

## **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (1984 NIV)**

### ***Three Heaven-Ward Promises*<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

This evening we are gathered here in memory of the late Bro. ABC. He passed away peacefully at home on Wed. (25 June) at about 11.15 pm. He's aged 76. The late Bro. ABC left behind:

- His wife.
- One son.
- Two daughters.
- Daughter-in-law.
- Two grandsons.

More importantly, we want to especially remember Bro. ABC this evening as a believer in Jesus Christ, and what it then means to him at his death. Though ill health had stricken him for quite some time, he was still very much aware of the promises of God in his life. And three of these promises which had given him so much hope and help during his long period of illness must be those in 1 Thess. 4:13-18. I call these out-of-this-world promises—i.e. heaven-ward promises given to those who belong to Jesus Christ when their time on earth is done.

What are these three heaven-ward promises given to a believer in Jesus Christ like Bro. ABC?

#### **I. The Promise of a Reception (vv. 13-14)**

The early Christians in the time of the Apostle Paul were like many people today. At the death of many of their fellow believers and loved ones, they were greatly troubled and asked, "Is death an eternal departure?"

And so Paul wrote these words of comfort to encourage them. He told them that those who died as believers in Jesus Christ were actually "asleep" (v. 13). They were not like wandering spirits lost somewhere out there in the nowhere. But they would be "with Jesus". They would be received into the presence of Jesus Christ in heaven safe and sound. And being with Jesus is definitely much more glorious and wonderful than the best that life can offer here on earth. So, the Apostle Paul called on the early Christians not to grieve as people who had no hope.

In the same way, the Lord Jesus is telling us today not to grieve as people who have no hope. The late Bro. ABC may have departed from this life. But at

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<sup>1</sup> This is a funeral sermon.

the same time, he has entered a glorious and blessed reception in the presence of the Lord Jesus. These are no empty words of a man like me trying to give temporary relief to the pain of loss and grief. These are the very authoritative words of God's promise in the Bible. I believe this was the very promise that had kept Bro. ABC's spirit so sure and rested in his last days. He knew that death was not so much an eternal departure, but an expected reception to be with Jesus.

Bro. ABC is now received into the glorious and wonderful presence of the Lord Jesus Christ not as a stranger who has accidentally dropped in, but as one who is expected to be there because he is a believer in Jesus Christ; not as one who has no relationship with the Lord Jesus, but as one who belongs to the spiritual family of Jesus Christ. So, the glorious and wonderful reception granted to Bro. ABC by the Lord Jesus Christ is because of his personal relationship with the Lord Himself. While he's on earth, he had believed and received Jesus into his life as his personal Master.

And I know Bro. ABC was a man who treasured and cherished relationships while he was still alive.

- When I was the pastor of my church, I remember the many afternoons he came to church bringing special food cooked by his wife for Jen—his sister-in-law. As you know Jen is a ministry staff with us, and she is diabetic and needs special diet. He truly treasured and cherished his relationship with Jen as his sister-in-law.
- His wife told me how on one occasion he went all the way to accompany her on a certain journey because he was so afraid that she might get lost. On another occasion, he was supposed to fly to Genting Highlands with his wife for a holiday. At the airport, he sprung a surprise on her by flying with her to Hong Kong instead because he wanted to give her a better treat. All these gestures tell me that he treasured and cherished his relationship with his wife.
- I also learnt that he had been very gentle and patient with his children almost all his years as their father. He treasured and cherished his relationship with each of his children.
- I visited Bro. ABC one time when he was very ill in the hospital. He was given some potent medicine to ease his discomfort. When I was at his bedside, I found him very dozey. I wasn't sure if he was aware that I was present. I whispered into his ears to tell him who I were because he seemed so sedated that he could not even open his eyes. I then talked with his family members who were there. After some time, as I was wondering if I should pray with him or just with his family members, he opened one of his eyes slowly and slightly; took a peek at me and then said, "Eh, you have a new hair style?" Indeed, I had just cut my hair real short—almost crew cut. He not only recognized me, but he also noticed my new hair cut even with

only one eye slightly opened. I then realized that he's one who would remember his friends (and even their hair cut) because he treasured and cherished relationships.

Most important of all, I believe Bro. ABC treasured and cherished one relationship above all else—i.e. his relationship with his Lord Jesus Christ. And because he had been so sincere and true to this relationship, there were many times he could not wait to leave his earthly body and to be with the Lord Jesus. And I have good news for all of us—today, Bro. ABC is now received into the glorious and wonderful presence of the one he had placed his trust in—i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Bro. ABC wants all of us to know now and today that he has indeed experienced this glorious and wonderful reception into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ as promised him in the Bible. So, we do not grieve as people who have no hope.

There is a second heaven-ward promise for the believer in Jesus Christ here.

## **II. The Promise of a Resurrection (vv. 15-16)**

Verses 15-16 read, “According to the Lord’s own words, 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.”

What an amazing scene! Though we may not fully understand how this is all possible, but this is nevertheless a great promise in the Bible. Jesus will return one day to gather all those who have trusted and believed in Him. These will rise up to meet Jesus Christ, beginning with those who have died physically. That’s why the Bible says the believer who has died is only “asleep” because he will “rise up” to meet Jesus one day. He will have a new body—what we call a resurrected body. This resurrected, new body will then reunite with the spirit to meet up with the Lord Jesus Christ. What kind of body is this? The Bible tells us that this is a body that is free from pain, from sickness, from decay, from sorrow, from sin, and from death (Rev. 21:3-4).

As we come today in memory of the late Bro. ABC, we do not grieve as those without hope because such a new, resurrected body awaits him. He knew all too well the limitations of his earthly body that had been battered by all kinds of illnesses over the years—heart attacks, diabetes, pneumonia, etc. The fact of life is this—the human frame as you have now is such that when it ages and breaks down, it is never quite the same anymore.

Bro. ABC was very much aware that the earthly body he had was a temporal one subject to decay and decline. Like any human being, he did question and complain about his condition. But he did that not because he wanted to be away from the Lord Jesus, but he wanted to be with Him as soon as possible. And I believe the Lord understands us when we vocalize our human emotions in times of pain and despair. We are created as human beings with limitations

and emotions. And when we struggle to come to terms with our human limitations, the Lord Jesus allows us to sound out our human emotions. We cry out, “Lord Jesus, I am human!” The Lord responds, “Yes, I know. And I still love you.”

The Lord reassured Bro. ABC of His love for him by blessing him in many ways during his long illness.

- His condition improved enough in the hospital, and so his heart desire to spend his last days at home was fulfilled.
- The family was able to get a very good domestic helper to take care of his needs at home.
- The hospice staff was also very caring whenever they came to visit him.
- Before he breathed his last, he had his whole family with him—a blessing indeed from the Lord for him and for his loved ones too as they could accompany and usher him into the arms of Jesus.
- He could pass on to be with the Lord with great peace and little pain or distress.
- After a major heart surgery in 1990, the doctor gave him only 12 years to live; but he lived for 24 years!

Bro. ABC has now experienced not his final destruction, but his final deliverance from all earthly ills. We praise the Lord that he is now free from suffering the wear and tear of his imperfect earthly body. As a believer in Jesus Christ, this earthly body is not a loss to him because the Bible promises him a new, resurrected body that does not undergo pain, illness, sorrow, and decay. Death for Bro. ABC who’s in Jesus Christ is not a hopeless destruction today, but a happy resurrection one day. And he wants all of us to know this today. So, do not grieve as people without hope.

A third and final heaven-ward promise for those who believe in Jesus is ...

### **III. The Promise of a Reunion (v. 17)**

Verse 17 reads, “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.”

This assures us that death is not permanent separation or “goodbye forever” for those who have believed and placed their trust in Jesus Christ. When the Lord returns, those who believe in Him will be with Him forever. This means also another thing—i.e. if believers in Jesus Christ are to be with Him forever, then it implies that believers too will be with one another forever because of

their common belief and trust in Jesus Christ. This verse assures me that one day I will be united not only with Jesus in heavenly bliss, but also reunited with Christians whom I once knew and who had already left this world ... because all believers will be with Jesus forever.

From all that I have heard about the late Bro. ABC from his family members, I conclude that he was a loving, kind, responsible, considerate, and God-fearing man. He was a “good” man, a “good” husband”, a “good” father, and a “good” friend. Indeed, he is one man whom I will love to meet and talk with face-to-face when I see him in heaven again.

Today, I see only his lifeless body and come the day of his cremation on Saturday, even his earthly body will be no more. But I take heart because I know that between him and me, it will not be an eternal separation; it will not be “goodbye forever”. Why? It is because I know I will meet him again when Jesus returns, not because he is a “good” man, but only because of our common belief and trust in Jesus Christ. The Bible promises that believers will be with Jesus forever, and so, be with one another forever when Jesus returns. It will be a reunion of all believers in Jesus Christ on that day.

So, I first rejoice that I will see Jesus because of my belief in Him, and I also rejoice that I will see other believers like Bro. ABC because of our common belief in Jesus Christ. I expect to see him again on that great day of reunion of all believers. What about you? Do you expect to see him then, or is it really “goodbye forever”?

I have learnt that Bro. ABC had done much in telling friends he knew and people he loved of Jesus Christ in his own quiet way. He would also try to influence people for good as a witness for Jesus Christ—like encouraging them not to smoke and to quit other bad habits. He even went on mission trips overseas to tell people of Jesus Christ. Why did he do all these things to friends and strangers? I believe it's because he wanted these people to believe in Jesus Christ so that he could be with the Lord together with them.

The late Bro. ABC had made a commitment to believe in Jesus Christ and receive Him into his life at one time when he was still alive. Thus, he is not going to a lonely place, but he will be united with Jesus and reunited with all other believers as well. He wants us to know this today, and in this, we do not grieve as those without hope.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, look at the casket behind me—this is the harsh reality of death.

What does the Bible promise today as we come face-to-face with death? Well, it gives three great heaven-ward promises to the believer in Jesus Christ:

- One, the believer is promised not an eternal departure, but an expected reception by the Lord.
- Two, the believer is promised not a hopeless destruction, but a happy resurrection before the Lord.
- Three, the believer is promised not “goodbye forever”, but a great union with the Lord and a grand reunion with other believers in the Lord.

To all of us, especially to members of the bereaved family, the Lord is saying—“Release Bro. ABC into my arms. He belongs to me; he will be safe and sound with me; he is asleep and will rise again. Claim my promises and comfort for you today, and then move on in life.”

To those of you who are not yet Christians, as you pause and reflect on the reality of death, ask yourself this question—“Is death the end of me, and where do I go from here?” If you want to know more about Jesus Christ, or what it means to believe and receive Him into your life, I encourage you to talk with me or any of the Christians here tonight. We will be most glad to share more with you.

Let’s now observe a one-minute silence in remembrance of our beloved and Bro. ABC.

Prayer:

Father in Heaven, we entrust all our time to you. In our waking and sleeping, help us to rest and find peace in you. We also entrust our Bro. ABC into your hands as he sleeps with the peace of Jesus Christ, awaiting to awake in His presence. Help each of us who are living to trust you as the giver of not merely peaceful sleep, but also the giver of life forever. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen!