

Ever heard of Thomas Hobbes? He was an English philosopher and prolific author back in the 1600s. If you're into politics it might be a familiar name. In many ways he is regarded as a founding father of modern political thought. He was active in what world history acknowledges as the "age of enlightenment." Namely, that the majority of Europe was coming out of the middle ages during his life time. Thomas Hobbes was one of the great minds of that era of human enlightenment. His contributions to the fields of mathematics, geometry, physics, political thought, ethics and just philosophy in general, are priceless. By all human standards this guy was a renaissance man! A brilliant mind gifted with incredible intelligence. At the age of 91 he suffered a stroke, and as he lay on his deathbed, do you know what his last words were?

"I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark."

All his brilliance and intelligence afforded him no comfort in those last moments. For as certain and steadfast as he had been for the majority of his life – at the end he had no certainty and nothing to encourage him.

Even though Thomas Hobbes uttered those final words back in the 1600s, this is the way that many people, even Christians, feel about death. And naturally so! Death is a scary thing. I'm not going to stand up here today and say that we all should enjoy the thought of dying or say that death isn't scary, painful or sad! Even Jesus cried when his friends died! What can we do in the face of such sadness or pain or when we feel uncertain and scared? We can encourage one another.

This is what St. Paul does when he writes to young pastor Timothy and his little church in Thessalonica. He isn't telling the believers to look at death through rose colored glasses. No, he speaks encouragement!

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

Paul calls death for a believer "sleep." When you take a nap or go to sleep at night, we fully expect to wake up with the full use of all of our abilities and feeling refreshed! Encourage one another with these words! This is encouragement for both the person in their final hours and those who are left behind – even in the face of grief or fear.

Paul doesn't say not to grieve. He says don't grieve like the "rest of mankind" who have no hope. When you shut your eyes in the sleep of death the next thing you will see is Jesus. And you who are left behind, know that this is what your loved one saw when they closed their eyes. How can we be sure?

14 For 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.

This is the reason that death is just a sleep. In so many words Paul reminds them of John 14:19 "Because I live, you also will live." This in a nutshell is the bedrock of our faith, that Jesus died and rose from death. He showed his power over the greatest weapon that sin and Satan can wield. He is master over death and because he rose, I will to. The one who dies in Christ dies well!

This is what we call an objective truth. It can be grouped with other truths like grass is green, snow is white, the sky is blue, the sun will rise tomorrow, if it rains the sidewalk gets wet. Christ conquered death. No question.

But Satan and our sinful natures fight a relentless battle and seek and use every outlet they can to cause doubt and fear in us, they seek to overwhelm us as they did with Thomas Hobbes in his final moments. The devil sought to do the same to that young congregation in Thessalonica as well.

¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

This verse can sound a little confusing until we understand that this is the reason Paul was writing to them. There was a general fear or anxiety on the part of believers in Thessalonica, that their loved ones who died in the Lord would miss the great event of the Lord's return. This might seem a bit silly from our perspective. But it was a real concern for those living in this congregation. The question we ought to ask is, why was that so?

Well, reading between the lines a bit, things were bad. Paul took the special time to write to this little church in Thessalonica, he made a special point to send Timothy there to be their pastor. These believers thought that the Lord's return was imminent, and usually that means that living conditions, or persecutions or famine or wars are rampant. So a legitimate question for these believers the question, "What will happen to Grandma, when Jesus comes back?"

Paul wants to encourage them so gently hints at the fact that these people were "uninformed" about the happenings at the final Judgment. Perhaps it was the BIC lesson that they never got around to. Either way this was a young congregation with new converts. So when they saw the evil in the world, and heard of wars and rumors of wars, they naturally had some concerns.

Now, we might not wonder what will happen to grandma when Jesus comes back Scripture tells us: ***we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.***

We have the benefit of all of Scripture and yet we still have plenty of questions of our own concerning death. Why do infants die? Why is there tragedy like the one out in Cali – both the shooting and the fires?

The devil does all he can to get us to doubt and question God's goodness. He doesn't want us to encourage one another with the sure promises of God, the Lord's ultimate purpose for all believers. So in the face of tragedy he often gets us to offer false comfort to each other. How many times at a grave side committal haven't you heard, "I just know that they're looking down on us." Or at some momentous life event like a wedding or graduation people say, "I wish that grandma was here..." and the reply is "Oh she's here." Is that actually comfort?

I remember hearing that stuff as a kid at funerals, and I remember it causing me a great deal of discomfort. Do we want to believe that our loved ones who've died are looking down on us – at all times? Is it comforting to think that they look down and see our sins and this sinful world still subject to decay and all the pain, hurt and turmoil here? Where do we draw the line with that? Are they here when we want them here and not looking down on us when we don't? Friends don't offer false comfort. Our comfort and our encouragement is the theme of our service for today – the Saints are Triumphant!

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

This is the ultimate triumph that all believers are destined for! There will be no doubt about it, no doubt of God's goodness, no doubt of God's purpose for his people. You will march in that victory! Think about that ponder that for a moment. Your eyes will see that. You will be there. At your savior's side, along with all those who've gone before – mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends and family. As Paul says:

¹⁷ After that, 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.

So why would we want a loved one to return to see this sinful world again? Why would we want them to still be with us and watching over us? So they can see all the sin and uncertainty in the world all over again? Even now they are in PERFECTION! They have peace and joy beyond our comprehension! They are already forever with the Lord! What greater peace can we have than that! Let us comfort and encourage each other in times of grief with TRUE words, these Words. Think of the time when we will all be forever with the Lord at the marriage feast of the Lamb!

Because Christ who died rose from death, there is no uncertainty, the saints will be triumphant, your eyes will see this,

¹⁸ encourage one another with these words. Amen.