

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

THEME: THE TRIUMPHANT LIFE IN CHRIST

1. God's Saints Are Triumphant in Christ
2. Faith Triumphs Over Sight

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 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. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) *NIV84*

Dear Fellow Saints of God:

GOD'S SAINTS ARE TRIUMPHANT IN CHRIST

In this time leading up to our national elections, we are sure to hear a few speeches. Many professional speechwriters strive to end speeches on a positive note. After all, the last words of a speech are often the climax, containing those specific words and ideas the speaker wants his audience to take with them and remember. Positive words are memorable words. Positive words inspire confidence and hope.

Near the end of the Christian church year (as we are), we set aside two weeks—Saints Triumphant and Christ the King—to lift our weary eyes from this wilderness, up from this battlefield called earth, to see the glory and majesty of heaven. The message of these services perks up our ears. It reminds us that life in this sin-wrecked world is not as good as it gets. For those who put their faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, both life and history end on a positive note of triumphant deliverance into unending joy and victory.

Paul also ends this first letter he wrote to the Thessalonians on a positive note. There were certain fellow believers who were troubled in their faith. They did not fully understand what the believer's triumphant life in Christ is all about. Their pastor Paul diagnosed the problem from afar and provided them with the only cure there is for troubled hearts—the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we worship and live our faith these last two weeks of the Christian church year, may Paul also be our pastor and the Holy Spirit our Comforter, patiently and lovingly reminding us that through faith in Christ, we truly are God's saints, sharing in his triumphant life.

FAITH TRIUMPHS OVER SIGHT

Yet, our life as a Christian doesn't always look triumphant, does it? In fact, a lot of the time, we may look defeated. So how can we be sure we are triumphant? The phrase "seeing is believing" is thought to have originated in 1639, at a time when science was beginning to

rise in academic prominence. The phrase asserts that only physical, observable evidence for a hypothesis ought to be accepted as true. (Of course that speaks volumes about the theory of evolution. There is no observable evidence for the theory of evolution. In all of recorded history, no one has ever seen one species evolve, develop, turn into another species. Yet people want to believe the lie—and there is none so blind as he who will not see. But, I digress.)

However, long before 1639, the disciple Thomas asserted “seeing is believing” on Easter evening. He would not believe that Jesus had truly risen until he saw him with his own eyes. Later, when Thomas did actually see the risen Lord with his own eyes, Jesus took the occasion to praise those who live by faith and not by sight: **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29)**. Doesn’t it thrill you that Jesus was talking right then about you and me!

But how difficult it is at times to live that way! In our sinful weakness, we always want proof—proof that things will work out, proof that what the Bible says is right, proof of God’s love in a specific, spectacular way. Like John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, we want some sign that proves God’s promises in his Word are true. Zechariah was struck mute for lack of faith. What do we deserve for the same?

Paul handled the grieving Thessalonian’s lack of trust not by giving them proof but by giving them a different set of eyes—the eyes of faith. The Thessalonians had seen their fellow believers die, and death looks like defeat and loss. Most of us have seen that too. But Paul gently guided them to look again, this time with the eyes of faith: believers who die in the Lord lose nothing and gain everything. And in the resurrection, those who are alive at Jesus’ return have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. God’s power and promises guarantee that.

“Faith is being...certain of what we do not see,” says the writer to the Hebrews (11:1). We cannot see many things of God: his power that sustains the universe, the heaven in which he lives, his Spirit at work through the Word and sacraments, the forgiveness of all our sins through his Son’s suffering and death and resurrection. But faith trusts these things are true because the One who promised them is trustworthy.

And, one day, faith will be turned to sight as **“I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:26-27)**. Speak that out-loud with me.

Paul lovingly assured the Thessalonians, grieving over their deceased fellow Christians, that our Savior has conquered our greatest enemy—death. And since every believer’s life is **“now hidden with Christ in God”(Colossians 3:3)**, the same resurrection, the same glory, and the same eternal triumph await us, whether our bodies are alive at Jesus’ return or asleep in the grave. Life triumphs over death and faith triumphs over sight. Amen.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

In the congregation of those made righteous through Christ—your saints triumphant—we praise you, O Lord, with our whole heart. Your great works are full of honor and majesty. You have sent redemption to your people because you are gracious and merciful.

Through your Word, we learn that Judgment Day is fast approaching. With the assurance that all our sins are forgiven in Christ, we can approach that day with peace of heart and quietness of mind. We know that you have entered our names in the Book of Life by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, we look forward to the day when your angels will gather the elect from the four winds.

O Lord, you are a refuge for the righteous. Confident of your compassion, we call to you on behalf of the civilians in France and around the world who caught in the upheaval of Islamic war. Protect them when Islamic terrorists turn their communities, theatres, stadiums, and restaurants into battlegrounds. Care for the wounded and heal them according to your will. Comfort the bereaved, confused, and distressed with the gospel of your Son, Jesus. Lead them to find consolation in knowing that nothing in all creation can separate us from your love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Lord, bring to nothing the plans of evil men who despise you and your believers.

God of life, our lives...every moment, every second...are in your hands. How easily we can forget that. We lay into your hands the lives of Helga Jenkins' parents, who are both on hospice care. Lord, we place them in your power, your wisdom, your grace, your control. Keep them strong in saving faith and send your angels to bring them safely to their heavenly home with you. Even as we pray for them, most precious Lord, we lift our hearts on behalf of our sister, Helga. Hold her hand through the dark hours of her watching, and keep her with your saving strength.

In the name of him who will be the final Judge of all, we humbly pray the prayer he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER in modern language.