

The Problem of Despair

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[0 : 00] Let's now read from God's Word in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, page 928.

1 Thessalonians 4, just so that you can see it, we have a new pulpit Bible, and it's a proper pulpit Bible this time. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 from verse 13.

This is the Word of God. 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.

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.

[1 : 14] 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.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. What is our hope for the future?

What is our hope for the future? Hope is in such short supply today, don't you agree? There's a lot of fatalism about. People live for today, not for tomorrow, and certainly not for what happens after they die.

They say, YOLO, you only live once. The media doesn't help with world news filling our heads with man's inhumanity to his fellow man.

Societies where the God of the Bible is squeezed out always tend toward hopelessness. It's dressed up as cultural advancement, but we know it for what it is.

[2 : 25] A return to the meaningless existence of our Stone Age ancestors, where human life is of no more value than that of a virus. It is hope which separates us as human beings from the rest of creation, and which fills our lives with meaning and with joy.

A life with no hope is no life at all. But a life with hope is full. And this hope is what the Christian gospel, and the Christian gospel alone, offers.

We're here today to hear more about that hope, or perhaps for some of us, to hear about it for the first time. We live in a society with no hope for this life or for the next.

So we've come because we want to invest ourselves in real hope, that hope that comes through Jesus Christ and Him alone. In these verses in 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul is talking about the Christian hope.

He writes these words, as we read in verse 18, so that we might encourage one another with them. That word encourage could also mean comfort or cheer. In other words, the Christian hope encourages us, comforts us, and cheers us to thrive as Christians in the darkness of this society's hopeless winter.

[4 : 00] But that word encourage can also mean call alongside. These are the truths we need to have alongside us every day if we want to have real hope.

We need to call them to mind when we're tempted to despair, and give in to the hopelessness of our society's fatalistic worldview.

In our passage, the Apostle teaches us at least three things, all of which combine to provide us with the kind of hope this world, or any other world religion, and certainly not atheism, cannot offer.

He talks, first of all, about the Christian view of death. Then of the Christian view of the end. Then of the Christian view of eternity. Let's open our minds and hearts to the truth of the Bible today.

Because what God teaches us here is better news than anything we will ever hear elsewhere. First of all, then, we have the Christian view of death.

[5 : 12] The Christian view of death. There seems nothing quite as final as human death. There's nothing quite as surreal anyway. One moment, there's life. The next, there's nothing.

We know it's coming, but it doesn't make it any easier to accept, because the truth is we weren't made to accept human death. There's something quite unnatural about human death.

Apart from personal grief, we also face the question, well, is that all that is? Is death really the end of my conscious existence?

Notice I said our conscious existence, and not just our existence. You know, we use the expression, the circle of life, you know, Elton John, the Lion King, as a way of saying that what we are now will decompose and provide the nutrients for trees to grow, providing the basics for the life of the future of our planet.

So according to this point of view, death is not the end of our existence. It's quite close to the Hindu idea of reincarnation. The elements from which I am composed will one day form part of a tree, or a plant, or an insect, or a bird.

[6 : 44] But we're not talking here about existence as a merely physical substance. We're talking about conscious existence. We're talking about that which makes me, me, and you, you.

What we call our souls, the essence of who we are. Is death the end not just of our bodies, but also of who we are?

In the circle of life, it has to be. Lest the tree that grows from my decomposing elements has the same sense of humor that I do, or has the same affection for my loved ones.

Can you imagine in a hundred years' time walking through Victoria Park, and there's an elm tree there, and it bends its trunk, it bends its trunk at dad jokes.

And then when Kathmer walks past, it shakes its branches in excitement. I don't think so. The question is this.

[7 : 53] Is death really the annihilation of all my dreams and ambitions? Of all I ever was, or hoped I would be?

What about those I love most? My wife? My children? I simply don't buy it. That all their lives are worth is composed in six feet of dirt, or in an urn of ashes, scattered in a special place.

There is no hope in humanism with its circle of life ideology. No wonder people turn to drink and drugs to dull the pain of the question of death when all they are being told is that death is the end of their conscious existence, and that what they are will become a tree, or a plant, or an insect, or a bird.

The Christian view of death is really very different. The only worldview that provides us with genuine hope. Three times in our passage in verse 13, 14, and 15, Paul describes those Christians who have died as being asleep.

Being asleep. Now, Paul's no fool. He knows the difference between a living and a dead person, so he's not denying the reality of human death. Rather, he's telling us in words we can understand that death is not the end of our conscious existence and the destruction of all we are.

[9 : 36] He's not, likewise, denying that human beings die. For in verses 16 and 17, he talks of those who are dead in Christ and contrasts them with we who are alive.

He's telling us, rather, that though our bodies may die, the essence of who we are as Christians lives on. That who we are and what we are is not lost.

That who I am still exists. All my dreams. All my ambitions. All my loves and all my passions. That which makes me, me.

It's not gone. It lives on beyond my death. It's not a ghost. It's not a spirit. It's in Christ, to use the words of verse 17.

The Christian hope is far greater than that which any humanist can offer. For who I am is not forever lost.

[10 : 44] Who I am is in Christ. Even after I die, and because Christ lives forever, so shall I.

That's the point of what Paul's saying here. Death for the Christians, not the end. Just like we watch infants going to sleep in the arms of their mothers.

So when we die, it's as if we go to sleep in the arms of Christ. Who we are is not lost, but lives on beyond immediate physical death.

In the Christian worldview, there's no space for a fatalistic attitude of saying, once you're dead, you're dead. Rather, for the Christian, death is somewhat like a child going to sleep in the arms of its mother.

Paul's using, you see, this word sleep here to insist that death for the Christian is not the end of our conscious existence. The essence of who we are lives on beyond our physical death.

[11 : 53] He calls it being dead in Christ. And in verse 13, he tells us these things that we may not grieve as others who have no hope. Our Christian loved ones die.

We have a funeral. And we grieve for them. But we need not compound our own misery. Rather, knowing that who they are lives on, that they are asleep in Christ, we are encouraged and comforted.

The Christian has hope. The humanist has none. For whom death is really the end, there can be no hope for the future.

But Paul says, human death is not final, and therefore our lives are not meaningless. Christian view of death.

But then secondly, a Christian view of the end. The Christian view of the end. What is to be the end of all things?

[13 : 04] As we have seen, the answer to this is not death, for even when we die, who we are lives on. However, just as surely as there was a beginning, there shall be an end.

Just as clocks begin to tick and time began, so the clocks will stand still and time will end. The question is, how shall that happen?

No doubt they are right. But physicists tell us that eventually the sun shall burn through its resources and our solar system over a period of millions of years will freeze, die, and cease to exist.

One wonders how a person who does not believe in God lives with that reality. That not only shall we no longer exist, but that every memory of human existence in this solar system shall be wiped out from the DNA of the universe.

what is the hope in that form of strict scientism? Just a grinning skull at the edge of the universe waiting to embrace us in its cold darkness.

[14 : 23] Paul tells us that before any of that should happen, something more wonderful lies before us. He tells us in verse 15 that the Lord will come.

The Lord will come. The glorious Lord Jesus Christ through whom the universe was made shall come to wrap it all up and bring it to a conclusion.

What shall determine the end shall not be the limited resources of a star we call the sun, but the conscious loving decision of the Lord Jesus Christ who we are told in verse 15 is coming.

We learn more in verse 16. The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

It's impossible for us really to picture, but Paul tells us the day is coming when the Lord Jesus Christ who at present is exalted at the right hand of the Father will leave his throne and descend to earth.

[15 : 33] Every human eye will see him descending from that exalted place of glory and every ear shall hear his voice of command for it shall thunder like that of an archangel and as loud as the sounding of the trumpet of God.

this shall be the end when Christ shall come in his glory. He will appear in the air every eye shall see his glory and every ear shall hear his voice.

At that very time men shall be fighting against men and then in the time it takes for us to blink our eyes the sky shall be ripped apart and Christ shall appear.

the end will not come as the result of some devastating extinction event which is random and has no meaning an asteroid strike the end of the sun the end will come as the result of the loving command of God and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I was trained as a scientist to be sceptical of things beyond the realm of theory testing and proof. So is there any proof which is sufficient to convince me and every Christian of the truth of what shall happen and how the end shall come?

[17 : 01] After all is this not some fairy story devised by the equivalent of a first century Hans Christian Anderson? In verse 14 the proof is there for all of us to analyse Paul says for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

In other words he says our confidence in holding to the second coming of Jesus Christ and with him the end comes from the historical reality of the first coming of Christ.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us bone of our bone flesh of our flesh he was crucified for our sins upon a Roman cross but on the third day he rose again.

What seemed utterly impossible that a dead man should rise really did happen two thousand years ago in a garden graveyard outside the city of Jerusalem.

The resurrection which we could not have otherwise imagined is a historical reality. If we accept the historical physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and if on the basis of all the evidence we possess we'd be mad not to then we must also accept that that same risen exalted glorified Jesus will one day return.

[18 : 45] As a trained scientist I cannot but accept on the basis of the evidence laid before me the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead two thousand years ago the reality of his second coming.

What it shall look like or sound like I cannot imagine but I know it shall happen. In the humanist scheme of things where the end shall come by a mindless random extinction event that is not even a conceivable grain of hope for the future all the art of Rembrandt all the music of Tchaikovsky all the sculpture of Bernini all the science of Louis Pasteur all the stories and words of C.S.

Lewis all human language and all human love it shall all have been for nothing and the universe shall bear no record of any of it. What hope is there in that?

And the bigger question therefore is this why should I bother in the light of a random future extinction event to improve my culture today? Why should I bother loving anyone else more than I love myself if all I and they are is a grain of space dust floating in the meaningless vastness of a meaningless universe?

The Christian view of the end consists in the sovereign loving decision of God the Father that the time has come to wrap it all up.

[20 : 37] Christ shall come in his glory the end shall not come in the cold darkness of an extinction event but in the glorious light of fulfillment when Christ shall appear in the sky and his voice shall sound over all he has made.

You see this Christian view of the end it is the only view that affords real hope for our future. It shall not end in meaninglessness but in light in glory and the appearance of the Christ who having died and risen shall like a king being born in a golden carriage take his rightful place as king of kings and lord of lords.

the Christian view of the end. Third and finally the Christian view of eternity.

The Christian view of eternity. Now this is all very interesting but of what immediate comfort is this to the widow grieving over the loss of her husband or the mother weeping over the death of her child.

They've lost those they love the most. They are cruelly separated by that which was never meant to be. The apostle here doesn't deny the reality of grief.

[22 : 03] He says we do not grieve as others who do not have hope verse 13 rather but still we grieve. to not grieve at the passing of our loved ones is unhealthy and unreal and unhuman because even Jesus wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus.

Weeping and tears are the healthy human response to the death of those we love the most. But for the person who isn't a Christian that's all they have tears and memories.

And maybe a few black and white photographs. Their time with their loved one is over and they shall never be together again. Never.

All they had was this life for as long and as short as it was and that was that. But for the Christian what happens after death according to this passage is best described by the word withness.

Withness. In verse 17 Paul talks of how when Christ comes again having raised those who sleep in him those who died before us they shall appear with him in the sky and we too shall be caught up together with them in the clouds.

[23 : 34] For the Christian the death of a loved one in Christ is very far from the end of our love for them because the Bible tells us that when Christ comes we will meet them again and forever we shall be with them.

All the love that we enjoyed with them here shall deepen and grow to its ultimate end. When Christ comes again it's going to herald the beginning of a forever being with those Christians we have loved but died before us.

We shall be with them again. This Christian widow weeping over the loss of her Christian husband this is not the end for her.

It is the beginning of a deeper relationship from which death shall never separate them and of which their mutual love will grow over the endless ages.

This Christian mother crying over the grave of her beloved Christian child so cruelly snatched away from her she shall be with him again she shall again hold him in her arms and they shall never be parted.

[24 : 49] What a reunion they shall have on the day of Christ's coming. And more even than that for not only shall we be with our loved ones in Christ we shall also as read in verse 17 be with the Lord forever.

Up until now none of us have ever seen Jesus as he really is none of us. We believed in him we followed him we loved him though we have never seen him but then we shall behold him face to face not for a moment not for an hour not for a day but forever.

I wonder what the face of Jesus looks like. I wonder what his voice sounds like. I wonder what his touch on my shoulder will feel like.

He'll be with us and we'll be with him forever. When we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun we'll have no less days to sing his praise than when we first begun.

filled with the peace and the love and the joy of the presence of Christ will stand beside our loved ones who went before us and who will go after us never again to be parted but to gaze in amazement together at the face of our Lord Jesus Christ who having died for us rose on the third day and returned for us.

[26 : 23] I wonder I can scarce imagine what the smile of Jesus Christ shall be like or how tender his words shall be to those that I've always loved the most.

Well, what then is our hope for the future? The Bible makes it plain that for the Christian, the Bible makes it plain what the Christian hope is for death, for the end, and for eternity.

It's a hope filled with joy in believing and faith, but for the humanist who believes in no gods, but in reality many gods, there is no hope for any of these things at all.

Do these truths all seem rather fictional to you? They would be too good to be true if it was not that Jesus Christ died and rose again.

There on those fateful three days 2,000 years ago, death was defeated on the cross, the end was assured, and an eternity of witness was offered to anyone who will believe.

[27 : 44] Here's the crux of the matter. How what Paul describes as the Christian hope can become our hope, how we can turn away from the empty vanities of humanism and embrace the truth of the Bible's version of reality, it is all encapsulated in one little word in our text, in Christ, verse 16, in Christ.

It is for those in Christ all these promises are made. But how then we ask ourselves, can I become in Christ? How can I be in Christ?

Faith in Christ is the answer. Trust in the crucified, risen, and returning Christ, that's the answer. That we believe that he died for our sins and rose on the third day for our forgiveness, that we have faith in him as our Lord and our King, and that we trust him for our past, for our present, and for our future.

Are there any here this morning who were bold enough to take this step of faith? A step not into the darkness of bare humanism with its nothingness and its fatalism and its hopelessness, that's truly blind faith, but a step into the light of gospel truth, as it is in Jesus Christ.

You may say to me today, I want this to be true, I really do, but I find it so difficult to believe. Pray for God to open your heart to a hope that's so good it must be true.

[29 : 39] Pray that God would shine a light upon the cross of Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the grave 2,000 years ago. But then you may say, I want this to be true and I want that hope for myself right here and right now.

I want to become a Christian and be in Christ so that I can have this hope too. I close with this. The risen exalted Jesus Christ who has yet to return but is at the Father's right hand today offers it to each one of us here through faith in him.

Will you not reach out the hand of your heart and tell him that you want what he has to give.

Amen.