

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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[0 : 0 0] Today is a sad day at the close of a very sad week. We have lost a loved one, victim of an unspeakable tragedy, and yet we must speak. We can't remain silent, pretending that everything is okay. We're not going to wake up and realize it was all a bad dream. We've lost Catherine, and we are left bereft with a lingering sense of shock and disbelief. We don't pretend to know why, we just don't know. And what are we to do? Well, we are to grieve.

But as Christians, there is also something that we can also do as we grieve. We listen to what God would say to us. We turn to His Word that is not silent. God speaks in the face of the unspeakable.

We've read words directed by the Apostle Paul to Christians in Thessalonica, where he speaks to them in the midst of their own tragedy and loss. A loved one, perhaps more than one, had died, and the believers in Thessalonica were grieving. And Paul writes to them, and his purpose in writing to them, he states very clearly, it was that they might be encouraged, comforted. The passage ends with these words, therefore encourage each other with these words. Now, the concern of the believers in Thessalonica was a very particular one that may seem quite strange or alien to us, and it was a concern that went beyond the sadness that accompanies death. Their concern on behalf of their departed loved ones revolved around what would happen when Jesus returned. It seemed that here in the first century of the church there was an expectation that Jesus would return in their own lifetime, which was fine for those still alive, but what of those who had died before He returned? Would they miss out on the blessings that would accompany His return? Well, the one-word answer is no, but in answering that question and in allaying their fears, Paul also provides us today with a word from God that is both clear and comforting. In the face of death, Paul reminds us of a resource, a spiritual resource that is ours and that makes all the difference. What is this resource that we speak of, that Paul speaks of? Well, it is this, we have hope. We have hope. In verse 13, Paul contrasts believers with who he describes as the rest of men who have no hope. Notice there in verse 13, brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or those who have died, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. And in the following verse, having just referred to those who have no hope, he goes on to speak of those who have hope, and crucially, why we have it. And what does he say? Well, there at the beginning of verse 14, we have the answer, we believe that Jesus died and rose again. This is at the heart of the Christian hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. Our hope as believers is not grounded in fantasy or wishful thinking. Our hope is not the product of a fertile imagination, but ultimately empty words. Our hope is grounded. It's grounded in the past.

It's grounded in the historical reality of the resurrection. We have hope in the face of death.

Now, this morning what I want to do is spend a little time exploring what Paul says about our hope. And what he says about our hope can be divided in three aspects or three elements, three big truths that I want us to grasp this morning. The first that we've already touched on, and we'll just say a little bit more about, is this, that our hope is grounded in the past. It's grounded in a past event, more specifically.

[5 : 16] But we'll also notice in what Paul says that our hope looks forward to the future, indeed to a future event. And then, finally, what I want us to notice from these words, that our hope makes all the difference today. Our hope is grounded in the past. It looks forward to the future, but it makes all the difference today. First of all, then, our hope is grounded in the past. As we've seen, it's grounded in this event that Paul makes reference to. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. Our hope is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died some 2,000 years ago outside Jerusalem. He was crucified and died. He breathed His last. He was dead and buried. End of story. But, of course, it wasn't the end of the story. What does Paul say? We believe that Jesus died and rose again. And we do really believe that that is so. He died and He rose again. He rose from the grave. He conquered death. Death could not hold Him down. The resurrection lies at the very heart of the Christian faith and of the Christian hope. We believe that Jesus rose again. It's not possible to be a Christian if you do not believe that Jesus rose from the grave and, by necessary consequence, is alive today. If Jesus did not rise again, then let's all just go home and put an end to this pointless charade that we call church.

And if the last one out can turn the lights off. You see, if Jesus did not rise, then really this is a pointless gathering by any estimation. But Paul, the Apostle Paul, who wrote these words to the believers in Thessalonica, was rigorously insistent on this point, on the crucial nature of recognizing that Jesus rose again. Listen to what he says as he writes to believers in Corinth. We find that in his first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 15. You can look up the passage or just listen as I read the verses.

1 Corinthians chapter 15, we'll read from verse 12. We'll read a few verses where Paul is stressing the central importance of this truth. But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. For we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Notice how rigorous Paul is. He's so brutal, really, in his analysis. He's saying, look, if there's no resurrection, then this is a complete waste of time. I'm a false witness. You know, our faith is useless.

He is insistent on the centrality of this truth. But having contemplated what the outcome would be or what the implications would be if there is no resurrection, he then concludes, but Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

[9 : 33] Our hope is grounded in the past. It's grounded in history. It's grounded in a past historical event.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Do you believe that Jesus died and rose again? If you do, then your hope in the face of death is grounded in the past, grounded in history, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you do not believe, then you have no grounds for this hope. Notice how hope, this hope that Paul is speaking of, this hope in the face of death involves or requires two things. It requires, very obviously, the reality that Jesus rose from the grave. If that's not true, then the foundation is taken from under us. It requires that. It requires that this be true, that it really did happen.

But it also requires this hope. It also requires that you believe that He rose from the grave. You see, even if it's true, if you don't believe it to be true, then it affords you no hope. So, these two things need to be married, the reality of the fact, married with your own conviction concerning that to be true. And of course, this is what Paul could take as a given as he writes to believers in Thessalonica, we believe that Jesus died and rose again. So, our hope is grounded in the past or in this very specific past event. But secondly, what I said we would notice in these verses is that our hope looks forward to the future, or very specifically, a future event. Having grounded the believer's hope in a past event, Paul immediately proceeds to point us forward to a future event that is presented as a direct and necessary consequence of the past event, the resurrection. And what is this future event that Paul points to? Well, he points to the resurrection of believers in verse 16. And at the end of the verse, he speaks of this future event and declares, the dead in Christ will rise first. He's speaking of those who had been followers of Jesus who had died, and he's saying, in the future, there is a day coming when they will rise again. In the passage that we've just read in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as the first fruits. It's the language he uses. He speaks of his resurrection as the first fruits, and that is language which implies and requires later fruits. You don't have first fruits in the absence of later fruits of later fruits. And what are these later fruits? Well, precisely this, the resurrection of believers. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a solitary event, but one which secures and guarantees our resurrection. But let's focus on our passage and notice two things about this future event that Paul speaks of. And the two things we want to notice about it are, first of all, the event itself.

What does Paul say about the event, if we can call it an event? But also, and these are very related, and there's considerable overlap, but I want to distinguish also with the outcome of the event.

So, we've noticed how our hope, the Christian hope in the face of death, is grounded in the past, this past reality that Jesus rose from the grave. It looks forward to the future, to this future event, the resurrection of believers. And we want to think about that in terms of the event itself, but also the outcome of it. First of all, the event itself. Paul is speaking about an event in time and space in the future, the resurrection of the dead. Here, his focus, his primary, we might say his full, sole focus is on the resurrection of believers. We know that it's broader than that as we bring to bear the whole of the teaching of Scripture. But here, Paul's concern is the resurrection of believers.

[13 : 56] He's speaking about this event. And what does he tell us about it? Well, even before we notice some of the things he says, it is important to stress that it is not Paul's intention to provide a detailed, blow-by-blow timetable or description of the event or day. His concern is pastoral. It is to reassure those who are unsure as to what will be of those who die before Christ returns. That said, Paul does say things concerning this event. And I think there are three principal elements identified by Paul concerning this day, this future event. I think the three things that we can notice are these. There's a coming, a calling, and a gathering. The coming of Jesus, a calling by Jesus, and a gathering to Jesus.

These three together make up this event, this future event that our hope is grounded in. First of all, the coming of Jesus. Then in verse 16 we read, for the Lord Himself will come down from heaven. The Lord Himself.

Paul wants to make it clear that there be no doubt about this. The Lord Himself will come down from heaven. He will come from where He ascended following His resurrection. And in verse 14 we're given another detail.

We're told that He comes accompanied. Notice what we read there in verse 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.

So this event involves the coming of Jesus, but the event also involves the calling by Jesus. Then in verse 16, for the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a loud command.

[15 : 49] Now a lot could be said concerning the three noises, if we can call them that for want of a better word, spoken of by Paul there in that verse. He speaks of a loud command. He speaks of the voice of the archangel.

He speaks of a trumpet call. In thinking about what Paul is actually saying in describing these things, I think there's some merit in the suggestion that the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call spell out or describe how the call of command will occur. But regardless of how we understand all that is being said here, what is central is the command. That though Paul doesn't explicitly state so, must be the command of Jesus to the dead to rise. This voice of command. Who is it that voices the command? Who is it that utters this command? Who is it who commands? Jesus, the one who comes. He commands to the dead, rise. Of course, we're reminded, aren't we, of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus. Lazarus, come out. Words of command. And how, well, follows the dead man came out. It's very incongruous, really, isn't it, to speak of the dead man coming out. But the drama is such that this is how it is described. The dead man, of course, he wasn't dead anymore because he'd obeyed the command of Jesus.

He came out, perhaps of even greater relevance as we consider this aspect of this event, the calling, the command that is uttered. Even more relevant are words of Jesus himself that we find in John's gospel in chapter 5. Let me just read what John records, what Jesus says in chapter 5 of his gospel and from verse 24. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and listen to what he says to them.

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, the time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming. Listen carefully. This is Jesus speaking. A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. So, this future event described by Paul in some measure, it involves the coming of Jesus. It involves the calling by Jesus, but it also involves the gathering to Jesus. The souls of the believers who have died and who come with Jesus, as we've read, are reunited with their resurrected bodies, and they gather with those who remain alive, believers who are alive when Jesus returns, and together they are brought to

[19 : 09] Jesus. Together they are caught up together to meet with the Lord in the air, as Paul describes it. And so, this event involves this coming of Jesus, this calling by Jesus, this gathering to Jesus, but also Paul speaks of the outcome of this event. We've really already stated what the outcome is, but I want to explicitly highlight two related and intertwined outcomes of this future event. The first is this, that we will all, we will all as believers be together. Verse 17, after that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them, with those who have died in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. We will be together. Those who have died and those who remain alive will be together. This will be a day of re-encounter. This will be a family gathering to trump all family gatherings. We will all be there, and no one will be missing. This is an outcome of this great event, we'll be together, but the second outcome, and it's intertwined is even more glorious. We will be with the Lord. And so, we will be with the Lord forever. We will be there because of the Lord. We will be there gathered by the Lord, and precious, we will be there with the Lord. And will this be a fleeting moment of bliss?

Well, the answer is clear. We will be with the Lord forever. It's not Paul's concern in this passage to explain, you know, what happens next. You know, we read this and we say, okay, so we're gathered with those who have died, they're resurrected, and if we are still alive, well, we're gathered with them and with Jesus, and what happens next? Well, Paul doesn't address that question. That's not his concern. Do we with Jesus ascend into heaven?

Do we with Jesus descend to a renewed earth? Well, such questions have their place, and no doubt the Bible gives us considerable information that would help us to answer these questions, but this is not Paul's primary concern. What really matters is that we will be with the Lord forever. You know where it is, questions of location are secondary. The important thing is that we will be with Him.

So, our hope as believers, our hope as Christians is grounded in a past event, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our hope looks forward to a future event. But finally, our hope makes all the difference today. It makes all the difference today in the face of death. We can't live in the past, and we can't live in the future. We live in the present. We live today, and our hope makes a difference. It makes all the difference today. Paul identifies two related ways in which our hope makes a difference today. First thing we can say is this, that our hope transforms our grief.

Verse 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. We do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. Now, let's be very clear.

[22 : 47] We do grieve. We ought to grieve. Grieving is good. Grieving is necessary. Grieving is healthy. Death merits grief. Paul is not counseling a stoic calm or a callous indifference in the face of death. We are to grieve. Nor is Paul contrasting a lesser grief with a greater grief. He's not saying in some very superficial way, well, we grieve less than others. He's not saying that at all. What Paul is doing is contrasting how we grieve and the radical difference between the grief of those who have no hope with the grief of those who have hope. We have hope in the face of death. We can and we do rejoice in the complete victory that Christ has won. Those who have died, to use Paul's language, have simply fallen asleep. We could say this, that Christ died, that we might sleep. And those who have slept in Christ will wake with Christ. And in the light of this truth, in the light of this prospect, there is no reason for despair. We grieve. Yes, we grieve. But we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our hope transforms our grief. But then Paul also says, and this is very related, perhaps just another way of saying the same thing, our hope grants us encouragement. We've already noticed how the passage ends, and Paul's primary purpose in bringing this instruction, therefore, encourage each other with these words. In the face of the death of those we love, and as we contemplate our own mortality, we are encouraged by our hope. But notice one very practical and necessary call that is made by Paul.

Encourage one another with these words. This encouragement is not to be some solitary activity. No, we are to encourage one another. We are a family of believers. We are a community of faith, and we are to encourage one another. Today I need encourage. Tomorrow it's you.

And as we encourage one another, then these truths are applied to our grief and to our tragedy and to our sadness. Words of encouragement need to be spoken. It's not enough that all this is true.

These truths need to be applied. The balm needs to be applied on the wound. The words are true, but they need to be graciously applied. And this is our calling as Christians to encourage one another with these words. Our hope makes all the difference today. We have hope. In the face of death, we have hope.

Our hope is grounded in the past. Our hope looks forward to the future. The resurrection and the gathering of God's people to be with the Lord forever. Our hope makes all the difference today as it transforms our grief and encourages us. Do you have this hope? Do you have this hope?

[26 : 27] In the letter to the Hebrews, we're told that faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Are you sure of what you hope for? Such security comes as you put your faith, your trust in the one who has conquered death, in the one who died and rose again, in the one who died for us and rose again for us. And so, allow me to end by speaking words that we read in Paul's letter to the Romans. May the God of hope fill you with all joy in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound you may abound you may abound in hope. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you. We do thank you that we gather as those who are persuaded that what we read is true, that when we read of Jesus as the one who died as the one who rose again, we don't read of these accounts as nice stories that may or may not be true.

We don't read them as things that bring comforting lessons in difficult times, but we read of these events as those things that took place, that Jesus, the Son of God, who came into the world to save sinners such as we are, who died on the cross in our place, rose again triumphant from the grave, that Jesus conquered death, that He is indeed the first fruits of all those who believe, and that our hope is one that is grounded in history, it's grounded in reality. We thank you that we look forward to that great day, when there will be this great gathering of your people, when we will meet once again with those we have lost who had placed their trust in you. And we thank you that we not only look to the future, but today we turn to your Word and we listen to what you have to say to us, and we ask that it would be for us encouraging, that it would be comforting, it does not remove the sadness, it does not dispel the grief, nor is it intended to do so. But we pray that it would be used of you to help us, and that we would know what it is to encourage one another with these words. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to close our service this morning by singing.

We're going to sing Psalm 47. You'll find that on page 62. Psalm 47. We'll sing the whole of the psalm to the tune, Warrington.

We've read in the passage in Thessalonians of Paul looking forward to that great day when Jesus will come. And the language that he uses, and we didn't explore this, our purpose was another this morning, but the language is the language of a returning triumphant king. This is the picture that's being painted of this cosmic king returning in victory. And it's very similar language that we find the psalmist employing here in verse 3, or verse 5, sorry, the third stanza of Psalm 47. And it's very possible that Paul had these words in mind as he penned the words that he writes to the Thessalonians.

So, we'll sing Psalm 47. We'll stand to sing. We'll sing to the tune, Warrington. Psalm 47. We'll sing to the ■■■ that He can Susent, that was the five- houses of The joyful prize to God regals.

[30 : 44] How awesome is the Lord most high. Great King who rules the earth to earth.
He has subdued beneath our feet. The nations who have beat our foes.
In blessing Jacob, holy Lord. Our heritage for us he chose.
For the past on our wish shall have some joy. The Lord of me, the trumpet sound.
Sing praise, sing praise. To God most high. To God our King.

[32 : 10] Let praise the man. For God is King upon the air.
Sing sounds of praise to him alone. God rules the nations from on high.
He sits upon his holy throne. The leaders of the nations come.
To yield and send to Abram's God. To him beyond the shields of earth.

Exalted with me is the Lord. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and always.

[33 : 43] Amen.