

1Thessalonians 4:13-18

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13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.

16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

## THE SECOND COMING

If you asked the average Christian what came to their mind when they heard the phrase "second coming," most would reply, "the end of the world."

Unfortunately this is a total misunderstanding.

The second coming is not about the end of the world. The second coming is about the beginning of a new world. It is about the new creation.

This is at the heart of what we believe about the resurrection. The hope of the resurrection is connected to the recreation of the world by the One who created the world in the first place.

The resurrection has universal implications.

We are not the first to misunderstand this most important doctrine.

The church at Thessalonica had the same problem. Some of their members had died, and they were very upset.

They didn't understand the far-reaching implications of the resurrection, and sadly this apparently caused some of them to "grieve as those who had no hope."

Paul didn't want them to struggle in this way so he said, "We don't want you to be uninformed about the resurrection."

This knowledge was vitally important for the life of the church at Thessalonica, and this knowledge is also vitally important for the church today.

Everything we believe as Christians is filtered through the lens of the resurrection.

And if our beliefs about the resurrection are wrong, then our faith is distorted and our hope for the future becomes cloudy.

So, what is the hope of the resurrection and how does it affect the way we look at life and death?

## RESURRECTION HOPE

First, we believe that Jesus died and rose again. But, it's not just about Jesus. It's about those who have died in Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus provides the template for our future hope. Just as Jesus died and rose again so it will be for those who die in Christ Jesus.

So, exactly what happens to Christians who die in the Lord?

Now let me say that the answer will not be totally satisfactory to many of you. We want to know all the details, but we cannot know the details. We live on the other side of eternity, and that means there is mystery when it comes to the resurrection.

Hope does not mean knowing everything. Hope means knowing enough to trust God with our present and our future.

The apostle Paul talked about this mystery in his letter to the Corinthians. He said, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1Corinthians 13:12)

In the ancient world, mirrors were not of good quality. So, if you looked in the mirror you didn’t get a clear picture of reality.

Those of us who live on this side of eternity do not have a clear picture of the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. But, those on the other side of eternity do have a clear picture. According to Paul they see face to face.

The hymn that we’re going to sing this morning, “For All the Saints” expresses this dichotomy well. We will sing, “We feebly struggle” but the saints who have gone to be with God “they in glory shine.”

But, what we do know is this: In life and in death we belong to God. When Paul faced martyrdom for his faith, he wrote. “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul was not afraid of life or death because he believed that God in Christ was with him throughout the journey.

Perhaps Paul’s most insightful words about the resurrection come in Romans 14:8. He said, “If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

A person of great faith who was a member of our church was told recently that she was dying, and was put on hospice. She was excited to learn that she would soon be with the Lord.

But, as it happens sometimes, the prognosis was wrong. She was taken off hospice, and she was equally excited about the fact that the Lord still had something for her to do.

She truly had Paul’s attitude. She knew that in life and in death she belonged to God.

#### FIRST IN THE NEW CREATION

Christians who have died are with the Lord. They are not at a disadvantage in any way. They have not missed out on anything.

In fact Paul suggests that they are at an advantage. When the final trumpet sounds the dead in Christ will be the first ones to become a part of the new creation. The risen Lord will lead a procession of saints into the Promised Land.

Now exactly how this happens is not spelled out. In fact exactly how the resurrection of Jesus occurred is not spelled out either.

The only thing we know is that the God who created heaven and earth did it. God raised Jesus as the first act in the drama of a new creation. Paul gives us a glimpse into what that new creation will look like when the final act occurs. Paul said that this is not speculation on his part but a “word of the Lord.”

God created the world with a “word” and the world will be recreated with a word. When God speaks things happen. The call of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet will signal this second coming, this new creation.

This final trumpet will sound and the new age will begin.

This is the big picture when it comes to resurrection. And it’s important that we focus on the big picture because we are a part of the story. God’s kingdom has come, is coming and will come, and we get to be a part of that larger story.

And even when we die it is not a reason for despair. The Spirit of God in Christ will never leave us. Heaven will come down to earth, and the dead in Christ will be raised first.

And then the Christians who are alive at the time of the second coming will be caught up in this heavenly drama. They will meet the Lord “in the air, “ and they will be with the Lord forever.

## NOT LEFT BEHIND BUT GATHERED TOGETHER

In this passage the “rapture” is not used as a way to separate and judge people. The “rapture” is not a way to leave some behind.

Instead, this apocalyptic language is used to talk about how God in Christ brings us back together. It is a word of comfort.

I don't think it's helpful to over analyze this passage. This is the poetry of eternity. This is an image of the unimaginable.

But, sometimes the language of poetry can give us more truth than prose. Sometimes images and visions can be more comforting than just the facts.

I think that's true with this passage. We need to live with the hope that is professed in this passage.

We need to use this passage as a way to bring comfort each other in our time of sorrow.

We need to use this passage as a way to look up instead of about.

#### SURPRISE, ALL THINGS NEW

In the book of Revelation we hear God say, "See, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

For those who put their trust in Jesus and the resurrection this is not just a future hope, but also a way of life.

We live life on tiptoe because we believe the same God who came in Jesus continues to come to us even today.

We are a people of hope who eagerly await the new thing that the resurrected Christ brings.

This new thing is not dependent upon what has come before or what is possible. This new thing is the totally unexpected. This new thing is the surprise when heaven comes to earth. This new thing is more than we can imagine.

In the Hebrew Bible the prophets spoke of this. For example in Isaiah we read, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

We live in a world that does not believe in the truly new thing. I heard a scientist from Cornell being interviewed on a talk show. The Pope had suggested that evolution might be God's way of recreating the world.

But, the scientist was not convinced. He said that he was a materialist. He believed that all there is in the universe is matter and energy. There is nothing else. He said that the Pope could not believe in evolution and God. The two viewpoints were mutually exclusive.

Of course this scientist's viewpoint was also a matter of faith. How could he know that there is no God behind the matter and energy that comprises the universe? How could he know that the world holds no surprises for us, that it is all cut and dried?

He couldn't. In fact I would suggest that it's hard to be a really good scientist without a sense of wonder and awe. It is this sense of not knowing that propels the really good scientist to learn more.

Remember that old commercial for Holiday Inn? The tag line was "the best surprise is no surprise." That might be a good slogan for a motel, but it's not a good slogan for the faith. Faith is full of surprises.

And for those of us who have eyes to see, these surprises point to a new world coming.

There's a verse from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that I often quote as a declaration of pardon. Paul wrote, "... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

There is a tension between the believer's new life in Christ and the old world. The old world will not go quietly. But, God uses surprise to change things, in our lives and in the world.

C.S. Lewis wrote about conversion in terms of surprise.

We are surprised by joy. We are surprised by the grace of God.

God will continue to surprise us with new things.

God will continue to make a way in our wilderness and streams in our desert.

## GOOD GRIEF

Grief can still cause us to lose hope. Our stories about the future have to be rewritten in the face of our loss.

But, this passage suggests a future narrative that includes reunion with those who are loved but not lost. This passage suggests a surprise ending based upon the resurrection of Jesus.

Maybe the best image of this is that old country song, “will the circle be unbroken?” This passage suggests that circle will not be broken, that there will be a connection forged in heaven for all eternity.

The NRSV translates verse 13, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

The translated “died” means literally “to fall asleep” and was a common euphemism in those days for death. It was much like we say that someone “passed away” instead of saying that they died.

But, in this case there may be more truth in the euphemism. In fact this word is often paired in the Bible with the phrase “in Christ.” So believers are said to have “died in Christ” or “fallen asleep in Christ.” We are never lost to the presence of God. Even death cannot claim the final victory.

Certainly death comes as a terrible stranger, and we all grieve. No matter what euphemism we use for death it cannot blunt the sting.

But, on the other hand, when we look at the big picture, when we consider the creation and all God has made and is in the process of remaking, we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

We do not withdraw from life. We live our lives with a sense of expectation.

## LIVING LIFE ON TIPTOE

Later in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul wrote,

“So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8)

Paul said that many people live life with blinders on. They live as if they were intoxicated or asleep. They just go from one thing to the next with no sense of purpose except self-gratification.

As the philosopher put it, “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.”

But, Christians have a different philosophy. We believe that history; our own personal history and the history of the world in general have a purpose and an end. Life is not just one thing after another.

Life is lived out under the Providence of a gracious and Almighty God. We live today and every day with an eye on tomorrow.

We don't have all the answers. But, this we do know that “... neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Christ has promised to never leave or forsake us. The future is God's future, and that's what gives us hope for the living of these days

Our grief is tempered by hope.

We have hope in a future that only God can bring. God has surprised us before and God will continue to surprise us.

We live life on tiptoe because we know that one day the word will be spoken, the trumpet will sound and the new day of God's kingdom will become a reality for all God's children.

Until that time let us comfort one another with these words.

Amen.