

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"What happens when we die?"

Scripture: John 14:1-6, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Rev. Steve Filyk

August 31, 2025

Opener: Rejoice The Lord Is King (267)

Choruses: Blessed Be Your Name & How Great Is Our God

After sermon: Speak O Lord

Closer: It Is Well With My Soul

On Friday, I received some difficult news:

a member of my extended family suffered a medical emergency  
and was rushed to the hospital.

Not much information was available,

But it was suggested that they might not have much time to live.

Earlier this past month I learned that a son of a colleague

Took his own life.

The family is still reeling from the impact.

Sometimes we can go for years

Without considering the fact that we are mortal.

Other times, we are confronted by such an extended series of deaths  
that we can barely catch our breath.

Moments like these raise questions we often try to avoid

What happens when we die?

Is there life after life and death?

If so, what can we expect in this afterlife?

"On November 14, 2004,

six-year-old Alex Malarkey and his father, Kevin,  
were involved [in a serious car accident].

Alex suffered various injuries in the accident,

including a severe spinal injury, severe neck injuries, and brain trauma...

[He] was left a quadriplegic; and was in a coma for two months.

During his recovery, Alex told his parents stories of visions of heaven...

These include an out-of-body experience,

where he saw his father being caught

and carried to safety by an angel

after flying out of the window of the car...

[Alex spoke about being carried by an angel]

through the gates of Heaven... to meet Jesus...

Five years later at the age of 10,

Alex became "the youngest person to have the surgical procedure  
first carried out for Christopher Reeve to allow him to breathe  
on his own without a ventilator."

The media attention that came with the surgery

inspired Alex's father to cowrite a book

about his son's heavenly experiences.

The result was sensational.

The book entitled "The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A True Story"  
was a 2010 bestseller which sold a million copies  
and was turned into a made-for-tv movie."

(book by Kevin and Alex Malarkey. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from Wikipedia.org website:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Boy\\_Who\\_Came\\_Back\\_from\\_Heaven?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Boy_Who_Came_Back_from_Heaven?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

But as compelling as the story sounded,

it later turned out to be a fabrication.

Later, as a teenager Alex confessed:

"I did not die. I did not go to Heaven.

I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention.

When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible.

People have profited from lies, and continue to.

They should read the Bible, which is enough.

The Bible is the only source of truth..."

("The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven" Recants Story, Rebukes Christian Retailers. (2015, January 14). Pulpit & Pen News. <https://pulpitandpen.org/2015/01/13/the-boy-who-came-back-from-heaven-recants-story-rebukes-christian-retailers/> )

I love hearing stories of near death experiences (NDEs).  
So many interesting details about so many curious things.

But we need to be careful about simply accepting  
anyone and everyone's claims  
Especially since 'Heavenly Tourism' has become a commercial venture.  
Information about the afterlife needs to come from an authenticated source.

It is interesting to hear Alex's confession,  
And his assertion that people should read the Bible.  
So does the Bible, the library of Holy Scripture  
That we regard as our ultimate authority  
have to say about this topic?

The Bible does address the afterlife.  
If you just consider Jesus' parables you will note  
That many address eternal destinies and final judgment.  
Think of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus  
Or the Sheep & Goats.

Of course it is dangerous to read too much into parables.  
The details of those stories are just the background  
For a point they are trying to illustrate.

But beyond parables there is explicit teaching about the afterlife  
The kind of which has already been read today.

The reading from 1 Thessalonians  
Is probably one of the earliest of Paul's letters  
And in it he is attempting to address peoples' concerns  
About the destinies of those who have died.

"Foundational to [the faith of the Christian community in Thessalonica]  
was the expectation that Jesus' return was imminent,  
so imminent that Paul had to remind them  
to keep up their employment in the meantime (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:10–  
12).

[Unlike today they did not need to be convinced that Jesus was returning.]  
They were part of a community that could see...  
the light of the new dawn was just below the horizon.

So when some of their members died, the question arose:  
will they miss out on the blessings of Jesus' coming?  
Some may have thought the dead would miss out on the entire age to come,  
while others worried about the joys of [Jesus' return] itself;  
but in either case these concerns  
heightened their natural grief over losing a loved one."

Mark B. Lee, "Homiletical Perspective on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18," in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 281.

Paul understands the importance of grieving death,  
But he doesn't want the Thessalonians  
to grieve like those who have no hope.

And so Paul reminds them of their core belief about Jesus  
and what this tells them about their future.  
He reminds them "we believe that Jesus died and rose again".  
This reads like a mini-confession of the Christian faith.  
Longer than "Jesus is Lord" but shorter than the Apostles' Creed.  
Jesus died and rose again is the core of what we believe.

Paul knows that they believe this.  
But if they believe this, and here is his argument,  
What follows is that "God will bring with Jesus  
Those who have fallen asleep in him."

At Bible study we had some discussion about what Paul means  
By talking about those who have fallen asleep.  
Paul isn't describing a mysterious state of the soul.  
He's simply using a gentle term for death—like when we say,  
'she has passed' or 'he is no longer with us.'

Paul argues that if Jesus has died and risen,  
That is if Jesus has himself broken the bonds of death,

He will bring those who have died in him,  
When he returns as he promised.

Again for that promised return you have to go no further  
Than that Gospel lesson that was read for us,  
Where Jesus declared: And if I go and prepare a place for you,  
I will come back and take you to be with me  
that you also may be where I am. (John 14:3)

Jesus will bring the death back with him.  
Of course it is significant that the dead are dead 'in him'.

Jesus is coming to his own,  
And he will bring those among his own  
Who have already died, when he returns.

As for any lingering concern about those who have already died,  
Paul doubles down and says that those who are still alive  
Won't precede those who have died.  
Jesus will tend to them first.

Paul then provides a fantastic sequence of imagery,  
Where he describes the sequence of Jesus' return:  
The Lord descends,  
The archangel shouts,  
The trumpet sounds,  
The dead are raised,  
And then those who are alive  
Are caught up together those who have been raised,  
To meet the Lord in the clouds.

This sequence ends with an incredible promise:  
"we will be with the Lord forever."

This fantastic sequence,  
sometimes spoken of as 'the rapture'  
where Christ's followers are believed to be teleported to heaven.

But it really should be seen  
for the visionary apocalyptic poetry that it is.

Paul is borrowing from Jesus' own quotations of the visions  
Of the prophet Daniel "where one like a son of man"  
goes up on the clouds as he is vindicated by God after his suffering"

Theologian Tom Wright cautions that "their 'meeting' with the Lord  
doesn't mean they will then be staying in mid-air with him.  
They are like Roman citizens in a colony,  
going out to meet the emperor when he pays them a state visit,  
and then accompanying him back to the city itself."

*NT Wright Revelation for Everyone 125*

So what do we learn from the Bible's teaching about the afterlife  
In Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica.

We are provided a short list of what to expect:  
There IS life after life and death.  
There IS life for those who have already died in Jesus.  
Those who are living in Jesus (but haven't died) can expect  
To be reunited with those who have died  
and live with Jesus for eternity.

The Apostles' Creed replicates its brevity:  
"I believe in... the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting."

This may not scratch all your itches  
When it comes to all our questions about the afterlife.  
We aren't told what we will look like.  
We don't know if we will need to sleep.  
We aren't given any promises of reunions with pets.  
It doesn't speak of all the sights and sounds and smells  
That are sometimes shared in those sensational Near Death Experience  
stories.

But Scripture provide all that we need to maintain courage

In the midst of loss and disappointment.  
This is our sure hope:  
Death does not have the last word.  
We will be with our Lord forever  
and with those in Christ, whom we love.

Amen.