

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is a perfect fit for our Memorial Day experience. We see why in verses 13-14, which reveal what the text is about. It's about **"those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."** **"Asleep"** is a euphemism that means **"dead."** This text is about all dead Christians including the ones you named earlier today.

Now, notice what Paul says in verse 13. He wants us to be informed about those dead Christians, that is, about their futures with us, if we're Christians. And that's what I'm going to preach about today.

I begin with verse 15-16. Paul mentions **"the coming of the Lord"** in verse 15, which is what we call the Second Coming of Jesus. He then gives us the fullest description of that Coming in the Bible, in verse 16. Jesus Himself will utter a command, an archangel will shout, and a trumpet will sound. Jesus will then descend from the sky to earth in His resurrection body for the entire world to see. It will be the noisiest and most dramatic event in human history.

In this text though, Paul focuses on one aspect of the Second Coming in particular. He writes in verse 14, **"God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."** He goes on to explain what that means in verses 15-17. The resurrection bodies of once dead Christians, followed by the resurrection bodies of living Christians, will begin ascending. They will quickly meet the descending Jesus in the sky and then live with Him and each other forever in heaven.

Paul stops at that point. He doesn't tell us the rest of the story, what our never-ending lives with once dead Christians will be like. But I'm going to tell it today, at least a small part of it. I'm going to address three specific issues in that regard.

Which Dead Christians

The first issue is this. Which once dead Christians will we live with in heaven? It's all of them. The renowned American preacher Jonathon

Edwards recognized and affirmed just that. He wrote: **“There will be the infant of days that we have lost below, through grace to be found above. There the Christian father, and mother, and wife, and child, and friend, with whom we shall renew the holy fellowship of saints, which was interrupted by death here, but shall be commenced again in the upper sanctuary, and then shall never end. There we shall have companionship with the patriarchs and fathers and saints of the Old and New Testaments, and those of whom the world was not worthy.”**

Grasp the ramification of that. You and I will have never-ending lives with all the dead Christians that were named today. Some of you named Christians I didn't meet and know. But I will meet and know them in heaven. You'll likely introduce them to me in fact. I named Elizabeth Emans, my Christian Endeavor teacher in church when I was growing up. I'm planning on introducing each of you to her. You'll eventually come to know her intimately during the eternal life you have with her in heaven.

Let's do another little exercise. Name a celebrated dead Christian that you would like to someday meet and know. I'll start by naming Brother Lawrence. Now you. You and I will someday meet and come to know all the Christians that were just named.

It's true. The once dead Christians that we'll live with in heaven are all of them, including the ones we knew on earth - spouses, parents, children, siblings, friends, and so on.

Recognition and Remembrance

The second issue is this. Will we recognize and remember in heaven the once dead Christians we knew on earth? Many people think not. Some years ago, a Christian, James, upset another Christian, Julia. He told her she wouldn't recognize her dead son in heaven or remember what they experienced together on earth. Julia then asked me what I thought and so, I told her. It's this.

First, we'll recognize the Christians we knew on earth when we see

them in their resurrection bodies. I agree with C.S. Lewis' mentor George MacDonald. When asked if we would recognize family and friends in heaven, he replied, "**Shall we be greater fools in paradise than we are here?**" Our resurrection bodies will look different than our bodies do now because they'll be anatomically perfect. But there will be enough continuity in appearance that we'll recognize those in heaven that we recognized on earth.

I told Julia a second thing. We will remember the experiences we had with the Christians we knew on earth. Some interpret Isaiah 65:16-17 to mean that we won't remember anything we've experienced on earth. It means instead that God will remove our earthly experiences from our existence not our memories. Heaven's happiness doesn't depend on our ignorance of what happened on earth. Our memories of that in fact will enhance our appreciation of God and heaven itself.

I remember what Elizabeth Emans, my C.E. teacher, looked like. She was 5' tall, weighed 90 pounds, and had the kindest face I've ever seen. I also remember my experiences with her, including she teaching my friends and me, several times a year, the flannel graph of *Barney in the Barrel*. *Barney in the Barrel* is the touching story of a homeless boy who lives in a barrel. After coming to know Jesus, he becomes quite ill, is found by a policeman, and taken to a hospital. Before dying there though, he ends up leading a nurse and doctor to Jesus.

My point is this. I will recognize Elizabeth Emans in her resurrection body. I'll also remember my experiences with her, including *Barney in the Barrel*. It will be the same with all the Christians we know.

Our Lives Together

The third issue is this. What will our never-ending lives with once dead Christians be like in heaven?

First, we will pursue and develop relationships with each other. There will be one heavenly language and we'll get together with other Christians, as we choose, to "**chew the fat**" with them. We will get to

know them and they us as we talk and listen. I'm looking forward to some lengthy conversations, for instance, with the 18th century Anglican William Law and the founder of Quakerism, George Fox.

Second, we will witness and even participate in each other's exciting creative enterprises. Each of us, in our incredibly powerful resurrection bodies, will develop our own assigned parts of heaven in fantastic ways. And we can and may invite other Christians to enjoy the things we've done or even assist us in doing them.

Third, we will share experiences with each other. That is a vital part of our relationships now isn't it? Some of you go on vacations with family or friends, for instance, or are members of the same book club, or go to ballgames together, and so on. Heaven will be filled with limitless opportunities to enjoy its wonders and we will do that with others as we choose. The greatest of those wonders of course is God. We'll experience Him with others as we choose. So, I'll contact all of you one day in heaven and plan a Bethel Friends reunion worship service in the New Jerusalem on earth. And in that service, Robert Queen and I will sing a duet as we've been threatening to do here. We'll sound great I'm sure, although that might be too much to expect, even in heaven.

With those three things in mind, you see how significant once dead Christians are to our lives in heaven. Some deny that though. Protestant reformer John Calvin, for instance, wrote, **"To be in Paradise and live with God is not to speak to each other and be heard by each other, but is only to enjoy God, to feel His good will, and rest in Him."** Calvin was wrong. It is true that enjoying God is primary in heaven. But that certainly doesn't exclude enjoying Christians as well. Other Christians will make heaven sweeter. Enjoying them in heaven won't offend God. It will delight Him instead.

Not Grieving as Do the Rest

Let me ask a question. Do you believe what I've just preached today about our futures with dead Christians? Verse 13 reveals the vital result

if you do. You **“will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.”**

Hope in the Bible means the anticipation of good not yet here. As the word **“believe”** in verse 14 reveals, it’s closely related to faith. It is the confidence, grounded in reality, that a future good will be so. In this case, the future good is life with once dead Christians in heaven.

According to verse 13, some people **“have no hope.”** They lack the confidence or even knowledge of a future with their dead loved ones. Lacking that, the prospect they face is complete and final separation from them. That’s a catastrophic reality of course that shrivels their souls.

I read about a man with no hope whose wife and 10 year-old son were killed in a car accident. He seriously contemplated suicide, even bought a gun to carry it out, but finally decided against it. He never did recover though, becoming a despondent shell of the man he once was.

In contrast, some people have hope. They possess the confidence of a future with their dead loved ones. Possessing that, the prospect they face is never-ending relationships with them, ones that are indescribably greater and grander than they had on earth. That’s a spectacular reality that enlivens their souls, even in the midst of their grief.

How many of you know the name Horatio Spafford? His story is a tragic-triumphant one. In 1871, his only son died. Then in 1873, a ship that was carrying his wife and four daughters sank, killing all four of the daughters. As Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters died: **“When peace, like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll – Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.”** That is of course the first stanza of the great hymn Spafford wrote, *It Is Well with My Soul*.

Spafford illustrates what Paul’s saying in verse 13. Yes, we who have hope grieve when our loved ones die. But it’s a grief that’s laced with the joy of anticipation. And that joy of anticipation dramatically alters the nature of our grief. It makes it well with our soul.

So have the hope Paul mentions in verse 13. The good news is that

we can and here's how. It's by doing three things.

First, become a disciple of Jesus. Make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. The Holy Spirit enters into our mental, emotional, and volitional processes when we do.

Second, learn all the details we can about heaven. The Holy Spirit uses our understanding of heaven to create hope in us. But the more abstract and vague that understanding is, the less He has to work with. So let's give Him more to work with. Let's make our understanding vivid and detailed instead. Using a topical Bible and Bible dictionary, learn all the details about heaven that the Bible reveals. Then use good logic to infer other details from the ones revealed. I've done just that in a 103 page study titled *Life after Life*. If you'd like a copy, let me know.

Third, consider the details we've learned about heaven. In 2 Corinthians 4:18, Paul calls those details "**the things which are not seen**" and urges us to "**look at**" them. To look at them means to bring them constantly before our minds. So, let's do just that.

If you and I do those three things, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us will work in us as well. He'll transform our mental, emotional, and volitional processes so that we have the hope of verse 13.

Conclusion

You are now informed, partially at least, about dead Christians. Calvin Miller wrote a penetrating poem that I'd like to read in closing: "**I once scorned ev'ry fearful thought of death, When it was but the end of pulse and breath, * But now my eyes have seen that past the pain There is a world that's waiting to be claimed. * Earthmaker, Holy, let me now depart, For living's such a temporary art. * And dying is but getting dressed for God, Our graves are merely doorways cut in sod.**" All the dead Christians we named today would say "**Amen**" to that. Dying is but getting dressed for God. Graves are merely doorways cut in sod. That's the exciting truth about "**those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.**"