

# 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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[ 0 : 00 ] Normally when we come to a text, we explain what each part means and how it all fits together. Today I'm actually going to spend less time, dramatically less time than usual explaining the text.

! Because if you look at it quite clearly, he's talking about the future. So I don't want to step on Mike's toes from last week and cover that same ground. What I want us to do today is look at how he's doing it.

Because Paul is comforting Christians who are mourning. I want to ask, what is he doing? Why is he doing it this way? What is his process? What is his method?

If we look at that, we will learn how to minister to one another in our tears and in our trials.

We're going to find out that it's actually really simple what he does. Everyone here can do it. And actually at the very end of the passage, Therefore encourage one another with these words.

[ 1 : 02 ] He's telling us that we're to follow his example. So not only can we, but we must follow his example. So let's get started. How do we, as the Church of Christ, lift up the broken heart?

And build our church into a family that will care for one another. Those who are currently suffering and preparing this community for the day that I suffer and need it to support me.

The first thing we see is in verse 13. Paul says, 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.

Who is he talking about? Who is he talking to? It's the church in Thessalonica. It's a port city in what is now northern Greece.

Paul had just recently planted a church there and had been driven out by both political and religious persecution. And he kept up a correspondence with this church.

[ 2 : 17 ] He was probably only there for a matter of weeks before he was driven out. And so it was a very young and fledgling church. And he, in the midst of this letter, writes to them this passage.

And he says, Don't grieve about those who are asleep. You're probably wondering what that means. Maybe you're not, but it's similar to our phrase, you know, someone who has passed away. It's a euphemism for death. The first thing we see here is that Paul is not just saying, Like, oh, you know, when you guys are a little down, when you're sad, he knows, That's the first thing, he knows their struggle.

He doesn't address sorrow in the abstract. He doesn't say, you know, when you experience some of life's sadnesses, do this or that. Or when you find yourself in any sort of trouble, think like this.

He knows exactly what kind of trouble they have. And he zeroes in on that. And if we're going to follow his lead here, we must.

[ 3 : 24 ] And if we're going to be a community that comforts each other in grief, which we must. And if we're going to be a light to the world, a city on a hill, as we build one another up in our troubles, we need to know each other's burdens.

I can't comfort you if I don't know what troubles you. Right? You can't build me up if you don't know where I need help. It's not possible.

We can't support one another in Christian love if we don't know where to direct that love. Well, how do we do that?

How do we know where our brothers and sisters in Christ are hurriedly? It's no mystery. We have to talk to each other. Which means we have to be in Christian fellowship.

If you come to church to sing some songs in worship and hear a sermon preached to the edification of the saints, that's a good thing.

[ 4 : 31 ] But if that's all you're here for, you've missed out. You've missed something big, something crucial. In that sense, you are simply coming to church rather than being the church.

Ask yourself this question. Do you know your church family well enough to pray for specific needs and cares and sorrows and joys?

Not everybody here. But do you have a community of faith here where you know what to pray for people, both good and for God?

If not, you can't possibly follow Paul's lead here. We can't build one another up in Christian love if we don't know what's going on in each other's lives.

Paul knew exactly what the Thessalonian Christians were grieving over. The loss of their loved ones. What is your church family burdened with today?

[ 5 : 35 ] Do you know? And likewise, does your church family know you well enough to pray meaningfully for your needs?

If not, you're not connected to one of the greatest sources of comforts you will need on that day of trouble. When your church family knows you and your life well enough to pray for you, the things that concern you this day.

If you can't answer that question clearly, amen, brothers and sisters. But if you can't, let's fix it. How do we get there?

Paul's writing a letter back and forth, so maybe you could do that. It begins for us, I think, mostly by diving into our church community.

Which can look like a lot of things. In our church, we try to provide as many opportunities for Christian fellowship as we can. That looks like weekly fellowship before and after church.

[ 6 : 44 ] A lot of churches, people just file right up at the end. I'm really encouraged and gladdened that people stick around and talk here. That's a small thing, but it's a huge thing in the end.

We have weekly community groups. If you're not involved in one of those, you need to be. Twice a month, we have after church meals. We go to the cafe and the bakery and have lunch together. Incidentally, that's canceled today. What can I do? We have monthly prayer gatherings for men and women. The upcoming mystery guest dinner is a really cool way to get to know people in our church family that you're literally randomly assigned.

It's like a real great mixer. It can also look like hospitality. Invite someone to your home for a meal or for dessert or for board games or for a hike.

Not to take a hike, but for a hike. And while you're with your church family, it's not enough to simply arrive and just be there. It takes some intentionality.

[ 7 : 55 ] For the church to really follow this example, we have to genuinely engage with one another. We can't just stay on that level of pleasantries. Right?

You know? How are you doing? Oh, I'm fine. How are you? Oh, I'm fine. That's great. Good. But you know, that doesn't cut it. That won't get us to where Paul is. And that won't make this the redemptive community it needs to be.

We need to ask the questions like, how are you doing? How are you really doing? What's good right now? How's that affecting you?

What's hard right now and how is that affecting you? How's that changed your prayers? How has that changed the way you see yourself? The way you see the Lord?

How can I, as your brother or sister in Christ, pray for you or serve you? What's coming up for you? How are you praying for?

[ 9 : 04 ] Can I just point out that even asking those questions is a great comfort in a disconnected world. Having someone pay that kind of attention is itself a care and a comfort.

How people feel loved and cared for when their church family regularly checks on their souls. Especially because sorrow and pain and grief and turmoil are isolating things.

You feel disconnected simply by experiencing it. How supportive it feels to belong to a community that doesn't simply rely on its own strength.

Right? That goes to God. Takes hold of the heavenly resources. Resources beyond itself for these things. God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble.

How reassuring it is to know you belong to a community that regularly does these things. You can come to count with it.

[ 10 : 06 ] That is a high, high privilege. That we can be confident that in our day, these helps will be there for us.

Now, those questions, being involved with one another in Christian fellowship and asking those questions, that's a huge step forward. But simply asking them needs to be followed by another step,

and that's our own vulnerability.

See, for many people it's easier to ask those questions and not have to answer them themselves. Right? What if our struggles are messy?

Or deep? Or embarrassing? If you're scared to share your burdens with your church family, let me tell you that for both the person who shares their struggle, and for the person who hears it, the gospel of Jesus Christ means nothing is too big or too complicated or off limits to share with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

If you're scared to share your burdens with someone, because your problem seems too big. Friends, the tomb is empty.

[ 11 : 29 ] Jesus is alive. Like, there is nothing that is too big. There cannot be something that is too big. Now, your church family can't fix all your problems, but they certainly know the one who can.

They can support you on your way to the life. If you're scared to share your burdens with your church family because you're ashamed of them. Jesus hung and died, naked and alone, a criminal's death.

The King of glory did that for us and removed all our shame. Your church family shares in that same glorious truth.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And if you're scared to share your burdens with your church family because you would have to reveal sin that you're hiding.

Friends, Jesus died on the cross for every sin you have ever or will ever commit. If you're scared to share your sins. If you're scared to share your burdens with your church family because you would look weak.

[ 12 : 50 ] When you received Christ, two things happened. You said, I am weak. And you are strong. Second, he indwelt you with his Holy Spirit.

The strong arm of the everlasting, all-powerful God is on you. So the Creator of Heaven and Earth strengthens you.

And if you're scared to ask these kinds of questions because you're not sure you can help that person. Like what if their problems are too big? Well, Jesus died and rose again to reconcile us to God.

And has endless resources. It doesn't depend on your ability and my ability. But on our simple faithfulness. To point a suffering saint to an all-satisfying Heavenly Father.

And Jesus died and rose again to make for himself a bride. The church. And so it does not depend on you alone.

[ 14 : 04 ] Because you are part of that larger church family. Your child doesn't solve some of these problems on your own. It's to connect that person to the resources found in the whole living people of God.

So how do we come to know someone suffering? Each other's struggles? It's a living fellowship. Where we ask the kinds of questions that show isolated sufferers they're not alone.

And where the gospel frees us to be honest about our needs. That's how we come to know each other's struggles. And once we've done that, what do we do then?

That's what the rest of the passage is about. The first half of verse 13 shows us that Paul knows their troubles. Once he knows their trouble, he shows them in the second half of the verse.

That we have more tools at our disposal than a quick fix. Actually, the second step, there are three things. You know there's struggle.

[ 15 : 12 ] The second thing is actually that don't do this. Don't do a quick fix. Christianity does not magically make our problem go away.

Right? Paul says, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not breathe as others do who have no hope.

New life in Christ does not mean that you magically rise above all the cares and concerns of this world. Being part of the church doesn't mean that you're insulated from all of life's troubles.

In these four sermons, we've preceded each of them with a testimony of great trial and suffering. It would be blasphemous of us to pretend like that would be otherwise.

And Paul knows this. Very personally, from his own experience, he knows suffering very well. And he knows from the Thessalonian Christians as well.

[ 16 : 16 ] So he doesn't just say, like, oh, don't grieve. Right? Instead, he says, don't grieve as if you had no hope. Those are very different things. Saying, you know, basically, just be happy

because you're a Christian.

That tells somebody, I don't care about you and your trouble. Get over yourself. Right? That's what that basically says. And far from a comfort, a cold shoulder like that increases the suffering.

Because I'm telling you, you're not worth my time and my effort. And then maybe you're just a little weird. But saying, don't grieve as those who have no hope, that supports someone.

Gives them guardrails that keeps the suffering from overwhelming and from drowning. Paul does not hear reach for the quick and the simple answers.

He doesn't say, hey, you know, if you were good Christians, this wouldn't bother you. Maybe you've received a quick fix answer in your time with me.

[ 17 : 29 ] Maybe from someone in the church. I was giving some pastoral counsel to someone who was going through some significant and complicated suffering.

This person mentioned they hated sharing their burdens with other people, especially Christians. Why?

Because they were offering quick fixes. Oh, just press them. You'll be fine. Just read your Bible some more. You'll be great. You know, if you, uh...

Somebody just was really weak and boiled down to, you know, smile, Jesus loves you. Which is true, but radically incomplete. Someone accused them of being faithless, really.

It boiled down to, you know, if you were a good Christian, you wouldn't be so sad about this. It felt dismissive and hurtful and added to this person's grief.

[ 18 : 29 ] Those answers aren't comforts at all. Our first sermon in this series was in Psalm 77 where we read, My soul refuses to be comforted.

And Christians can really be there. So if we don't have something to offer that person, it's better that we don't say anything at all. If we go for the cheap and quick fix, not only do we give no help, we add to the sorrow.

Because now they have to deal with the fact that we're telling them that their life-altering trouble can be solved for the cool effects.

And it's better to keep saying that. Maybe you've felt that way too. You've shared your burden with someone and they've essentially said, you know, you're a Christian, be happy.

You've felt dismissed and belittled. I said to that person, I said, you know, don't worry about those people.

[ 19 : 38 ] They're just stupid. Now I said that because I knew this particular person would appreciate the humor of them. But what I meant and what I explained was people generally do that because they feel like they have to say something, they should say something, and they're just not prepared to do it.

And so they say the first thing that comes to mind. It's mostly because we're unprepared to serve sad people.

But Paul helps us here. He shows us the way to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ when they face sorrow and suffering. We don't say, don't grieve.

That's not what we say. Instead, we say, grieve well. Grieve with hope. We have a deep well of truth and hope and comfort to share with our brothers and sisters in their tears and in their dry.

We don't need to rush to quick faces. Instead, we can say, it's okay to. It's actually a very Christian thing to do.

[ 20 : 54 ] And there are distinctly Christian ways to do it. That's what we've been studying these last three weeks. We rest in God's past faithfulness, knowing that while our world may fall apart around us, we belong to a strong God who is on our side.

We walk with him in this moment of trouble. Trouble often feels right in your face. But running to God for refuge, we find out just how close he is and how strong a refuge he is.

And we walk through suffering with hope. That even though our trials may threaten a complete loss, he has made ironclad promises.

That our future is brighter and richer than we can know. When we have helps like that, we have tools to help our brothers and sisters in the Lord walk through every sorrow.

So Paul knows their struggle. He doesn't go for the quick face. Instead, he gives them real, meaningful help.

[ 22 : 20 ] That's the third thing. It is tailored to their particular sorrow. How does he comfort them? What is the substance of his comfort?

We see him hint a little bit at the ideas from our previous sermons. He touches a little bit on God's past faithfulness.

Verse 14 is an echo of our first sermon in this series. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again. That's a look back to his previous faithfulness and his strength and his care for us.

And so even when it looks like there's no hope, Jesus bled and died to pardon my sin. His tomb is empty. So I can have confidence because I belong to a strong Savior.

And though I don't understand this present grief, I need not despair. Because I have been welcomed into the family of the one who created the world and rules it for his glory and our good.

[ 23 : 25 ] No one else in all the world has a foundation that we have to stand on. Only the church of Christ. Only those who belong to him. He also hints a little bit at our present.

And while our sermon on the present in Psalm 77 looked mostly to what it looks like to walk with God in that present moment. He here focuses his present help on bringing grieving saints into the present fellowship of the church.

His language here is filled with references to the family of God we live with today. Verse 13, we do not want you to be uninformed brothers.

That's family language. Verse 14 begins, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And that reminds us of our common confession of faith through which the Lord gave us everything.

And so there's a community of believers pointing each other to Christ. So he references the past like we did in our first sermon.

[ 24 : 34 ] But that's not really the substance of his comfort here, is it? And he hints at the present like our second sermon. But that's not it either.

He doesn't even mention all the other comforts in the Bible that we didn't have space for in four sermons, right? He doesn't remind them that God is both completely good and completely sovereign, powerfully reigning over the storm itself with care and concern for them.

He doesn't tell them God plans to mature and sanctify them through their suffering. He doesn't even mention that God intends for us to help others with the comfort we've received.

The Bible is full of so many helps for his suffering saints. Paul doesn't mention those here. And he only briefly hints at the ones that we've already seen in this sermon series.

Instead, starting with verse 13, when he speaks about our hope, and then again, halfway through verse 14, when he says God will.

[ 25 : 45 ] From that point on, all the way to the end of the passage, Paul chose to focus, basically all of his words, on the comfort that comes from our future hope in Christ.

He doubles down on it. Now, if we are trying to learn about his process here, here's the question. Why did Paul focus almost exclusively on the future?

It cannot be that we're supposed to point every Christian who mourns to the future waiting for us. Otherwise, Psalm 77 about God's past faithfulness, Psalm 46 about God being a very present refuge, wouldn't even be in the Bible.

Why does Paul spend all his energy talking about the future? The help he has given them is tailored specifically to their point of pain.

They are worried about the future. What will happen to our brothers and sisters who have already died? So he speaks words of comfort about the future.

[ 27 : 07 ] In other words, his counsel is not one size fits all. It is tailored to him. He doesn't overwhelm the Thessalonian Christians with everything he can think of.

Grief has a way of occupying all our thoughts, and so it's really hard to multitask. So one thing to hold onto is often much more helpful. He puts his eyes on his brothers and sisters.

He looks at them. He sees them worried about one thing, the future. And he puts all his weight on that. God's comfort for the future. And that's the third takeaway for this formal sermon.

After we've come to know someone and their sorrows. After we've kept ourselves from giving them a quick fix. We prayerfully bring the most relevant comforts in God's words into their life.

First, we don't overwhelm them. And second, so we give them the best help we can. That kind of brings us right back to knowing their struggle, doesn't it?

[ 28 : 14 ] We can't comfort our church family if we don't know their sorrows. And we can't comfort them well if we don't know how it's affecting them. And this is kind of important.

So really, listen in on this. Because just knowing the problem in someone's life does not get us all the way to help it.

Let's take the sorrow in this passage. Bereavement over the death of a loved one. Not everybody grieves the same way over them.

If you don't know the way this loss affects this person, you don't know what words of comfort will help. Because it might not be words for the future that help every person who is bereaved over someone's death.

Right? So if this person has experienced in this death a wonder about that person's fate, words like Paul about the future are absolutely the best way.

[ 29 : 21 ] But if this death has put this person into an intense loneliness, the present experience, words about walking with Christ and finding him a present refuge, walking daily among the community of the saints, those would be most important.

Or if this death has made this person doubt God's goodness, showing them his past faithfulness, grounded especially in the cross and empty tomb, that will serve him best.

And maybe that sounds complicated. Like it's for the professionals. Does that sound too advanced for normal Christians like you and me? Here's how complicated that is.

Ready? Step one. Learn what's going on. Know their self. That looks like saying, how are you doing? Or maybe you might have to ask, how are you really doing?

But this helps you discover what their challenges are about. Two. Learn how it's affecting them.

[ 30 : 34 ] That is as complicated as saying, how does that affect you? That helps you discover how this trouble affects this person.

And then step three. If you feel it's wise in that moment to offer words of comfort, specifically related to the way they are being affected, point them to our Christian hope that most clearly speaks to the way the trouble affects them.

Now those first two steps every Christian can do without even pausing for a moment. You don't need to prepare for that. You don't need a counseling degree to ask those two questions, and they are what you need to do to minister to a brother or sister in Christ in their circle.

That last one, speaking wise words of comfort, that's a bit trickier. Want to know the solution to that? It's two parts. First, you don't have to do it right away.

You can pray. And secondly, you don't have to do it on your own. Ask a Christian brother for help. You can simply say, I'm really moved by your trial.

[ 31 : 52 ] And I don't know how to encourage you right now. I don't know the words to speak. Do you mind if I share this with someone at church to help me comfort you?

And then ask for wisdom from someone in your community group, from one of the pastors here, from someone you think would be a mouse help. Friends, that's what it takes to minister wise words of comfort to another Christian, in their tears and in their trials.

How are you? How's that affecting you? And then sharing what comfort we have in Christ for just that. If you've not been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus, I would like to offer you the one comfort that all these other comforts are built on.

Paul explained that future hope that he offered the Thessalonians was built on that. Verse 14.

Everything, the whole passage is built on. For, since we believe Jesus died and rose again.

Jesus died and rose again. Why? Why did he do that? To save us? As is the theme of this series, from suffering.

[ 33 : 26 ] You see, we all stand guilty before a completely holy God. For the things we've done, things we've not done. And for the things we've desired, that are evil.

And the verdict is hell. Endless suffering. Because we've sinned against an endless God. But because of his rich and steadfast love.

God the Son chose to die on a Roman cross in the place of every man, woman, and child who turns from self and sin, places their trust in him, and cries out, have mercy on me.

Instead of suffering, you receive the greatest comfort the world has ever known. Adoption into God's family. And the present helps.

The future joys that fill up these wise words of comfort that we've been talking about, they're all built on that one thing.

[ 34 : 33 ] This God who loves us. And they all become yours, the moment you become Christ's.

And then Christians can become the most honest mourners in all the world. And that gives us permission to confront our suffering head on.

You don't need to smooth over the rough edges. You don't need to distract yourself from your suffering. Or to hide your pain from others. You don't need to ignore the darkness.

Or pretend it's sunny. You don't need to make it better all by yourself. You don't need to fear that dealing with it will push you over the edge into hopelessness.

Because you have a Savior who went through the fire ahead of you. Mocked, ignored, beaten, betrayed, tortured, slandered, murdered, and emerged victorious before you.

[ 35 : 43 ] The tomb is empty. He sits on the throne. He has promised Himself to you.

He has secured you, your soul, your victory, your future forever. So if you've never received that comfort, will you cry out for mercy even now?

He delights to save sinners. And if you are suffering today, will you reach out for comfort? This passage is all about the Church of God comforting one another.

For all of us, may we be a people who take up this call to comfort others. Will you ask, how are you doing?

Will you ask, how is that affecting you? And will you punt to Christ? Let's pray. Lord, our God, you have made the greatest comfort available to your people.

[ 37 : 02 ] Lord, may we find in you a treasure and hope.

Lord, may we help us to point to one another in the midst of our sorrows, not with platitudes and bumper sticker settings, but Lord, with care and concern for one another and our well-being.

Lord, may we help us to the endless grace of your throne. And the great hope we have in our King Jesus.

And Lord, as we do this, will the world see how we love one another.

So that you will be shown as worthy, as valuable. Lord, will it be attested to the greatness of your name.

[ 38 : 07 ] We pray that in the name of Jesus, who secured all of these comforts for his people, when he died for our sins. We pray that in his name. Amen.

Amen. And please stand in the name of Jesus.