

One of my favorite comedians and actors was a man named Robin Williams. He starred in many movies such as Mrs. Doubtfire, Mork and Mindy, Good Morning Vietnam, and Good Will Hunting. He had a way to bring a smile to your face. But on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, he committed suicide by hanging himself. On the scene there was no evidence of alcohol or illegal drugs. After his death, there was a lot of confusion and ignorance about his death. A lot of the talk was not good. Some said, Robin had a lot of inner turmoil in his life, and suicide was a way he could finally be released of that inner pain. Others promoted the idea of universalism. In other words, Robin was a nice person. And all nice people go to heaven. Some of the talk about Robin Williams promoted that this life is all there is, so you'd better enjoy it as much as you can, because the grave is coming. A lot of ignorance and senseless talk goes on when someone dies.

Maybe you have gone to a funeral of a friend, where the sermon preached by the minister was just a basic eulogy on the person's life. The minister talked about how the departed would give you the shirt off his back, how he did volunteer work in the community, how he was so selfless and caring. He pointed out pictures on an easel of some happy times the departed had with loved ones. Then he topped off the message by saying, the departed is in a better place. After the service, the family went out to a restaurant, and had a few drinks. It all seemed so empty, so hopeless. All the family had to hold onto were some memories of their loved one. They would never see the departed again. Their grieving was grieving with no real hope.

In our lesson for today, we have a group of people from Thessalonica who are grieving. They are sad. But their tears are tears of hope. Let's find out to cry the right way. Let's learn to "Grieve as Ones Who Have Hope"!

Why are we Christians such a positive upbeat bunch? Our text says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." Note he didn't say, "We hope Jesus died and rose," or "We think Jesus died and rose." No, "We believe" it. It's such a confident belief and trust that we know it to be truth and fact—because it is!

Death is the ultimate reality for us. It's the sobering truth, the cold splash of water that reminds us who we are. Adam and Eve were not created to die. God made them as perfect people who would live forever. But as soon as they broke his will, disobeyed, and sinned the perfect image of God was lost. They became sinful, and with sin came death. Sadly that sinfulness became a part of human life, passed down from generation to generation. That sinfulness has infected every person. Oh, God's demands are still in place. He still declares, "Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy." Jesus still tells us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The demands from our God are still in place. If we want to live with him in heaven, then we must obey God perfectly. If not, well, God says it very clearly in the book of Ezekiel, "**The soul who sins is the one who will die.**" **That means we face a separation from God forever in hell.**

All it takes is one bad thought. One selfish thought. One doubt. One lie. One cheat. One hateful or vengeful thought. One worry. Just one sin is all it takes. The soul who sins is the one who will die. But we've sinned much more than once! No wonder death is scary! No wonder people worry about what comes after death! But Paul steps right in and says, "No don't worry. Don't grieve like the rest of men. *Know the Facts that Give You Hope.*" Jesus died and rose.

We are sinners and we deserve God's punishment. We deserve death. But Jesus came to take our punishment. We believe that Jesus died. He went to the cross to carry our sin. He went to the cross to carry our guilt. He went to be the death of all deaths as our substitute. But he didn't stay dead. Just as he showed that grieving mother whose son he raised to life in Nain, so he showed his power over death to all people. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. He rose to a life victorious of sin and Satan and death. And He promises, because He lives, we also shall live.

The apostle Paul wants us to know those facts that give us hope. Death isn't scary for us. We don't need to grieve like other people. Those who die with faith in Jesus as Savior, and when we die with faith in our Savior—all believers will join Jesus in the joys of heaven.

There was once a young girl who was very sick. Her parents hardly knew what to do. Previously, she had bounced to full health when she had been sick. But not this time. She only seemed to get worse. So the parents turned to Jesus. Just as you or I might pray in such a situation, the father especially turned to Jesus, imploring him to help. But there was no answer at first. It seemed as though Jesus didn't care. Sure enough, the beautiful little 12 year old girl died. If only Jesus had answered the requests and prayers of the parents! (How often don't we talk like that?) The next day the weeping and wailing crowd was quieted as a man arrived. It seemed almost insensitive and uncaring when he said, **"Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep."** They laughed at him in disdain and anger. But then he went with the father and the mother and his three close friends to see the girl. He took the girl's hand and said, **"Talitha koum! (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!")"** Immediately the girl stood up and walked around. The apostle Paul talks about death in the same way Jesus did. He speaks of death like a sleep. But that is exactly what death is for Christians. It's like closing your eyes to sleep. You close your eyes in physical death, but you immediately wake up in the joys of heaven.

What comforting words for these Thessalonians! They were terrified that they would never see their loved ones again who had passed away. But Paul tells them that's not the case. First of all, death is but a sleep from which we immediately wake in heaven. Secondly, when Jesus returns on Judgment Day, all those who have died will rise to life again, and their bodies will join their souls in heaven—like they had just woken up from a really long sleep.

Another misunderstanding the Thessalonians had about the death of their loved ones is that they felt the departed loved one was going to miss out on the excitement of Christ's triumphant return. Not so, explained Paul. On the contrary, they will have a front row seat for it. More than that. They are going to participate in the return for they will be at Jesus' side. And they won't just be there in spiritual form with only their souls. Paul says that Jesus will raise their bodies back to life.

It's no wonder Paul says that when a Christian dies we don't need to grieve like those who have no hope. We don't need to cry for a believer shut into a casket and lowered into a grave any more than a child should cry when her mother takes the picture she drew for Grandma, puts it into an envelope with a stamp on it and drops it in the mailbox. That envelope and picture will surface again and so will believers who have fallen asleep in Jesus. So when you're lowered into the grave someday, your soul will be delivered to Jesus where it will await the Last Trumpet and the resurrection of the body.

Yes, death is now God's postbox thanks to Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning!

But now what about those believers who are still alive at the Last Trumpet? What will they experience? Paul tells us. "After [the resurrection], we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever".

You've probably heard of the rapture before. "Rapture" means to be suddenly taken up into the air. You might think of a mouse suddenly seized in the talons of a hawk and finds itself soaring over trees. Of course the rapture for believers will not be a scary experience like that, for Jesus, and not some hungry hawk, will draw us to himself as he descends on the clouds. It's important to note that the rapture will happen on Judgment Day not some time before as some believe.

Not only will we float up to meet Jesus in the air and join the resurrected Christians there, our bodies will be changed so that we will be without sin, pain, or any disability. And best of all, this life with Jesus will never end. The final school bell may signal the end of studies for the day or even for the summer, but you know that there's going to be another bell in the fall – one summoning you back to the schoolbooks. That's what makes the sound of the Last Trumpet so much better. When it blasts, it will be crying out in wild jubilation that our perfect life with Jesus will never end. Never again will we have to wonder if Jesus really loves us. Never again will we wonder how our loved ones in Jesus are doing. We'll never be separated from them or from Jesus again. Nor will Satan be around anymore to threaten this perfection.

To Be With the Lord Forever. How good will it be? Better than any water volleyball or Pickleball match. Better than a great dinner at the Nancy Lopez Restaurant. Better than spending time with the grandkids. Better than walking holding hands with your spouse. Better than anything you could do or feel, better than being in the company of any person you could possibly imagine, will be that moment when you are in the company of God together with your loved ones who died in Christ and rose again - nothing will be better than that moment - and it is something that will last forever, we are told right here.

Why does God want you to know this? God tells us right here: "Therefore, encourage each other with these words." We all need encouragement. And so, when a loved one dies, here's what God gives you to think about. The person died, yes, but that person died in Christ. That person's just sleeping, God tells you here. That person will rise on Judgment Day, and you and that person will someday together meet Jesus in the air and be with him forever.

My brother Bruce died when I was 5 and he was 4. My dad died when I was 11. My mom died when I was 26. Plug in the name of your loved one. We are sad. We grieve. But we grieve with hope. We are going to see them again. Soon! No need for a Eulogy! Keep the focus on the one who gives us the victory. Jesus! He will eventually wipe away all tears from our eyes. Amen.