

Comfort for the Grieving

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It's lovely to be here again. My name's Tim. I am one of the trainees here, or the interns here at Brunfield, and it's great to be with you in this fantastic bit of the Bible that we're about to get stuck into.

Sleeping Beauty is one of the many fairy tales which were written down by Charles Perrault in the late 1600s. I hadn't realised it was such a modern notion.

Thanks to Disney and the Brothers Grimm, I'm sure we all know a rough sketch of the plot of how a princess is cursed to sleep for a hundred years, only to be woken by a prince who discovers her in the long since overgrown castle.

In many versions of the tale, the princess was meant to die, but her sleeping is the best attempt to save her.

In other versions, on top of this intervention to make her sleep rather than die, there's also a sleep cast upon all the residents of the castle, so that she will not awaken alone and be distraught at the loneliness of her existence.

[1 : 18] While this work of fiction is nothing but a children's story, yet it's a fascinating little illustration of what happens to Christians when they die.

Rather than truly dying in the sense that we think of, they will merely be temporarily resting, awaiting the coming of the one who will bring them back to life.

And not only will they come back from their rest, but with their awakening will come the awakening of their communities, of their church families, and those whom they love who have all similarly slept. But in the fairy tale, notice the one discrepancy. It's the wrong way round. Rather than the body remaining alive and the person going to sleep, in true Christian theology we have the body dying and the soul going to be alive with Jesus.

Notice the time when we are in the spirit of Jesus, conscious, conscious, awaiting the time when it will be brought back through the coming of the hero and it will be reunited with its body back into a state of wholeness.

[2 : 27] We're going to be thinking particularly about that time when the hero comes this evening, when Jesus returns. And we're going to be looking at that time when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening.

When the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening, when the hero comes this evening. If you cast your eye to chapter 4 verse 1 and verse 9 and verse 13 and then into 5 verse 1 and verse 12.

Each of these verses introduces a new topic or a new section. And when I was reading it last week in preparation, I noticed that the phrasing was very, very similar to in Corinthians, where Paul takes issues that have arisen in the letter that the Corinthians have written.

And it seems that the report that Timothy gave in chapter 3 was very good, but it wasn't just a whitewash. It wasn't just they're doing great.

It seems that Timothy brought back questions and issues which were arising among the Thessalonian church. And the question which Paul is addressing for them and for us this evening is, what about our brothers and sisters in Christ who have died?

[4 : 11] The scenario seems to be that some of the Christians in Thessalonica have died. They've only been Christians for a few weeks, maybe a couple of months, and they're already gone.

With the incredible persecution which Paul faced while he was there, the possibility races to our minds, doesn't it? Maybe they were martyred for the sake of their newfound faith.

Perhaps some of these now deceased folks, they were the folks who were prominent in their community. They were the people who you would look to for leadership. Perhaps they were the ones who were bolder in their evangelistic fervor. And they paid the greatest price for it. But as we get into this topic, I want to lovingly and carefully say that many of us have lost loved ones. And as we look at these verses, the first objection sometimes is that we think it says that we shouldn't grieve.

[5 : 16] But that's not what it says. Grief is very normal. Not only is it normal, but it's both healthy and it's a necessary process. And it's a proper response to death.

Death is an aberration within this world that our Father created for us. And we long for the day when it is finally recreated, when death is finally crushed as the world is recreated by our Savior.

Paul here is saying that our grief should be different to that of the world around, but not that we shouldn't grieve. And these deaths that the Thessalonians were thinking of, they've stirred the people there into a state of profound grief and perhaps even of panic.

And Paul isn't just going to go, oh, too well. And buy a little card from the faith mission and scribble in a wee verse from Psalm 23. No, he's going to teach these young Christians what the truth is. So that they can be comforted in this time of pain and grief and loss. And so the question is what will come of our loved ones. And his first response is to take them right back to what they've been already taught.

[6 : 34] And he says that the creed is the basis for our comfort. If you notice verse 14, the phrasing's quite formulaic.

It seems that this is a common Christian creed of the time. A summary of Christian teaching. Perhaps it's one that Paul taught them. And Paul takes them right back to the man, to Jesus. At the very centre, the very core of their faith. The one who we've been singing and worshipping this evening. We believe that Jesus died and rose again.

This is the beating heart of the Christian faith. If you take this out, everything else is useless. If Christ is still in the grave somewhere in the Middle East, then we better find a good developer and get this place sold off quickly.

If Jesus died and stayed in the ground, we have no hope. No amount of grief would be sufficient to make up for the loss of our believing relatives.

[7 : 38] Because they would have wasted their lives believing in fairy tales. No more profitable than Sleeping Beauty. If Jesus is not now in heaven, we're wasting our lives.

But, Jesus did live on this earth. Jesus did die and he rose again. And if that sounds pretty wacky to you here this evening, perhaps you've never heard that message before.

I want to agree with you a little. People don't normally come alive after being dead. If it were normal or even an irregular occurrence, believe you me, I wouldn't be talking so much about Jesus doing it. And perhaps you aren't sure of that tonight. And it would be fantastic to talk to you afterwards. And I would highly recommend, if you wanted a resource, to go and find *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel.

He's an excellent writer. And he was an atheist who pursued the truth to try and find out if these things were true. In fact, he tried to prove that they were wrong.

[8 : 47] And in his investigation, he changed his mind and came to know Jesus for himself. It would be a fantastic place to start reading. And it would be brilliant to start discussing some of the evidence around this matter.

But we believe that Jesus died and that he rose again. But it isn't just an interesting historical fact. It's a personally applied to all those who are united with Christ.

We said that death was an aberration in this world and so it is. But notice that in the first couple of verses here, only Christ is described as having died.

For those of us who are in him, who are united to him, who own him as Lord, Paul deliberately avoids using the word die or death.

Some translations have it in there, but it's an insertion to make the meaning clear. And he's hinting this idea to the Christians. Death is now a temporary state, almost as if we merely fall asleep.

[9 : 57] Paul's giving us a metaphor for the reality changing effects of the cross. For those of us who die as Christians, death has been robbed of its power.

It's no longer the last enemy. Instead, it's become merely the end of a day. And though for us who are left behind, it can be so hard to see it that way.

But this is the reality because of the death, defeat and crucifixion of Christ. And we need to be careful here. We ought to realize when Paul talks of sleep, it's only an illustration that Paul is using. From what we read elsewhere in the Bible, those who die aren't unconscious or asleep, but their soul, their consciousness, it goes immediately to be present with Jesus while they await his return to the earth.

And those who are with Christ in death, they'll return with him when he comes back to this earth. They don't do the crazy things that we read about in secular materials.

[11 : 05] They don't turn into angels. They don't turn into stars. They don't strum harps on clouds. But they are with God, eagerly waiting, as also should we for the time when they will be given their resurrection bodies and they will be whole again.

This is the creed that Paul takes them back to. This is the basic teaching that Paul now goes on to expand in the next few verses. And Paul then changes his tack and goes from the creed to the word of the Lord as our comfort.

Paul's raising the stakes here. Did you notice when we read it together? From verse 15 to 17, he claims that this is a word of the Lord. It reminisces us of the Old Testament prophets, doesn't it? Thus saith the Lord. But let's not misunderstand what's meant here. It's not that the rest of this letter isn't God's word. The whole Bible is true and trustworthy.

Paul is calling his readers here to pay careful attention. And Paul seems to be indicating that what he's about to teach is something that Jesus actually said.

[12 : 23] It has similarities to what Jesus teaches himself in Matthew 24, verses 30 and 31, if you want to look those up later. And they talk about the Son of Man arriving on the clouds with glory and of the angels being sent to gather God's elect and the trumpet being sounded.

And this seems to be where Paul is basing his teaching. But as we have it here, he gives us three main elements of comfort from this word, which we're going to look at in the remainder of our time. Firstly, those who have died won't miss out. Those who have died won't miss out. And we see this in verses 15 and 16. The first point is that we won't go on ahead without our fallen brothers and sisters.

It seems that the Thessalonian Christians had understood that Jesus was coming back soon. It was only a reminder that they needed of that. They'd already understood it, but they didn't expect Christians to die in the intervening time.

And they were worried that their fallen friends were going to miss out on the joy of Jesus' return. But Paul's emphatic that these dead Christians will definitely not, it's as strong as he can make it, definitely not miss out or be second-class citizens on that day.

[13 : 53] In fact, he begins to use a common cultural image here to explain how the Lord's return will work. And this image underpins the rest of our passage. Back then, if the governor was coming, the victorious general or even the emperor himself was coming to your city, he would come in splendor.

And all his servants and all his entourage would come with him. And the citizens of the city would go out to meet him. And it would be an absolutely triumphal celebration.

all of the worthy people of the city would be there. And the procession would then come back into the city with great joy and celebration.

This is something similar to what we see in Jesus' triumphal entry in Matthew. And when he comes into Jerusalem, you see the crowds come out and they come and they strew his way and they cry praises to him.

And we have similar accounts of things happening with Roman emperors and governors and generals. And this happened all the way through the Middle Ages as well. And the dead in Christ make up his entourage as Jesus comes back as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as reigning emperor of all things.

[15 : 19] And even the very trumpet of God calls. And the archangel's voice is heard. I don't know about you, but that sounds like it's going to be a noisy day.

It's going to be unmistakable, unmissable, and it's going to mark the moment in all of its glory. And it seems this command that's talked about, this is going to be the command for the Christian dead to be resurrected again.

Much like the command that Jesus uses to call Lazarus out of the grave. Remember that? A temporary resurrection, one who was brought back from the dead only to die again years later and only for one person.

But this summons, this summons will gather from every grave, from every seabed, from every scattered molecule, the remains of those who have died in Christ. and their bodies will be reunited with their souls which have come with Jesus and they shall be fully, gloriously alive as they have never been alive until that point and never again to die.

[16:37] With so much of the speculation and so much of the talk around the return of Jesus, we have what the teenagers of today would call FOMO, fear of missing out.

It's an acronym I use often. This is the fuel which keeps alive so much of the false teaching about Christ's return that there's a fear of missing out but Paul is clear that neither we nor they will miss out and we'll see this in the second note of comfort as well.

We are going to be reunited with them. Notice verse 17, the start of it. We will be caught up together with them.

They and their recreated resurrection bodies. We presumably transformed into ours at the same time we find that elsewhere and together we will go out to meet our King and Saviour.

No longer will we suffer the pain of separation from them. And we can look forward to an eternity of being in perfect community not just with the ones who we knew and who we loved but of all those who are likewise in Christ forevermore.

[18:00] No more separation. no more departure. No more death. No more see you later. We cannot fathom life like this.

And don't we long for that day. Then when we get to that day we will finally be able to see the whole body of Christ.

Every member of his church together. Many of us were probably at origin at Easter and it's incredible to see a big place filled with Christians singing together.

And that's not going to be even the slightest drop in the ocean compared to this day. From every tribe, tongue, people and nation, from every time and every era, whether we're from Europe or Asia or America or anywhere else.

And we will be together forever more. Isn't that such an incredible thought? And what a sweet moment it will be when we see them again.

[19:19] The old ladies who encouraged us, who maybe sat in front of us and slipped us the sweets as we were sitting maybe bored in the meeting some night.

The men and the women who spent evenings and weekends teaching us and urging us on. Those of our peers and friends and family who walked faithfully by our sides until they too went home. We'll see them all. We will be together again. But as wonderful as the reunion will be, the third comfort will outstrip it far beyond and with room to spare.

We are going to be reunited fully and finally with Jesus. We see it at the start of 16 and we see it at the end of 17.

The Lord is coming. Not a general, not a governor, not the first minister. It's not going to be a representative. It won't be an angel or an apparition.

[20:32] Jesus himself is coming for us. And when he comes, he will finally establish his perfect rule and perfect reign.

We are going to finally see with our very own glorified eyes the very person of Jesus Christ, our Savior. All of the theories, all of the thoughts, all of the emotions, all of the abstract ideas we've had in our head as we've walked here down below, all of them will find their completion, their perfection, their fulfillment right in front of us physically in him.

All of the yearning of all of our Christian lives to hear his very own voice speak to us directly, it will all be fulfilled. all of the desire to be able to stand before him and to worship him and to bow before him and to tell him how much we love him, it will all be possible on that day.

We're finally going to be with Jesus in the presence of the God-man who died and rose again so that we could be in relationship with him and could be with him forever.

How can we not look forward to that day? But perhaps for some of us this evening, perhaps for some of us actually we look forward to that day with dread and rightly so because we see the depths of our sin and our brokenness and we know that we can't deal with it and we realize that we don't deserve to be in that delegation which will go and meet Jesus in the air but we deserve to be

in the prison cell waiting fearfully for his judgment.

[22 : 35] If you aren't sure if this day will be a good day for you, can I urge you to look again to the cross of Jesus, to see Jesus dying for you, taking the wrath that you deserve for your sin and mine so that we together can know forgiveness of our sins, if only we welcome him and accept him, become citizens of his kingdom and turn our backs on our sin.

Some of us are Christians but even with that we still worry about this day. We still struggle with our sin and we wonder if this day will be a day of joy or of shame.

I wonder if you find yourself in that position. Perhaps it's time to talk to somebody about it. I realise that we all find it uncomfortable to talk about our weaknesses, don't we?

But that day is the most certain thing of all the future and it must be top of our priority lists to ensure that that day is a day of joy and celebration, not of fear and uncertainty.

It's possible to be sure and if you're not, there are many of us here tonight that would love to talk with you, to pray with you, whether after the service or during the week.

[24 : 08] And as we think of the certainty of our being with Jesus and returning with him, we have an incredible fresh spurring on.

We need not fear death, nor need we fear the day of Jesus' return. And so as we go about our day-to-day lives, as we seek to follow Jesus here and now, we no longer need to play it safe. We know that we will not miss out on our eternal reward. so we can live with boldness in the face of every temptation to waver and to wave the white flag.

And it doesn't matter whether we live or die because we are so sure that he is coming back for us.

And notice one final thing before we get to our conclusion.

he meets us in the air. Through the Bible, sometimes we see the air as Satan's dominion.

[25 : 20] He's called in another place the prince of the power of the air. And yet that is the very place where the ultimate victory will be proved.

Where all of our longing and hoping, where all of our struggles will finally come to an end. It's as if Paul is screaming from the rooftops.

This is it. This is the signs, seal, and utter conclusion of the matter. Satan will be vanquished.

His control of our lives will be over. And everything that we have struggled with, and everything which we have doubted, and everything which we have been tempted by, it will all be over in that day.

Because Jesus is going to come to that very place and turn that place into the center of jubilation. salvation. He's coming back.

[26 : 28] But as we finish, notice that Paul knows that sound theology from afar is not enough for these grieving Thessalonians.

Comfort without these truths would be utterly impossible. But even with this knowledge, we are all going to face grief. If we haven't done it yet, we soon will.

And we're all going to be in the dark place, whether that's sooner or whether that's later. And in those moments, we are going to need our brothers and sisters around us to encourage us.

We're going to need our good understanding of the future to come with a face and with a box of Kleenex and with a cup of coffee.

Paul doesn't say to the Thessalonians, here we are, here's the facts, now go and debate endlessly about what I haven't said. No.

[27 : 37] He says to them and to us, there are hurting people who need to hear these truths from us and it's our responsibility to go and to sit and to listen and to grieve and to care for and to remind.

These truths were not given to the Thessalonians so that they could know the future. These truths were given to the Thessalonians to comfort them and the explicit, the only explicit command in this is that we comfort one another with these words.

And that's going to be hard. To meet folks, to have them round for dinner over the course of weeks and months and maybe even years. To be open and free enough with each other that they can call us when they need a shoulder to cry on.

To encourage them to get out the house to take them to some events that maybe aren't our own cup of tea. And in amongst all of this living, normal life, to find the right opportunities to keep on reminding them of the truth.

To point them back to Jesus. Certainly not trivialize their grief, but with wisdom to show them their hope.

[29 : 12] people. And so we are to keep on reminding one another of these truths, to keep on encouraging each other to look forward to the sure return of Christ and to live our lives in the light of these core truths of the gospel.

These core truths of the gospel that sound like this. we believe that Jesus died and rose again. Can we pray?

And then I'll hand back over to Gary and the band. Father God, thank you so much that as we look to the future, we look not to uncertainty, but to an event that is utterly certain, to an event that is completely out of question, to a time that is beyond any suspicion.

You are coming back for us, Jesus. And as we live here below, as we long for that day, as we live in this broken world, would you continue to spur us on, to keep our eyes fixed on you, to remember these core truths and to comfort one another.

Lord, thank you for this church. And we pray that as we make it up and as we live lives together, that you would bless us.

[31 : 00] You would give us compassion for one another, that our love for one another would abound and that we would live wholly before you. Lord, we praise you and we thank you and we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.