

## **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 – And The Dead in Christ will Rise.**

### **Introduction.**

The 19<sup>th</sup> February 2019 is a date I'll never forget. This was the day on which my wife and I experienced the joy of our welcoming our third daughter into the world. But it was also the day on which, a sister in Christ, known to many in this congregation, died in hospital.

I remember driving from the hospital (my head trying to process everything) to the home of someone who had been very close with this sister. When I arrived, people were in the house, sitting, weeping, grieving.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> Feb many within our 5pm community felt the deep grief of losing a fellow Christian, who you knew and loved. And I suspect some of you still feel that grief.

Death within a Christian community – particularly when it happens amidst unexpected circumstances – is a painful experience. And that's because in a healthy church community we are sharing not only the gospel of God but our lives as well (As Paul says in 2:8). In a church community We do life together. We serve alongside each other, we sing with, pray and encourage each other. We fellowship in each other's homes. And the more all this stuff happens the deeper our relationships get. So that when we lose one of our number, we feel it deeply.

Well in tonight's passage we learn that the church in Thessalonica had also felt the pain of losing one or more of their own. It is likely that these *ancient* believers, much like us, gathered together in each other's homes - sitting, weeping, grieving. And that's why Paul

takes the time he does in this text to encourage them with the good hope of resurrection that they have in Jesus.

But these words are not only for their encouragement, but for ours too – particularly as we think about the grief of losing brothers and sisters in Christ. That is big purpose of this passage. That the Thessalonians/we encourage one another (v.18) *with these words*.

So what I'm going to do is think about three key things this passage is telling us about believers who have died.

1. There is hope within the grief.
2. Jesus has not lost them and will not forget them.
3. Jesus will powerfully raise them.

And then we'll think about what it might look like for us to be a church that encourages one another with these words.

### **1. Hope within the grief.**

So, first, Paul tells the Thessalonians who have lost members within the church that there is hope within the grief.

Like a number of us, the Thessalonians had felt the grief of losing one or more of their own. Now we know that's bad enough. But it would *also* appear that their grief was compounded by a confusion regarding the second coming of Jesus Christ – that final day in which Jesus returns to Earth as the great judge of all, and welcomes His followers into the new Heavens and Earth. We know they had been told about His coming. We know they were eagerly waiting for His coming (1:10). But it would appear, that they were confused and worried

about *how* those who had already died, would actually benefit from that coming. You can kind of imagine their concerns:

- “Our friends had so looked forward to seeing Christ, but now they won’t be around to meet Him when he comes.”
- “Have they missed out entirely!? Will their souls at least be present in some way on that day?”
- “Paul told us we would live forever, together through faith in Christ, but will we really ever see them again?”

The death of fellow believers had appeared to take the shine off the good hope of that day for some within the church.

It’s kind of like this: Imagine that you and four close friends were planning an amazing trip up North to Queensland for a week. You had mapped out everything in detail together – the amazing high rise hotel, the list of restaurants you wanted to visit, plans to spend your afternoons at the beach. All five of you were totally excited about the thought of being together in this wonderful place. Then one of you gets gastro the day before you leave. One of your number has to miss out. Suddenly the shine has been taken off your holiday together. You wanted them there with you. And you’re sad for them too. How terrible that they miss out.

Amplify this grief and disappointment several times over, and you might begin to capture some of where the Thessalonians were at in their grief about believers who had died.

So what does Paul say in response? “There is hope within the grief... No need for despair. And you guys need to know about it.” Look at what he writes in v.13:

<sup>13</sup> *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, [we don't want you to be confused about this issue... why?] so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

Now, I think it's good to be clear what Paul is not saying here. He is not saying that when a fellow believer dies that because of our resurrection hope "we should not grieve... full stop." No, he's says we should not grieve "*like the rest of mankind who have no hope.*"

Grief in the face of death is not simply unavoidable it is appropriate (Mourn with those who mourn – Rom 12:15). We *should* be saddened by the intrusion of death into our lives and relationships. Jesus Himself, grieved at the entrance of Lazarus' tomb. It is right to grieve. But in the face of Christian death, Paul is calling us to a particular type of grief – one that is marked with the hope not hopelessness – which was the kind of grief expressed by the Pagan world around the Thessalonians ("the rest of mankind").

The pagan world in Paul's day by and large understood death as final and complete. The idea that a deceased person was known and loved intimately by an all-powerful God who promised to them bodily to life again was unthinkable. Though there was some concept of an afterlife in the pagan world, it wasn't usually that inspiring. The person more likely to be seen as simply cut off from the land of the living. Forever separated from those they loved and who loved them. They had no hope.

And I think you see this today – our increasingly secular world, has no real and good hope in the the grief of death. Often, we will be told to simply: "look back on the person's life and take comfort from the memories."

What Paul is saying here is so much better than that. He's telling us when a follower of Jesus dies we can "look forward to their promised resurrection and take comfort from that hope."

*Your* grief is different – it marked by hope.

Tim Keller, the Christian writer, says that Paul here is calling us to "rub hope into our grief":

"Take your anger and grief and rub hope into it, the way people used to have to rub salt into meat to keep it from going bad. Rub hope deep into your grief and it will make you wise."

When a believer dies, we don't want our grief going bad through hopelessness. We grieve with the good hope of resurrection life always before us.

There is hope within the grief.

## **2. Jesus has not lost them and will not forget them.**

The second, thing Paul says about believers who have died is that Jesus has not lost them and will not forget them. This is part of the good hope. You see, that was possible confusion and fear right. That these believers may have been in some sense lost to Jesus or that they would miss out on the glory of His return.

No, says Paul, Jesus has got them, and Jesus will make sure they get to that Day and experience the fullness of its glory. Jesus death and resurrection guarantees it!

Look at verse 14:

*<sup>14</sup> For 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.*

Jesus died for the very purpose that believers in Him would *live*. You see, the full horror of death (which is the penalty for our sin) is not simply the decay and shut down of our bodies. Death, biblically speaking, is physical yes, but also spiritual – where you are cut off from true life with God and condemned to face his judgment. At the cross Jesus took on that *full* horror of death for us so that we wouldn't have to.

And how do we know God accepted Jesus sacrifice on our behalf? How do we know it actually worked to give us forgiveness and life? Because God raised Jesus to life. That shows us that God was satisfied with what Jesus did for us. And it assures that if we believe in Jesus we, like He will also be raised to life.

Because of Jesus, the idea of death has been totally transformed for the believer. No longer are we considered dead in sin – we have been forgiven. No longer are we cut off from God, Jesus has reconciled the relationship! No longer does physical death bring about our judgment in Hell, it has become the gateway to life in Heaven. And though our bodies do get old and sick and shut down, they will rise. In fact death has now been so transformed for the believer that the NT writers refuse to speak of Christians actually dying! You see it throughout our passage, they aren't said to "die" but "fall asleep in Christ." Dead people stay dead. Sleeping people wake up.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is a game-changer for the horror of death humanity faces because of our sin.

In 1 Corinthians 15:17-18 Paul puts the matter like this:

<sup>7</sup> *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.* [that would mean the cross didn't work] <sup>18</sup> *Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.* <sup>19</sup> *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

<sup>20</sup> *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

The death and resurrection of Jesus tells us that believers who die are not lost and will not be forgotten by Jesus on the day of His return. He has saved them completely. They are precious to Him and will not miss out.

Now, if all this is a little new to you, I'll try and sum it up: When a believer dies – their soul immediately departs from their body and they remain safe and satisfied with Jesus in Heaven. That's why Jesus tells the thief on the cross that “*today* you will be with me in paradise.” Not tomorrow, not next year, immediately safe with Jesus.

And on the day of Jesus' return, the souls of departed believers are brought *with Jesus* (note those words in v.14) in order to receive their resurrected and glorified bodies – which we will think about in just a moment. But the point is that Jesus won't be scrambling to find the souls of believers on that day, they are already safe by His side and coming with Him! At no point within or beyond death is the believer left on their own. Jesus does not lose them. He will not forget them.

One of our elderly neighbours once approached me while I was pottering in my front yard and asked whether I could speak to her about what happens when she dies and how she could be prepared for death. She knew I was Christian, and that Christianity offered some level of hope in this department. These are the kinds of discussions we long to have as Christians, because we have a good hope. And so what did I do, I sat down with her and opened up the bible. I pointed her to Jesus who promises her that through His death and resurrection, she also could be forgiven and restored to God. That through trusting Him she would not be lost after death, but safe with her saviour in Heaven. And on that last day, Jesus would not forget her, but powerfully raise her bodily to life to live in God's presence forever.

If ever there was a truly satisfying answer to the question of life after death, Jesus surely gives it to us. My prayer for myself is that I would be brave enough to keep sharing something so good.

We can rest assured that when a believer dies, Jesus has not lost them and will not forget them. Which leads us to our final point.

### **3. Jesus will powerfully raise them.**

Third, Paul encourages the Thessalonians by driving home his big point that Jesus will powerfully raise up believers who have died, on the day of His return.

Many people, I think, assume that souls in heaven is the sum total of our Christian hope when believers die. And this makes sense because there are a number of passages in the NT that speak of how much better it is for our souls to be in the glories of Heaven rather than the



broken and sinful world we live in. Paul certainly makes this clear in Philippians 1:23, when he writes:

*...I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is **better by far**..*

For our souls to be in Heaven after we die, *is* better by far – no more sin, no more suffering, no more tears.

But what we see in this passage is that, even though life in Heaven is infinitely better than life on earth, the best is still to come in the resurrection of our bodies on the day of Christ's return. You see, God created us not merely to exist as souls but as *embodied* people. Our bodies are a good part of God's creation. They are part of what makes us truly us. And when working well, our bodies allow us the joy of eating, of dancing, of hugging a friend. God, therefore does not wish to permanently rid us of our body, but to restore and glorify our bodies on that final day.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who is a quadriplegic, captures the goodness of bodily resurrection which comes on the day of Christ's return:

*My hope of running through earthly meadows and splashing my feet in a stream will never come true – but it will in the new heavens and earth. My dream of hugging a loved one and actually feeling his or her embrace will never come true – but it will when we stand together with Jesus.*

Believers who die have the good promise that Jesus will take them to *better* and then bring them to *best*. Their soul satisfied in Heaven. Their Soul *and* body satisfied in the new creation that Jesus establishes at His return.

Paul is saying to the Thessalonians here, “you can rest assured that the brother or sister you just buried, will not miss out on the resurrection *best* that Jesus has to offer.” In fact, Paul is clear that they will be the first item on Jesus’ agenda on the day of his return. Did you notice that in verse 15?:

*<sup>15</sup> According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

When Jesus returns, his first order of business will be to raise those who we’ve said goodbye to. You see it again verse 16:

*<sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

One thing is very clear in verse 16 – When Christ returns to raise the dead it is going to be very noisy. Jesus’ loud command, the archangel, the trumpet. But there is purpose behind this noise. It speaks of Jesus authority (in his loud command), Jesus glory (in the presence of the archangel) and Jesus’ divine power to raise the dead just as He said He would!

The trumpet call of God, actually taps into the imagery of Exodus 19:16 where Israel heard a loud trumpet blast as they prepared to meet with God at mount Sinai. The trumpet sound

upon Jesus' return is a signal to God's people that they are about to enter into the glorious presence of their God and saviour Jesus. Believers who have died, won't miss that glory, They will rise first to see it.

To a Christian community in grief these words are a game changer. They say with absolute clarity, that there is a glorious *resurrection* waiting for their departed brother or sister in Christ on that last day. But they also speak of a glorious *reunion* that will take place on that day between believers – living and raised. They will see each other again! Look at the first part of verse 17:

*17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

How we long to be reunited with the loved ones we have lost.

Many of you will have heard of Eric Clapton – He is one of the most famous guitarists of all time. In 1991 Clapton's 4 year old son, Conner, tragically died in a horrible accident in during a stay in New York. Two years later Clapton released a song called 'Tears in Heaven' in which he sang of his longing to be with his son again. Whenever I hear it, I'm totally moved by it. He sings

*Would you know my name*

*If I saw you in heaven?*

*Would it be the same*

*If I saw you in heaven?*

*Would you hold my hand*

*If I saw you in heaven?*

*Would you help me stand*

*If I saw you in heaven?*

If you've lost someone you love, you may be able to relate to longing in those words – we wish we could be with the person again. We wonder what it would be like. We want to touch and hold them again.

Jesus fulfills this longing in the community of His people. Death will not be the end of our relationships with fellow believers in Jesus. On the day of Jesus' return, we will be caught up together *with them*. Can you imagine seeing your believing parent who has passed away, grandparent, friend, or sibling or child? It is an unspeakable joy, that is only surpassed by seeing the Lord Himself – a joy that Paul leaves his readers to soak up. Look at the end of verse 17:

*And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

God's people both newly raised and living will go to meet Jesus in the air. Like joyful citizens travelling out to the city gates to meet their king who has chosen to visit them.

Believers throughout all history go up to meet Jesus and then continue with Him as He makes all things new in the renewing of creation. So we will be with the Lord forever.

**Encourage one another.**

When a believer dies, what do we do in our grief? Paul tells us to encourage one another with these words (v.18) – words that tell us there is hope in the grief. Words that tell us believers are not lost and will not be forgotten. Words that speak of bodily resurrection.

So what does it look like for us to encourage one another with these words?

Well, firstly, to those of you who are listening tonight but are not yet Christians, there is actually encouragement here on offer for you too, if you put your trust in Jesus. For his offer of resurrection life extends to all who believe in Him. There is no one too sinful, no one too stuck in their ways, no one who is outside the bounds of this great promise. Now is the time to turn to Jesus, seek His forgiveness, follow Him and find a hope that is real and good. You are welcome to speak with me afterwards. Or you might like to learn more about Jesus in our CE course starting next term.

But to those of you who are followers of Jesus, keep encouraging each other with these words in the moments of grief that come to us.

- When you someone close to one of us dies – we need to get around them. Love them. Support them. Pray for them. And if the person who has died was a believer, encourage them with these words of hope. Remind them that their loved one is safe with Jesus, that He is looking after them, and that they will be reunited with them again on the last day.
- Sometimes this encouragement is needed when one of us shares about the grief of seeing a believing friend or family member whose mind has been affected with dementia or body damaged by a stroke or car accident. Encourage each other with the

hope of bodily resurrection. That Jesus will renew the body, renew the mind so that they will once again, walk and talk in the presence of Jesus.

- And when we undergo that collective pain of losing someone from our own let us do what I saw us do two years ago. Gather with each other, in small and large groups - helping each other in the grief, giving thanks to God for how the person blessed us, and most importantly, speaking to one another of the resurrection hope that Jesus – through his death and resurrection.

In these moments, you might be worried about being so forward or saying something in the wrong way. But let us not forget that God's *calls* us to say something here. It is worse to say nothing. We need to trust God and do what He says to do in these moments – encourage one another with these words.. So just pray that the HS would give you tact and care and encourage them:

- There is hope in your grief.
- Jesus has not lost your loved one and He will not forget them.
- Jesus will powerfully raise them up at the last day.

Let's pray.