



Central Peninsula Church

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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Hope Beyond the Grave

The subject of death is “hot press” in American culture today. Ever since Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published her accounts of near-death experiences in the late ‘60’s, a great number of books have appeared that deal with death and the afterlife. Some claim to offer a glimpse into death as if one could actually peel back the shroud of mystery and take a peak inside. Others describe the death experience as movement “down a long corridor towards a great light.” These images tickle our fancy and speak to us from the shelves of every retail outlet. Major movies visualize stories of those who have died and yet are still able to interact with the living. Supermarket tabloids consistently post headlines like “What Really Happens After We Die.” And to no one’s surprise, Christians writers have also joined in this trend. A recent survey revealed over 350 books currently available on apocalyptic topics, the majority penned in the last ten years. The *Left Behind* series dominated Christian bestseller lists in the late 90’s. But behind all the intense general interest in death and life thereafter lies a deeper personal concern: What happens to me after I die? And what about my loved ones?

Well, these are questions the Thessalonian believers were also concerned about. This is not to say they were completely ignorant. They understood that, through the cross, Jesus had taken the “sting” out of death and, at some point in time, He would return to claim His own. They had been taught by the apostle Paul to expect His coming from heaven. So real and possibly near did they regard this great event that many had stopped working and were living in feverish expectation of it. But as weeks passed by and the Lord didn’t come, they ran out of food and would have starved if not for some hand outs from the community. Consequently, they had become a burden to the church. Paul deals with this more specifically in his second letter to the Thessalonians. But here the question was, would they see their loved ones again? As they were awaiting Christ’s imminent return, relatives and friends had died. This caught them by surprise and caused much sorrow. Naturally, they began to wonder, would those who had died miss the blessing they were soon to enjoy? Were they lost? So on one hand, some of them had given over to spiritualism. In a sense, so heavenly minded they were of little earthly good. On the other, they were

confused and misinformed as to the basis of Christian hope and in need of Paul’s reassurance.

One can easily imagine how Paul must have felt when Timothy brought him this news. Concern for this young church must have weighed heavily on his mind as he penned this letter. In a spiritual sense, he was like a proud papa. Each conversion was like the birth of a baby; each new ministry like a nursery, full of the joy and challenges of new life. Had he neglected to adequately instruct them of Christ’s coming? Or, had they not quite listened? Isn’t it funny how simple misunderstandings can cause such complex problems? I certainly see this in my own life - my wife and I can hear the same sermon or watch the same movie, and yet walk away with complete opposite points of view. It needn’t cause rifts in our relationship - we long ago “agreed to disagree.” But this is one of the reasons why the Scripture is so helpful when it comes to matters of eternal significance, for it provides a plumb line for absolute truth - a truth that doesn’t change from one day to the next. And I would even say that without it we would be hard pressed to tell what’s real from what’s not. One of my favorite Peanuts cartoons involves a conversation between Linus and Lucy. Looking out a window, Lucy wonders: “Boy, look at it rain...what if it floods the whole world?” “It will never do that,” Linus says. “In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” “Wow! You’ve taken a great load off my mind,” replies Lucy, to which Linus responds: “Sound theology has a way of doing that!” This cartoon captures the essence of Paul’s intent in this passage we are about to study, to offer “sound theology” as a comfort to those struggling to make sense of that universal experience called death. Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 4, starting 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. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”

Paul wants these Christian brothers and sisters to get their facts straight about death. In the words of Mark Twain, “the trouble with the world is not that people know too little but that they know so many things that

ain't so." Now, the typical attitude of the ancient world concerning death was one of utter hopelessness. One Greek poet wrote, "Suns may set and rise again but we, when once our brief light goes down, must sleep an endless night." This term "sleep" is a common euphemism for death. But there were significant differences in how it was understood. To the pagan world it was often viewed as a sleep from which there would be no awakening. Those who viewed death in this way are characterized by Paul as those "who have no hope." For Jews and Christians, death was no less real, but in the same way that a restful night's sleep is followed by the dawn of a new day, so death is followed by resurrection. Now, it's not our spirit or soul that sleeps - once we die our spirits are alive with God. It's our bodies that peacefully await resurrection.

But have you ever noticed how unbelievers face the death of a loved one? Generally speaking, what we see is the face of hopelessness. They either become completely numb or fall apart at the seams. Recently I met a woman who had lost her daughter in an accident two years before. Her present experience, however, was just as fresh as if her child had passed away today, in fact worse. From that time onward she began to medicate her pain with alcohol and prescription medications. As a consequence, her other daughter was taken from her. And she eventually ended up in a treatment center; penniless, homeless, angry at God and suicidal. At first all I could do was listen. It would have been ludicrous for me to say, "I understand how you feel." Nor could I fill her emptiness or salve her sorrow with any pat solutions or canned data. All I could do was listen and pray. After she had poured out her grief, I shared with her this story:

"Four candles once burned slowly; their ambiance so dull one could hardly hear them speak. The first candle said, 'I am Peace, but these days, nobody wants to keep me lit.' Then Peace's flame slowly died and went out completely. The second candle said, 'I am Faith, but these days, I am no longer needed.' Then Faith's flame slowly diminished and went out completely. Sadly the third candle spoke, 'I am Love and I haven't the strength to stay lit any longer. People neglect me by abandoning those who love them the most.' And waiting no longer, Love went out completely. Suddenly a child entered the room and saw the three candles no longer burning. 'Why are you not burning?' she cried. 'You are supposed to stay lit until the end.' Then the Fourth Candle spoke gently, 'Don't be afraid, for I am Hope, and while I still burn, we can relight the other candles.'"

The problem for this grief stricken mother was that she had allowed the loss of her daughter (who was

a born-again Christian) to steal her peace and destroy her belief in God. In her mind, God had crossed an irreconcilable line by taking from her the one thing she could not live without. As a result her bitterness towards Him extinguished any flicker of hope. And as she sunk deeper into a bottomless pit of despair she forgot about tomorrow. When I asked if she ever looked forward to seeing her daughter in heaven, she replied: "I'm not sure I believe in that hocus-pocus any more. It all seems like some cruel, sick joke."

In contrast, Paul affirms a reality beyond even death. In view of God's resurrection of Jesus, the death of a believer is not an end but a transition to a greater, richer experience of life - life in the presence of the Lord. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed this at the funeral of four young girls killed by a racist's bomb in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963: "I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying times."

To affirm with Paul that death is not an end but a transition is not to deny or minimize the destructive effects of death. To lose a loved one is to lose a part of oneself. Our days become marked by indescribable sorrow, sleepless nights, endless reminders, that numbing mixture of anger, helplessness, denial and confusion. It's through releasing our anguish over time that God internalizes the healing we need. And it's been my experience and observation that we can't set this process to any convenient time frame. Not all of us can be like Jason Schmidt - the pitching ace of the Giants staff - who tossed a two hit shutout only days after his mother lost a much documented fight with cancer. It can take months or even years to make the adjustments necessary to move beyond the loss. But even in the midst of our sorrow Paul reminds us not to lose sight of God's resurrection of Jesus. It was His victory over death that provides the foundation for our hope - a hope in what God will do, based upon what He has already done. If God didn't abandon Jesus to death neither will He abandon those who have died in Christ. Like a huge down comforter, life and not death will swallow us up. For this reason the way in which we mourn ought to be qualitatively different from those "who have no hope." What Paul

is discouraging is not grief but hopeless grief. We are to grieve with a sense that there is life beyond the grief. But in the valley of sorrow, tears are appropriate. Some of you are well acquainted with loss and know what a struggle it is to align our emotions with our faith when someone we love has passed away. But this is the challenge death presents to all of us: to live out our beliefs when it is most difficult to do so. And Paul took it for granted that our beliefs and not our emotions should govern our perspectives around death and life thereafter.

In verses 15-17 Paul spells out the implications of this for those who have already died,

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

Paul starts by qualifying what he is about to say - the word he has for the Thessalonians comes straight from the Lord Himself. Now, have you ever had anyone, in the midst of a conversation, say that God had given them a “word” for you? Honestly speaking, my knee-jerk response when I hear that is normally one of skepticism and curiosity. Now, I don’t mean to label anyone as a “prophecy nut,” and yet I wonder in what medium that exchange took place. You can’t believe everything you hear! In fact, Paul suggests later in this letter not to “despise prophetic utterances,” but to examine them carefully. Most often I’ll take two steps back in order to do just that. So if any of you have a word for me after this message you’ll understand my body language.

The Scripture doesn’t say how Paul received this word. Scholars speculate he may have received a direct revelation from God or he may have been quoting from a remembered saying of Jesus that is not found in any of the gospel accounts. Who knows? I think we can trust, however, that it was not the result of having one too many martinis at the bar mitzvah that morning. Regardless of the “how,” the “why” is perfectly clear. Paul wanted to cut through any speculation or present opinions concerning the resurrection. This is what all the fuss was about. So he is saying “Hey! This message comes from the highest authority. Here is truth you can count on” - that those “who are alive” when Christ returns “will certainly not precede” or have any advantage over those who have already died. In other words, they are not lost. They have not been left behind. Nor will they miss

the blessing. On the contrary, God will give them preferential treatment. So Paul goes on to make four affirmations about this great event: First, there will be:

The Return: **“The Lord Himself will come down from heaven”**(v.16a). This is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s cry, **“Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down”** (64:1). The word Paul uses for “coming” refers to a visiting dignitary of highest rank. Christ’s return will be a personal, dramatic and unmistakable visitation, the details of which are loaded with imagery. Paul says that Jesus “will descend from heaven with a shout.” This is another word for command. It’s the cry made by the ship’s master to his rowers. By a military officer to his soldiers. Or by a hunter to his hounds. When used in a military context it summons the cry to battle and may be associated with the calling forth of the dead. And the point is: God is able to gather His own with a single majestic command, with “the voice of an archangel” and “with the trumpet of God.” Now, trumpets are mentioned in the Old Testament during times of celebration and triumph. A trumpet blast called the exiles to return to Jerusalem. And in 1 Cor.15 Paul associates it, as he does here, with the return of Christ - **“Behold, I tell you a mystery,”** he writes, **“we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”** (vv. 51-52). What a great day that will be! Secondly, there will be:

The Resurrection: **“And the dead in Christ will rise first”**(v.16b). It amazes me that God would want this body when I die. I can hardly stand it myself! It’s getting older and grayer; I’ve lost my boyish charm. My legs are too skinny. I can’t dance. But God promises to take this weak, perishable body and give me an upgrade, implying that He must be the greatest surgeon of all time. As Paul explains again, in 1 Cor. 15, **“The body that is sown is perishable, (but) it is raised imperishable . . . it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual (one)”** (42,44). But how can we know this is true?

Well for one, we can see the principle of resurrection throughout nature. Winter is a season of death for much of plant life, but when the springtime comes it bursts into life again. In the same way, we can’t have a blossom without a seed, and seeds are dead. So when a seed sprouts life, nature testifies to the reality that life can come from death. Every spring blossom, then, is a messenger of hope reminding us that life is ever renewing itself. Jesus used a similar picture to describe the link between death and resurrection: “Unless a grain of wheat falls

into the earth and dies," He said, "it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus, Himself, is the "first fruit" of the bountiful harvest yet to come. In other words, the down payment on our own resurrection is the resurrection of Christ. At the "sound of the last trump," not only will the dead rise but they will be transformed into the glory of His likeness. Now that's something I can live with! And what of those still living? For them it will be:

The Rapture: **"We who are still alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"**(v.17a). As a new believer, I thought 'the rapture' was some trance-like, ecstatic experience that happened when Christians came together in prayer, like a Christian mosh pit or something of that order. You will be pleased to know that in our text the meaning is quite different. The verb Paul uses means "to seize or carry off by force." It expresses a sudden and irresistible action, often to the benefit of its object, as when the Roman soldiers snatched Paul from the rioters in Jerusalem (Acts 23:10) or when the male child in Rev. 12:5 was caught up to God in order to protect him from the great red dragon. What Paul is saying is this: like iron filings to a powerful magnet, the living will be snatched up, together with the resurrected dead to meet with the Lord "in the clouds." Now, "clouds" symbolize the reality of God's presence - at the Exodus, on Mount Sinai, during the wilderness crossing, at the transfiguration of Jesus and at His ascension into heaven. And finally, the word for "meeting" is used for the formal reception of a visiting dignitary and describes the movement of a welcoming party going out to meet with and escort that person back to the final stage of his journey. Now, the details of this meeting are not given in this passage. Nothing is said whether the Lord, along with His people, will continue His journey to earth or return to heaven. Personally, I don't buy into the belief that the rapture and return of Christ are two separate events as the *Left Behind* series assumes or that believers will be secretly raptured before the great tribulation. But you may want to form your own position based on the relevant Scriptures that deal with this event. Here, the emphasis is not one of sequence or direction but on the outcome and result. And that is to unite the Christian living with the Christian dead, and ultimately to the Lord. So Paul turns with joyful anticipation to:

The Reunion: **"And so we (that is, all believers, whether alive or dead at His return) will be with the Lord forever"** (v.17b). Death, that great separator - the one thing some Thessalonians thought would stand as an insurmountable barrier - is in reality no barrier at all. Here is the prescription for the grief they were experiencing. The final destiny of those who had died before Christ's return is not death, but rather resurrection leading to everlasting life. So for those of us who are wondering what happens or "where we go" when we die, Paul says: "We

will be at home with the Lord forever" - reunited with our Creator. Our future, then, is not so much a place as a relationship. What makes heaven home is the presence of Jesus Christ. I'm sure, there is no door like the one to your own home. No better place to put your feet than under your own table. No coffee like coffee out of your own mug. No meal like the one at your own table. No embrace like the one from your own family. Our homes are our refuge, our sanctuaries. It's where we hang our caps. Where our kids mistake us for jungle gyms (and in some cases, 80 lb. heavy bags) on a daily basis. But at some point, each of us must leave our earthly dwelling and enter into the eternal rest God offers. At some time we must go home.

In John 14, Jesus was sharing his last meal with his closest friends. He was about to leave, to die on the cross and this left them greatly troubled. So He told them, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you, for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may also be." What great words of comfort! Comforting because our outlook on the future is anchored in the promise of the past. Comforting because we will be reunited with the Lover of our soul in eternity. It occurs to me that we are all a bit closer than we think. Each moment is a step taken. Each breath a page turned. Each day another mile marked, a mountain climbed. We are closer to home than we've ever been. And before we know it, that time will come. When that day arrives you'll see faces that have been waiting to see you again. (I realize that might be a frightening moment for some). You'll hear your name spoken by those who love you. And maybe, just maybe - in the back, behind the welcoming crowd - the One who would rather die than live without you will say "Welcome home, my child."

On the other side of the coin our knowledge of the future ought to shape how we live in the present, even in the presence of death. And it is on this basis that Paul concludes this passage with: "Therefore (because all of this is true) comfort one another with these words." Paul is writing about death for the sake of the living. He expects "these words" to affect our attitudes and behaviors today. So let me ask you: are you living each day charged with an expectation of what God might do or has your flame slowly diminished over time? What difference would it truly make to believe in the imminent return of

Christ? And how would that affect your relationships in the present? It's been my observation that when we are face to face with the reality of death, we then become more appreciative of life. What is here today is often gone tomorrow. So how would that perspective change things?

For me, it would certainly cut the fat out of my life. I'd probably be less self-consumed and far more thoughtful and loving towards others. There might be less mornings that my wife or daughter would take a back seat to my schedule. Our prayer times would be richer, fuller and more worshipful. Each moment might be captured as if it were my last. Every effort would be made to not leave unfinished business that way. Few regrets for things undone. No forgiveness as yet unuttered. And I would so want you to know how much I have appreciated your fellowship in my life, how I have depended on it, considering every encounter as a gift not to be taken for granted, that tomorrow is never guaranteed. This is why the ancient Psalmist prayed, "Lord, teach us to number our days, that we might present to you a heart of wisdom."

The Christian faith has always been characterized by a strong and focused sense of the future, with belief in Christ's return as its most distinctive detail. And the practical effect of this belief is to charge each moment with resounding hope and heartfelt gratitude. For if the future is dominated by Christ's coming there is little room for projecting our fears or anxieties. And we're far more ready to respond to God in the here and now. C.S. Lewis wrote, in his book *Christian Behavior*, "Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continued looking forward to the eternal world is not, as some modern people think, a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

Let me take this a step closer to the crux of this passage. If the resurrection of Christ is not true, then we have no hope that anything the gospel declares is true. For the resurrection is proof that His death on the cross has accomplished, and is accomplishing, our freedom from sin and death. If it is not true, then death is not conquered but remains the enemy against which no human power can avail and we remain in bondage to its effects on a daily basis. If the resurrection is not true then we can only concur with the Greek poets that death is

"one unending night." and we may as well "get ours today, for tomorrow we die." If it is not true, then when we lay our loved ones down we have no basis to believe we will ever see them again. We have no grounds for optimism or comfort. We live in a universe without a personal God. Struggle against sin without a risen Lord. And face the darkness of the grave without hope.

But because the resurrection is true, the gospel is, indeed, full of power to change the heart and we can stand in the freedom it offers today. Because it is true we can hold what we love loosely knowing that this life is not all there is. Because the resurrection is true, we are connected by a timeless bond to our family and friends or any believer who has died. Because it is true, our sufferings are bearable. There is a place for our pain to go. And we can live each day with the certainty of being reunited with our Lord forever. Death may have been "the last enemy" but it was not the final victor. The ultimate victory belongs to God. Through His resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ provides hope beyond the grave.

I want to close with a story that, I believe, summarizes these two perspectives well: The year 1899 marked the deaths of two well-known men - D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, and Robert Ingersoll, the famous lawyer and political leader. These two men had a lot of similarities. Both were raised in Christian homes. Both were skilled speakers, traveled all over the world and were well respected. Both drew huge crowds and attracted loyal followers. But there was one difference between them - their view of God.

Ingersoll was an agnostic; he had no belief in the eternal and stressed the importance of living only in the here and now. He made light of the Bible. To him the Bible was "a fable, an obscenity, a humbug, a sham." He spoke against the Christian faith claiming that the Christian "creed was the ignorant past bullying the enlightened present."

Moody had different convictions. He dedicated his life to presenting a resurrected Lord to a dying people. He embraced the Bible as the hope for humanity and the cross as its turning point. He left behind a legacy of written and spoken words, and changed lives.

Two men. Both powerful speakers and influential leaders. One rejected God; the other embraced Him. The impact of their decisions is seen most clearly in the way they died. One biographer parallels the two deaths in this way:

"Ingersoll died suddenly. The news of his death stunned his family. His body was kept at home for several days because his wife was reluctant to part with it. It was eventually removed for the sake of the family's health. His remains were cremated, and the public response to his passing was altogether dismal. For a man who put all his hopes on this world, death was tragic and came without the consolation of hope.

Moody's legacy was different. On December 22, 1899, Moody awoke to his last winter dawn. Having grown increasingly weak during the night, he began to speak in slow measured words. "Earth recedes," he said, "heaven opens before me!" His son Will, who was nearby, hurried across the room to his father's side.

"Father, you are dreaming," he said.

"No. This is no dream, Will," Moody said. "It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. God is calling me, and I must go. Don't call me back."

At that point, the family gathered around, and moments later the great evangelist died. It was the day of his homecoming, a day he had looked forward to for many years. He was with his Lord.

The funeral service of D.L. Moody reflected that same confidence. There was no despair. Loved ones gathered to sing praises to God at a triumphant homecoming service. Many remembered the words the evangelist had spoken earlier that year in New York City: "Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I will be more alive than I am now."

What a wonderful hope we have! So when we face the thought of our own death, or stand at the grave of a loved one, we can be comforted by this tremendous vision of the tomorrow that awaits God's own.

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