

1 Thessalonians Hope

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[0 : 00] What happens after I die? This week, some of the staff, we went on a staff retreat. We spent some time out in a place called Bathurst, planning the future of the rest of the year and the next couple of years.

And on the way out to Bathurst, there's a little tiny town called Yetome. This is where my family, the Barnett family, comes from. There's even a Barnett's Road.

I didn't get a selfie, although I should. Definitely should do that next time. And so because I hardly ever get the chance to go out there, but, you know, Bathurst is not close, the staff team thankfully indulged me.

We dropped in there for about five minutes. And we stopped into Yetome. And the only thing worth visiting in Yetome is the cemetery. And that's where all my family are. And so we went to the Anglican church at Yetome, where there are a lot of my family.

And so you'll see a photo come up of my pop, my grandfather, Aubrey Austin. My great-grandfather is there, my grandfather's brother.

[1 : 07] There's a lot of family connections. And I love visiting my pop when I can. It's quite a special thing to kind of journey out to Yetome and see my family.

And I've always thought that was where I was going to go when I died. But recently, my dad, who I thought would be heading back to Yetome, recently my mum and dad said, oh, we've bought some land somewhere else.

And I was shocked, flabbergasted. What do you mean? I've always thought that the Barnett family, we were all going to be at Yetome. This is where our family is buried.

But they've bought some, you know, a small amount of land in the Sutherland Shire, of all places. And I've got this uncertainty.

What happens after I die? Where am I going to be buried? What's going to happen to my corpse? Look, I don't really care. But there's this family connection and then this specialness to Yetome.

[2 : 16] Am I going to lose this family connection after I die? And I'm thrown into this place of unknown where I'm going to end up. Maybe you know what's going to happen to you after your body dies.

Maybe you're not even thinking about it at all. But there are many uncertainties when it comes to death. What's going to happen to me when I die? I'm worried what's going to happen to my body.

I'm worried about what's going to happen leading up to death. The sickness and the pain. Death causes me so much fear. And so it's easier to just not think about it, to avoid it.

We've been looking through the book of Thessalonians. And we've had a look at how this little church started. And the encouragement Paul has written to them. And this church were worried about the same thing.

They were worried about what happens after death. And so Paul spends a fair chunk of time writing so that they are informed about what's going to happen after death.

[3 : 19] And so as we look at this last sermon in our Stand Firm series, we're going to be challenged to stand firm in the face of death. So let me pray as we have a look at 1 Thessalonians.

Heavenly Father, death causes us so much pain and grief. Help us to understand how you have defeated it.

And how to have hope in what you have given us, Lord. Amen. Please have your Bibles open, your phones unlocked, or look at the screen. We're going to start in chapter 4, verse 13. Brothers and sisters, we do not 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.

Paul wants to make sure that the church of Thessalonica is not confused, that they're not uninformed, that there is no speculation and wild guessing and fear-mongering.

But he wants people to be able to say with confidence, I know where I'm going. I know what's going to happen to me. Paul wants there to be no fear. And so he talks about those who have already died.

[4 : 35] Paul's going to use a particular metaphor about sleeping in death. He's going to use it twice in totally different ways. Paul likes to mix his metaphors sometimes. And so the first way he's going to talk about sleeping is those who are dead following Jesus.

If I was to die right now, I would be asleep following the Lord in that metaphor. Paul is a little bit later in chapter 5 going to talk about those who are asleep, as in those who are ignoring God.

So you've got these two different illustrations that he uses. He talks about those who follow the Lord and then die, and they're waiting on Jesus, and those who are ignoring Jesus. And so Paul, he doesn't want this church, who are facing persecution from the people around them, who are being attacked and may even have been martyred and killed, he doesn't want them to grieve like the rest of the world.

The rest of the world who grieves without Jesus and without hope. He doesn't want them to grieve like there is no future, or that their future is in doubt.

In the Greek religious culture, people had to stand before hostile spiritual forces, hostile gods, without hope. One author from that time reflected that hope is for the living.

[6 : 02] The dead are without hope. In the face of death and desperation, grief reigns. How do people deal with grief?

Well, we say that there's the five stages of grief that people go through. So how would someone at this time deal with their own pending mortality or the death of a loved one?

First of all, there would be denial. It's easy for many of us here who feel like death is a long way away just to deny that it's ever going to happen to us. We just push it out of our minds.

Maybe at this time, when somebody did pass away, maybe there would be anger. There would be anger at the gods who had taken their loved one. Maybe then they move to bargaining.

Bargaining with the gods, offering sacrifices, trying to buy this person's health or buy their way out of hell into some kind of heaven.

[6 : 59] Maybe they move into depression then, where there is just no hope. And finally, to acceptance that their loved one is lost. There is no hope in any of this.

And how do people comfort those who are in grief when there is no hope? Often there is just empty platitudes. Even if someone doesn't believe in God, they'll often speak like they do.

I've found people who will say things like, it's okay, they're with God now. They're one of God's angels. They're looking down from heaven on you right now.

And people say it because they want to comfort people grieving, but they don't have any real hope in the future. In reality, they'll just end up grieving because all is lost.

So what should we do then? How should we grieve? Paul says, Don't grieve like them, like all hope is lost. What do we do when we face sickness and pain and our own mortality?

[8 : 10] Verse 14. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Paul doesn't give a fickle comfort. He doesn't say, Don't worry about death. It's fine. It's going to be lovely. You'll go to be with God. You'll be an angel.

Paul doesn't tell them, Don't grieve. Death is awful. It is horrible. It's painful. When Jesus himself was confronted at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, even knowing that in a moment he was going to raise his friend to life, Jesus still weeps.

We see pain and death and it is right to grieve. It's right to get angry and say, This is not right. This is not how God made the world to be.

Death is an enemy. And we cannot deny it by suppressing our grief. But it is not a grief that has no hope.

[9 : 22] Hope is not a subjective feeling that can change day by day, depending on how our mood feels. The hope that we have is an objective reality that is true every day.

Our grief is tempered and informed by the hope that we have. Jesus was raised from the dead. This is the reality of the world we live in.

We live in a world where dead people come back to life and live forever. It's only happened once. There's only been one person who's died and come back to life and is still alive, and that's Jesus.

But we live in a world where that is the reality. The reality is that Jesus is coming back soon, and all of those who have followed him, even if they have died, they will be raised.

And that is not false hope. Jesus' resurrection is a guarantee for us. He was dead and he was raised. So too will the Thessalonians, and so too will us.

[10 : 23] If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15, we are fools for believing it. We are fools for even being here tonight.

It's the most important. It's the central part of Christianity. It's the one piece that all of Christianity rises or falls on. The testimony of Jesus' resurrection from the dead has gone out.

There were authoritative witnesses. There were people who saw it. They could have been appealed to. People could go and check. Did you see Jesus after he was dead? Yeah, I saw him. People saw it.

It was recorded. Jesus was dead, and now he is alive. The Thessalonians, they were worried about their death.

They were worried about what their future held. In particular, they were worried that their friends who had died were going to miss out on seeing Jesus. But Paul doesn't want them to be fearful or anxious about what happens when we die.

[11 : 30] He wants to inform them so that they can have certainty, that they can have hope in the future. I think fear of death is pretty similar to the fear of the unknown.

It's a fear of what happens after we die. I see it in kids. I see it in my kids. They fear the dark under their bed. And what do they do?

They often fill the dark under their bed with imaginary things. They fill it with monsters and boogeymen. Is there some kind of great phrase in Chinese?

I didn't hear you. I'm sure there is. We fill the unknown with things that we fear. But Paul, he gets a flashlight, and he shines a light in the dark, and he says, relax.

Child, there's nothing there. Go back to sleep. He says, relax. God has got this. Actually, he doesn't just take a light and shine it under the bed. He takes a hacksaw to the legs, chops the bed, and the bed drops down.

[12 : 32] So there's nothing under the bed. There is no fear. Jesus, who was dead, is alive. And those who follow him, they will be too.

If you're struggling in your faith, and yet can say, I believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, and God will raise me like him. That is an amazing and wonderful thing to hold on to.

Even if you're struggling with all other parts of Christianity, with how God wants you to live your life, with sexual purity, as we saw last week, stand firm in the fact that God raised Jesus, and he will raise us.

Verse 14, for we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And so we believe that God will bring with Jesus, those who have fallen asleep in him.

Paul doesn't want them to fear. He wants them to have certainty about the future. But we don't know too much about what the resurrection will look like. We don't know what this future hope looks like.

[13 : 41] But Paul gives us some certainties. He paints a bit of a picture of what it will look like. Have a look at verse 15 with me. According to the Lord's words, we tell you that we who are still alive, we who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Paul reassures the Thessalonian church about those who have already fallen asleep. And he paints a picture of those who are already dead. Will they have a place of privilege?

The dead will rise first to meet the Lord in the air. And then those who are still alive, they'll be caught up in the clouds to meet with the Lord. Now, I don't necessarily think this is a step-by-step guide to the resurrection.

[14 : 51] However, what it does affirm for us is that Jesus hasn't forgotten the dead. Even those who have been dead for thousands of years, like the Thessalonians, we will all meet with Jesus together.

And he speaks of the clouds because that's the meeting place between humans and the divine. The clouds were the place where we meet. You know, you think of the kind of the classic picture of heaven from, you know, the Simpsons or something.

It's always fluffy clouds. It's a metaphor. It's a picture of being together with Jesus. And when that moment does come, the moment when Jesus returns, the moment we've been waiting for for thousands of years, it will come with a loud command.

The voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God. Does anybody play the trumpet these days? I know Darcy does, but I think he's actually playing it right now.

But the trumpet, if you didn't know, it's primarily a military instrument. And so you would use it to get the army ready for battle. You know, it's a nice loud instrument that just kind of cuts through everything a bit better than, you know, gentle keys or the strumming of an acoustic guitar.

[16 : 09] It cuts through. And it says, people, get up, stand up, be ready. And Paul says, when the Lord returns, there's going to be a trumpet call. It paints this picture that we're going to be ready, that we'll hear a trumpet call and we will rise.

Even those who are dead will stand up, ready to attention, ready for our commander, ready for our Lord to return. And so this picture of the Lord's return, it paints that the dead are raised, that those who are still living are lifted up to be with Jesus.

Everyone will hear the trumpet will ring out. Now, I have no idea what this looks like in practice. We have a globe, not a flat earth. And so I don't know what it's going to look like when there's a trumpet call and Jesus returns at one point.

It fascinates me. I love to dwell on this. But what I have confidence in is that no one will miss out. All of those who follow the Lord, living or dead, will hear his call, will hear that trumpet call.

The dead will be raised. Paul gives all of this information, not so that people are really aware of trumpet calls and watch the clouds. Paul gives this information so that people don't grieve without hope.

[17 : 38] Verse 18. Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Remind each other that the hope is in the Lord and in his return.

Our hope, our future, is not the stuff of speculation. It's not the stuff of fiction. It's not the stuff of the latest sci-fi TV show. So, it's a passage for us at a funeral, at a graveside, in our hands comforting a brother or sister in their greatest sorrow.

I know of a man who became a Christian about 15 years ago, but he was so fearful of death that he just didn't talk about it at all. He would avoid the topic.

If the topic came up, he would just change the conversation. He was so fearful, he just couldn't engage at all. And it's only been in the last three years that he's actually been able to engage, that he's been able to talk about his own funeral, about his own death, and what the future holds.

It took 12 years of following the Lord to see that change in him. I can understand fearing the pain and fearing the uncertainty of how we're going to die, but we don't need to fear death itself or what happens after.

[19 : 03] We know what will happen after. Those who are following the Lord, they will be raised to everlasting life. So, when we grieve, we don't grieve like it's the end.

We don't grieve as if we have no hope. We grieve in the hope, knowing that the Lord will return and that we'll be raised with him. Paul has painted this picture of what happens after death and when the Lord returns.

And now he answers the question that's on everyone's mind. Imagine the Thessalonians, they're being persecuted. Some of them are being murdered for following Jesus. They've heard that the Lord is going to come back and I can imagine they would be thinking, when?

When is he coming back? We're facing a lot of persecution. When is the Lord coming back? And so Paul, likely knowing that this was their next question, he answers it at the start of chapter 5.

Have a look at verse 2 with me. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Compared with those who were saying that there was peace and security, the Lord will return in an instant when no one is ready.

[20 : 18] There was a common phrase in the city at the time, peace and security. It came from, I think it's Latin, Pax Romana under Augustus, who was in charge at the time.

This was a repeated phrase. The Romans had taken control of the empire and they had brought peace and safety, peace and security.

And so it described a reality for people that there was an absence of war and there was social harmony that brought joy and prosperity to people. But in reality, there was joy and prosperity between countries, but there was no peace between people and God.

It gave them false hope. Just like the false hope of living in Sydney, we can very easily walk around and say, peace and prosperity, peace and security, life is good, everything's great. You know, yesterday was a wonderful day to be at the beach out in the sun.

Pretty sure I got sunburned mowing the lawns. Peace and safety, no one was attacking me. It was lovely. It's the flip side of the picture of joy and hope in Jesus.

[21 : 44] For those who aren't following Jesus, who think there is peace and safety and security, destruction comes. And it comes without warning.

This is not like a typhoon where there's a warning, there is no earthquake alarm. It is labor pains. It comes upon a woman suddenly. I remember when Alyssa was in labor with Isaac.

She had a really long labor. But at one point, she tried to get up and say, I don't want to do this anymore. This hurts. I want to escape this.

I want to go home. I'm going to get off the bed. You know, she couldn't. I don't know why I'm laughing at her. She's not here. But there was no salvation. That baby had to come. There is no escaping labor.

In that day when Jesus returns, there will be fulfillment of hope. There will be joy. But it will also be destruction for those who are not ready for the Lord.

[22 : 46] There will be no escape. But he hasn't come back yet. And I think this is a great motivator for us to be on mission.

Jesus could return at any moment. And there's many people in my family who don't know the Lord. This should be an alarm for us. This should be the earthquake warning.

We should be getting ready. Growing up, my parents had a garage door that had a clicker. So I remember sitting in my room at home, teenager, should have done all kinds of stuff, homework, clean the room.

And then I'd hear the garage door start opening and it was a sign that my parents were home. And I'd jump up and I'd start cleaning things and start looking like I was really busy. The Lord will return at any moment.

This should be the thing that alerts us to get ready, to get our lives in order, to get our friends and our family ready for the Lord's return.

[23 : 54] But what do we do while we wait? It's been 2,000 years. The Lord's return is a lot closer than it was 2,000 years ago, but we don't know when it's going to be.

So Paul says we need to wait ready. Have a look at verse 6. So then let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.

For those who sleep, sleep at night. And those who get drunk, get drunk at night. Paul says to wait for the Lord. Wait and be ready. Don't be drunk.

Don't go to sleep. But stay awake and be ready for the Lord's return. Don't walk through life thinking, ah, look, I'll follow Jesus later.

I'm going to live my life like I want, but when I get to about 80 or so, or maybe when I get sick, just on my deathbed, I'll repent, I'll turn to Jesus, and I'll just slip into heaven, and I'll have it all.

[24 : 56] Be ready. The Lord will come back at any moment. He will come back like a thief in the night. So don't binge on immoral activity, but wait patiently.

Wait expecting the Lord to return. Verse 8, But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

These are the themes that have been all throughout 1 Thessalonians. Faith, hope, and love. And it comes back to them at the end. So while we wait, we stand firm in faith, in hope, and in love.

We stand firm in the faith that Jesus was raised from the dead, and so will we. We stand firm in the hope that even though we will die, Jesus is coming back to take us to be home.

We stand firm in love of God and one another. When we do this, when we stand firm in the face of death, we show, we model to people.

[26 : 09] we actually get the chance to encourage and build others up, persevering towards that last day. It was towards the end of last year.

One of my aunties got sick with cancer and passed away very suddenly. She was a wonderful Christian lady. And even though it was a time of grief, it was also a time of celebration.

There was joy and hope in what we long for. She now has the reward. She is now with the Lord that she has what I want.

She gets to be with Jesus. And I don't have that yet. It is such a different grief to those who have no hope. When we stand firm in the face of death saying Jesus is Lord, even when it terrifies me, it speaks loudly to those people around us.

When we hope in the resurrection that is more than this life. Paul answers the what happens when you die question. We will be raised with the Lord.

[27 : 20] He answers the question, what's going to happen? Sorry, when is the Lord going to return? And Paul says soon. It is very soon. I mentioned earlier that we got to visit Yet Home, where a lot of my family are buried.

And there is one headstone that I thought I would show you. It should be on the screen. It is normal Barnett. It is proof that there is at least one normal Barnett.

We actually think they got his headstone wrong and it should have been Norman Barnett, but there you go. It is normal. But what will our headstone say? Will it just be he was a normal person?

He was a good father, a good mother. These are good and important things. Is our headstone going to say, you know, he is someone who tried to have everything in life.

Do we just want to have a normal headstone? He was a person who was normal but is now dead. What would it like to live a life so that our headstone read, this person stood firm in faith in the face of death.

[28 : 36] They hoped for the resurrection of the dead and they loved people radically while they waited. How will people describe us as a church?

See, standing firm doesn't mean that we stand still. We hold firmly onto the gospel so we can go forward in God's plans and in God's purposes for us.

When our hope is in God, when we trust in no matter what happens on earth, even death, when our hope in God is like this, we can make radical decisions.

We can take massive risks because it doesn't matter what happens to us on earth because God has an eternity for us. Standing firm in faith means we won't be rattled by every wind of temptation.

Standing firm in hope helps us to make decisions that aren't just about our, I don't know, 80 or so years, whatever the current life expectancy is. Standing firm in hope means we have an eternal view.

[29 : 42] It helps us to make decisions that have an eternal impact. And standing firm in love means we can hold out the hope that we have in the Lord's return to those who grieve and say this is the only comfort that there is a Lord who loves you, who died so that we can have life.

What will you stand firm in? Let me pray. Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you to your word to us, to the whole letter to the Thessalonians.

And Father, we thank you that we can indeed stand firm in you because of what you have done through your Son. Heavenly Father, we ask that in the face of death and pain that we would stand firm hoping not in this life but in what you have prepared for us in advance.

Father, help our lives be ones that show that this life is only temporary but we long for what is eternal, Lord.

And while we wait, help our lives be marked with love for those around us. We ask this in your Son's name and feel glory. Amen.