

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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[0:00] A few years ago, Keanu Reeves appeared on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. And right at the end of the interview, kind of out of the blue, Stephen Colbert says to Keanu Reeves, What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?

What do you think happens when we die? And Keanu is a man of few words, so he pauses and he gets very thoughtful for a moment. And then he delivers this answer.

I know that the ones who love us will miss us. I know that the ones who love us will miss us. I mean, it's a poignant answer, especially given the suddenness of the question.

It came out of nowhere. He did quite well, didn't he? But how would you respond to a question like that? What happens when we die? It's in some sense the big question behind this whole sermon series on the second coming of Jesus Christ.

What happens when Jesus returns? What happens when we die? Is Jesus even coming back at all? Does it even matter? What about all the people who've already died before us?

[1:19] What happens to them? These are just a few of the questions swirling around in the minds of a small group of Christians in a church plant in the Greek city of Thessalonica, just 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

What difference does Jesus' promised return make to my daily work now? What difference does it make to my home life, to my work life, to my planning for the future, the way I invest my time and my money and my relationships?

What difference does it make? So we're talking about the future this morning, which means we're talking about Christian hope, which is very different than the sentiment that Keanu Reeves expressed.

And if you look at the first verse of our passage from Thessalonians, page 987, if you look at verse 13 with me, you'll see the difference. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. You see, Christian hope is not a holy hoping for the best. It's not wish fulfillment. It's not even a vague platitude. Christian hope is a joyful and confident expectation that because of what God has done in the past through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus, those who believe in Jesus have confidence that in the future, he will come again to make our home with him forever.

[2:46] And this is what Paul's reminding the Thessalonian church of in our passage, that Christian hope means that we must resist, therefore, the myth of progress or the idea that humankind must always look forward to find some sort of hope, to find a utopian future.

The best is still to come. Now, unstoppable improvement is the narrative of progress. But Christian hope, as Paul expresses it here, surprises us about where it asks us to put our gaze.

You expect it to say, well, he wants us to look forward. He says, no, for Christian hope, the first thing I want you to do is look backwards. I want you to look backwards. Verse 14 reads like this. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. So look backwards to what Jesus has done.

His resurrection is the guarantee of our Christian hope. And then you can look forwards. Look forwards with hopeful anticipation to what he will do when he returns. And then finally, Paul says, this is very important, hope through Jesus' death and resurrection.

[3:53] This hope will transform the way you live now, in the present. So this simple structure provides us an outline. First, we're going to look backwards, hope through Jesus' death and resurrection, in verse 14.

And then we look forwards to the hope in Jesus' promised return, in verses 15 to 17. And then the bookend of our passage, verses 13 and 18, living in the present, hope in Christ now.

So let's have a look at verse 14. Hope through Jesus' death and resurrection. So I want you to imagine that you're living in that first generation after Jesus' resurrection. Even though Jesus clearly taught that no one will know the day or the hour of his return, many new Christians are expecting that he's going to come back any day.

And then suddenly, some from that first generation of believers, they start to die. And the church grows anxious. What does this mean for our hope in the resurrection?

I mean, will our friends be left behind when Jesus returns? So Paul's responding to this kind of anxiety found in the Thessalonians by reminding them where their hope rests.

[5 : 02] And as we read verse 14, it kind of reads almost like the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed, doesn't it? We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

And what Paul's doing is he's connecting the first advent with the second advent, the incarnation connected to the second coming. That's what we've been doing in this whole series.

And Paul's looking backwards, yes, but you notice it's not nostalgia. And nostalgia may be the opposite of progressivism, looking backwards instead of looking forwards, backwards to some sort of imagined golden era in the past when humanity was flourishing and better off than we are now, maybe like the 1980s.

That was a joke, by the way. And so Paul's not looking back nostalgically, but rather historically. There's a difference. It's the historical reliability and truthfulness of Jesus' death and resurrection that forms the foundation of Christian faith and Christian hope.

So elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 20, Paul writes this, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

[6 : 18] So first fruits implies second fruits and third fruits and much more fruit to come, doesn't it? More resurrection fruit. But only because it was Jesus who suffered and died in our place so that he might blaze a resurrection trail that we will follow one day.

And did you notice how Paul refers to death as falling asleep? He does it three times in our passage. Falling asleep. So the question is, in verse 14, when he's talking about Jesus, why doesn't he say this?

Why doesn't he say, for since we believe that Jesus fell asleep and rose again? Why does he use the word died? Well, here's Leon Morris, a commentator very helpful on this.

In the New Testament, there's two distinct strands of teaching about death. On the one hand, death is the most natural of all things and it's inevitable part of the condition of our earthly existence.

On the other hand, it is completely unnatural, a horror, the result of sin. Christ, in his death, bore the wages of sin. He endured the worst that death can possibly be, and thereby he transformed the whole position for those who are in him.

[7 : 31] It is because there was no mitigation of the horror of death for him that there is no horror of death for his people. For them it is but sleep. Isn't that wonderful?

Our gospel hope is that Jesus has conquered death. For those who call him Lord, death is no more scary or permanent than sleeping. And this is the way that Jesus talked about death, isn't it?

You remember John chapter 11. He says this, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him. Or in our series in Mark, we were in chapter 5, Jesus was in the home of a recently dead 12-year-old girl.

This is what happens. Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child's not dead but sleeping. And they laughed at Jesus. But he put them all outside and he took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.

And taking her by the hand, he said to her, Talitha kumai, which means little girl, I say to you, arise. And immediately the girl got up and began walking. So firstly then, we look backwards and Paul reminds us the foundation, the basis, the source of all of our hope is in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[8 : 44] And that enables us then to look forwards. Secondly, to the hope in Jesus' promised return. So we look at verses 15 to 17 and particularly in verses 16 and 17, Paul makes four positive affirmations about Christ's second coming.

I want to just unpack these verse by verse here. So four times in these verses, we find the repetition of the word will. Whenever you see this word in the Bible, God will, he will, he will.

It's as good as done. That's a promise that he's going to keep. So look at 16, the first half of it. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, with the sound of the trumpet of God.

The Lord himself is Jesus. And you know, when we read the Christmas story, we notice how quiet and humble and localized the event is.

Attended by his mother and father, a few shepherds, and then later some wise men. But the imagery here evokes noisiness. It's a raucous scene, doesn't it?

[9 : 49] You can't miss it. A cry of command, an archangel's voice, the sound of a loud trumpet. All of these are Old Testament imagery used for the Lord God speaking, appearing in glory and power and majesty, and now applied to Jesus and his return.

So then the first thing that Paul wants us to know is that no one's going to miss Jesus' return. And then verse 16 continues. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

So the phrase, the dead in Christ, are those who put their trust in Jesus, who were united to Christ in his death, so that they would be united with him in his resurrection.

The dead in Christ. They share the joy of being the first fruits to be reunited with Christ when he returns. The first ones. And this promise is meant to comfort the anxiety that I was telling you about, the anxiety that Thessalonians felt about those who had died recently.

So Paul says, not only will they not miss the resurrection, in fact, they will be the first ones to celebrate. And that word rise is the same resurrection word we saw referring to Jesus, death and resurrection, death and rising.

[11 : 00] So his victory is now their victory. We continue with verse 17. 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.

So thirdly now, the remaining saints, those who are alive, when Christ returns, will be caught up, they'll be seized, literally. The word there is quite violent. It has a sudden connotation.

Elsewhere it's used in the book of Acts when Roman centurions order, they order Paul to be snatched up or grabbed by force in the midst of a violent mob to save his life.

It's actually, in the Latin translation, it's the word we get for the word rapture. It's a seizing. It's a snatching away from danger.

And we see here references to clouds and the air, and these again are biblical images for the place of God's presence. You can think of the Exodus here. You can think actually of Jesus' transfiguration or his ascension.

[12 : 03] But most importantly is that little phrase, with them. With them. This is the joy of reunion with our beloved brothers and sisters who previously died in Christ.

We'll be with them again. We'll be reunited so that grief is replaced by joy and all of our longings are fulfilled. Fourthly and finally, verse 17 ends like this, and so we will always be with the Lord.

This is the final and forever fulfillment of Christian hope. We will always be with the Lord. Always. It's the consummation of the story that we remember during Advent, the incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us.

And then this is the same Jesus at his ascension when he was leaving his disciples and they were saddened. He said to them, No, no, no. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations and behold, I am with you always.

I am with you to the end of the age. That's God's invitation to all of us. An invitation to be with him forever. And I know that your curiosity begs all kinds of questions from this passage.

[13 : 12] So many unanswered questions about what's going to happen when Jesus returns. We don't get them answered here, do we? But the primary aim of these verses is not to gratify our curiosity, but to help us live our life in Christ now, grounded in what Jesus has accomplished in the past, looking forward to what he's going to do in the future, and living, abiding, day by day in Christ, in the present.

So we look finally at our hope in Christ now. So I was surprised, pleasantly surprised actually, to find a Peanuts cartoon in a commentary this week.

And this is how it read. The conversation is between Lucy and Linus. Looking out a window, Lucy wonders, boy, look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?

It will never do that, says Linus. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again. And the sign of the promise is the rainbow. Oh, you've taken a great load off my mind, replies Lucy.

To which Linus responds, sound theology has a way of doing that. And that's what our passage in 1 Thessalonians is doing. It's meant to do this for us.

[14:30] Paul offers us sound theology in order to comfort and encourage us in the present. Sound theology is what he's sharing with this church plant when he says this in verse 13. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others who do not have hope.

To be uninformed means to be ignorant, not understanding or recognizing the truth and goodness and beauty revealed in Jesus Christ. And then Paul ends the passage by instructing us how we should apply these words of sound theology.

Verse 18. Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Encourage one another. Because words matter. Three times in our short passage, Paul mentions words.

True gospel words give life. They give hope. We're called to encourage, or another translation would be to comfort one another with these words. Now philosopher Jamie Smith has just recently published a new book.

It's called *How to Inhabit Time*. And in that book, he describes what it looks like for Christians to live as a future-oriented people, as awaiting people, praying for God's kingdom to come.

[15:46] This is a quote from Smith. To live futurely is to inhabit the present in such a way that the future is the beating heart of my now. To live futurely is not just to look for what comes next, like waiting for a pot to boil, or a child who hears the ice cream truck jingle three blocks away and is waiting for it to turn the corner.

Such modes of waiting put a pause on living. Instead of being defined by waiting, my active life is shaped by what I hope for. I am acting now on the basis of the future.

So if you believe Christ is coming, the key question isn't when, but how. The question is not how long have we got, but rather, how should we live now in light of that expectation?

How will the future shape your present? End quote. So this is why the church has a different way of keeping time, which we call the liturgical calendar.

This is why we do this, because hope takes practice. The practice of Advent, for example, therefore encourage one another with these words, that's what we're doing this morning, is the slow and deliberate retelling and retelling of the true story of God with us for the sake of encouraging one another to walk by hope in our daily life.

[17:05] And when we live by this different calendar, the church calendar, it reorients my affections and my allegiances away from the priority of profits or promotions or pre-approvals, prioritized by the academic calendar, for example, or my fitness app, or my employee's timesheet, or whatever other calendar that you guide your life by.

Instead, Paul says, use this very practical and personal example. He says, I want you to think about grief as a way of pressing this point home.

He says, consider this applied in the area of grief. He says, I don't want you to grieve as those who don't have hope. I don't want you to grieve as someone, say, like Keanu Reeves, who can only be agnostic about what happens when we die.

Christian grief doesn't mean, though, the absence of mourning. It doesn't mean the absence of tears. Just consider Jesus at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Jesus wept. And Paul, in his letters, he shares his grief and his tears in several letters.

But no, the struggle for us in grief as those who hope wrote Canadian evangelist Leighton Ford.

[18:22] Leighton Ford lost his son tragically at the age of 21. He said, the struggle is to bring our faith and our emotions together. And we rehearse, we practice these words of hope so that we might grieve safely in the arms of Christ or safely in the arms of brothers and sisters who share our faith and the emotions in Christ.

And this hope in Christ now is also what Horatio Spafford expressed in his famous hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*. So Spafford wrote that hymn shortly after the tragic death in an accident of all four of his daughters.

And he ended the hymn this way by expressing his advent hope in Christ's return. You can see that he borrowed this imagery from 1 Thessalonians 4. And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, and the clouds be rolled back as a scroll, and the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend.

Even so, it is well with my soul. And Annie Dillard wrote, how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

So what difference does it make that Jesus is coming back? We're discovering, I hope, during this advent season just what a difference it can make to place our only hope in life and death in the saving power of what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross in the past.

[19 : 59] And then, what a difference it can make to wait with joyful hope for Jesus' future return to bring us home with him forever. And finally, what a difference it can make in the present, in my daily life, to my calendar and my timekeeping, to my wallet and my friendships and my awkward Christmas dinners with extended family.

Even to my grief, what a difference it can make. So, therefore, encourage one another with these words. Amen. Amen. Amen.