

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians 4, 13-18 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.

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

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.

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. 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.

[1 : 04] And so, we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. It would be difficult to argue that we have here anything other than the great apostles' teaching on the Christian's hope.

A hope that is connected to the parousia, or to Christ's return. And therefore, even intermingled within it, material on human grief, from which our need for hope rises.

Grief. Grief. Deep distress of soul brought on by losses in life.

A variety of losses, whether they concern uncertainties, or unforeseen events, or unfortunate circumstances.

[2 : 34] We grieve many things for many reasons. Grief. Never enjoyable. Not always avoidable.

Life is going to be, if you haven't found out already, it is going to be littered with losses. And therefore, grief will be gained as an unwanted companion.

What will we do with human grief? I swear I don't have anything on me. I'm not packed. I'm clean.

Recently, a letter was discovered, a Greek manuscript actually, in a 15th century monastery.

I raise this letter in the introduction for two reasons. First, the city in which it was found. Second, the subject in which it was written.

[3 : 54] It was found in Thessalonica, the very city that we're reading about. The subject was that of grief. The title, well, it's Galen's avoidance of grief.

How to avoid grief? Interestingly, this rare find, never before published in English, even to this day, has been gifted to our own Dr. Claire Rothschild, who is translating it, and soon to be published, hopefully by year's end.

We'll all be able to read in English this manuscript that's been hiding for 500 years that concerns Galen, who wrote in approximately 190 A.D.

concerning grief in the city in which we read about today. It's a fascinating letter. I asked Claire to give me her provisional English translation.

It reads to me like a Lemony Snicket novel. Have you ever read Lemony Snicket? Matters go from bad to worse.

[5 : 09] And somehow, Galen lived by principles that allowed him to grieve not. He opens by recalling the loss of life of many of his slaves, which accounted for the loss of great property in his work, only to tell you that the pestilence which took them occurred in sequences of ways in which this loss of life came three or four times.

He goes on to talk about the great loss of property and his possessions. He had stored them in a repository that was the place of a great fire.

Everything he owned, it seemed like, is cataloged for us to read about. Yet, even in this, no grief.

He then goes on like Lemony Snicket's novels do to plummet the depths of those losses in the fire. As if it wasn't bad enough to hear, he chronicles for us the listing of books which were lost.

First editions even mentioned. Catalogs that had been painstakingly copied. Medical textbooks and remedies which, to his knowledge, existed nowhere else in the Roman world.

[6 : 56] Imagine, what a find. It would have been part of the special collections at the U of C had it not gone down in that great fire in 190. And then he moves on with rhetorical flair to tell you that he's lost all of these things which were one of a kind.

Commentaries. And then he lists gold and his silver and the pounds of cinnamon. It must have been a good smelling fire given all the pounds that Galen lost.

And then he writes, and I'm using this provisional translation, but perhaps you might say that your passion and desire are enjoined the more now to know after losing such a great variety of objects, each in and of itself constituting the most painful possible loss for other men.

I have not been grieved like others. Rather, how equally I have endured what has come to pass.

how do you do that? Well, in part, he gives his answer. I would paraphrase it this way.

[8 : 11] For Galen, grief can be held at bay if greed is kept from consuming the soul.

In other words, he argues that I didn't lose everything. Pity the man who loses absolutely everything.

That is a man who has the right to grieve. But if I lost a hundred books in the fire, but I had three hundred in my total possession, how shall I grieve?

That's my paraphrase. In his own words, he puts it this way, but if someone does not incessantly seek the possession of too many other fields, seeking only those sufficient to cover private costs, then he might withstand great loss without grief.

Thus, it is not a big deal that I have not been at all affected by the loss of my property, for what remains is still much more than I need.

[9 : 20] I can't wait to read it. The avoidance of grief. How do you grieve not?

According to Galen, partial loss without total loss alleviates grief in the life of a principled person.

And yet, Galen lists things that would cause him to grieve. Let me miss three.

Three. The loss of his home. A friend who was being punished by an unjust tyrant. And the demise of his health.

death. Which, presumably then, would include death itself. Death. An adequate cause for grief.

[10 : 28] And so Galen meets Paul. Chapter 4, verse 13, But we do not want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as others who have no hope.

Paul writes on the subject of grief to the citizens in Thessalonica and he must establish a principle strong enough to meet your greatest need.

if Christianity cannot meet the greatest of needs, then we all ought to go home and about our day.

Let me say a word personally then, as we come to the core commitments of this text, for I have stood in many graveyards over 22 years of pastoral ministry.

And I have seen, as have you, good and godly people learn to grieve well.

[11 : 55] I spoke earlier this week with a dear friend whose son died in infancy years and years and years ago. he spoke of a settled peace that has emerged in his home, but he recalled the days, even two years after this infant's death, when his wife would desire to go and dig him up that she might hold her son.

Grief. Grief. Like you, when we hear the grievings of others, we personify it to our own world.

I have stood at earth's gaping, open mouth as it receives the bodies into the ground and the clumps of clay and dirt that enfolded again.

what hope truly meets that grief? I know that my paternal grandparents await the day of resurrection in central Illinois farm soil and have been waiting my grandfather for nearly 50 years.

Saints hundreds of years, thousands of years, waiting, waiting for a promised hope of the parousia, the return, the coming, a new day.

[13 : 52] Is there hope? Or is it fanciful desires of unwitting, unlearned citizens who need something to move on?

Evidently, when Paul wrote and sent Timothy to the Thessalonians, he wondered, will it last?

Will this work last? But upon Timothy's return, concerns of the Thessalonians came to him. And their concerns in part were, what about those whose lives have already passed?

Obviously, it seems to me that some have died in this local congregation from Paul's visit until even the early return of this letter.

will our faith last, Paul? Absolutely, the word continues to grow in us, but let us know, are those who have died somehow disadvantaged when that day comes?

[15 : 09] Do they miss out on that return and that resurrection and all the glories of it? Paul says two things, look at them in verse 13, I do not want you to be uninformed about this, which is interesting given the letter to this point, he's been continually telling them time and time and time again, you know this, you know this, I told you this, I'm reminding you of this, you know this, and now he writes, I do not want you to not have any knowledge about this.

This is something that he hadn't told them before. Have those who have died in Christ somehow put themselves at a disadvantage to the return.

He says, I don't want you to be uninformed, and then he says, secondly, I do not want you to be without hope as the pagans. Certainly, in their context, there were some in the Greco-Roman world who held some notion of an afterlife, all the way back to Plato's shadowy figures that somehow rise between earth and heavens as it were.

But there were, just like there are today, many who had no such hope, that there were pagans who were modern-day naturalists. This is it.

I think they would be those who would find an affinity with John Updike's Pigeon Feathers, the book where he recounts this vision by the character David about what happens at death.

[17 : 06] And he writes things like a long, slow body into the ground, a hole no wider than your body, down into which you are drawn, white faces recede, you reach them but your arms are pinned, shovels in your face, there you will be forever, blind, silent, and in a time to come no one will remember you, you will never be called as strata of rocks shift, your fingers elongate, your teeth distend sideways, in a great underground grimace undistinguishable from a strip of chalk, and the earth tumbles on, and the empires move, and unaltering darkness reigns, where once there were stars.

Updike, nobody could say it quite like him, hopeless life upon the fact of human death.

Paul says, I want you to grieve not in that way, because Paul believed that the human body itself was created by God and would be reunited!

with the spirit and soul of the individual at the great coming of Christ! And therefore, this great reunion is, in some sense, the Christian hope.

Is this thing going to stop or no? It's not? Okay, get used to it, because it's not going to stop, and I'll try to get used to it. Are we used to it?

[19 : 01] He gives them, pay attention to it, you've got work to do, the Christian's reason for this hope. Verses 14 and 15, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

notice the implication of the phrases, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

The grounds of the Christian's hope in the resurrection of the body are rooted in the resurrection of Jesus himself. So the resurrection of Jesus is a critical matter, not only for himself, but for all.

For just as we believe that he died and rose again, even so, on that basis, in him, we will be raised again.

In other words, according to Paul, the resurrection of Jesus matters. The bodily resurrection matters. Don't give me any mythological discourse or the spirit of Easter.

[20 : 16] No, the bodily resurrection matters. Not only does it matter, but evidently it is also believed.

I was thinking at this point in the message of those of you who are here who don't yet believe, and I want to say a word to these people who have come on today wondering, is the resurrection of Jesus real?

Normally, we would simply call you to believe it. It happened. And we would call you to believe it on the basis of the apostolic witness. and the synoptic gospels, which put forward this very act.

They tell it. Yet you might say to me, Pastor, I would like to believe that there is a hope for me that goes on into all of eternity through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but for you to ask me to ground it in the apostolic witness.

Well, these are the very ones who write of a one-off event in all of history. How would I ground my belief in people who first began at a very small moment in history to articulate such a thing?

[21 : 48] Well, many will believe strictly based on that apostolic witness, but I would like to say a word to you who are not yet convinced, and I would like to say that you ought to consider not merely the apostolic witness as found in the gospels, but you ought to consider what I would call an apologetic of coherence or a defense of the coherence of all the scriptures for this is true.

The synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are not beginning something. They are climaxing something.

They are not the only ones who believed in a resurrection. They are in a train that is rooted in the history of Israel and in the promises to David that a resurrected one would rule.

And you have thousands of years of God in history working through His people, His ultimate promises that the apostolic witness conveys as finally having come.

So before you reject Christianity and the resurrection simply because you won't be able to get yourself to believe the witness of a very few people in the first century, I encourage you, go back to Genesis and begin to read again and see if they are not just the latest to witness what God has from the beginning promised that He would place a forever ruler in the world and that one is Jesus.

[23 : 43] The apostles recognized Jesus as the Christ. They didn't create Him.

And your belief can rest on a strong foundation of God's complete Word. The reason for the Christian's hope is grounded in the resurrection of Christ.

And notice it's also a hope that is somehow upheld by the Word from Christ. Look what He says there in verse 15. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord.

Now it's curious. We don't know exactly what that means. We don't know if it's a prophetic word. Somehow Jesus as He appeared to Paul at his conversion experience later appeared to him in some way and told him exactly about this return and what it would mean for those who had already fallen asleep or perhaps he's referring here to something in Matthew's later work where it speaks about the day of the Lord.

We don't know. But the Christian's hope is rooted in this. The resurrection of Christ and it is upheld by the word of the Lord. Two wonderful things for those who believe.

[25 : 05] Well what about that day? If that is the reason for hope, what about the day wherein our hope is consummated? I'll be quick on this but it just rises.

Verses 16 and 17. For this we declare to you by 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.

For verse 16 the Lord himself will descend from heaven with the cry of a command with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God. What about the day in which hope is consummated?

He leads with the return of the Lord. He will return in this way. Victorious! And the apocalyptic literature of the day is rising with the trumpet calls of God that end human history.

What will that day look like? It will be marked first by his return. 16a. And then secondly the resurrection of those who preceded his return in death.

[26 : 20] 16b. Look at the very end of it. And the dead in Christ will rise first. That's Paul's ultimate concern in the letter here. They're wondering what happens to those who die before he comes?

Will they miss out? Are they disadvantaged? Will they see it? Will they be there? He says, look, let me get this straight. He will return and then there's a primacy given to the resurrection of those who died first.

And then he gets this verse 17 where all the rapture material has come out of. Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds and meet the Lord in the air.

Now, I'm not going to get into all the modern day stuff. It's not going to be edifying to you. Actually, if you look at the purpose of this passage, it's to encourage one another with these words, not to fight over them.

But people often ask me, do you believe in a rapture? I believe in a rapture in this way. The Greek verb here says that he will be caught up.

[27 : 35] It has this element of forcefulness to it. And so, the dead will be raised, those who are alive at his return will be forcibly brought up to him in the air.

Raptured in that sense. And then, of course, the point of Paul is that they will be united then with those who died before.

And then finally, that day that consummates our hope is a reunion with him. Look at 17. And so we will always be with the Lord.

Those two verses. What's the day going to look like? It's going to be marked by the return of the Lord in victory. The resurrection of the dead first. They receive primacy.

The rapture of those who are alive that we might have unity and the reunion with him unto all eternity. That's his argument. The consequence of all of this, the consequence of hope, verse 18, therefore, encourage one another with these words.

[28 : 52] Let's come back to the very idea of grief. There will be a day where you will stand at the graveside of loved ones.

And according to the Christian message, whether or not they are in Christ or out of Christ matters. And the Christian's hope is that once in the ground, not always in the ground.

Let me put it as visually as I can get it for you. When I stand in the cemetery, which is basically a place of the sleeping, when I stand in the cemetery over the fresh ground of the grave, I am ever reminded that this dirt, this soil, this plot is resurrection ground.

that this soil, on His return, will be that which breaks open, gives way, yields up all those who have faith in Christ.

That they are not disadvantaged. Your mother, your father, your grandparents, your sister, your brother, your child, all in Christ who await that day, are not going to miss out on a thing.

[30 : 23] And if you die tonight in Christ, neither will you. Why? Rooted in Christ's resurrection as the first fruits, grounded in His word, marked by His return, filled with the primacy of their rising, our rapturing, and a reunion in heaven forever.

Thus far, God's word. Our Heavenly Father, as we come now to the celebration of the table, I pray, O Lord, that our grief, which is real, would be graced by the glorious death of Christ, that has made it possible.

And so, Lord, in these moments, wed our hope to what He has accomplished in history through His death.

I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.