

Third Sunday of End Time – Saints Triumphant
November 19, 2017
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Our Ultimate Participation Trophy
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Dear friends in Christ Jesus, who died and rose again and is coming soon on the clouds:

We are in a contest; a race really. The finish line is within sight. The finish line of our race is “the coming of the Lord.” Two groups of people cross the finish line together. There are those who have fallen asleep in Jesus; a blessed sleep for sure. There are those still alive, “left till the coming of the Lord.”

There will be no winners and losers. No believer will get to the finish line ahead of all others and receive a large trophy for first place. No believer will end the race and go home empty handed for last place. All believers will receive the same trophy whether we are dead in Christ or alive in Christ when the Lord comes down from heaven “with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God.”

We all are participants. We will receive the type of trophy so often maligned in this world, the participation trophy. At the finish line of the race of time no trophy is handed out for personal best, or order of finish. The Lord himself will award the trophy to all who participated in the kingdom of God; who believed that Jesus died and rose again.

This is **Our Ultimate Participation Trophy**. “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” It is ours if we rise from the dead when Jesus comes. It is ours if we are still living when Jesus comes.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw “Saints Triumphant” and wrote in chapter 35 verse 10, “They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will cover their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” They are the redeemed. They are those Paul wrote about who are not like “the rest of mankind, who have no hope” but along with their loved ones trust in Jesus Christ “who died and rose again.”

When Jesus comes again with the souls of the dead in Christ, perhaps including some of our souls, he will award them with our ultimate participation trophy. God will raise the dead bodies of Christians to reunite them with our souls. In body and soul “we will be with the Lord forever.”

I said earlier there will be no winners and losers. We are saints triumphant. Our triumph is Christ’s victory and Satan’s defeat. Jesus is the winner. All the devils are the losers. Jesus has destroyed the final enemy death. We will rise from the dead because Jesus rose from the dead.

We are thankful God has given us this information. We are not “uninformed” about our loved ones asleep in Jesus. We have hope for them, and for us, should we perish before the second coming. As participants in the kingdom of God by the Spirit’s gracious call, Jesus will award us our ultimate participation trophy, “we will be with the Lord forever.”

Paul does not suggest that with this knowledge the Thessalonian Christians and we will not grieve because of death. The Apostle says we will not grieve like unbelievers who have no hope. There is no hope of being with the Lord forever for those who deny Jesus’ death and resurrection. For them there is only the certainty of being separated from the Lord forever in damnation. We grieve knowing the dead in Christ will join the living in the day of saints triumphant.

Paul’s inspired words were a great assurance and a great comfort to the new Christians in northern Greece. The Thessalonians looked to the skies daily, as do we, in eager expectation to see “the Lord himself come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the

archangel and with the trumpet call of God.” Some feared that their loved ones, now dead, who had participated with them in faith in Christ would miss out on seeing Jesus return, and not receive their participation trophy. This is not the case.

What about the living in Christ? We trust that “God is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness,” Peter wrote in the third chapter, verse 9, of his second epistle in reference to the day of the Lord’s coming. Jesus is coming soon, a message we will reinforce throughout the approaching Advent Season. Our ultimate participation trophy, being with the Lord forever, is ours if we are still living when Jesus comes.

Christians of every generation look for Jesus’ coming as imminent; today is the day. This was true of those new relatively new believers. It is to be true of us. With eyes lifted up, and ears listening up, we can’t wait to hear Jesus’ command, the archangel’s voice, and the trumpet call of God. When it happens if we are living, God will transform our mortal bodies into glorious bodies. Our bodies will be changed “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye,” Paul wrote in the great resurrection chapter 52 of 1 Corinthians.

Paul tells the living we will be “caught up together with them (the resurrected) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This is no rapture independent of last judgment. This is the gathering of all the participants in the kingdom of God, dead and alive. Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, died and was buried. Jesus rose again in new life having conquered the last enemy, death. Jesus will come and gather the participants in his work of redemption through faith, the church, to meet him as he descends.

Saints of God, people holy in Christ’s righteousness, spiritually and eternally alive in Christ’s resurrection, “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.”

We use Paul’s words of encouragement to comfort those who grieve the loss of a loved one asleep in Jesus. We use his words to encourage the weary in life; those whose crosses weigh heavy on their hearts. These words encourage us that there are no such things before God as winners and losers through our own skills and exertion.

There is only Christ’s triumph. There is only my participation in the kingdom of God. We are participants through the Holy Spirit by grace alone, by faith alone, through Scripture alone, by Christ alone. There is nothing to brag about if I get a participation trophy for some activity in this life. But nor is there any brag I can make to “be with the Lord forever.” My ultimate participation trophy is a gift from God so that I may not boast.

Asleep in Christ, or alive and looking, soon Jesus will lift us into the clouds with him. With no one preceding another, together we will enter Zion singing with everlasting joy covering our heads. Amen.

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