

The Day of the Lord: Not No Hoppers

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[0 : 00] I mic'd the place this morning, well I mic'd everything but up there, so if you can't see me, I apologise. We'll get there, and by the time he leaves, you know, I might be able to survive without him.

Friends, in a shelf at home, I have three books by a man named John Herkus. One book is called Pages from God's Casebook.

It was published in 1962, and John Herkus was an Australian eye specialist who turned his hand to writing character studies of biblical figures.

Now, I did not ever know John. I do know, however, that he was a strongly Christian man. And by a strange set of circumstances, I found myself to be at his funeral a number of years ago.

And the story of his death is one that's etched in my memory, and I hope I'm remembering it accurately, but because it's fairly, it was so strong at the time, I think it's pretty accurate.

[1 : 01] The details are a little sketchy, but here's what I remember. Apparently, John was travelling on the Manly Ferry. And as on the Manly Ferry in those days, there were some seats out in the open.

He was sitting out in the open seats, and there was a young woman nearby. Anyway, he had this massive heart attack and began to die. And the young woman cradled him in her arms and looked after him as he died.

Anyway, she was not Christian. However, at the funeral, it was reported that after watching him die, she said these things. She made a comment that if you can die like this man died, then I don't need to be afraid of dying.

Friends, John Herkus did not fear death. He could therefore embrace death without fear. His funeral, I remember, was a triumphant one.

For John knew Jesus. He loved Jesus, and therefore death was not something that he feared. Dying for him was simply the entrance into another existence. So there's the first story.

[2 : 06] Now let me tell you another. This one comes from a famous preacher, an Anglican clergyman in England, and he had a physician who was not Christian. And so one day he asked this physician about Christians and dying.

He asked his physician, do Christians generally die well? And the physician answered, no, they don't. His experience was that Christians often feared death and hung tenaciously to life.

They did not die well. Now friends, that's been reported by atheists as well who have made the same comment about Christians. And their comments are that if what Christians say is true, if they believe what they profess, then Christians should die well.

Now friends, I know that dying can be painful. Sometimes, having watched it, I know it can be a long and often drawn out and stressful process.

And if it is drawn out like that, it will rightly be filled with existential distress and suffering. It will rightfully mourn the good things that God has given in life. The sound of music, the love of a lifelong spouse, the hugs of children, the smell of spring, whatever that has made life so rich for you, the joy of watching a sunset.

[3 : 25] However, friends, I am convinced that Christians can and should die well. And we who are Christians should be able to mourn well and can mourn well.

And I want to use this passage that we have in front of us today to reflect on how that might be the case. So I want you to come with me today as we explore this passage together. Let's see the God who loves life talk about death and give us words about death.

Let's see what he has to say about death. So turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 4 and verses 13 to 18. Now, as you do, I want you to notice something about this passage. This passage is essentially

directed at addressing a pastoral issue with the Thessalonian Christians.

In other words, perhaps from Timothy or somewhere else, Paul has picked up that the Thessalonians have a pastoral problem, a crisis of some sort. You can see that in verse 13. Look at me. Look at it with me. Paul says, Can you see the pastoral issue?

[4 : 37] It's something to do with those who have died. And somehow the Thessalonians, Paul thinks, are a bit at risk at this point. You see, Christians are meant to be people of hope.

But they are, perhaps in a potential way, grieving inappropriately for Christians. They're at risk because of those who have died already. And that is the issue.

There are people in Thessalonica who were Christians and who have died. And the Thessalonians have, Paul thinks, been inadequately equipped to grapple with this question.

And so he realises there's some new things he needs to teach them. And he seeks to inform them. Now, before he does that, we need to probably work out exactly what's going on. So let me tell you what I think is happening here.

There are a number of things to say. First, have a look there at that word died in verse 13. And you'll notice if you're reading the version of the Bible in front of you, there's a little footnote to it.

[5 : 32] And it says, literally, it says, fallen asleep. You see, what Paul is doing is he's using a euphemism for death. Death, it's a way of capturing that for the Christian, really.

Death is merely a transitional state. It's sort of like falling asleep and then waking to a new existence, to life. Second, the question the Thessalonians have is not about all Christians.

They're not saying, please tell us about the fate of all Christians. No, it seems to be a question about a certain group of Christians, a group of Christians who have already died or fallen asleep.

Third, the question only becomes a serious question if the assumption of the Thessalonian Christians is that the return of Jesus was going to come in a very short period of time, within their lifetime, relatively soon after the first coming of Jesus.

So you can see what's going on here, can't you? The Thessalonians believe Jesus is coming back and coming soon. However, one or more Christians have fallen asleep. That is, they've died.

[6 : 33] And the Christians in Thessalonica are sorrowful about their departure. And perhaps they're even worried about these people. Perhaps they think, are they going to miss out? How do they fit into the second coming of Christ?

Will they be there? How will they be there? When will they be there? In other words, what happens to our fellow believers who have died already? If the Lord comes tomorrow, will they be there?

How will they be there? What's going to happen? And there's the pastoral question. So it's a group of Christians concerned about their brothers and sisters who have died. And in verses 14 to 18, Paul seeks to inform them, comfort them, encourage them.

And I love it because he's a pastor teacher at work. You know, here are his people. They're worried about their brothers and sisters in Christ. And he wants to encourage them and help them and teach them. So the first thing he does is give them some theological reminders.

Because that's the way to go, isn't it? If people have got a problem, often we need to give them a theological reminder. So Paul does this in verse 14. And here is the theological grounding for his pastoral encouragement.

[7 : 35] He reminds them of some fundamental truths we say believe, which we all believe. First, Christians believe that Jesus died. Second, Christians believe that Jesus rose again.

Now, if you haven't got that from the kids story, you weren't listening, were you? It was so well done. So first, Christ died. Christ rose again.

And third, Christians believe that through Jesus, all who have died will rise from the dead. Those truths, those three truths, are fundamental Christian beliefs.

Belief in Jesus is a belief in a death and a resurrection of Jesus. And belief in the resurrection of Jesus carries with it the belief of the resurrection of all who believe in him, who are in him.

Friends, I want to ask you this morning, before we even get underway, do you believe that? That is, Paul regarded these things as things all Christians believe. These are distinguishing marks of Christians.

[8 : 40] If what happened to Christ is true, then Christians are not no-hopers, if I could put it that way. On the contrary, they are people filled with hope.

Christ died, Christ rose, and through Christ, all who believe in him will be raised with him. You see, those are non-negotiable facts of Christian faith.

And that makes us Christians full of hope. Okay, so there's the pastor teacher. He's observed the pastoral problem. He's given the theological undergirding for what he's about to say.

Now, he turns to the details of the pastoral issue. Look at verse 15 with me. Listen to what Paul says. David again picked that up for us.

He said that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven.

[9 : 50] And the dead in Christ will rise first. And then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up into the clouds together with him to meet the Lord in the air. And so we'll be with the Lord forever.

Now, can you hear it? Paul's point is clear. The Thessalonian Christians do not need to worry about those who have already died. They won't miss out on the Lord's coming.

In fact, according to Paul in verse 15, those who are still alive at the coming of Christ won't precede those who have died in glory, as it were. No, they won't precede those who are already dead.

In fact, when the Lord comes in splendor, when he comes with that cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, when he descends from heaven in all glory, then those who have already died in Christ will rise first.

Those who are dead will actually precede those who are alive when Jesus comes. Can you see it in verses 16 and 17? The dead in Christ will rise first.

[10 : 55] And then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught into the clouds together with them. So Paul's addressed the question of order. The order is clear. Christ comes.

Those who are dead in Christ rise first. Those who are alive come next. And the question of order, though, is not the most important one, is it? The most important one's in verse 17.

Can you see it there? Look at what Paul says. It's clear and categorical. All who are in Christ will be there together. You see, all together is what we are about.

We are one in Christ and we will be with the Lord Jesus Christ forever. Friends, this is our glorious, glorious inheritance. Death is not the end if we are Christians.

Death cannot end relationship with a living God and a living Lord. We are destined for eternity. If God is the author of life, death cannot stop him being the author of life.

[11 : 58] An eternity in the presence of our God and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is ours. An eternity in the presence of all his saints. An eternity in the presence of those who have loved and embraced faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his work on the cross.

What a wonderful, what a wonderful and glorious thing this is. So Paul the pastor puts the challenge to his readers. Look at verse 18. You see, he knows he can't be present with his people.

But he can speak God's word to them in writing. And so he does. But he knows also they can speak to each other. And look at what he says. He says, encourage one another with these words.

In the face of death, Paul says, take on a ministry to each other. Turn to your brothers, your sisters, and remind them of these deep and timeless truths.

Remind them Jesus is coming again. Remind them that those who have died, they're not going to miss out on anything. Those who have died have not gone forever.

[13 : 01] They are just simply asleep. And there will be a great reunion with them in the future. And all who have loved the Lord Jesus will be bound together in Christ and with Christ for eternity.

Friends, this passage, I reckon, is clear and simple in its main message. I don't think there's anything complicated about it. I haven't told you anything you couldn't find out for yourself just by reading it. It's straightforward, isn't it?

Plain as day. However, as you can imagine, it raises a whole host of questions. And some of you have got them going through your brains right now. I wonder if you can see them. Let me name just a few.

And these are not all of them. The first one's a fairly basic one. But it's a real one for many contemporary Christians. I've had it asked of me in this last week. It's that of cremation and burial. You see, after all, if there's a resurrection of the body, as this passage seems to indicate, then perhaps burial might be the way to go.

Now, my view, if I can say this, I don't think that's something to get too worried about. Let me tell you why. God can put flesh together.

[14:06] He can put bones together. He who formed humans out of dust can form new bodies out of dust as well. I don't think he's going to have a problem with it. If he made Adam and Eve, he's not going to have trouble putting some dust back together.

So I don't think, personally, I wouldn't get too worried about it unless it's an issue of conscience for you. For some, it is a real issue. You just follow your conscience at that point, I think. But there are some more complicated ones out of this passage, aren't there?

Look at verse 16. Verse 16 seems to indicate that Christians stay asleep, that is, dead, until the second coming. But you don't have to look very far to see that there might be some problems with that.

Look at verse 14. Verse 14 seems to indicate that those who have died are with God. So how can that be true? They're buried but with God. After all, God will bring with Jesus all who have died. Now, just reflecting a bit more broadly in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 8 and in Philippians 1 verse 23, there is an indication that after death a Christian is with Christ.

[15:09] So exactly what happens to Christians when they die? Where are they? Well, let's press on until the other question.

Another question has to do with whether Paul's theology of the second coming of Christ differs here from elsewhere. You see, it seems apparent here that he might have taught the Thessalonians that Jesus will come again in their own lifetime, or at least in the imminent future.

Does that differ from his later letters? Friends, those are just a few of the questions that sort of spring out of this passage. I've raised them for you. And let me tell you, Christians have an insatiable curiosity about these questions.

I'm asked them every year at theological college, and I'm asked them every year in a parish.

Christians have endlessly speculated about the implications that this passage might have.

Friends, I want to tell you, I'm not going to spend time, having raised these questions, I'm not going to spend time on them today. I'm going to, I'm very willing to have a go at answering them, one-to-one with you later, and maybe sometime down the track we'll have a sermon devoted to them.

[16:17] But I don't think that's the main part of this passage. The Bible does not address the answers to those questions in great detail. They're somewhat speculative, because the Bible doesn't focus in on them.

What the Bible does do here is give us what's important and essential. It gives us the main things. And what Paul says here is simple and straightforward, I think.

The first thing that he says is that the resurrection of Christians is somewhat like the resurrection of their Lord. It's not a spiritual resurrection. It's a bodily, physical resurrection. Whether I have died or whether I'm alive, I will physically be with Christ, and it will be me.

Me in my body. Me physically. Me physically to be with Christ, who will also be physical as he was in his resurrection. Christians believe in a physical, bodily resurrection. The second thing this passage is saying is that Christian doctrine, Christian teaching, should make people hopeful, make them full of hope.

You see, we Christians are not to be like the rest of the world. We are not no hopers. That is, we are not to sorrow over those who have died. Now, friends, that doesn't mean that we don't mourn.

[17:26] But we are not to live as though death can be the end for anyone who has died a Christian. All Christians will be united with Christ for eternity. All dead Christians will be united with Christ for eternity.

All Christians who are alive on the day when the Lord Jesus returns will be united in Christ, with Christ, for eternity. Christians are people of God's promise, people of hope.

That's the second thing that Paul wants to convey. The third point, and that is that Christians are imbued with hope. The third point, I think, is equally clear. Look at the last verse.

Verse 18 says that because Christians are people of hope, they should encourage each other with these words. Friends, when the Thessalonian Christians met, when the Thessalonian Christians mourned the death of another Christian, the other Thessalonian Christians are to gather around them and encourage them.

They are to remind them, friends, we are people of hope. We are people who believe in a living God and a living hope. We are people with a future and our friend has a future.

[18 : 38] And that future is guaranteed in Christ. Christ died. Christ rose. And through Christ, believers in Christ will rise. Friends, don't grieve like the no-hopers.

Encourage each other with hope and promise. Friends, these last couple of days, for a number of reasons, I've seen some old friends that I haven't seen for, some for five, some for 15, I think one perhaps for 20 years.

We all have a lot less hair. The hair we have has now grown grey or white where once it had colour. The surrounding skin around that hair is full of wrinkles that I'm sure weren't there last time we met. Friends, we have people who live 5, 10 or 20 or 30 years away from death. And as I look around the church today, I don't think we'll be alone.

There are others of you here who will be with us. Friends, we are getting on, aren't we? Not to put too fine a point on it, many of us are going to die soon.

[19 : 49] Now, others may hold on for longer. Friends, I'm sorry to be so brutally honest with you.

I mean, it's a bit much, isn't it? Two weeks ago, I was brutally honest about sex. Now, I'm being brutally honest about death. Well, I'm doing so because the passage doesn't allow us to hide this. Because God doesn't hide truth from people. I'm doing so because I think that God has something he wants to say to us in the light of this truth. So unless we acknowledge the truth that we're dying, we won't hear this word properly.

So friends, many of us here are facing death at some time before too long. In fact, all of us are unless the Lord returns. And many of us have friends who are Christians who have gone before us over the last few years.

So what should we do when we face this? Well, God has a number of words for us here in this passage, I think. The first word is, don't look upon death as an end, friends.

[20 : 56] For Christians, it is merely that sleep that comes before an eternal existence with our Creator and our Saviour. The second word is, don't be a no-hoper.

We should be people filled with hope. Christ has died. Christ rose. Christ guarantees that all who believe in him will rise through him and with him.

Friends, we are people with a future existence ahead of us. We are people of hope. And the third thing we should do is encourage each other with this real hope and this real word. We should urge each other to be Christian.

Not sorrow after our friends who have died in Christ. Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't mourn our friends, but it does mean we should not sorrow over them like those who have no hope. We should encourage each other.

Friends, in preparing this Bible talk this week, I want to tell you that I've been encouraged by another Christian. He's not alive any longer. His name is D.L. Moody.

[21 : 57] Moody was a great evangelist. And as he was exploring Psalm 91, he said these words to his hearers. He said this. Jesus Christ came into the world to destroy death.

He took death into his own bosom. He went into the grave to conquer and overthrow it. And when he arose from the dead, he said, because I live, ye shall live also. Thank God we have a long life with Christ in glory.

And this is the bit that's really encouraging. He went on. He pressed on. And he said these wonderful and have now become quite legendary words of encouragement to his hearers. And they go like this. My dear friends.

If we are in Christ, then we are never going to die. Do you believe that? If some time you should read D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead.

Don't believe a word of it. He has gone up higher. That is all. Gone out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal. A body that death cannot touch.

[23 : 04] That sin cannot taint. A body fashioned like unto his glorious body. Friends, I urge you to similarly allow the words of scripture to encourage you.

Let them fortify you. And use them with each other to encourage, fortify and help each other. You see, we really need to hear God's word from each other.

You see, it's so easy to forget in the humdrum of life, isn't it? It's so easy to be overwhelmed by life. Someone was telling me this morning, you know, it's so easy to forget the words of a sermon by Wednesday.

You see, it's so easy to mourn as well, isn't it? Like those who have no hope. So encourage each other with these wonderful words. Christ died. Christ rose.

And through Christ, all those who are in Christ will also rise. Death, friends, has no sting. Now, friends, I wonder if I could close by reflecting upon where I began.

[24 : 01] You see, I want the words of this passage to seep deep into our lives. And I want them to prepare us for dying. And I told you at the beginning that I think many Christians don't die well. But I think Christians can die well.

So I wonder if I could give you some tips on dying well. Now, I need to say I haven't done it yet. So, you know, this is not from experience. So I hope that I myself can carry my resolve through. Here are Andrew's tips for dying well. I think they're a tip. They arise out of this passage and from other passages in the Bible. So perhaps, well, here they are.

I offer them to you. Four tips. Tip number one is this. Live well. Friends, if you are God's people, then God calls you to live rightly before him.

He calls us to be people who live believing in Jesus. He calls us to be people who live obeying God's word. This is the good life. Obeying God's word, trusting in his son.

[25 : 03] So there's tip number one for dying well. Live well. Tip number two is this. Believe well. Friends, beliefs shape life and shape death.

Fill your heads and your hearts with God's word. Believe it. Cling to it. It is God's word and it can be trusted.

So tip number one was live well. Tip number two is believe well. And tip number three is this one. Hope well. Friends, Jesus died for us. Jesus rose for us.

Jesus at this moment sits at God's right hand interceding for us. If we are believers in Christ, in Jesus, we are in Christ. And if we are in Christ, that cannot finish with death.

We are not no hopers. We are people filled with hope. That's tip number three. Hope well. So now we have live well. Believe well. Hope well.

[26 : 01] Tip number four is this. Encourage well. Encourage well. Friends, we Christians, like I said, can easily be overwhelmed by life and circumstances. So we need each other.

That's why we meet. To encourage one another. To speak to each other. We need to remind each other of God's word for us. We need to encourage each other. So live well.

Believe well. Hope well. And encourage well. And I think if you do this, you'll be able to die well.

You'll be able to face death without fearing.

You'll be able to face it without trembling. You'll be able to smile at the passing of life. For it will be a life in the presence of God and his son, Jesus Christ.

And it will go on for eternity. Friends, if we are Christians, then our future is sure and secure. It is a future with the Lord.

[26 : 56] It is a future with the Lord forever. Christ died. Christ rose. And through him all in Christ will also rise. So let me encourage you with these words.

And let me urge you to encourage each other with these words. Don't worry about the details. God can look after them. Christ died. Christ rose.

And through Christ all who are in Christ will rise with him. This is the word of God. And it can be trusted. So let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you sent your son into the world to die. Thank you that death could not hold him. For he was your son, the son of the living God.

And that therefore he rose again. And thank you that you have bound us together with him. That we are in Christ. And therefore we will also rise.

[28 : 01] Help us to encourage ourselves with these words. And to encourage each other with them. Father, help us please to die well. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.