

The Gospel and Death

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to St Paul's. My name's Steve. I know I met you before. I'm a senior pastor here at St Paul's. Let me just add my welcome to that of Nick, whether you're here in the building or online, but also want to welcome specifically Craig Farmer into our building this morning.

Craig, for those of you who are not aware, Parish Council has engaged Craig to help us as a church family to discern where God is leading us into the next phase of our life and ministry together as we see Chatswood and beyond to treasure Jesus for their joy. And so Craig is here and he is going to start today with some focus groups that you've been invited into to hear from you.

We want to hear from you about that process. So welcome, Craig, as part of today and thank you for your contribution to our church life beyond this day.

If you are just joined in amongst us as well, as we have just heard from Nick, we are in 1 Thessalonians. If you've got a Bible, I'd be grateful for you to open it. If you don't, there are versions available around here for you.

But what I'm going to be saying will be on the screen or in a printout in front of you. Where we're up to in 1 Thessalonians is the Apostle Paul is now encouraging people, the Thessalonians, to live lives worthy of God, that is to live lives pleasing God.

[1 : 2 7] And the foundation of that is what he has already said in the first couple of chapters of 1 Thessalonians, and that is that you, in the gospel of the Lord Jesus, have the pleasure of God already imparted to you, which is why you can live to please God, because you've already received the pleasure of God in Jesus.

And so last week, we started that process of what it means to live pleasing to God. And Paul picked up on, he's really focusing in chapter 4 on three major areas that are a major preoccupation for all of humanity, and that is sex, work, vocation, if you like, and number three, death.

And I said, the first two are the ones that you want me to spend more time on. I'm going to be really brief with those. I'm going to focus more time on today. And death, the thing you don't want me to talk about. So we're going to spend our time talking about death.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we are thankful for the hope of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, that he who died and rose again, that we who believe in him might have his life imparted to us, so that death has no more sting.

It has no more mastery over us. We pray that this hope would fill our hearts today, and it would be a hope that would overflow into this city.

[3 : 0 3] And we ask it for your glory. Amen. Mark Ashton was a minister in Cambridge in England. At the age of 62, he was diagnosed with inoperable gallbladder cancer.

He wrote a book about his journey towards Jesus. Oh, sorry, his journey with Jesus in the final 15 months of his life.

His joy in Jesus, in fact, in those 15 months were profound. He showed an enormous deal of confidence and even anticipation of his impending death in those months, despite a keen recognition of the grief and the sadness of not just his church family, but his family and friends and so on and so forth.

A very keen recognition of that grief, accompanied with a deep sense of joy and contentment at the same time. So over those last 15 months of his life, he talked with virtually everyone he met about his coming death, with ease, with elegance, and with a great deal of poise.

And this unnerved so many people. He found not only... People found not only his attitude, but even his presence difficult to take.

[4 : 39] For instance, he tells the story in the book, one day getting his hair cut. And he was asked by the young lady who regularly cut his hair, you know, how he was.

And he replied, well, actually, I've only got a few more months to live. And he said, in that moment, the ordinary pleasantness of the salon just stopped.

The friendliness, the chatting just stopped. Not just with him, but everyone else in the room at the same time. And he said, no matter how much he tried to talk to the hairdresser, not about death, but about anything, he could not get another word out of her for the rest of the haircut.

At all. And yet, as he said, the great irony of it all is, it's... Death's not something that any of us can avoid in any way.

It's been said that all the wars, all the plagues have never actually raised the death toll. It's still one for one ratio. Death makes a claim on each and every one of us, and it pursues us relentlessly throughout all of our days.

[6 : 04] And yet, we, this generation, this modern generation, seems to be far less prepared for it than our ancestors were.

not even able to talk about it in our society. You see, we know intellectually and rationally that we can't beat the statistics.

But deep down, we sort of repress it. And we kind of act day by day as if somehow we can or that we will.

And rather than accept it and prepare for the inevitable, we only avert it. We deny it.

And so, in our modern society, death has replaced sex as the unmentionable topic in polite company. So, three points today.

[7 : 08] They're on the St. Paul's app if you've got that, if you want to take notes along the way. But fearing death, death to death, and living with death. So, verse 13, fear of death. Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

Death, as I've said, it's that universal problem. Everybody struggles with it. And there are traditionally two ways that we struggle with the fear of death.

There's the Stoic way, which the Stoic way acknowledges death as something that's terrible, something that is awful.

There's a normal reaction of anger and grief with death. death. But the way to handle that is to acknowledge it, but then shut it down.

Shut down the emotions associated with it. Even talking to someone recently about their banter with someone about death, talked about not going to be here much longer.

[8 : 24] And you can't talk like that. You shouldn't talk like that at all. The number of times as a pastor, I've sat with people who are dying or visiting them in hospital, and one of the questions I've always asked is, have you talked about your impending death with your loved ones?

The vast majority say no. No. Don't know how to do that. That's the stoic way.

Acknowledge it's awful. Suppress it. Don't give in to the emotions. Be strong. Because nothing good will come out of grief.

That's the assumption behind it all. The more recent approach in our modern world is to handle the inevitability of death, particularly in the secular age, is to deny anything about death that is in fact terrible, horrible.

So one acknowledges grief and it's awful, just don't deal with the emotions associated with it, don't grieve it. Over here is the other one that says there's nothing really that bad about it.

[9 : 46] and this approach sees that death is just simply the natural process of the cycle of life. It's just the next, it's just the next step.

You can go into funeral homes! And grab the material off their shelf as to how do we understand death? It's just natural. It's just the next phase of life.

It's part of the life cycle where you will simply slip into a state of non-being. It's natural, nothing to fear.

And in your death you help others live by becoming worm food as Shakespeare said in Hamlet. I think, sorry for the Shakespearean people, out there, it sounded impressive though, didn't it?

You just become worm food and so you're helping the flowers grow. Secularism says there's no God, there's no soul, there's nothing of the supernatural.

[10 : 53] Life is constrained to this early life and so instead of fearing death, which you can't control, ensure that the life that you do have, you live it to your fullest because there's nothing beyond it.

So you do whatever it takes to live now. Discover whatever it is that gives you meaning, purpose, and go for it. Just don't think about death.

And the problem with that philosophy of life is that everything that you think will give you meaning, everything that will give you hope and joy and happiness in this life, death takes it all away.

It removes it all. It's all gone. Whatever we build our lives on in this short season of life, death destroys it all, makes a mockery of it all.

If the greatest joy in your life is relationships, loving relationships, then death strips you away of all of that. Bit by bit, death will strip you of all of your loved ones and eventually will strip your loved ones of you.

[12 : 12] It destroys everything meaningful in life. The great irony of the secularist who says, I do not fear death.

The irony of that statement is that if you really understand what you've just said, you've just said, I do not love life. I do not love what I have in life right now.

The other reason we should fear death is because we don't know what happens after death. You see, it is an enormous leap of faith to say that we just slip into a non-conscious state.

That's an enormous leap of faith. No one knows that to be true. There hasn't been a culture in history that has approached death so shallowly and given its people so little tools to handle the inevitability of death as our modern secular age.

to say death is just natural, is to harden and perhaps even to kill a part of the heart's hope that makes us human.

[13 : 37] No animal thinks about death. death. We know deep down that we are not just trees or grass.

We know something deep down that says that we were created to last. We don't ever want to be just fleeting to be inconsequential.

and the deepest desire of our hearts is for a love that actually lasts. And death is not the way it ought to be.

It's abnormal. Death is not natural. It is not a friend. It is not right. And so Paul says here grieve but with hope.

And I would say that these verses here that we have in front of us this morning and the Christian hope that sits in these verses we have in the Christian faith the resource that all of humanity needs to face death and therefore how to live well.

[14 : 54] this is if you like the greatest contribution that we can make to Chatswood to our neighbours.

Verse 13 again Paul writes so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope. It's a double negative which basically what he's saying quite literally to grieve hopefully he doesn't say instead of grieving I want you to have hope nor does he say there's no real hope so just grieve he says Christians can and must both grieve profoundly and fully because death is wrong it is unnatural and yet do it with such hope because grief while good unfortunately can turn into bitterness it can darken your life it can stifle your joy if grief takes over without hope now let me just jump back in the

New Testament to John chapter 11 we have the greatest example of how to grieve hopefully and it's in Jesus when he goes to his mate Lazarus who's just died in John 11 notice in there you won't notice it because you haven't got you to read it but in John chapter 11 Jesus does not come up to Lazarus sisters Mary and Martha his bereaved sisters who were grieving and he doesn't say to them they're there stiff upper lip chin up be strong he didn't do any of that at all he did bring words of comfort to them he did speak to them he did bring words of comfort that I am the resurrection and the life it was something they looked forward to he reminded them that Lazarus will rise again but that's not all that happened here we are told in the shortest verse in the

Bible in verse 35 John Jesus wept he he was deeply grieved deeply grieved!

as he sees the grief of the people weeping over Lazarus and the fact that he lost one of his mates so think about this think about here is Jesus the son of God who knew quite well in that moment when he weeps that he is about to do a great miracle and raise Lazarus from the dead and he weeps would he not have come in to Mary and Martha and gone chin up just follow me I'll show you something there's good news here no need to grieve I know it's sad but just wait hang on something big's about to happen he weeps and he calls the

[18 : 47] Thessalonians and us to grieve likewise but to do it hopefully and that's the next bit in verse the death to death the key to all of this is in verse 14 we believe that Jesus died and rose again that's the key benefit of the Christian faith if I could be so bold is that Jesus defeated death that is if death is our greatest fear so much so that we can't even handle talking about it and we spend our lives avoiding it then the gospel of Jesus Christ is what we hold out to a community as we treasure Jesus together and we do it for their joy this is the greatest thing that we have to offer them one of the interesting things about the John 11 passage is that

Jesus didn't go home if you've not had the experience of a funeral nowadays so many funeral services nowadays never get done in the presence of a coffin they're not actually funeral the preference nowadays is memorial service so many times I have I have literally laid a person to rest in the presence of no one we've done the memorial service and it's just me a funeral director and a coffin to lay that body to rest because we cannot cope in the face of death and so this is interesting because Jesus arrives he weeps with Mary and Martha and then he does the unthinkable what does he do he heads to the tomb who does that he heads to the tomb and as

Jesus goes to the tomb we are told twice in chapter 11 that Jesus is deeply moved deeply moved and when we read that we assume that well you know the whole emotion of everything he's weeping he's grieving and yet that's not what that statement deeply moved means it doesn't mean that he's weeping it doesn't mean that he's grieving quite literally the words deeply moved there in the original language mean he was snorting with rage as he walked to the tomb snorting he was roaring towards the tomb with anger death how could the creator of the world be angry at something that was natural in his world only if death is not natural it is an intruder into his world death was not the original design of

God for human life we see that right at the beginning of the Bible Genesis 1 and 3 tells us that we were never meant to die we were meant to last we were meant to get more and more beautiful as time goes on not more and more debilitated we meant to get stronger not weakened and die Romans 8 verses 18 and 23 says that when we turn from God to find for ourselves our own meaning our own ruler to become our own rescuers everything in the God's created order broke the natural created order our bodies our hearts our life nothing works as it was originally designed by God to be everything is marred everything is distorted everything is broken death is not just our enemy death is our executioner because it is the punishment that humanity deserves for rejecting the author of life and

Jesus grieves! as he witnesses the intruder playing havoc with his people and he is angry at the monstrosity of death it is the deepest distortion of the creation that he loves it is hideous it is frightening it is cruel and it is unusual it is not the way life was meant to be and our grief while we may not express it publicly our grief that is there that we carry in the depths of our being acknowledges death as just that and Jesus weeps as he sees and experiences the destruction of death and he storms with anger towards Lazarus tomb and

[24 : 25] Jesus knew in that moment something that no one else knew in that moment and yes they did not know that he was going to raise him from the dead they did not know that but there was something else that no one else could predict in that moment as he went to the tomb we get a glimpse of it right at the end of John chapter 11 when Jesus raises his mate Lazarus from the dead and people are rejoicing except not everyone is the enemies of Jesus when they saw Lazarus alive after being dead for four days that was the signal for them well that's it we now have to kill

Jesus that was the signal for them we now have to kill Jesus you see what Jesus knew as he stormed with anger towards Lazarus tomb was that for him to bring joy to Lazarus family and friends to bring Lazarus out of the tomb was for him to be put into the tomb that's what he knew in that moment the only way he could give Lazarus life was ultimately for him to give up his the only way to get him out of that tomb was for him to be put into the tomb if he is to guarantee the resurrection for all who believe in him he must succumb to the great enemy and executioner of humanity and put himself in the grave that is

Jesus Christ the eternal son of God who always existed came into his broken creation and he chose death he was born to die on the cross he died as our substitute for our sin against God he lived the life that we should have lived and he died the death that we should have died he faced our greatest enemy and executioner and he was the victor every Easter day we celebrate that he walked out of that tomb on the third day triumphant over death triumphant over sin and Paul is here reminding the Thessalonians that because of Jesus death and resurrection those who believe in him those who put their trust in him are released from sin and death and they share in his resurrection in such a way death no longer has its sting and so if you are someone who right at this point do not trust in the

Lord Jesus at all if you're online or in the building I'm not asking whether you think I'm asking whether or not you've embraced Jesus as your life take the decision today to die to yourself and surrender to Jesus and put all of your hope in him I'd be delighted to talk to you about that after service or in the coming days or weeks or whatever it is do not let this moment if you felt anything in your heart go ping do not let this moment pass do not be distracted!

from it at all so Paul is encouraging! these Thessalonians how therefore to live in the face of their impending death how to live with death so that's my last point he's really trying to encourage these Thessalonians clearly some of their members of their church in such a short time have died they're worried about them what does it mean does that mean they miss out of the hope that is in Jesus and he points them the hope of the gospel and then he adds right the word encourage is an active word it doesn't simply mean to call them to take heart and to have some perspective on their life and death what he's written here is not to even to feed some fascination about what happens after death or any future plans that God might have he calls the

[29 : 32] Thessalonians to take this gospel message together to do it together and to drill it down into their hearts to the centre of their being together as a church family together constantly remind themselves of the hope that they have in such a way that they will live their daily lives where they can face absolutely anything with poise with confidence in other words drill this truth down into your life in such a way that it entirely transforms all of your life so let me just say three things about this Christian hope the hope of the gospel beyond death what does it look like so first of all it's a personal hope that is what the life that we have in

Jesus is highly relational you see it there in verses chapter 4 verses 16 and 17 notice that the future of those who die in Christ is a world of infinite love if you look down verses 16 and 17 what you'll notice there is all these references that we will be with one another together beyond death you're not just a drop in an ocean where you get absorbed into the cosmos where you lose your sense of self as many religions and philosophies in this world would declare it is highly one another we will be with all people in Jesus that we have lost and we will be with the Lord together forever these are words that mean personal relationships it means perfect relationships of love that go on and on and on forever the great

Jonathan Edwards preached a famous sermon called heaven is a world of love and it begins by arguing that the greatest happiness that we can know right now is to be loved by another person that's the greatest happiness that we can know right now to be loved by another person however he adds that even the very best relationships in this world right now even the very best marriages the very best friendships!

in this world right now he says are like a pipe so clogged with rubbish that only a little bit of love actually gets through the end of the pipe in heaven he says the pipe is clear all blockages are removed and the love that we will experience will be infinite it will be inexpressibly greater than anything that we've ever had here in this world right now even in the best love relationships we hide behind facades of fear fear for being rejected and so we never experience the transforming power of being fully known and loved at the same time we also love selfishly and enviously which disrupts and it weakens and it even ends love relationships and our love relationships are also darkened by the fear of losing the person we truly love and unfortunately all of those clogs in the pipe can make us controlling which drives people away or in some cases it becomes fearful of making any commitments to people at all because we don't want our hearts broken all these things reduce love in this world to a trickle just a trickle at the bottom of a river bed and they're all removed all removed beyond death in the presence of

God in heaven love is an endless deluge deluge and fountain of delight and bliss flowing in and out of us infinitely and internally the Christian hope is for a personal future of infinitely free loving relationships the second thing about the Christian hope is it's physical notice that Paul says here in 1 Thessalonians 4 he does not merely say you go to heaven he says that the dead in Christ will rise that is you will rise like Christ has risen physically the climactic end of our salvation at the end of all things is a brand new body will be raised like

[35 : 10] Jesus was raised when Jesus was risen from the dead he met with his disciples and he insisted that he was flesh and bones he insisted that they touched him he insisted that he ate with them that he was not just a spirit floating around on clouds no presence of harps no presence of wings physical no other really I'm not sure if you've understood this there is not a single religion or philosophical structure in the history of all of humanity that promises that heaven will be this world renewed a renewed heavens and earth a perfect material world from which all suffering all tears all disease all evil all injustice all death has been eliminated

Christian hope is physical it is this existence perfected we are going to walk we are going to eat hug we are going to work we are going to hug we are going to be loved we are going to sing and we will do it all in degrees of joy and excellence and satisfaction and beauty and power that right now we could not even possibly grasp in other words Christian hope is not a mere consolation prize where okay you know you've lost everything else in this world but let me give you this instead it's the recapturing of everything and perfected it's not a consolation prize it's getting the love the body the mind that we've been always long for there's others but let me just finish the

Christian hope is a radiant hope Paul does not simply say here that we're going to be together with others in this lovely world the main thing in his mind the biggest emphasis is that in verse 17 we will be with the Lord forever it means that we'll be in perfect communion with our creator God we will see his the great God the infinite God the one who is glorious and magnificent face to face and when we look into the face of Christ it will completely transform us because as Paul says we will be fully known yet at the same time fully loved we're always cautious of being fully known right now because we fear if we are fully known we won't be fully loved and on that day we will we were originally created to know and to love

God supremely created to commune with his love and see his beauty and at some level all human restlessness all of it our drive for approval for comfort for a beautiful experience for love for power for accomplishment are all ways of trying to do what Saint Augustine called the God shaped hole trying to fill that God shaped hole in us in every set of arms we are seeking the arms of God in every loving face we are seeking the face of God in every accomplishment we are looking for the approval of God and the future of the Christian hope is the radiant face of God the embrace of God the approval of God the hope of the

Christian gospel eliminates the fear of death and it fuels transformation in life it fuels what Paul calls at the beginning here living to please God knowing that the end is certain to live each day with increasing joy and anticipation for that moment this is Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica as they were concerned about the death of their loved ones he's hoped for them that the reception of the gospel that they took at the very beginning would not be a vanity that they would continue to grow in it in such a way that they grow in transformation of life and confidence as they need their own death and this Christian hope when it was first declared utterly transformed as I said last week the early

[40 : 30] Christians in such a way that it entirely transformed the Roman Empire in the first three centuries of the millennium that millennium the early Christians had an extraordinary impact on people in the Roman Empire the way that they loved people in three areas by not giving their body or not using not seeing sex as a way to exploit or to treat people badly but as a way that they gave the way that they served the way that they built up their loved one their spouse in their work as a way to serve society to build up for their good the way that they surrendered themselves and loved and in their death in the way that they forgave particularly those enemies and the way they had such poise and confidence as they walked to their death as if they never feared it at all in fact many scholars agree that one of the major influences that took the apostle

Paul who wrote this letter calling these Christians to look forward in their hope one of the major influences of the apostle Paul to turn him as the chief enemy of the Christian church in its very early days to its chief advocate the one event they agree that started Paul on that journey was when he consented to the death of the very first martyr Stephen and when he saw Stephen die it unsettled him when he saw Stephen die and the way he died that unsettled Paul he could not get it out of his heart he had never seen someone die so joyfully so confident so last week I mentioned the German theologian and outspoken critic of Adolf

Hitler and the Nazi party Dietrich Bonhoeffer he was as I said he was appalled by the way the German church had lost the gospel capitulated to Hitler out of fear and Bonhoeffer was imprisoned he was finally executed by the Nazis on the 9th of April 1945 three weeks before the end of World War II he was on the morning he was executed at dawn on the 9th he was naked which is what the Nazi party do want to bring all sorts of humiliation to those who they saw as their great enemies he was stripped naked led out into the execution yard and this is the account of one eyewitness I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer praying fervently to God I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed so certain that

God heard his prayer at the place of execution he again said a short prayer then climbed the few steps to the gallows brave and composed in the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God that's the words of the doctor who had to confirm his death death was able death used to be able to crush us but now in Christ all the death can do is plant us in God's soil and so that we become something extraordinary forever that is the Christian hope and I think the Christian hope is expressed so eloquently perfectly boldly in the famous the words of the famous 19th century

Christian evangelist Dwight L. Moody not long before he died he said soon you will read in the newspaper that Dwight L. Moody has died don't you believe it I'll be more alive than I've ever been that's the Christian hope embrace it for your joy