

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Caught up in the Clouds

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¹³We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope. ¹⁴Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.

¹⁵In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

Caught up in the Clouds

I.

“One great use of words is to hide our thoughts.” So said Voltaire, the French writer and philosopher. “Words mean things.” So says the great philosopher Pastor Schamber on a fairly regular basis.

Do a quick search and you will find plenty of euphemisms for death. Some of them are designed to be offensive, like the mobster euphemism of “sleeping with the fishes.” Sometimes the saying is just matter-of-fact, like “Bought the farm.” The idea was that GI benefits paid out after a soldier died in battle could pay the mortgage on the family farm. There are plenty of others, ranging from the silly to some that can seem touching.

Why do we come up with euphemisms for death? “Words mean things,” and “One great use of words is to hide our thoughts.” Isn’t that just the thing human beings tend to do with death? Don’t we want to hide our thoughts about it, sometimes even when the reality is staring us right in the face?

There is an attempt in our use of words to hide our thoughts to soften death in some way; perhaps even to make light of it. There is a reason, of course. Death is one of two things the old saying says you can’t escape, the other is taxes.

II.

From the time a person is born, one is destined to die. There is a reason. Paul speaks it bluntly in his Letter to the Romans: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23, EHV).

Death brings you up close and personal to the realities of the wages of sin. Standing near the closest loved ones of the deceased, one tries to dredge up some of those euphemisms, perhaps striving heroically for the gentlest and sweetest of them to soften the blow and to get through that uncomfortable moment.

That uncomfortable moment is infinitely more uncomfortable if you are with the closest loved ones of a deceased unbeliever. Euphemisms for death don’t really soften the blow when faith was lacking at the moment of death. That’s because when Paul said “The wages of sin is death” it goes far beyond the fact that lungs stop breathing in and out, far beyond a heartbeat becoming fainter and fainter and finally ceasing.

Sin—*all* sin, from the sins we think of as minor like telling a little white lie to the sins we think are major sins, like murder—sin causes a separation from God. The first sin brought out shame in Adam and Eve who hid from the God they had once spoken personally with every evening. While some still try to hide their sins from other people and from God, others flaunt their sins and are proud of them. No matter which way you go with your *own* attitude about sin, your sin separates you from God.

When Paul said: “The wages of sin is death,” it reminds us of the ultimate separation from God. Sin’s final consequence, if left unchecked, is the separation from God forever—eternal death. The wages of sin brings hopelessness.

But Paul says he does not want *you* to “grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, EHV). There is to be a difference in attitude—a difference in *reality*—when you stand at the side of the closest loved ones of a deceased believer.

III.

Listen to Paul’s words about grieving in the context of the whole verse: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, EHV).

There goes Paul, using one of those euphemisms for death. He talks about those who have fallen asleep.

When you get right down to it, the Bible uses a bunch of euphemisms for death. Of Abraham’s death the Bible says: “He was gathered to his people” (Genesis 25:8, EHV). King David spoke about his own impending death, saying to his son, Solomon: “I am about to go the way of all the earth” (1 Kings 2:2, EHV). Jesus said about Lazarus: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up” (John 11:11, EHV). Mark says of Jesus’ death: “Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last” (Mark 15:37, EHV).

Here is a two-fer—two euphemisms in one passage: “We are confident and would much prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8, EHV). “Away from the body” is the first, and “at home with the Lord,” which makes us think of a favorite choir song we have often heard: “Going Home.”

“One great use of words is to hide our thoughts.” Is Voltaire’s saying applicable to the Bible and to Christians’ use of these euphemisms? Are we just trying to hide our thoughts about death? Is the *Bible* trying to hide from us thoughts about death? Is the Bible trying to soften the blow?

God doesn’t soften the blow when it comes to the wages of sin. His perfect righteousness and holiness *demand*s perfect obedience to his Moral Law.

Biblical euphemisms aren’t there to hide our thoughts about death. Words mean things. These biblical euphemisms show us God’s vast love and grace that go right alongside his perfect righteousness and holiness and judgment.

God gave us the Bible to learn something very important. Our Lord Jesus is not just the central figure in the Bible, but the whole focus of the Bible. Mankind’s sin separates from God, but God had a plan to deal with sin. Jesus, God himself, carried out that plan and dealt with sin. That’s why Paul’s passage from Romans didn’t just stop with that bit about wages: “The wages of sin is death, but the undeserved gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23, EHV).

Rather than leaving us bereft of hope because we face the wages of sin, God *did* something about it. That’s why Paul could say in our text: “Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, EHV). We are not hopeless,

but have the sure hope that comes because of Jesus' death and resurrection. He has paid the wages of sin so that we might have the undeserved gift of eternal life.

IV.

“In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:15, EHV). Something had been bothering the Thessalonians. They wondered if those who had died before Jesus returned at Judgment Day would be lost. Paul's repeated use of “fallen asleep” was to instruct them that the death of these believers was not the end. You are not afraid to fall asleep at night, are you? Waking up the next day is something you never give a second thought. Paul's use of “falling asleep” for dying teaches us that death need not be any more intimidating than going to bed at night.

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, EHV).

You and I are still alive. If Jesus returns today, we will all see him coming on the clouds. But before anything else happens, all those who have died ahead of us will rise from their graves before the judgment begins. *Then* all of us believers will be caught up in the clouds to go with our Lord Jesus to our eternal home.

“And so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18, EHV). It has been an interesting year, to say the least. There have been many trying times. Many have found these days and weeks that stretched into long months to be very taxing—to mental health, to physical health, to financial health. Encourage each other with these words. We will always be with the Lord. Those who have gone before us—the Saints Triumphant—will be caught up in the clouds together with us who still wait for the Lord Jesus.

Words mean things. *These* words about death—the words of Scripture—are not meant to *hide* our true emotions or feelings, but express spiritual and Scriptural truths. Death for those who believe is merely sleep. Jesus, when he comes on the clouds, will take us with him up into the clouds to eternal glory in the mansions he is preparing for us. Amen.