

Sorrow Not...

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Thru the Bible
Radio Network

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*God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.*

*God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,
Never a river, turbid and deep.*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the laborer, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

– Annie Johnson Flint

Sorrow Not...

People all over the world are seeking comfort at this very moment. They long for peace in their hearts. Jesus alone can bring that comfort. In John 14:1 He tells us the basis for it: "...ye believe in God, believe also in me." And for those who believe in the Lord Jesus, death brings hope as well as sorrow.

Let's look at what the apostle Paul says in 1 Thessalonians about the death of a Christian,

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

"I would not have you to be ignorant." I love the way Paul says that. He uses the same phrase in the Corinthian epistles. When Paul says, "I would not have you ignorant, brethren," you can pretty well put it down that the brethren are ignorant. Paul just didn't come out and say so in a flat-footed and crude way. He is more polite and diplomatic. I would say that he did it in a very Christian way.

"Concerning them which are asleep." Paul is referring to the death of the body. This never refers to the soul or the spirit of man, because the spirit of man does not die. We shall note that as we move through this passage, but first I want to mention several reasons that the death of the body is spoken of as being "asleep."

First, there is a similarity between sleep and death. A dead body and a sleeping body are actually very similar. I'm sure you have been to a funeral where someone has remarked that So-and-So looks just as if he were asleep. Well, in a way it is true – the body of a believer is asleep. A sleeper does not cease to exist, and the inference is that the dead do not cease to exist just because the body is asleep. Sleep is temporary; death has its resurrection. It is not that life is existence and death is non-existence, you see.

Second, the word which is translated “asleep” has its root in the Greek word *keimai*, which means “to lie down.” And the very interesting thing is that the word for “resurrection” is a word that refers only to the body. It is *anastasis*, and it comes from two Greek words: *histemi* which means “to stand” and *ana*, the preposition “up.” It is only the body which can stand up in resurrection.

C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* uses a little sarcasm to ridicule the liberals who believe that the resurrection is a resurrection of the spirit and not of the body. He asks what position the soul or the spirit takes when it lies down in death, or what position the spirit takes when it stands up in resurrection! If you want to believe in soul sleep, you must explain how a soul can lie down and then stand up. Obviously, “asleep” refers to the body.

The same Greek word used here for “sleep” is used elsewhere when referring to a natural sleep when the body lies down in bed. Let me give you two illustrations of this. “And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them *sleeping* for sorrow” (Luke 22:45, italics mine). Imagine – Peter, James and John went to sleep at this time of crisis! The word is the same word that is used in 1 Thessalonians. Again, in Acts 12:6, “And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was *sleeping* between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison” (italics mine). One thing we know for sure about Simon Peter is that he did not have insomnia! Even at times of great crisis, he was able to sleep. Again, the same word for “sleep” is used, and it is the natural sleep of the body.

Third, the Bible teaches that the body returns to the dust of the earth, but the spirit returns to the presence of God. Even the Old Testament teaches this. In Ecclesiastes 12:7 we read: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” “The dust” – that is our body. God told

Adam, "...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19). It was the body that was taken from the dust, and then God breathed into man the breath of life, or the spirit, you see. It is the body that will go to sleep until the resurrection – only the body. The spirit of a believer will return to God.

What is death? Death is a separation. It is not the ending of the spirit or of the personality. These do not die. The real "you" goes on to be with the Lord if you are a child of God. It is the body that disintegrates. Death is a separation of the body from the individual, from the person. The body disintegrates, decays, decomposes. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes applies only to the body.

The spirit or the soul does not die, and therefore the spirit or the soul is not raised. Only the body can lie down in death, and only the body can stand up in resurrection. This is quite obvious when Paul says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

The body is merely a frail tent that is laid aside temporarily in death.

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2 Corinthians 5:1)

The Greek word for "tabernacle" here is *skenos*, which means "a tent." The bodies we live in are tents. I have news for you: You may live in a home that cost \$250,000, but the place where you really live is in a little tent. It is not a matter of some living in a hovel and some in a mansion – we have all been given the same kind of tent. You could reduce the body to its component chemicals, and I am told the whole amount would sell for about \$4.00, although inflated prices may push it a little higher. Every one of

us lives in a tent that is worth about \$4.00! It can be blown down at any moment. If you don't believe that, step in front of a car and you will find that your tent will fold up and silently slip away. Our bodies are actually very frail.

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.... For we that are in this tabernacle do groan.... (2 Corinthians 5:2, 4)

We groan within our tents. Have you discovered that?

I met an old man at the corner bus stop many years ago. He must have been pretty close to eighty. He was swearing like a sailor. I said to him, "Brother, you won't be here very long, and you are going to have to answer to God."

"How do you know I won't be here very long?" he asked.

"God is telling you so. He has put gray in your hair, a totter in your step, a stoop in your shoulder, and a shortness of breath when you walk. He is trying to tell you that you won't be here much longer. You are living in a little tent down here, and you are going to be slipping away soon."

I am told that when President Adams was an old man, a friend inquired about his health. He answered that he was fine, but the house he lived in was getting rickety and was not in good repair. That is the kind of body each of us is living in, my friend.

When I was a young man, I could bound up and down the steps to my study. Today it is different. I come down the steps one at a time, and there is no more bounding. My knees hurt, and I groan. My wife tells me I groan too much, but I tell her it is scriptural to groan. Paul said that we groan in these bodies.

These old bodies are going to be put into the grave, and there they are going to sleep. The spirit goes to be with the Lord.

Paul wrote,

Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (for we walk by faith, not by sight). (2 Corinthians 5:6, 7)

Now we are at home in this body; this is where we live. People don't really get to see us, you know – we are hidden in our bodies. Sometimes people who come to rallies or services when I speak tell me they have heard me on the radio and they have come just to see how I look. I always feel like saying, "You really haven't seen me. All you have seen is a head and two hands sticking out of a suit of clothes. You don't see me – I live within this body." This house I live in isn't in such good repair, but that's where I will live as long as I walk on this earth.

Paul goes on to say,

We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

I can't think of anything lovelier than that. If you should attend my funeral, I wouldn't want you to come by and say that I look so natural. Friend, I won't even be there. You will just be looking at my tent that I have left behind. It's my old house that has been put to sleep. I will have gone to be with the Lord. At the resurrection our bodies will be raised up.

Many years ago in the city of New York (in fact, it was way back in the days when liberalism was called modernism, back in the 1920s) they had an argument about whether the resurrection was literal or spiritual. The liberal even today claims it's spiritual. He doesn't believe in a bodily resurrection at all. A very famous Greek scholar from the University of Chicago read a paper on the passage from 1 Corinthians 15: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised

a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). His paper put the emphasis on the word *spiritual*. He concluded by saying, “Now, brethren, you can see that resurrection is spiritual because it says it’s spiritual.” The liberals applauded, and somebody made a motion that they print that manuscript and circulate it.

Well, a very fine conservative Greek scholar was there, and he stood up. When he stood, all the liberals were a little uneasy because he could ask very embarrassing questions. He said, “I’d like to ask the author of the paper a question.” Very reluctantly, the good doctor stood up. “Now, doctor, which is stronger, a noun or an adjective? A very simple question, but I’d like for you to answer it.” The professor could see the direction he was going and didn’t want to answer it, but he had to say that a noun is stronger, of course. “Now, doctor, I’m amazed that you presented the paper that you did today. You put the emphasis upon an adjective, and the strong word is the noun. Now, let’s look at that again. ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.’” He said, “The only thing that is carried over in resurrection is the body. It’s one kind of body when it dies, a natural body. It’s raised a body, but a spiritual body, dominated now by the spirit – but it’s still a body.” And they never did publish that paper. They decided it would be better not to publish it. May I say to you, just a simple little exercise in grammar would have answered this great professor’s whole manuscript and his entire argument which he presented at that time.

Daniel is another writer who spoke of the death of the body as “sleep.” “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Dust will go back to dust – that’s the body; but the spirit goes to God who sent it.

Fourth, the early Christians adopted a very wonderful word for the burying places of their loved ones – the Greek word *koimeterion*, which means “a rest house for strangers, a sleeping place.” It is the same word from which we get our English word “cemetery.” The same word was used in that day for inns, or what we would call a hotel or motel. A Hilton Hotel, a Ramada Inn or a Holiday Inn – they are the places where you spend the night to sleep. You expect to get up the next day and continue your journey. This is the picture of the place where you bury your believing loved ones. You don’t weep when you have a friend who goes and spends a weekend in a Hilton Hotel, do you? No, you rejoice with him. The body of the believer has just been put into a motel until the resurrection. One day the Lord is coming and that body is going to be raised up.

Now look at the text in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 again, “...that ye sorrow not, even as others [the rest] which have no hope.” The pagan world had no hope; so for them death was a frightful thing. In Thessalonica they have found an inscription that says: “After death no reviving, after the grave no meeting again.” The Greek poet Theocritus wrote, “Hopes are among the living; the dead are without hope.” That was the belief of the ancient world. It is pretty pessimistic and doleful.

Believers are not to sorrow as the pagans. I have officiated at many funeral services during the years of my ministry, and I can always tell if the family is Christian. I can tell by the way the people weep whether they have hope or not. Christians weep, of course – there is nothing wrong with that. Paul never says that believers are not to weep. What he does say is that we are not to sorrow as the others which have no hope.

The Lord Jesus wept at the death of a friend. John 11:33-35 says concerning the death of Lazarus,

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept.

If you want to know how God feels about the death of your loved ones, look at this. He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Death is a frightful thing. And you can be sure that He enters into sympathy with you.

His sympathy was for the living. He knew what He was going to do for the dead. “Jesus wept.” John’s Gospel was written to show us the deity of Christ, but here Jesus is shown in all His humanness. He mingles His tears with ours. He groans within Himself. I get a little impatient with Christians who say one must not cry at a funeral, that one must be a brave Christian. Death is not pretty; it is a terrible thing. Jesus wept!

A Christian has a sorrow at the death of a loved one, but he also has hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

(1 Thessalonians 4:14)

I want you to notice that Paul says, “Jesus died and rose again.” It doesn’t say Jesus slept – He died. How accurate this is! And He died to pay the penalty for your sins and mine.

There are three kinds of death in Scripture. There is physical death, which is the separation of the spirit from the body. That is what we ordinarily call death. Adam didn’t actually die physically until 930 years after the Fall.

Then there is spiritual death. Paul says that to be carnally minded is death, which is separation from God. This is what happened to man in the Garden of Eden when God said that man would die in

the day he ate of the fruit. Man became separated from God. Adam hid from God; he ran from God when God came into the garden – there was now a separation between them. Adam did die the day he ate the fruit – a spiritual death. Paul describes this spiritual death in Ephesians 2:1: “And you hath he quickened [made alive], who were dead in trespasses and sins.”

A famous judge toured around this country some years ago giving a lecture entitled “Millions Now Living Will Never Die.” There followed him a famous Baptist preacher whose lecture was “Millions Now Living Are Already Dead.” And they *were* dead – spiritually dead.

The third death is eternal death. That is eternal separation from God. This is the second death described in Revelation 20:14, “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”

But Christ has conquered death – all death. In 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 Paul put it this way:

*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through
our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I heard a Bible teacher say that since God has taken the sting out of death, it is like a bee that has his stinger removed. Well, I can't tell when a bee's stinger has been removed. I can't stop every bee and ask, “Say, do you have a stinger?” Therefore, I am afraid of every bee.

Death has lost its sting, because we are to look way out beyond death. It is a doorway that opens up the vast regions of eternity. It starts us down the hallway, not of time, but of eternity. But I don't like going through that door.

“O grave, where is thy victory?” It looks as if the grave wins.

Many a man has been a successful businessman, but death finally won over him. Many a politician gets elected to high office, even to the presidency, and then dies in office. They reach the heights, but death walks in on them and claims a victory. Death is an awful monster. However, Christ has been down through that way. Just as the ark of the covenant went down into the Jordan River (see Joshua 3:14-17) and over to the other side, so Christ has gone down through the waters of death for me, and He tells me, "I am your Shepherd. Remember, I not only lead you through this life, but I'll lead you through the deep waters of death, and I will bring you into eternity." So like a little child I'm afraid, but I'll put my hand in His nail-pierced hand, and He will lead me to the other side. "O grave, where is thy victory?"

"The sting of death is sin." It is sin that has the real stinger.

"The strength of sin is the law." The law is the mirror that shows us we are sinners.

"But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory." How? Because we are smart and clever and are overcomers? No. The victory is through our Lord Jesus Christ. Life is ours, and I want to enjoy life. Death is ours, for we have the One who got the victory over death. Things present (the things of time) and things out yonder in the future are all ours. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us!

Yes, there is great comfort in the fact that Christ has conquered death, and those who have received Him need not sorrow as others do.

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

“By the word of the Lord” is Paul’s assurance that he is giving God’s answer to their question. Paul knows they have been worrying about those who had died before the Rapture and wants them to know that the dead in Christ will have part in the Rapture.

“We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.” “Prevent” is an old English word meaning “precede.” Those who are alive at the time of the Rapture will not be going ahead of them – in fact, the dead in Christ will be going first.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

“The Lord himself shall descend from heaven.” I love that – He won’t be sending angels. When the Lord takes His church out of the world, the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven. In John 14:3 He assured His disciples that He was coming again,

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

He will descend from heaven “with a shout.” That is the voice of command. It is the same voice which He used when He stood at the tomb of Lazarus and said, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43).

“The voice of the archangel” – it is His voice that will be *like* the voice of the archangel. It is the quality of His voice, the majesty and the authority of it.

“The trump of God.” Will there be trumpets at that time? No, I don’t think so. It is His voice that will be like a trumpet. Can we be sure of this? In Revelation 1:10, John, who was exiled to the

Isle of Patmos, wrote, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.” He turned to see who it was, and he saw the glorified Christ. It is the voice of the glorified Christ that is *like* the sound of a trumpet.

That ought to get rid of the notion about Gabriel blowing his horn or blowing a trumpet. I don’t think Gabriel even owns a trumpet, but if he has one, he won’t need to blow it. The Lord Jesus is not going to need the help of Gabriel. Do you think the Lord Jesus needed Gabriel to come and help Him raise Lazarus from the dead? Can you imagine the Lord Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus saying, “Gabriel, won’t you come over here and help Me get this man out of the grave?” The Lord Jesus will not need anyone to help Him. When He calls His church, their bodies will come up out of the graves.

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

Again, “caught up” is the Greek *harpazo*, meaning “to grasp hastily, snatch up, to lift, transport, or rapture.”

It is going to be a very orderly procedure. The dead will rise first. Here comes Stephen out of the grave. It may be that he will lead the procession since he was the first martyr. Then there will be the apostles and all those millions who have laid down their lives for Jesus. They will just keep coming from right down through the centuries. Finally, if we are alive at that time, we will bring up the rear of the parade. We will be way down at the tail end of it. Most of the church has already gone in through the doorway of death.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words.
(1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Does Paul say, “Wherefore terrify one another with these words”? Of course not. My Bible says, “Wherefore comfort one another.” It not only means to comfort in the usual sense of the word, but also to instruct and to exhort one another and to talk about these things. My friend, Jesus is going to take His own out of this world someday! What a glorious, wonderful comfort this is! The bodies of the dead will be lifted out. Then whoever is alive at that time will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. So shall we ever be with the Lord.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*Now He's drawing closer
And the voice of my beloved sounds
Over the rocks and rising grounds
O'er hills of guilt and seas of grief
He leaps, He flies to my relief.
— Watts*

