February 11/12, 2023

Together Forever

A People of Hope Series

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Whether we like it or not, death is a part of life in this world. If you have never experienced the deep pain of grief at the loss of someone you dearly love, you will…you will! It's just part of the story of life in a fallen world. So, what is it we need to know in order to find both hope and comfort in those most difficult seasons of grief?

Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to First Thessalonians, Chapter 4. If you're new with us, we've been walking our way through the New Testament book of First Thessalonians. Last week, Jeff told us that the believers in Thessalonica were so convinced of the imminent return of Christ, some of them actually quit their jobs and were sitting on a hill waiting for Jesus to return. And that's true. I don't think it ever crossed their minds that some of them would die before they experienced the return of Christ. But some time has passed, and some of them have died, and so now it's raised all kinds of questions. Now what happens? Will they miss the coming of Jesus? Will they miss this grand event? Will they ever see Him again? Will I even know them? So, I think they voice these questions to Timothy, and Timothy brought them back to Paul. One of the things that's noteworthy is, we know that Paul was only in Thessalonica a number of weeks, and yet with these brand-new believers, there was such a strong message of the return of Christ. It shows up in chapter one; it shows up in chapter two, chapter three, chapter four. It was clearly a main theme of Paul's teaching. We pick it up in verse 13:

> **But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** (*NASB, 1 Thessalonians. 4:13)

So, this is something they need to know in order to have hope, even in the midst of their sorrow and grief. Paul refers to those who have fallen **asleep**. This was actually common language in the ancient world. It was phrased in different ways. Sometimes in the Old Testament, you read about somebody that died and went to sleep with their fathers. Or sometimes it's about someone who went to their rest. It was that kind of terminology. Paul takes this concept and is going to develop it further because it has more meaning for those that have died in Christ. The "sleep" is referring to the body. Even in the ancient world, it was a reference to the body. Where did the body rest? There were all kinds of different beliefs in the ancient world then, about what happened from there as far as life after death. But it will be evident in this text that the "sleep" is in reference to the body. But as a believer, the idea of sleep suggests a temporary state. When you go to bed at night, there's the assumption I'm going to wake up in the morning. It's a temporary state. Some of you this morning will sleep through the sermon *(laughter),* but you will awaken in time to go home. It's not a permanent condition, and you'll go home well rested, *(laughter)* so that's good.

Paul does not say we as Christians should not grieve. He says w*e should not grieve as those who have no hope.* It's very important that we don't overly spiritualize grief to the point where we think if we really believe, we shouldn't grieve the loss of someone whom we loved. That isn't spiritual. It's just indicative of a lack of emotional health. Paul, when he wrote to the Philippians, said if his friend Epaphroditus would have died, *"It would have been sorrow on top of sorrow for me."* It is deeply painful. We grieve the loss of someone we deeply love, but we don't grieve as those who have no hope.

Now, I've been a pastor for 40 years. I've walked a lot of people through grief. I've done well over 300 funerals. I've seen really bad, destructive grief, and I've seen those that grieve with hope. But one of the very consistent things that happens when someone dies, and it doesn't matter if these people have a secular worldview, it doesn't matter if they have no interest in God, it doesn't matter if they're a different religion or have no religion, one of the consistent things I see is when someone dies, the people that love that person suddenly want to believe there's life after death. And you'll hear it in the things they say. They talk about, "So and so is in a better place." "So and so is looking down on us." "So and so has become an angel." You hear all these different things, but the reality is, for most people, in their worldview it is nothing more than wishful thinking. They have no reason to think that other than just, deep in their gut, they want to believe that's true. Which I think is interesting, because I think it is true that, deep in our gut, as people made in the image of God, there's something that causes us to want to believe there's got to be something more than this, and there's got to be something better. People, in the middle of the night, in their most difficult moments, want to believe, "Please tell me there's something more."

We, as Christians, do believe there's something more, and it's not wishful thinking. It is rooted to an event in history that took place on this earth about 2000 years ago. We believe that the God of the universe took on human flesh, that He died on a cross to make payment for sin, and that He was buried. And because He had made payment for sin, He also conquered death, because death is the result of that sin. This was evidenced by the fact that three days later, He rose from the dead—once for all time—conquering sin and death. And it's because Jesus rose from the dead that we believe that one day we, too, will experience a resurrection of the dead.

Paul connects these dots in First Corinthians 15. He says, ***"If Jesus is still in the grave, then there is no life after death, and we're just a pitiful people. But if it's true that Jesus rose from the dead, indicating He had conquered death once and for all, then we as believers should expect to experience a resurrection, literally, physically, bodily, a resurrection from the dead."***

Now Thessalonians was a very early letter, well within the lifetime of people who are eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. We know for certain that the religious Jews would have done anything to have stopped the movement of Christianity, including putting Christians to death. Don't you think if it was possible to open a tomb and display the dead body of Jesus, they most certainly would have done that to stop Christianity once for all time? But that isn't what happened. As a matter of fact, what happened was the opposite. Christianity exploded out of Jerusalem because the evidence was overwhelming for a resurrected Christ. So, that's where Paul goes. Verse 14:

> **For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again,** (And the grammar is: if we believe, and we do, that Jesus died and rose again) **even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.**

I think the best way to understand this text is to follow the three times that the Greek preposition "soon", which is translated "**with**" occurs in the text, and this is the first of those occasions. One of the questions we have when a loved one dies in Christ, and in those moments there's such a feeling of loss and such a feeling of separation, there's something deep within us, and we wonder, "Will I ever see that person again? You know, where does that person go? Will we ever see them again? Will we know each other? Will we have any kind of a relationship with each other?"

Well, Paul just answered that question. The body has gone into the ground and is asleep. It's a temporary condition. The immaterial part—the spirit—has gone to be with Jesus. "With Jesus" doesn't mean floating on a cloud somewhere. It doesn't mean disappearing into the Twilight Zone, doesn't mean becoming part of the energy of the universe. It's a term of relationship: awake, alive with Jesus. Now there's a lot of mystery and unknown to that. For example, "Will we, in that state, have a body…kind of a temporary in-between body?" And the answer is, "I don't know; we're not told." What we are told is that the immaterial part of us is very alive and with Jesus, and when Jesus returns, ***He will bring them with Him***. So, whoever that is for you, whoever it is that you've lost, understand that when Jesus comes, those people are not going to miss the party. They actually return **with** Jesus.

Now the text keeps reminding us these are ***those that are asleep in Jesus***, which, of course, is a reference to believers. This, then, always raises the question, "What about my loved one who has died without Christ?" And I know that's an extremely painful thing to process. We certainly don't have time to go into all that this morning, but let me just make a couple of comments. Oftentimes, people will say to me, "So and so died, and I know they didn't know Jesus," to which I respond, "You don't know that…you don't know that." The reality of grace is so scandalous that it's possible if, in the last 30 seconds of life, if Jesus made Himself known one more time, that person could choose to receive Jesus. If, in order to be saved, you had to go out and get good; if in order to be saved, you had to go out and get religious, there'd be no hope. But God's grace and mercy is such that you actually don't know what transpired in those final moments. So, you don't know that.

Think about the thief on the cross. This was a really bad guy; that's why he was on the cross. And imagine you're his parents, and as soon as he's nailed to the cross, you don't want to see this horrific ending, so you leave, and someone says to you, "Did your son have a relationship with God?" And they would have said, "No, no, he was a really bad guy." They would have had no idea that something amazing happened in that final moment, when that thief on the cross turned to Jesus and affirmed Him, and Jesus said, "***Today, you will be with Me in Paradise***." They would have said, "No." I would have said, "You don't know." So, for starters, you don't know that. Second of all, you do know God. And you know God has a heart of kindness, and is a God of compassion and a God of love and a God of justice. So, you have to trust your loved one with God.

Now, that's not to imply that at the end of the story, everybody makes it in. I don't think that's true; I don't believe the Bible teaches that. Frankly, I think it would be reckless to say that. But I do

know that God loves your loved one more than you love them, and you know the heart of God. You just have to trust Him. The text goes on. Verse 15:

> **For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, (**In other words, this isn't Paul's opinion. This comes directly from God Himself.) **…that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.**

So, there will be a generation of Christians that will be alive when Jesus returns. It could have been Paul's generation, but it wasn't. But it will be some generation of Christians that will be alive and remain. I think part of the concern of the believers in Thessalonica is, they were so excited about the return of Christ, but their loved one has died, and wherever that loved one is, they're going to miss out on this great celebration of the return of Christ. So what Paul is addressing is: those of us who are alive and remain, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. In other words, there was this thought that they'll get left behind. Wherever they are, they're left behind, because we'll go with Jesus, and Paul says, "No, it's not going to work that way. We're not going to precede them." Verse 16:

> **For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.**

Notice it says **the Lord Himself**. It's not an angel. It's not a representative. It's Jesus! Jesus is coming back! There's this myth that when Jesus returns, it will be this quiet, sneaky thing, where He's going to sneak in and sneak out and suddenly a bunch of people will be missing. You know, the vacuum cleaner's sitting there running without anyone pushing it, and the razor is on the counter running, with no one to use it, and someone at work just disappeared from their desk, and cars crash into the ditches. But what the text just said is: this is going to be a noisy, raucous celebration. This shout is like a military shout. It's a loud **shout**. **The voice of the archangel**—a little bit harder to figure out what that is—and then **the trumpet of God**. The imagery would be probably the shofar (the ram's horn that the Jews used to communicate in battle and for special events). Put all that together and it is a loud, noisy moment. There's no sneaking in and sneaking out, and he says the first thing that's going to happen is **the dead in Christ** (the bodies that are asleep) **will rise** first…will awaken. Maybe all the noise wakes them up.

So, this always raises a question. "Okay, if the body's going to be resurrected, what about those people that have been cremated?" To which I would say, "I don't think that's a problem." First of all, Christians have died in fires; they've been eaten by sharks; they've died in all kinds of ways. I don't think that's a problem. Second of all, even if you're putting a casket in the ground, you eventually turn back to dust— "dust to dust, ashes to ashes". That process is either quick or slow. But trust me, a body that's been in the grave is not really in a condition to be resurrected without God doing His thing.

The other thing to think about is, when we ask that question, we ask it through the perspective of a 21st century American, and we need to remember that over the last 2000 years, lots of Christians have died around the world and have been buried in very crude conditions, and their body decomposes very quickly. So, whether or not you are buried in the ground or something else really is irrelevant. A lot of people think today in terms of stewardship environment; there's a lot of

things to think through. But what we do know for sure is the dead in Christ will rise first. Then what happens? Verse 17:

> **Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds…**

So, the generation that is alive when Jesus returns, **will be caught up together with them**. So that Greek word that's translated **caught up**, needs a little conversation. The word itself just means like *a violent snatching*. If you remember when we were going through the book of Acts, towards the end of the book of Acts, Paul goes back to Jerusalem and there's an angry mob. The commander is afraid that the mob is going to kill Paul, so he *snatches him away*, to protect him. It's the exact same word that's used here. Many of you are probably aware that different churches have different ideas about end-times theology, what we call eschatology, and there are all different views by scholars that love Jesus and love the Bible. I think, at the end of the day, you have to approach this subject with a great deal of humility, because no matter what position you choose, it's not that clear…and maybe it's not supposed to be that clear.

So, one of the big arguments related to our text has to do with this word **caught up** and referring to what some call *the rapture.* So the question is, "Is **caught up** just a part of the description of the Second Coming of Christ?" or is it a separate event, known as the rapture, that precedes the coming of Christ? There's a great deal of debate about that. So, for those who believe that it's the same as the Second Coming of Christ, (sometimes I hear them say, as an argument, that the word *rapture* doesn't occur anywhere in the Bible), to which I would say, "That's kind of a silly non-argument. First of all, rapture is an English word, where there aren't any English words in the original Bible. It's Hebrew and Greek. If you were an early Christian, reading a Latin Bible, the word rapture does show up in your Bible, because it's the Latin word that translated the Greek word rapturo, which is where we get our word rapture, so it's just kind of a non-argument. It doesn't prove anything one direction or the other."

The second comment I would make is, I think most would agree that this passage in Thessalonians is the foundation text for establishing the view that there is a separate event known as a rapture that precedes the Second Coming of Jesus. It then is read into a lot of other texts, but I would suggest there would be nothing to read into those texts, were it not for this text as the foundational establishing text. The problem with that is: this text simply isn't clear one way or the other. It's simply not Paul's intent; Paul is not teaching eschatology here. These people have lost loved ones. Their hearts are broken in their grief over this loss. Can you imagine Paul sitting down with these grieving people and saying, "Hey, I think I have some charts here you'd like to see. I'd like to show you how all this works out on the chart." It has nothing to do with the conversation. I don't think Paul is teaching eschatology here. I think he is teaching life after death here, and he's seeking to comfort these people.

One of the real concerns, when we get sidetracked around whether there is or is not a rapture is, we miss the point of the text, and the point is significant because it's the second use of the word – "**with" - those who are alive and remain, will be caught up together "with" them.** If you've suffered deep loss, there's these questions about, "Where does that person go? Will I ever see that person again? Will I know that person? Will that person know me? What will life be like?" What

Paul has said is: once that person dies, the body goes in the ground—a temporary sleep—and the spirit goes with Jesus. When Jesus comes back, He brings them with Him. Their bodies are awakened, and they're reunited with a body that has changed. Then we who are alive and remain are caught up. Don't miss the language: **caught up together with them**. It's interesting how much emphasis Paul puts in this text on being **together** again. They come **with** God. We gather **with** them. Keep in mind the value of relationship—the value of marriage, the value of family, the value of friendship. The value of relationships; these are God's values. This isn't something we made up. You might ask the question, "Will there be a Dairy Queen in heaven?" *(laughter)* My answer is, "I certainly hope so. But I don't know." I could not make the case that Dairy Queen is in God's value system. I can absolutely make the case that marriage, family, relationships, and friendships are God's value system. There's no reason to think that would change it. As a matter of fact, the text makes a very strong case:

….that we gather together with them in the clouds…

The **clouds**, I think, represent *the presence of God*. This is a consistent Old and New Testament imagery. The *cloud* that led them through the wilderness…the *cloud* that was on Mount Sinai…the *cloud* in the tabernacle…the *cloud* at the Transfiguration of Christ. It's talking about gathered together in the presence of God. So, if you go out this afternoon, and you look into the sky and it's a beautiful blue sky with no clouds, don't say, "Well, it can't happen today; there are no clouds." (*laughter)* It's not what it's talking about. But look at what the text does say:

….with them in the clouds (To what?) **to meet the Lord in the air…**

One more word to talk about, and that is this word **meet**. So, this whole discussion about, "Is this the second coming of Jesus?" Or, "Is this a separate event known as the rapture?" boils down to when we meet Jesus together in the clouds, will we go back up? Or will we come down? If it's the second coming, we go down. If it's a rapture, we go up. Some seek to make the case that this word **meet** in the Greek had a technical usage for a group of people that would go out of a town to meet a dignitary that was coming to visit. They would then escort that dignitary into town with them…seeking to use that to make the case, it's the Second Coming because we meet and then escort Jesus into town.

Now one of the challenges with that is, what sometimes happens with these words is, you have a scholar that says the word means "this". Then another scholar quotes that scholar, and then another scholar quotes those scholars, and pretty soon you just have scholars quoting each other. And at some point, it's like, "That must be what the word means." But if you can get past that, down to what did that Greek word actually mean, the evidence is pretty weak. I would say it is possible that that term was used in that sense, but certainly the common usage was just simply meeting one another face to face. So it can't make an argument one way or the other. Again, I don't think Paul's purpose is to teach eschatology. I don't think that's even on his mind; it's simply not what this text is about. It's about those loved ones who have died in Christ, who return with Jesus. Their bodies are resurrected; we then are gathered together with them, with Jesus, in the clouds. I love the way this discussion ends:

…to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

There's our third "**with**". The saints that have died come **with** Jesus. We are gathered together **with** them, and then we are all together **with** Jesus. But what the text just said is, **always with the Lord**. In other words, the moment that day happens, there will never be another moment for all eternity where we will ever be separated again. No more loneliness. No more grief. No more sorrow. No more longings. No more partings. No more goodbyes. From that moment on—together forever!

Now, I don't think together means everybody in the same room, always together. Those of us that lean toward the introvert side of the scale, don't really like that description. *(laughter)* I think it means together, like, we're together. Like you're together with your spouse…you're together with your kids…you're together with your friends. You aren't always huddled in one room together. But we're together. No more goodbyes. No more grief. No more loneliness. No more sorrow. For the believer, death does not win. Death is a pause in the story, to be resumed in glorious fashion!

Sometimes when I'm watching TV, I will remember there's something I was supposed to do. Oops, I'm supposed to take out the garbage. I need to feed the horses. I need to drive through the Dairy Queen, *(laughter)* so I hit the "pause", do whatever it is, come back, hit the "play". That's what death is to the Christian. The story is not over. It's a "pause" to be resumed in glorious fashion forever.

You know what's amazing about that is that day may start today! I walk a lot of people through grief, and sometimes, in the midst of the painful grieving season, it feels like, "I'm not sure I can get through one more day." And there's deep hope in the realization, "Maybe you won't have to. Maybe last night when you put your head on that pillow, it will be the last time you ever had to do so with such grief and loneliness, because maybe Jesus comes back today." Maybe it's tomorrow. Maybe it's 100 years from now. I don't know. But in those most difficult seasons of grief, we're full of hope, in the realization…maybe today…and from that moment on…together forever! This is what we need to know. Paul says:

> **Therefore comfort one another with these words.** (Vs. 18)

It's not just, "Be comforted." It's, **"Comfort one another**." This is what we need to know together, to go through these most difficult seasons of life. This is what we need to know in order to go through the most difficult seasons of grief…as a people of hope.

> *Our Father, we celebrate this wonderful passage that reminds us death doesn't win…that one day Jesus is coming back and He will bring with Him, those who have died in Christ… that we will be gathered together with them, with Jesus, forever. Lord, until that day, we ask that You be our comfort and our hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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WINTER 2023 // WEEK 5

Life Group Questions

A People of Hope // February 11/22, 2023

Together Forever // 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

In this week's passage Paul addresses a concern the Thessalonian church had about whether those Christians who died before Jesus' return would miss out on the resurrection and therefore life with Jesus. Paul assures them that all followers of Jesus, whether dead or alive, will receive a resurrected body at Jesus' Coming and live forever in His presence. Because of this Paul urges the Thessalonians not to grieve the deaths of their own as those without hope. Rather they are to be people who exhibit hope in their grief and are to encourage each other with the truth Paul has told them.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

1) **Are you a morning person or a night person?**

2) **When you die or when Jesus returns, what is the first thing you would like to say to Jesus or ask him?**

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) What was your immediate reaction to this week's sermon?

2) In verse 13 Paul anticipates his readers will be encouraged by what he is about to say. Notice, he doesn't tell them not to grieve the deaths of those in their church. Rather he tells them not to grieve *like those with no hope*. How do we grieve as those who do have hope? What might that look like?

3) In verse 18 Paul commands the Thessalonians to comfort or encourage each other with what he is telling them. What specific truths in Paul's message makes his teaching a comfort?

Which truth Paul mentions gives you the most encouragement and hope? Explain.

4) Paul does not instruct his readers how to handle grieving the death of those close to us who, as far as we know, were not one of God's people. But based on what Paul says and other parts of the Bible you are familiar with, what might Paul say to us about how we are to grieve in those instances?

Does the thought of someone close to you who is not a Christian dying apart from God motivate you to tell them the good news of Jesus? Explain.

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

Prayer Focus: Paul commands us to encourage each other with the truth of Jesus' return. Pray each day this week that God would give you a specific opportunity to encourage someone who has recently experienced the death of a Christian close to them. Use the truths you learned from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 to give them hope. Or, if you have recently experienced the death of a Christian loved-one, ask God that he would provide you comfort and encouragement through the words of this text.

Scripture Focus: The basis for why we have hope in our own resurrection when Jesus returns is the resurrection of Jesus. Take some time to read slowly and carefully 1 Corinthians 15:12-23, 50-57 and notice the similarities between this and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and the hope we have because of Jesus' resurrection.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of "coming together" is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say "Amen" aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?