

Memorial for Betty Siemens Martens 17-May-2021

God Comforts Us about the Dead in Christ

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Lord took Betty from us and to himself. We grieve and we celebrate. Let's make room for both. We grieve because Betty had to leave her children. Her children lost their mother.

She did not want this, and neither did they. And there are Betty's siblings, and her children have spouses, and there are grandchildren, and great grandchildren, and many friends. There is sad loss, and we will not pretend otherwise.

But God has given us comfort in these times, and solid promises, and so we remind ourselves of these. Our Scripture is in 1 Thessalonians 4. This Scripture was written just for days like this. 1 Thess 4:13.

Our Scripture begins this way: *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.* And it ends this way: *So encourage one another with these words.*

God *teaches* us about death, and he *comforts* us, and he gives us ways to *encourage* each other. We will grieve, we know that, God knows that. We would much rather Betty was healthy and active among us. But she's gone, we have lost her, and so we grieve.

But God did something through Christ, so that we his people will have hope, and not grieve like the rest, who do not have hope. *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about Betty so that you do not grieve like the rest, who have no hope, the rest who have no solid promise from God.*

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.

We believe three things about Jesus, two have already happened, and we wait for the third. (1) He died, (2) he rose, and (3) God will bring Jesus back, and he will bring along those who died in the faith.

(1) He died, (2) God raised him on the third day, that's what we celebrate at Easter, and (3) he's coming back. These are the most important events in our Lord's life.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring, with Jesus, Betty and all the others, who have fallen asleep in him.

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 go ahead of those who have fallen asleep.

This letter was written to an early church, and those Christians were afraid that the dead in Christ, people like Betty, would be left behind when the Lord returned. They knew the Lord would return, but did not know what would happen to the people they had lost, like Betty.

According to the Lord's own word. Jesus himself taught this to his followers, and they passed it on. We get in the NT Letters some teachings of Jesus that are not in the Gospels. Jesus himself taught this to his followers, and they passed it on to Paul.

According to the Lord's own words, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not go ahead of Betty and others who have fallen asleep.

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. 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.

Here is what will happen. *First*, the Lord himself will come down. *Then* the dead in Christ, Betty and others, will rise from the dead. *Then* we who are alive and are left will be caught up with them, in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And *then*, we will be with the Lord forever.

It starts this way: *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.*

In the ancient world, this is battle language, military language, what happens when one army attacks another. Loud command, the voice of a mighty heavenly general, and the trumpet of God blowing. This will *not* be a quiet, hidden coming of our Lord.

That's how it starts. *Then* the dead in Christ, like Betty, will be raised first, *then* we who are still alive and left will be caught up with them, in the clouds.

These are not rain clouds. In the Bible, clouds often show the Presence of God. When God met Israel on Mt Sinai, Exodus says there was *a thick cloud* on the mountain. That's not a rain cloud, but rather the God cloud.

After Israel built the tabernacle, a cloud appeared over the tabernacle and stayed there. That was a God cloud, God was in the tabernacle. In Daniel 7, the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to receive his kingdom.

In the Gospels, when Jesus was briefly changed into his glory in front of his disciples, there was *a bright cloud*, and God himself spoke to the dpls from that cloud. That was the God cloud.

In Acts 1, when Jesus was taken up from the disciples, we read that *a cloud* took Jesus out of their sight. Not a rain cloud, but the God cloud. Jesus was taken up into the presence of God.

Paul means that God cloud: *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the God cloud, we will be caught up together into the presence of God.*

We will be caught up together with them in the God cloud to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. To meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Several times the apostle Paul writes about what happens to believers after death, and always like this: the best part is being with the Lord Jesus. Not going to heaven, not walking streets of gold, not even seeing the loved ones he had lost. No, being with the Lord Jesus.

He does not talk about leaving the troubles of earth behind, although that's also true. He only talks about being with the Lord Jesus.

Where will we be? In heaven? New heaven? On the new earth? Doesn't matter, we'll be with the Lord, that's what matters. Where we will be is: *with the Lord Jesus*. That's where we will be, forever. Wherever the Lord is, together with the Lord forever.

Detour: I'm going to take a little detour here to speak about the time between now and the return of the Lord when our bodies are raised, when the dead in Christ rise first. What about between now and then?

What about Betty right now? From our side, she has fallen asleep. But that's not the whole story. In Php 1 Paul says he would much prefer to die, to leave his body and be present with the Lord. In 2 Cor 5 he says the same thing: we all know that as long as we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. We would prefer, he says, to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Away from the body, at home with the Lord. Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Today, today, you will be with me in paradise."

So Betty's body is here, and her soul is with the Lord, right now, and that is what we all prefer, but we are here because the Lord has things for us to do. Revelation calls where Betty is now "the first resurrection."

Revelation 20 says the first resurrection is the souls, just the souls, of those who were faithful to Christ, seated now with Christ. Betty, right now, is enjoying the first resurrection, she is with Christ. The first resurrection is the life of the soul, after death, with the Lord.

When the Lord returns in power, then the dead in Christ will rise first, and she and all of us will have our bodies changed, which Revelation calls the second resurrection, the life of our bodies after death, with the Lord.. The Detour is over.

God says to us: *I do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, Betty and others, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

God says: I will send the Lord Jesus down from heaven. *Then* dead in Christ, like Betty, will rise first. *Then* you who are alive and left will be caught up together with Betty and the rest to meet the Lord. And *then* you will all be with the Lord and with Me your Father, forever. *Make sure you encourage one another with these words.* Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for comfort. You know that Betty's death grieves us, and scares us. We did not want to lost her, and we do not enjoy being reminded of our own mortality. But you speak to us, to comfort us and reassure us. You speak about Betty, and about ourselves. You speak encouraging words to us, and for this we praise you, Father. Father, comfort those who grieve. Amen.

BENEDICTION: *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.... The One who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.* Amen. God in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.