

*C*oncerning
them which are
*A*sleep

BY
JOHN O. MEANS

Concerning Them Which Are Asleep

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But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him . . . Wherefore comfort ye one another with these words—1 THESS. 4:13, 14, 18.

“CONCERNING them which are asleep!” What Christian delicacy breathes in these words! When writing to friends who are in bereavement, or conversing with them, we often catch ourselves feeling after some word which shall gently intimate our meaning without rudely obtruding it. We allude to “the departed,” “the friend who is gone,” “the absent one,” etc. How comes it that we have not adopted that phrase which is the favorite expression in the New Testament, and which is at once so touching, so tender, and so true—“Concerning them which are asleep”?

The great truth out of which the apostle brings comfort is that they who are asleep in Jesus shall awake again, and that we shall share their company and be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

So fully has the gospel fixed in our minds the truth of the blessed immortality of those who have fallen asleep in Jesus that we hardly need to be comforted concerning *them*. We are sure that they are supremely happy. The loss is ours, not theirs; it is we who are mourners. We need to comfort our own hearts when we have been compelled to watch them falling asleep and tearfully lay them away where no sounds can disturb their slumber.

I wish to suggest some thoughts of comfort which we, who are alive and remain, may cherish concerning friends who sleep in Jesus.

First of all, it is comforting to think that as the gift of our friends was from God, so is the withdrawing. After all our solicitude and watchful care, and it may seem in denial of our prayers, they have been taken. It is one of the sweetest persuasives to submission to remind ourselves that it is the good pleasure of our Heavenly Father which has brought it all about and that he giveth his beloved sleep. Disease could not have done it, nor weakness, much less the enemy of our peace. It is the Lord. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, and his love was as great and his mercy as eminent and his hand as tender in the taking as in the giving.

Does God care for sparrows, so that not one of them falls to the ground without our Father? And when a life in

which the hope and joy of loving hearts are bound up, and around which the holiest interests of many of his faithful servants are gathered, in which, it may be, the welfare of praying households and even of the church of Christ is involved; when the soul of one of his own children is struggling with disease, shall we imagine that our Father forgets, or fails to interpose in the right way? Does he allow one sigh to escape without his notice? Is it not to carry out some loving purpose by which to surprise us in due time, that he hushes the throbbing heart and gives the weary rest?

When beloved ones have fallen asleep we sometimes conjure up explanations why it was, and imaginations how it might have been otherwise. If this had been done, if that had not been allowed, if we had been more thoughtful to guard against some special exposure, we fondly imagine the stroke would have been averted.

Certainly we ought to blame ourselves for wilful and criminal carelessness. But when we have prayerfully endeavored to do all we could, when we have sought in the best exercise of an anxious judgment and a loving heart to restore health to the sick, there is a want of submission to our Saviour's will if we question whether the result might have been otherwise. If he had seen fit to prolong the precious life, would he not have overruled any mistakes which our affection made? Were we not praying to be guided aright, and did he not purposely allow us to do what we did? The *steps* of a good man are ordered of the Lord. Not only is the resting-place provided, but the way to it is all arranged. The providence of God reaches down to the little things by which events come to pass. When our vigilance

endeavors to thwart his love and hold back in the sorrows of earth those he is preparing to translate to heaven, he may purposely allow us to be blinded, so that we do not see that the very things which our love prompts us to do are secretly hastening the end which we dread.

The Lord has given to us the companionship and joy of a beloved friend. He has endowed him with manifold graces and made him the channel of great blessings. He has given shaping to our whole earthly life, and it may be to our eternal destiny, by the discipline and by the moulding and interdependence of this minister of his mercy. Having done for us what he saw needful, and accomplished the special purpose in our behalf which this friend was intended to accomplish, he has withdrawn him for higher services and nobler ministries. We have enjoyed the precious gift of God for many years and shall ever thank him for it. The withdrawal is as wisely intended and is to answer as merciful purposes. We have nothing to reproach ourselves for. We have done what we could to retain it. He hath said, Come up higher. We have nothing to reproach him for. It is sweet to lie passive in his hands.

Is it not a thought of comfort that, far above and beyond all the causes we may conjure up by which to account for their departure, there was a divine and gracious purpose concerning them which are asleep? "I will," saith the Saviour in his prayer for the redeemed, "I will that those whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory. Thy will, O Lord, be done!"

II. It is a thought of comfort concerning them which are asleep that we now see them in their true light. Death

reveals to us much we had not recognized in our friends, makes more vivid that which we had seen to be beautiful, and throws sunlight in among the shadows, so that we now appreciate their characters more thoughtfully.

Sculptors are sometimes unwilling to admit visitors to the penetralia of the studio where they are working out their ideals. They do not wish us to see a statue when it is but a rude semblance of what it is to be. They do not like to have profane eyes notice how rough and angular many parts are, and watch the process by which the chisel and the file reduce the stone and bring out the inlying beauty. But God permits us to handle familiarly his uncompleted statues, and look on while he is working into shape the lives of his children. It would be very strange if we saw in them, when in the rough, what he sees and what he is bringing out. By his discipline, in due time, all will be brought into the form he intends. So long as friends are living their lives are incomplete. Death rounds them out to perfectness. They are not finished till then. And when finished they need to be lifted upward, in order to assume their just proportions and enable us to stand where we can see them in the proper light. A statue intended for the cornice of a building, or to fill a niche in the archway of a cathedral choir, must not be judged by its appearance when it is lying on the pavement or set upon a temporary pedestal. We often misjudge those who are the closest to us because they are too near to be seen in the attitude God designs them to assume. When they are elevated so that we can walk around and look up to them, we may catch the true expression and discern perhaps an ethereal beauty unsuspected before.

In the sister art of painting it is still more important that a picture be hung in proper light. The only good light is light from above. The canvas needs to be pleasantly bounded also—the picture to be set in a suitable frame, that the shadows may be deepened and the different figures not be confused with surrounding objects. It is one office of death to set our pictures in golden frames and hang them up where the light of heaven shall fall upon them.

III. But how sad, one may say, that we should not come to know our friends truly till they have passed away! Nay, their having “passed away” is only a figure of speech and must not deceive us nor deprive us of the pleasant thought that they are still in our universe; that, in truth, they are only a few steps in advance of us, and we may overtake them at any moment.

They who are asleep to us are awake to the angels. They belong to our race, to our generation, still. They share with us the watchful government of the same God and Saviour. They participate with us in similar joyful services of worship and praise.

“The saints below in concert sing
With those to glory gone;
For all the servants of our King
In earth and heaven are one.”

We are not to think of heaven as at an infinite remove. It is very near to us. It is a part of our universe. The same

laws of divine goodness prevail there as here. Heaven and earth are provinces of one blessed kingdom. The change is the change from the basement story, where the heat and noise and dust of labor perplex and weary, to the lofty chambers which command the glorious sunset views and look away to the sun rising and are open to healthful winds and the songs of birds. We are ourselves, it may be, on the stairway; we have been far up where it seemed as though a slight shock would burst open the door and let us through. If it has proved that all was not ready for us, and that our time was not yet, but that we must come back and finish our task, let us think concerning them which *are* asleep that they are “not lost, but gone before.”

IV. It is a thought of comfort that they are safe through. The struggles, the doubts, the fears are all over; they are safe home, and that home is heaven. “I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, ‘Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth; yea,’ saith the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them.’” The message sent back from heaven for our consolation is that they rest from their labors. No more toil, no more weariness or want. The anxieties and troubles which fret the earthly life are over. The sorrows which cloud the brow are ended. Dissatisfaction and self-distrust have ceased.

They are beyond the reach of disease and suffering. The frail tenement of the body which enclosed the soul need no more be cared for; it can give no more distress, it no longer hangs a heavy weight too grievous to be borne.

They are beyond the reach of temptations; there is no more indwelling sin in them; the conflict and the gloom of

uncertainty are over. When we think of the spiritual struggles of this life and how we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom, it is consoling to remember that there is no more of this for them which are asleep. Sin hath no more dominion over them. That which was so hard and unsatisfactory in their religious experience is easy now. They are beyond the possibility of failing. The gentle nature which felt so unequal to the strife has come off conqueror.

Now they are where everything is favorable for the development of all that is beautiful and holy; nothing to fret and wear upon the keen sensibilities, all influences playing upon them to bring into full glory the qualities which were only germinant and blindly budding outward here. They no longer feel the want of spiritual guidance, of pastoral ministrations, and the upholding and comfort of innermost sympathy. The Lamb shall lead them to living fountains of waters and all tears shall be wiped away from their eyes.

We cannot perhaps explain how it is that in a few moments such a blessed change should come to pass, from our imperfect, sinful life to the perfect purity and holiness of heaven. But we sometimes see one who is changing before our eyes. Within a few years a new life has been forming—new purposes, new joys. Certainly this process of sanctification may be conceived as being *accelerated* intensely by the amazing movements which accompany death. We make more spiritual growth in some season of awakening than in other years. Some blessed Sabbaths ripen us more than whole weeks. Some single events, some sickness or sorrow, produce a spiritual change which the ordinary life

of years does not equal. So it is easy to imagine that the vivid conceptions, the marvellous revelations, which the soul has in stepping across the darkness into the new life may raise it at once to the heights of spiritual joy.

Besides all this, we see how helpful intercourse on earth is with friends who seem just fitted to our spiritual state. Some friends do more in elevating and guiding us than the world beside. When the soul finds all around in heaven companions of whom the best on earth are imperfect models, how easy and joyful must the spiritual life become!

Over and above all we may conjecture as possible by natural laws, there is a sublime transformation of the soul of the believer by the special and supernatural grace of God, so that when he comes to heaven's gate he is wholly cleansed of the pollution of his sinful life, as a garment is washed and made white. He passes through the portal clothed in heavenly righteousness; of this any one who reverently studies the Holy Scriptures cannot doubt. That divine power and mercy which fit up heaven for us and keep our mansions standing ready, with friends to welcome us, is certainly equal to fitting us in a moment for the society of heaven.

V. While they who are asleep in Jesus are thus safe from suffering, from sorrow, and from sin, we also are drawn nearer heaven as we watch them entering. The door stands ajar a moment and we catch glimpses of what is within. The death of friends opens our eyes to many truths which we have but dimly discerned before, and gives a preciousness to what has been only an intellectual belief.

This world and this life come out in their true light. Eternity grows into its just proportions. No preaching makes us feel about this world and realize eternity, and how all we are doing has its centre and interest there, like the death of friends.

The meaning of sin, which brought death into the world, and the meaning of that salvation which takes away the sting of death—nothing else so makes us feel these as to spend anxious hours in vain endeavors to relieve the sufferings by which disease does its work, and to watch the life ebbing slowly away.

We learn, too, the richness of the Bible and its divine adaptation to sustain the soul in the extremities of agony and to hold it up through the dark valley. When we have repeated the precious sentences in the chamber of stillness and seen what strength and peace and joy they bring, and when we have stayed our own hearts on this heavenly manna, we come to understand that this Word of God is the true bread from heaven, of which if a man eat he shall never die.

Above all, and to name no other truths, death reveals to us what a Saviour is our Lord Jesus Christ. We think we have known him. But ah! when the disciples went away from Bethany, after they had seen the Lord weeping at the grave of Lazarus, they had a new revelation of his love. We need to see how the blessed Redeemer comes to those who love him when they are passing onward, how his name falls on the ear that heeds no other sound and makes the pulses leap for joy; we need to see *how* he giveth his beloved sleep, taking them in his arms and bearing them into the everlasting rest, before we know what a Saviour is ours.

“Lo, I am with you always!” Yes; he is here. Friends are absent. They come, but they cannot avail. They cannot hold intercourse with the beloved one over whom sleep is stealing. But there is One who hath tasted death for us and opened the path for us to follow. He hath laid in the tomb and made it soft for our repose. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Listen! why so free from fear? “For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

“So he giveth his beloved sleep.”

I have lightly touched on a few of the thoughts of comfort concerning them which are asleep. But two things are implied, without which there can be no comfort.

One is, that they who sleep, sleep in Jesus. It is only of such that all this is true. Blessed are the dead who die “in the Lord.” It is the great motive to a prayerful life, and to earnest and unceasing efforts on our part, that our friends may all have that knowledge and love of Jesus Christ which fits them for eternity. You may think little of it now. But when you are weeping around the dying bedside of your child or of your father, of your husband or wife, or of any friend, you will give the world to feel that they are sleeping in Jesus, that they have a good hope by faith in the Lord their Redeemer.

Now is the time to pray and labor to make sure for them a Christian hope. It is no time when sickness comes. Work while the day lasts. The night cometh.

The other fact implied, in order that we may take comfort, is that we ourselves are in Christ. We can have no thought of comfort in them that sleep in Jesus unless we

also are in Jesus and share like precious faith. We have lost them forever unless we are preparing by God's grace to meet them. There is no other advantage so great as the death of friends may bring by making us true Christians, such Christians as we have never been before.

Are you making ready to fall asleep for that awaking which Christ gives his own? Are you preparing to meet in heaven those who have gone out of your hearts and are waiting for your coming? ☹

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