What is our Hope in the Face of Death? - 1 Thes 4:13-18

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1 Thessalonians / 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Intro

Good morning! We will be continuing our series through 1 Thessalonians titled “A Life Pleasing to God,” and this week we will be jumping into the last half of chapter 4

I want to invite Katie back up to help me with an illustration that I think will help us understand something very important about our passage this morning…

III. Happy Birthday Song

And the reason Katie is gonna help is because we are going to use the keyboard (and you do not want me playing the keys)

Now, Katie is going to go ahead and play a song for us, 2 different ways, and I want us to vote on which one we like better

And this song is likely going to be pretty familiar…Go ahead Katie…

HAPPY BIRTHDAY #1

HAPPY BIRTHDAY #2 (ending on the penultimate note)

Who liked the first version better?

Who liked the second version better?

What was the difference???

The second song didn’t have a satisfying ending, did it? It creates an angst in us, doesn’t it? A sense that..hmm, that wasn’t quite right. It didn’t end on the right note, the final note. Disconcerting

And that is not Katies fault, that’s actually exactly what I asked for.

Let’s give here a big round of applause…

The point I want us to see is that we can intuitively sense when something isn’t quite right musically, and the same is true when it comes to other things in life, one of them, is death

Like a song that doesn’t end on the right note…

Death, and the grief, tears, pain, disease, and suffering that generally accompany it, makes us uncomfortable

Death is scary, we seek to avoid it, to engineer solutions to prevent it, discover medicines to cure it, drive cars with airbags that cushion us from it

The intuitive distaste, discomfort, and even fear that we have of death is true of us all, and the reason extends all the way back to the opening scenes of history…

CREATION:

In the beginning, God created all things. And he created them out of the abundance of his love and to enjoy his goodness and glory (Gen 1-2). And in the midst of all of the creation, he created Adam and Eve in the Garden to dwell in loving fellowship with Him and with one another, and all of us as descendants were intended to enjoy this same communion with God in everlasting LIFE.

FALL:

Yet, Adam chose to sin, rebel against God and his word and choose his own path to life, which, as God warned resulted instead in DEATH (Gen 3). Ever since then, all of creation, and all of us humans in particular, experience the effects of sin and death. Every single thorn and thistle, famine and earthquake, all pain and suffering, all war and strife, every single disease and ultimately death, is the result of the Fall (Rom 5:12)(Rom 8:19-23).

Death entered in as an imposter and ever since then, it has remained in the picture as the great enemy of us all

And we all have to reckon with it…

Need:

Some of us try to answer the question of death by avoiding answering it at all:

- And we stay so busy, so entertained, so numbed, so focused on our careers and family that we don't give ourselves time to think of the reality of death - but it is there.

Others try to answer the question of death by trying to insulate themselves from it at all costs:

- Yet, no matter how healthy we are, or how much medical advances we experience, or how much money one makes, death will always eventually and often unknowingly come knocking at our doors.

And still more people, increasingly so here in the West, answer the question of death with embrace

- Our secular culture seeks to normalizing death on our terms and make light of it - as if it's just natural and normal and part of the cycle of life…but the problem is…it isn't. And the pain and loss we feel is real.
- And thats not to mention the stubborn, enduring concerns we have about what happens after death

Yet, as I've heard this compared to…

> If we were blindfolded and put in the drivers seat of a car going 60mph on the highway without any brakes, we'd be a bit anxious, wouldn't we.

Why would we respond to death any differently?

It is a stubborn enemy, and it's one that we don't have the ability to defeat on our own, and with our own wisdom

As Ben Franklin once quipped…

> "…in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes…"

This is true, but this is also incredibly painful to actually experience

Because what it means is that …

You and I will spend our whole lives with death taking away all of the people we love from us one by one

And then at the end of your life, death will take you from all your loved ones.

It's no wonder that Paul refers to death as our "last enemy" (1 Cor 15:26)

And we need real solid hope to hold on to in the face of it

And that brings us to why we need God's Word for us this morning in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18…

Paul writes to them...

1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV
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.

Though the church in Thessalonica was fairly young, some in their midst had already died, or to use Paul's term, they had fallen "asleep"

And for some, this was likely due to natural causes, but for others, they likely were killed as a result of their newfound faith

Death has ripped away from them those they love, and now the living are left to pick up the pieces

And they are grieving the loss of these individuals, but beyond grief, despair is creeping in, hopelessness is clouding their vision

And it is into this tender moment that Paul addresses them with a word of comfort

A Word of comfort, meant not to keep them from grieving, but to help them grieve with HOPE

That is the question we are going to ask ourselves this morning…

Main Q: What is our hope in the face of death?

And this morning, we are going to see Paul's answer the question of death, not by making light of it nor ignore it, nor by leading us to feel doomed by it

But rather, by acknowledging the reality of death in light of the reality of resurrection life that Christ has made possible through his first coming, and that he will bring about when he comes again

But before I give to much away, let's see for ourselves, starting with verse 14, where Paul comforts us with…

Body

Section #1: Christ's Work (v.14)

1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV
14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again

The fundamental reason that we should not despair and lose heart as we face death is the most basic and fundamental confession of our faith

Jesus died and rose again

This confession is simple, yet central to our faith

And for thousands of years, Christians have agreed that the embrace of truth is decisive in deciding whether we are truly saved

And before, we move on, right here towards the beginning of our passage, I want to take a moment to address those who have not believed in Jesus….

App. Believe that Jesus died and rose again

Because hear in the passage, there is a fork in the road that is determined by whether one believes in Christ, and in particular, that Christ died and rose again

And I must admit, it might seems strange to you that at Christianity's core, we trust and worship a Jewish man who lived almost 2,000 years ago, who we confess was nailed to a Roman Cross where he hung and died.

Oh, and I forgot to mention, we also believe that 3 days later he rose from the grave and is alive and well in heaven right now

You might ask…

Why is this Jesus, and his work of dying and rising, so important to us our faith?

This reminds me of a conversation an American pastor had while he was oversees that involved a mountain

He writes of his conversation, and I quote…

III. The Mountain

(https://radical.net/article/is-there-glory-in-a-narrow-gospel-part-2)

> "I remember visiting Indonesia and speaking with a Hindu leader and a Muslim leader. They would say, "We have different paths that lead us to spiritual fulfillment, that lead us to God."
>
> And they said, "We respect your path. You respect our path and we will all go different ways. Together we are one and we'll end up in the same place."
>
> I looked at them and I said, "Well, let me make sure I understand. You're saying that basically you picture God at the top of a mountain and we're all at the bottom of a mountain.
>
> And I may take one path to get to God and you may take another path up the mountain to get to God, but in the end, we'll all eventually end up at the same place?" They both had big smiles on their face and agreed with my assessment.
>
> I looked at them and said, "Well, if that's the way it is, let me ask you one question: What if the God at the top of the mountain decided he was going to make his way down the mountain to us, and he came to bring us up the mountain himself?"

And they said, “Well, that would be wonderful.” And I said, “That’s what the God of the Bible did. Let me tell you about who Jesus really is.

The reason that we confesses Jesus death and resurrection as foundational to our faith is because Christianity is not about a certain set of behaviors, or political activism, or becoming the best version of yourself

It’s not about our work at all, but rather Christ’s

A Christian is not someone who is trekking up the mountain to God, but who acknowledges that it is impossible to do so due to our sin

But, that in his amazing grace God came down the mountain in Christ, to die for our sin, and rise again in victory over our sin & and death, so that we can have hope in this life and in the life to come

For this reason, Christ’s work of dying for our sins and being raised from the grave is central to the Christian faith

And, My earnest hope is that you better understand not only why Jesus’ work is crucial to our faith, but for your life.

My appeal is that you would turn from your sin, from the ways that you are working hard to be right and ok and ascend up the mountain

And that you would turn to Christ, and his death and resurrection, to save you from your sins and give you the hope of resurrection life

I really want you to have hope in the face of death because of the work of Christ, and would love to talk more with you after service if you’d like to discuss this further.

The face that Jesus died and rose again is foundational to the hope we have

Yet, here’s the thing, Christianity goes even further than this

Look at what Paul says in the rest of the verse...

1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV
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.

Christianity doesn’t just claim that Christ rose again, but that he was the first of many resurrections…

III. Needle and Thread

String, Fabric, Needle, Thread the Needle, Pull through

Sting (Human Beings), Fabric (Death)

Impermeable barrier - No one has been able to escape the effects of the Fall, to return to how things were in the garden of Eden before the Fall.

Yet, there is a needle - **one who can and did pass through death and into new life, Christ. He entered into his fallen Creation, and rather than being conquered by sin and death like everyone else, he conquered over sin and death.**

> And just like with a needle goes through clothe not as an end in itself, but to bring with it the thread that is in it, Christ died and rose again to bring all those in him through death and into life as well

His resurrection is the foundation and foretaste of our own

Christ's resurrections is inextricably related to the Christians

As C.S. Lewis wrote…

> A man really ought to say, 'The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago' in the same spirit in which he says, 'I saw a crocus yesterday.' Because we know what is coming behind the crocus.

Or, as the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20-21…

1 Corinthians 15:20–21 ESV
20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

The reason we can find hope in the face of death is because in his first coming, is because in his first coming Jesus died and rose again

Brothers and sisters, we must never move past the simple, good news

The gospel is the way by which we are forgiven, and freed, and transformed in this life, it's how we receive grace for today….

But it's also how we have bright, resurrection hope for tomorrow

But, as we will see in the rest of our passage, our hope is tethered not only to what Christ has done in the past, but to what he said he will do in the future

Which brings us to our second section…

Section #2: Christ's Word (v.15-18):

In verse 15, Paul prefaces this future work with the following statement…

1 Thessalonians 4:15 ESV
15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord…

In everyday parlance, we typically use the word "hope" to convey something we desire to happen, but aren't necessarily able to ensure that it will happen

- I hope the weather is nice tomorrow
- Or, I hope my boss responds well when I bring this up in the office

Hope in our everyday life is a warm feeling about the future

Yet Biblical hope is different, it is the solid assurance about the future based upon the promises of God

(HANDMOTION) It's faith in God's promised future work that tilts into our present, right-now lives

And Paul is saying that God has promised to do future resurrection work for his people in Christ that gives us hope right now in the present

He goes on…

1 Thessalonians 4:15 ESV
…that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

There are two things that we need to unpack here

Firstly, Paul talks about how the Lord will come again…

This is referred to as the Second Coming - The Day of the Lord - and it is this return of Christ that we will actually unpack in even more detail next week

But, for our purposes today, Paul reminds us that Christ will return, and that this is crucial to our hope

And, secondly, Paul stresses here that our hope is true even for those Christians who have already "fallen asleep"…

A term Paul is using to refer to Christians who have already died

He's envisioning two groups of Christians, those who will be alive the moment Christ returns, and those who will have already died.

And it is this second group, if you remember, that the Thessalonians are currently grieving over…

Yet, Paul states there is hope, and that this hope is a hope that isn't quenched by death

Actually, somewhat the opposite is true.

He states that those Christians who are alive at Christ's return "will not precede those who have fallen asleep."

In the Greek, this is actually a double negative, the living **will surely, unequivocally** NOT PRECEDE THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP."

As verses 16 reads…

1 Thessalonians 4:16 ESV
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.

Christ's second coming will be a grand event

And he will cry out a command, and accompanied by the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God…

affirming his authority, signaling his power, and hailing his victory over death

He will cause his people the experience that same victory

Like Jesus raising Lazarus with the simple command, LAZARUS, COME FORTH!, with a just word, Christ will raise the dead who died believing in Him

I want to take a moment to speak to you who are grieving because death has recently taken someone from you who believed in Christ …

App. Hope for those Asleep in Christ (v.15-16)

And if that isn't where you are, listen closely, because you will be one day, and you are in a community with others who will too.

I myself have recently experienced the pain of death, having just lost my Dad a little more than a year ago - who to me was an amazing father, a spiritual brother, and a best friend.

I can truly say, the confusion, pain, shock, anger, sadness of losing someone you love is incredibly real, and true, and right to experience

Because death is an imposter, it is not how things are meant to be

Grief is real and to be embraced

And this passage is in no way meant to discount that

But, what it is mean to do, is show us how the hope of resurrection life is also real and to be embraced

And to know that, in a way, it's more real than death, because though it doesn't feels like it now

There will be a day when the pain and sorrow and finality of death will be done away with, but joy and hope and finality of resurrection life with last forever

> The final note that will ring out into eternity is not death, but resurrection life!

And get this, according to our passage, those whom death has cheated will not be disadvantage, they will be up at the front of the line

And, as verse 17 goes on…

1 Thessalonians 4:17 ESV
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.

With the same word that he will utter to cause the dead in Christ to rise, he will cause those alive in Christ to be transformed

You know what that means?…

App. Hope for those Alive in Christ (v.17)

There is a day coming when we will no longer deal with the effect of disease, or the turmoil of mental health or trauma, or tears

One day healing and wholeness will come for those in Christ

It's not a question of IF peace and healing will come, but WHEN

As a fellow believer once said about his sufferings…

> " I'm not suffering from anything that a good resurrection can't fix"

When Christ returns, there will be no need for doctors or pill bottles , wheel chairs or hospital beds, therapists or funeral parlors… because everything that is broken will be fixed

So, fellow Christian, as we face the suffering of these things in this life, take heart (2 Cor 4:16-17)

Keep going!

One Day we will indeed experience a “good resurrection” that will “fix” all things

The Resurrection and the Life will take us up to meet him as he descends from heaven in victory

And on that day, we will enter into an eternity enjoying life how it was created to be, yet even better, with him here on earth

I love John’s vision of this Day recorded in Revelation 21:3-4…

Revelation 21:3–4 ESV
3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Just like that, the great Enemy of all Mankind will be vanquished

The final note will not be DEATH, but LIFE!

With just a word at Christ’s return, the great Enemy will be destroyed, swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54)

To go back to the question we started our time with…

Big Q: What is our hope in the face of death?

The answer from Paul, based off of the work of Christ in his first coming and the word of Christ about his second coming, is…

Answer: That we will rise with Christ in glorious resurrection life.

There is no other true and satisfying way to hope in the face of death.

Nothing compares to the hope Christ gives.

And it is exactly for that very reason that Paul concludes by telling us…

1 Thessalonians 4:18 ESV
18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Conclusion

I think there is something incredibly pastoral about this point

Paul has just written about the hope we have, but he envisions the encouragement coming, not from him, but from each Christian to one another

In other words, it was not Paul, but the Thessalonians believers who were to comfort one another with the hope you have in Christ

I once heard a quote that went something like…

> ”We shout our doctrine in the light so that we can whisper it in the dark" - Pastor from the Village Church

In other words preach our doctrine from the pulpit so that we can whisper is at the bedside

Though our doctrine of the resurrection is crucial to know and believe, the comfort comes as we lovingly and sensitively hold it out to one another along the journey

As Paul concludes here in verse 18, he is calling us church, to be a safe place for those in suffering and grief. A church that tenderly and sensitively comforts one another.

And he has equipped us to be this way with the resurrection hope fond in verses 13-17

So let’s do just that brothers and sisters, day by day, until the Day we will need to no more.

Let’s pray…