins,

to give you hope not only in this life, but especially for the life to come.

This strength, forgiveness, comfort, and hope are here, in this place where His Word is taught and where He comes to you in Baptism and feeds you with His Supper.

Here He continues to teach and instruct you so that you are not uninformed,

not about those who have fallen asleep

or any other thing that He has revealed to us in Scripture.

Where His Word is given, He prepares you to live, or to fall asleep, ready with a clean conscience for the glorious return of your judge and Savior, with His saints, angels,

and **the cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet blast.**

And He prepares you to comfort others with these same words as they wonder about death, and seek comfort from their sins, and hope in the face of death.

**Therefore encourage one another with these words,**  
after you yourself have been comforted and encouraged by our Lord.

*Soli Deo Gloria*