



Sermon Transcript June 16, 2019

When Jesus Turns Your Life Around A Hope That Transforms 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 2, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by David Rucquoi. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, 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 fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Introduction

Has death ever touched your family, or someone close to you? They're gone. It's hard, and there's nothing you can do about it. Of course, different circumstances can impact the trauma of death; but, if you've experienced losing a loved one, under any circumstance, you understand one of the concerns facing the Thessalonian church. Paul had sent Timothy to check on the welfare of the church, and the report he got back prompted Paul to write the passage we will read today, where Paul provides comfort in the light of death.

Paul begins this section explaining there is a hope that far outweighs the pains of death, and he ends this section with the exhortation to "*encourage one another with these words*" (v. 18). What he discusses in between are three transformational promises that support his claim: there is a real hope that exceeds the pains of death. He likely had these same promises in mind when he told the Corinthians, "*Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting*" (1 Cor. 15:54-55)? And when he told the Philippian church, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Phil. 1:21)! Undoubtedly, Paul and Silas had these three encouragements on mind as they sang praises in the Philippian jail (in light of their own possible execution), before the ground shook, the gates opened, and they led the jailor and his whole household to believe in God and rejoice with them. These three promises, these elements of encouragement, are the basis for a hope that far exceeds the sorrows of death.

Grieve with Hope

Paul starts off this section saying,

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

In looking at this 3rd of the "other matters" Paul addresses in chapter four, I find it interesting that Paul discusses each topic as it relates to the surrounding community. In 4:1-8 he discusses sanctification, particularly sexual purity, that they would abstain from "*passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God*" (v. 5). In 4:9-12 he discusses the second topic: love of the brethren, and that they "*may win the respect of outsiders*" (v. 12). Now, in 4:13-18, he discusses how they respond to the death of fellow believers, "*so that [they] do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope*"(v. 13).

In each case, it's not that Paul is focused on propaganda, though he is concerned with reaching people with the gospel. To the contrary, he's seeking to ensure that the sincerity of their faith ripples down to transform and distinguish their conduct from the surrounding culture, rather than passively allowing the culture to squelch their faith.

And what does he mean by "hope?" Vine defines it as "favourable and confident expectation." Helps Word-studies says it's an "expectation of what is sure" adding "certain." The emphasis in hope is not optimism, but expectation. With this hope, the outcome is not just a tentative possibility. In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "...*the plowman should plow in **hope** and the thresher thresh in **hope** of sharing in the crop.*" (1 Cor. 9:10). Needless to say, the farmer plowing and the farmer threshing are not toiling for an optimistic, slight possibility that a crop *might* occur. They fully expect it to occur. What is referred to as "hope," for them, is a total probability, which is very different from how we use the word. Paul shares with the Thessalonian believers, in the context and anguish of the death of their loved ones, encouragement that radiates a tangible hope, an expectation that surpasses the darkness and pain of death itself.

Here's another question, Does God cry? Notice, Paul isn't opposed to grieving ("*that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*"). His tender reference to death as "*those who are asleep*" shows sensitivity to their pain that is consistent with his reference to speaking to them as "*a father with his children*" (2:11). The concept of lament, for this zealous Jew, was an intimate part of his worship, as were the laments in Psalms. The Old Testament has a book dedicated to lament. Speaking on John 11, Ryan explained how Jesus expressed extreme sadness, even frustration, as he wept over Lazarus' death. So, does God cry? Clearly He does; so, what makes God cry? In John 11, Jesus is pretty academic about Lazarus' death, until he is confronted with the pain of others. "What makes God cry?" God cries when you hurt. The Lord who created everything and declared it "good" was confronted by those grieving over this world's brokenness, the pain of death, and that tore him up; and it led him to confront that brokenness on the cross.

Please notice that nowhere are we admonished to buck-up and smile, as if our grief demonstrated a lack of faith. Instead devout Jews are taught to lament fully, and to bring their sorrows to God **as an act of faith**, embracing the notion that **He** is the source of comfort and Hope. New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold explains that while Christians should view death as the enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), "tears in the face of death are not the sign of weak faith but of great love." If anything, Paul is promoting a unique **type** of grieving that includes **hope**, in contrast to the cultural, social, and spiritual

context of this first-century church, and this hope does not erase the pains of death; but, it is greater than the pains of death.

Encouragement #1—The Resurrection of Jesus

Paul then introduces the first of the three encouragements, or promises. He states it this way:

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

The first encouragement, for a hope that far outweighs the pains of death, is that those “asleep” in the Lord are with the Lord, based on the fact and power of Jesus’ resurrection.

Here Paul is not just promoting good theology. He is stating an unprecedented fact of history that is bizarre enough to warrant attention, and substantiated enough to rest confidence in. The crucified Jesus overcame death itself. Of course, he said he would. The Jews and Romans knew that and did everything they could to make sure he was dead, **and** to prevent anyone from tampering with the grave. When he was reported alive, the authorities did everything they could to produce the body; but, they couldn’t. The people who met the risen Lord, and wrote about it (including Paul), were still walking around and talking about it, and no one could stop them.

The same Jesus who promised a thief that he would pass that day from presence on earth to presence in paradise (Luke 23:43) substantiated his authority to make such a claim by rising from the dead. And Paul, who had met Jesus, told the Philippian church he was torn between leaving this life to be with Christ, or to stay here on earth and serve Him (Phil. 1:23-24). It was one or the other. Thus, as Paul taught the Corinthian church, for believers to be absent with the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Here, Paul is connecting God’s activities in the past with our confidence in the future. **The first encouraging promise**, from the Lord who overcame His own death, is that those who have died **who trust in Him** are **with** Him. If you have lost someone, who loved Jesus, His message to you today is, “They’re OK, they’re with me.”

All of us have faced, or will face death, until the Lord returns. It could be a friend, a parent, a spouse, or even a child. We could be facing our own death. Naturally we recoil from the finality of something so dark over which we have no control. We especially

avoid it if we're not forced to confront it; but, consider this: if death is such a great enemy of life, pretty much every other challenge we face in life is subordinate to it. I wonder, how would we live our lives if we were freed from the grip of death? If each of us possessed a confident expectation, a real hope, that overwhelmed this uncontrollable, dark force, how would that affect our routine thinking and behavior? I suppose it's no wonder Paul could tell Timothy that God has not given us a spirit of fear but of "*power, and of love, and of controlled thoughts*" (2 Tim. 1:7). And it's no wonder that Jesus could say that in this world we will have tribulations; but that we should take courage, because He has overcome this world (John 16:33).

I saw this truth beautifully captured in a painting about 25 years ago. My wife and I attended the Manhattan Bible Church, in New York, and our missionaries, Bruce and Kathy Omer, serving in Thailand, had taken a trip to Tibet, where they met Buddhist monks that would paint a person's life cycle. The idea was that you would sit and tell the monk your story. The monk would paint the events of your life on a circle, typically in a red and gold setting. Though the events were unique, all the paintings showed a dragon behind the circle that clutched the circle above and below in its claws and feet. The dragon's head rises from behind the circle, gripping the circle in its teeth. There are many examples of these paintings on the Internet today. Bruce and Kathy told a monk about Jesus, they gave him a gospel of John, asked him to read it and to paint the life-cycle of Jesus, and set a date when they would return. The resulting painting was amazing. The monk had painted the typical life cycle, in a red and gold motif. The familiar stories of the gospel were depicted as you went around the circle, clockwise. There was Jesus' baptism, the calling of the disciples, the wedding at Cana, the Woman at the Well, Jesus healing people, feeding 5,000, the triumphal entry, his crucifixion, and this is where the painting became extraordinary. At the resurrection, the circle itself was broken, with the Lord in white rising through the broken circle. The dragon's claws and feet were open, not clutching the circle; the teeth did not have a grip on the circle, and the head was receding out of view. They explained that the monk had been transformed by the story of Jesus, and became a believer. The message was clear: the resurrection of Jesus is a "game changer." It represents a power that breaks the fatalistic, closed, hopeless view of life, and anything like it. The power and truth of this is represented in changed lives throughout this room, and throughout history. You have a habit? You have an addiction? You have a family history? No sweat, Jesus can change that. You have circumstances that are unbearable? Is life hard? Hey, he overcame death! And so we are told "*if anyone is in Christ [they are] a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*" (2 Cor. 5:17).

It is this power of resurrection that Paul provides as the first reason for the child of God to have a hope that overwhelms even death. And, at the same time, this great hope gives us a confident expectation greater than every other, lessor difficulty we face.

Encouragement #2 - The Promise of God

The second encouragement Paul shares saying:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

This second encouragement, for a hope that far outweighs the pains of death, is that we don't need to hurt for those who are "asleep." They are fine. Trust God's promises.

By qualifying this encouragement as "*a word from the Lord*," is that to say everything else was not from the Lord? Not at all. Today is Father's Day. How many of you have had a Father instructing you and mid-stream in conversation say, "I'm speaking to you"? Have any of you fathers said that yourself? Isn't it rather obvious you're speaking? I have a Belgian relative who is a linguist, that is fascinated by the North American colloquialisms, "*I mean*" and "*I think*." Of course I do, I'm speaking, so why do we say this? Such a statement offers nothing new; but, it does reinforce what is being said.

So Paul is emphasizing that this is a promise from the Lord; and, in doing so, he reminds us of the importance of all of God's promises. The specific promise he references is that those who have died are already with the Lord; and those of us who are alive until he returns will have to wait for that privilege. This sounds like a strange way to put it; but, in Paul's illustration he definitely depicts those "asleep" in a privileged light. This is consistent with his telling the Philippian church, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain ... My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is better.*" (Phil. 1:21-23). In his poetic style, the sense of privilege may be hyperbole; but, this much is clear: Paul is telling us that those in Christ who have already passed **are not to be pitied**. While we are encouraged to grieve, our grief shouldn't include feeling sorry for **them**. Those who know Christ are fine. For them, death is like a friend bringing them home. Thinking of God's promises, Jesus said (John 11:25), "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.*" Paul's statement assures us of the wellbeing of our beloved, while also reminding us of the wealth of assurances in God's Word.

So, in conveying his message, that there is a hope in Christ that far outweighs the pains

of death, the first comfort Paul mentions is that those “asleep” are with the Lord, based on the powerful assurance of Jesus’ resurrection. The second comfort Paul gives reinforces this assurance, based on the promises of God, and validates that those who have died in Christ are doing just fine.

Whenever we see repetition in scripture it usually indicates something important. Here Paul gives five back-to-back references to the Lord not by his name (*Iēsous*), nor by his functional title (*Christos*, anointed liberator of his people); rather, by his positional title (*Kurios*, Lord or Master. The one in authority). Paul is not simply referencing Him as “my Lord,” “your Lord” or “our Lord;” but as “the Lord,” leading us to the third encouraging promise.

Encouragement #3 - Jesus is Lord

Here’s how Paul states it:

¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

The third encouragement, for a hope that far outweighs the pains of death, is that we will be with our loved one’s again, for eternity, based on the authority of the ultimate King, Jesus.

Until now we’ve looked at Paul’s letter as just that: a letter. We read it in a straightforward way, like we would an email. Starting with 1 Thessalonians 4:13 Paul engages in a discussion that is so emotionally sensitive, requiring such a paradigm shift, that he uses poetic imagery to convey meaning beyond mere words. Honestly, if this seems confusing, it’s not because what Paul’s saying is complex; rather, it’s because we aren’t first century Thessalonian Christians.

Let me explain. The Greeks established ancient Thessalonica nearly 400 years earlier, as a consolidation of multiple cities. At that time the city had strong ties to the family of Alexander the Great, and was named after his stepsister. Under the Romans the city maintained both its visibility and traditions of political connectedness. The Thessalonians made extreme efforts to gain and maintain the status as a “free city,”

allowing them military protection without occupation, greater autonomy, tax relief and benefits of a Roman infrastructure, including roads and building projects. This was very much a contemporary issue for the Thessalonians receiving this letter, as only six years earlier they had just regained their status as a “free city.”

What’s most important to understand is how this impacts Paul’s imagery. To protect their standard of living, the Thessalonian people were constantly corralled to greet every visiting dignitary with enthusiasm and fanfare. The tradition is the opposite of a siege. In battle, the gates would be closed, the people would oppose an enemy from inside the walls, and the highest officials would be secured in the safest place. But, when greeting dignitaries, the gates were opened; the people were outside lining the streets offering invitation and praise, and the highest officials were the first to greet the dignitaries. The greater the dignitary, the more the fan fare. Paul is referencing an undoubtedly tiresome tradition for the politically motivated community of Thessalonica to make his appeal most relevant; and, in his scenario, Paul puts those who have died as the local dignitaries who greet the coming Lord. The rest of us will be part of the procession of praise. Our greatest takeaway from this is not the logistical details (like trumpets and clouds). Paul’s focus here is on two things. First, the dignitary they are greeting: Jesus. And, second, that we will be together with him and with those “asleep” whom we miss. So Paul’s third encouraging promise is that **it is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the ultimate authority who will bring this about**. Notice this: when the zealous Jews in Thessalonica kicked Paul out of the city, eager to show political loyalty to Rome, they cried, “...[he is] acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:7). Now, in seeking to inspire the fledgling church that live under the oppression of that same cultural setting, Paul is telling the Thessalonian church that 1) **it is Jesus who is the ultimate authority** (even over death), 2) that Jesus promises care for their beloved departed, 3) that Jesus is returning, and 4) that they will be rejoined with their lost ones forever. This emphasis on Jesus’ authority is consistent with Paul telling the church in Philippi, that God has highly exalted Jesus so that at **His** name “every knee should bow ... and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ...” (Phil. 2:9-11). In this Paul appeals to, and perhaps even mocks, the Thessalonian political fervor by revealing Jesus as the ultimate authority, the quintessential monarch.

In our passage today Paul gives a hope in Christ that far outweighs the pains of death. This hope, which encourages us to grieve thoroughly, is summarized in three points. 1) Those “asleep” in the Lord are with the Lord, based on the fact and power of Jesus’ resurrection. He **is** alive! 2) We don’t need to hurt for those who are “asleep.” They are fine, based on God’s promises; and 3) That we will be with our loved one’s again, for

eternity, based on the authority of the ultimate king, Jesus. And so Paul concludes this section saying,

Encourage One Another

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This covers our passage for today; but, it leaves two very important questions. First, did the original recipients find this encouraging? Second, how does it impact us today? As we seek to plant new churches, this matters. Pastor Scott pointed out last week, how the early church banded together in social networks, how they cared for each other and for their community, how they opposed social ills of their society and took a stand for purity. Not only were they encouraged, they were emboldened! The impact of this encouragement was so significant that from the time Paul got kicked out of Thessalonica (in the 1st century) to before the end of the 3rd Century, the Emperor of Rome declared not what he willed Rome to be; rather, what he had observed it had become, that Rome itself had become a Christian nation. The first recipients took this message, that radiates a tangible hope and expectation that surpasses the darkness and pain of death, so seriously, it changed their world.

Now, what about us? Perhaps you have lost someone recently, or are about to. Perhaps you're carrying a terminal diagnosis; or, perhaps you've been challenged in some other way, where life is heavy and hard. Paul's message, that there is a hope in Christ that far outweighs the pains of death, is just as applicable today as when Paul first wrote it.

Jesus promises, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"* (John 14:27). He invites you saying, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matt. 11:28). *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me"* (John 14:1). In our weakness we don't need to be reminded that we are weak, do we? The thief on the cross didn't. He said, *"we are receiving what we deserve."* What we need to be reminded of is that God is strong, and that we are in His care. That man on the cross turned to the Lord asking, *"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."* And Jesus responded saying, *"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43). His promise of hope is available for you today.

The scriptures tell us that, *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8) and that *"everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will*

be saved” Rom. 10:13. In a moment we are going to pray; and, afterwards we will have people up front available to pray with you. If your hope is not sure, like the thief on the cross, settle that today.

And, if you are carrying some other weight, the Scriptures tell us *that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”* (Romans 8:18). That *“we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies”* (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

We have a real hope that far outweighs the pains of death. May you too be encouraged by these words.

¹Vine, W. E., *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 572.

²“BibleHub,” *Helps Word-studies: 1680 elpis*, 2011, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1680.htm>

³Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 423.

⁴Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2014), 3-6.

Sermon Title: A Hope that Transforms
Sermon Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Sermon Date: June 16, 2019



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What relative was important to you while growing up?
2. What is your earliest experience with death? What do you remember the most about it?
3. What is one thing you are taking from the sermon?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13. What did you learn about the word “hope” through this sermon? What do you think it looks like to grieve with hope and to grieve without hope?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. What are the reasons for our hope? How do you gain encouragement from these three promises?
6. Read 1 Peter 1:3-9. What are the results of our living hope in Christ? What does it mean to have a “living hope?”
7. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:18. What word of encouragement would you like to offer each other in light of your conversation.

Taking It Home

8. Is there someone you can reach out to this week with a word of encouragement? Who is it and what would you like to do?
9. Prayer: Each one offer a prayer of thanks and a “help-me” request in light of your conversation.
Lord, thank you _____
Lord, help me _____