

You’re familiar with euphemisms, right? A euphemism is a language device that replaces a harsh or blunt expression with something that sounds milder or less offensive. Basically, it’s a way of talking about something bad that makes it sound better.

So, for example, if your boss is firing you, he probably will avoid that word and tell you they’re “laying you off” or “letting you go.” And if you have to describe someone who weighs too much for their height, you won’t call them fat – you’ll say they’re “full-figured.” People who have had a lot of birthdays – you don’t call them old. You say they’re “getting along in years.”

There are more examples – in our politically correct culture, we could go on all day. But here’s the thing about euphemisms: They might make things sound better, but they don’t change reality. Whether your boss says he’s firing you or letting you go – they both mean you’re out of a job. Saying someone is full-figured or getting along in years doesn’t magically take pounds off their waist or make them any younger.

It’s not any different when it comes to death. That’s one of those harsh, blunt terms we’ve come up with all sorts of euphemisms for to make it sound not quite as bad. But the euphemisms can’t change the reality. A sympathetic doctor can tell a wife that her husband “passed away peacefully,” but gentle words can’t soften the blow of the fact that he’s dead and she’s alone. Chances are you know that because you’ve been there; someone you love has died. And all the dozens of “softer” ways we have of describing death didn’t bring you any comfort, because they can’t change the reality and finality of it.

The only thing that can change the reality of death is Jesus. Don’t get me wrong – believers still die. It’s just that for people who die holding on to Jesus in faith, death becomes something entirely different. In the lesson I’m about to read from 1 Thessalonians, do you know what Paul calls death three times in six verses? Sleep. And you might think he’s just using a euphemism like any other to make dying seem not as bad, but that’s not the case at all. Paul is telling you that Jesus has radically changed death for all who believe in him. It’s not euphemism, it’s reality: In Christ, death is sleep. 1) With a glorious awakening, 2) with a blessed reunion.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words.

I. With a glorious awakening

In his short stay in Thessalonica, Paul had taught the believers there the basics. He told them that Jesus died and rose again, winning them salvation. He taught them Jesus would come back again to bring them that salvation. And these Thessalonians believed it. They were waiting for Jesus’ return. But Jesus hadn’t come yet. And some of their fellow believers were dying. And they started to wonder: What happens to them? If they’re not alive when Jesus comes back, will they somehow miss out on the salvation Jesus is bringing?

Just imagine the results of these doubts for a second. Sit in on one of their funerals. The person they loved so much is now a lifeless body in a casket. But no one's saying anything. There's nothing to say – because nobody's sure what will happen to that person. Only one thing is sure: If Christ didn't come soon, they'd all end up dying, just like their brother. What would happen to *them* when *they're* the ones in the casket?

So they were sad and scared, but had no hope. Which is why Paul writes to them: **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.** Notice, he doesn't say: "We don't want you to grieve," as if death weren't sad, or Christians are as unfeeling as robots. There's nothing more heart wrenching than watching someone you love die; even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend, Lazarus. He doesn't say, "Don't grieve." He says, "**We don't want you to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.**"

It's true, unbelievers will talk about hope at their funerals. They'll hope a dead person is in a better place, or that they finally have peace. But that hope isn't based on facts. It's wishful thinking – and, sadly, in the case of an unbeliever, the opposite is the case.

No, Christians have real hope, based on facts. **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.** Here are the facts: Jesus died and rose again. Death was real but temporary for Jesus; and he promises the same is true for all who believe in him. In Christ, death is sleep. Just like sleeping people wake up, the dead in Christ will rise.

And you know this. Unlike the Thessalonians, you know this. You even confess it in the creed every Sunday: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." We know it, but that doesn't mean we don't struggle to trust it. God says death is sleep, but from our perspective, it seems so final. God says dying is gain, and to depart and be with Christ is better by far than the life we have now, but we sometimes treat dying as if it were losing, as if it robs us of the good life, an enemy we'd rather not face yet. And so we worry about it. Isn't it true? We worry when the doctor's checkup reveals signs our bodies are wearing out. We worry when we see people our age dying and think, "Soon, that'll be me."

So we need the reminder too, don't we? In Christ, dying isn't losing. In Christ, dying isn't something to be feared. In Christ, death is sleep. And you can be sure it is because of this simple yet glorious truth: **Jesus died and rose again.**

Jesus makes death a peaceful sleep for believers. When we die in faith, we take our last breath on earth at peace with God. The sins that stood between us and him would have made death the beginning of hell for us – but **Jesus died and rose again.** He died paying for your sins. He died suffering your hell. He rose on the third day as proof that his payment was sufficient. Proof that for all who believe in him, dying is simply passing from life at peace with God here to the far better life with God in the perfect peace of heaven.

And Jesus' resurrection is also your proof that he'll wake your sleeping body on the Last Day. No, dead believers won't miss out on that day at all. In fact, Paul says, they're the first ones Jesus will tend to when he comes back; you have Jesus' word on it. **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. ¹⁶ 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.**

You remember the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter? He got to their home, and the people were wailing because she had died. But Jesus told them to stop. "She's not dead, but asleep," he said.

And the people there laughed or shrugged it off as a euphemism. Until Jesus said to her, “Get up!” And she did.

It’ll be like that on the Last Day, only quite a bit more spectacular. The exalted Christ who conquered death once and for all by rising from the grave will come down from heaven in all his glory, with angels and archangels in his train. And with the same commanding voice he used to wake Jairus’ daughter, he’ll wake all who have fallen asleep in him – this time, with perfect bodies that can never die again.

II. *With a blessed reunion*

Can you imagine what that day will be like, when **we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air?** Look around you as Jesus draws you to himself in the air. You see the millions of believers who have gone before you – Paul, the Thessalonians, lots of other faces you don’t recognize – but you’ll also see the people you do recognize. Grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, children, friends...all those who fell asleep trusting in Jesus.

Yes, Paul reminds us that in Christ, death is sleep, but we’ll wake up to a blessed reunion. And that’s so comforting, isn’t it? After all, this is what makes death so sad for us. The joy, the companionship, the blessings our loved ones bring us in life...that ends at death. It separates us from the people we love. But for those who are in Christ, that separation is only temporary. In Christian funerals, we don’t say goodbye to our loved ones...we say, “See you soon.”

And it will be soon. Did you notice Paul’s use of the 1st plural here? **We who are still alive** when Jesus returns, Paul said. Two thousand years ago, Paul expected Christ’s return during his lifetime. He had the same information we have about Christ’s coming: It’ll happen soon. Whether he comes today, or takes another 2000 years, it’s a day we can look forward to because it’ll be a blessed reunion of all God’s saints. Never again will death separate us! If a few years with them brought us joy here below...can you imagine how much more joy is waiting for us in the endless years of eternity we’ll get to spend with them in heaven? How many wonderful new memories we’ll make with them, how many new experiences we’ll get to have with them? Perfect memories and experiences, un marred by sin or sadness.

But our greatest joy will be this: **And so we will be with the Lord forever.** The Jesus who made us and died for us, we’ll finally see him face to face. The Jesus whose voice we’ve heard all these years through his word, we’ll get to hear in person. There will be no more grief or sadness, for he will wipe every tear from our eyes forever.

Therefore, encourage each other with these words. We have something far better than euphemisms to encourage each other with – we have Jesus. So, encourage one another. When we mourn the death of fellow Christians, let’s remind each other that we don’t grieve without hope. When we face our own deaths, let’s encourage each other by pointing each other to the Savior who beat death for us and will carry us safely through it. Let’s encourage one another to listen for the final trumpet, when death will be swallowed up forever. Let’s use the time left before that day to tell those who don’t know Jesus that he died and rose for them, too, so that death can become sleep for them, as well.

It’s not just a nicer way of putting it; it’s the reality. Christ’s death and resurrection make it so. In Christ, death is sleep. With a glorious awakening, and a blessed reunion. Amen.