

**+ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 + With the Lord Forever +
+ Christian Victory Service of Ronald Moilanen + 4 October 2015 +**

Dear Loved Ones of Ron Moilanen, especially you dear Reino,

How would you describe “forever”? “Forever” is something very difficult for you and me to wrap our minds around. Our lives last only a limited amount of time from conception to death, so the best we can do is describe “forever.” Some things in our lives may seem like they take forever when they really don’t like a long drive home in a snowstorm or another one of Mr. Moilanen’s physics lecture or another story about the glories of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Other things seem like they take forever because we have to wait for them. When I first visited Ron after he had attended worship back in 2007, he was worried about that kind of “forever.” His beloved bride, Siljo, had passed away just weeks before from cancer. Ron wondered how long it would be before he would see her again because the wait seemed like it would last “forever,” and he didn’t know how he was going to handle his grief. So he came here to Cross of Christ recalling a friendly invitation from a former co-worker years before. To be honest, I didn’t have the answer for Ron’s “how long?” question. Instead Jesus had a far better answer. Jesus dried Ron’s tears and filled his heart with hope that really lasts forever.

This afternoon as we mourn the loss of Ronald Moilanen, Jesus comes to you and me with that same comfort he gave to Ron. Jesus comes to you today through his Word and brings you comfort that I pray will go back home with you, comfort that I pray will stay with you for the days and weeks and years to come, comfort that he alone can provide to dry your tears and fill your hearts with hope that lasts forever

You see, death always leaves behind questions about “forever.” Will you see your loved one again or is he gone forever? The truth is, death makes “forever” frightening for everyone, even to Christians. There were times when Ron would tell me that he feared death because he would have to stand before the holy God and face his judgment. Yet I would always respond with the answer that our Lord through Paul gives to us today. That answer takes the terror out of death and replaces it with hope and comfort that all who trust in Jesus will be **WITH THE LORD FOREVER**.

“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. 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.” Did you notice what’s different in Paul’s words of comfort to those ancient believers—something missing from what you typically hear as words of comfort today? Paul doesn’t comfort them by focusing on their departed loved ones or talking about how good their loved ones were or how memories of them will live on.

Good memories of loved ones are good things. Recalling how they influenced or impacted your life is good, but if all you have is memories and recollections, then they’re only empty comfort. To offer only good memories leaves those left behind without hope, at least eternal hope. After all, what hope is there in being told your loved one was a “good man” when God’s Word tells you and me that ***“no one is righteous not even one”*** (Romans 3:11) and every one of us deserves sin’s wages of death? That’s been the case for every single human being going back to our first parents Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God’s holy command in the Garden of Eden.

The sad reality of death comes as a result of our sin for every single one of us as we all fall short of God’s holy standards. Sadly we all deserve to hear the curse of God’s holy Law—***“From dust you are and to dust you will return...”*** (Genesis 3:19b)—not just physical death, but eternal death. Ron clearly recognized that about himself. That’s what filled him with fear about death. That’s what fills us all with grief at the death of a loved one, because of the horrible wreckage that death makes of our lives.

...But the Lord does not abandon you in your grief. He does not leave you to wallow in despair or the fear of “forever” after death. Instead he reminds you that he did something about it. He didn’t let death win. He’s the only one who could and did, and that is what gives you real hope, real certainty. That is what changes your grief from that of everyone else around you.

You see, when a loved one dies in the Lord as a believer, yes, you grieve. Even Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, but you also rejoice for that loved one, because that loved one is with the Lord forever. That’s an assurance based on the biblical fact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. ***“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.”***

Ron knew all too well his faults and sins. He knew what sin had done to his life and the lives of those around him. He knew that he deserved God's eternal condemnation for his sins. Yet by God's grace through the faith the Holy Spirit had planted in his heart through the Word of God, Ron also knew and confessed that Jesus had suffered that punishment for him in his place. It wasn't because he was such a great father or husband or teacher or friend or because of anything he had done for his family or his community or his country, but purely because of God's undeserved grace and merciful love for sinners like him through Jesus Christ.

By faith in Christ alone, Ron knew that when Jesus declared from the cross, **"It is finished"** (John 19:30), Jesus had taken all his sins away. He knew he was forgiven through Jesus and assured of that forgiveness by Christ's victorious resurrection from the dead. Ron knew that because Jesus' tomb was empty, his grave would be empty someday too. Above all, Ron knew that since Jesus had died for him, since Jesus had risen again for him, therefore Jesus would one day bring him and all believers in Christ to be with him in heaven forever, and that's exactly what Jesus did for Ron.

That's the eternal comfort that the Lord has for you today—comfort that lasts forever. Losing your father, your friend hurts terribly, but the Lord dries your tears, fills your heart with hope and certainty, and comforts and reassures you with these words: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Such simple words, but they are words that change your life forever. They surely changed Ron's life. Reino, your sister told me that he cussed less and complained about politicians less. The simple good news of Jesus did change his life! They are the difference between eternity in heaven and eternity in hell. They are the reason Ron now enjoys a glorious eternity with his living Savior forever. They are what make every Christian's funeral a Christian Victory Service, because they are all about Jesus.

It was Jesus, the Ruler of heaven and earth, who abandoned the comforts and glories of heaven to put himself into our world full of sin and death and the grief and sadness they cause. He came to perfectly obey every command of his Father's holy will, and then to take on death, that terrible enemy that has terrorized humanity since the time of our first parents. He suffered the punishment of hell in our place, but he never gave up. That fight took him to a lonely hill outside of Jerusalem, where with nails piercing his hands and feet, Jesus finished the fight for our souls. He himself suffered the just punishment we all deserve for our sins, but then he destroyed the power of death forever by abandoning his grave three days later on Easter Sunday.

It was Jesus, who did that all for you and for Ron, and it's Jesus who will **"bring...those who have fallen asleep in him."** Someday that same living Savior will come in great glory and power to bring all the dead in Christ and all believers still living to meet him in the air. **"And so we will be with the Lord forever."** As I told Ron, I tell you. If Jesus kept his promise to pay for your sins by his own death, if he kept his promise to conquer death by his own resurrection, then surely he will keep that promise to someday bring you to be with him forever as he promised, **"Because I live, you also will live."** (John 14:19). My friends, that was the comfort that dried Ron's tears and dries yours.

That means that someday you'll see your father, your friend, your fellow believer again gathered with all believers in Christ around the throne of the Lamb of God, but that won't be the best part of all. No, the best part is that you will be with the Lord, your living Savior, forever. You will see him face to face, and you will enjoy his victories over sin and death and all the "forever" blessings that come with them for all eternity.

What a glorious day that will be—your first day of forever! What a glorious reality to be one of the countless saints triumphant from every nation, tribe, people and language rejoicing around the throne of the Lamb who took away the sins of the world! What a glorious reality that Ron even now enjoys!

On September 21, Ronald Moilanen fell asleep in Jesus, who died for him and rose for him and will come back again. Ron awoke and got his answer to that "how long?" question he asked years ago as he saw his bride and his parents and other loved ones in the Lord who had gone before him. Most importantly, however, Ron awoke to see his living Savior in all his gracious glory with nail-pierced hands outstretched welcoming Ron home to heaven.

On that day, Jesus made all things new, and now Ron is with the Lord forever. By God's grace through faith in your Savior Jesus, a time will come when you too will see your Lord in all his gracious glory and be with him forever. May that fill us all with certain hope until the end. Amen.