

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] Well, good evening, church. Tonight I'd like us to turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 through 18. That's page 987 in the Pew Bible.

1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 through 18, page 987. Last Friday we got the call that our friend and our good brother in the Lord, Scott, had unexpectedly passed away.

And as I thought about what I would share tonight, this text from 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 was what came to mind. This is a text that I have leaned on personally time and time again in moments like these.

And I think because in many ways it speaks right to our situation. This church at Thessalonica that Paul writes to had lost some of their loved ones.

And they were shocked. And they were grieving. So you see, God in his great love for us speaks to us in the Bible in the most direct and relevant ways. Here's a passage written to a church living the same experience we are.

[1 : 19] And it speaks to us right in our need. How do we face the loss of a loved one, of a friend? And what difference does Christ make as we face the reality of death?

Well, let's read Paul's words here and let's find out. Let me read this for us. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, starting in verse 13. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, starting in verse 13.

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Let's pray, Lord. Will you pray with me? God, we are grateful that in this moment, as we remember our friend, our brother, that we can turn to your word and find encouragement, comfort, and hope.

God, we pray that you would speak to us tonight as we gather around your word together. God, we long to hear a word from you. So would you speak tonight? We pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

[2 : 56] So there are three things this passage is telling us to do, actually. And those three things are, in the face of loss, this passage is telling us to grieve, and it's telling us to hope, and then it's telling us to encourage one another.

This passage gives us permission to grieve, gives us a ground for hope, and it gives us a call, a call to encourage. So I just want to look at each of those three things briefly tonight.

As we come to God's word together. First, grieve. Look again at verse 13 with me. Paul says, 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.

Now, listen closely to what Paul is saying here. He's not saying that I don't want you to grieve at all. No, he's saying, I don't want you to grieve as others do who have no hope.

In other words, he's assuming that they will actually grieve. And he wants to inform them. He wants to instruct them so that they can grieve with hope, so that they can grieve well. But Paul does acknowledge and affirm their sadness, their grief.

[4 : 03] Because you see, friends, when we lose someone we love, it is expected, natural, and right that we grieve. After all, in doing so, we follow the example of Jesus himself, don't we?

Pastor Matt opened the service with this passage. What do we find in John 11 when his friend Lazarus died? Jesus weeps at his tomb. In fact, Jesus doesn't just weep there.

He gets angry. Jesus actually rages at the ravages of sin and death that have corrupted God's good world. In fact, we Christians, when we're thinking and feeling rightly, you know, we ought to actually grieve more deeply than anyone else.

And here's why. Because we know that death isn't the way it's supposed to be. God created the world for life.

God created you and I in his image to live in fellowship with him forever. However, it's because of sin that death has entered God's good creation. In fact, Paul, in another letter of his in 1

Corinthians, Paul actually calls death an enemy.

[5 : 20] So you see, despite what the world around us might say, death is not something that's natural. It's not the way it's supposed to be. So it's right for us to grieve.

Christians are not stoics, you see. We don't simply bite our upper lip and say, that's the way the world works, time to move on. No, we actually grieve. So friends, tonight, let us grieve.

I, for one, am going to miss Scott showing up early, nearly every week to evening service. Which only those of us maybe on the music team and the AV team realized.

I will miss the way that he would innocently interrupt the music team's rehearsal every week so he could tell us how much he couldn't wait to sing the songs that we were practicing. Ooh, that's a good one, he would say.

I, for one, will miss the way that he would call me pretty much at any time of the day, except in the morning. He would never call in the morning because he was never up before 11th.

[6 : 26] He would call me just to tell me something exciting that had happened to him that day. For no particular reason. Nick, you won't believe what I just saw. And just tell me, just to share joy.

I think, above all, I'm going to miss Scott's enthusiasm for the Lord. On more than one occasion, I remember having conversations with Scott on the drive home.

I would often give him a ride home after the evening service. And he would often tell me of his hunger and his desire for God to show up, as he would often say. When is God going to come down and show up?

Friends, oh, that we had such a hunger for God to show up. So let us grieve.

But our text tonight presses on, doesn't it? It doesn't end there. We grieve, yes, but we don't grieve as those who have no hope. That brings us to our second point. First, we grieve, but second, we are to hope.

[7 : 31] And Paul's description of hope is found in the long central section of our passage from verse 14 all the way down to verse 17. And here, Paul gives us a thumbnail sketch of the Christian hope.

And you see, if you look at verses 14 and 15, that hope for us Christians is not mere wishful thinking. It's not just hoping that something may happen in the future like the Red Sox will win the World Series again or that the Patriots will win the Super Bowl again.

No. Hope for Christians is planted firmly in historical reality. In the event of Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection.

What God did in history through Jesus, his son, is the bedrock of our hope. In fact, in Hebrews chapter 6, our hope in Jesus is described as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.

So real, so firm, so weighty that it keeps us stable in the midst of the storm. Look again at verse 14. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

[8 : 47] Do you see there the deep connection that exists between Jesus and his people, those who trust in him? In his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus took hold of us in our humanity and dealt with our sins so completely that our fate and his are inseparable now.

Another passage from the book of Hebrews puts it like this. It says, since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, that's you and me, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things. Why? That through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. What Jesus did, he did for us. He died our death that our death might die. He rose to life that we might live. Jesus himself said, I'm the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never ultimately die. Friends, the Christian hope is all about him.

[9 : 53] It's all about Jesus. Jesus, I have nothing else to bring to you or to offer to you tonight than the name of Jesus Christ. And this hope that we have in him is actually sort of a twofold hope.

First, we know from Scripture that all who die in Christ at the moment of death are with the Lord, as Paul will say in Philippians 1. That to depart from this life is to be with Christ, to be with him in glory. And we find Paul saying similar things in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. He says, to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. And that is the first stage of our Christian hope. That the saints departed are with Christ in glory, with their sorrows gone and their afflictions ceased and relieved, and with their joy full.

As we heard tonight, Scott would often say, I can't wait to meet him. I can't wait to meet that guy. And friends, the promises of God are firm.

Scott is with the one who loved him best, his Lord Jesus Christ. We can have certain hope in that tonight. But there's an even greater climax to come.

[11:13] That's not the end of the story. There's actually a second part to our hope. Those who die are with the Lord, but the story doesn't end there. And that's what Paul is describing here in the rest of 1 Thessalonians in our text.

He's lifting our gaze up to the completion of God's promises to come. There's coming a day, Paul says, when Christ will return.

That's the first thing Paul says. Our bodies will be raised. And there will be a great reunion. Those three things, that's our hope in full.

Let's look at those briefly. In verse 16, we have Jesus' return. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and the voice of an archangel into the sound of the trumpet of God. What Paul is describing here is the return of Christ.

It's this royal arrival of the world's true king in glory. You see, friends, Jesus' first coming was a coming in humility. But his second coming will be a coming in glory.

[12:18] And it will be loud, Paul says, that coming. It will be unmistakable. See how he piles up these images to make that point? It will be a cry and a voice and the sound of a trumpet.

Maybe a few electric guitars here and there with amps turned up to 11. You won't miss it. Christ will return.

And friends, that's good news of hope for us. For lots of reasons. But one in particular, because what the bodily return of Christ teaches us, even though it seems a little strange on the surface, you have to admit.

What the bodily return of Christ teaches us is that the one who took hold of us in his incarnation has not let us go. That Christ will always be with us.

He will always be united to us. That he will not abandon us. And he will come and he will complete his good work. And upon his return, look at the rest of verse 15.

[13:18] The dead in Christ will rise first. Paul speaking here of this second part of our hope, the resurrection. Christ's return and the resurrection of the body.

Friends, I wonder if you've spent much time thinking about the resurrection of the body. My guess is probably not. But you have to see that the ultimate future that God has for his children is not merely one of souls in heaven.

But the ultimate future that God has for his children is of our bodies. Our very physicality remade and perfected and transformed in glory.

Dwelling in a completely healed creation. This is the future that God has for us. You see, just as Jesus emerged victorious over death in his body, the same will be true for all those who trust in him on that day.

The French philosopher Luc Ferry, who is himself not a Christian, once made this observation talking about the resurrection of the body. He says, the Christian response to mortality, the resurrection of the body, is without question the most effective of all responses to death.

[14:34] It would seem to be the only version of salvation that enables us not only to transcend the fear of death, but also to beat death itself.

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying, what we believe as Christians, what we know to be true because of Jesus, is unlike anything else that the world has on offer.

That what is held out for us in the hope that we have in Jesus isn't just sort of getting a nice consolation prize by getting to sort of go to heaven, but that God will actually consume and beat and reverse death itself.

That death is not the last word. And that God in the resurrection will give us back all that death has stolen. Our regrets will be undone.

And our sadness will be swallowed up. And our guilt will be cleansed. Because all those things that we wish we could have done in the body and that we regret we have done in the body will be healed in the body.

[15:43] You see, our bodies by a great miracle of God will be restored and made new. Because God will have the last word and not death.

And that leads us right into the third part of this hope that we have. The reunion. Look at verse 17 with me. 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.

And so we will always be with the Lord. You see what Paul is describing here? When Jesus returns and transforms our corruptible bodies into incorruptible ones, putting death behind us once and for all, on that day, the church in heaven and the church on earth will be united around Jesus as he comes to reign.

In other words, there is a great reunion that awaits us. When Christ comes to make all things new and all things well, then the children of God in our bodies made new will embrace one another again.

And every brother and every sister we have had in the Lord, not one, Paul says, will be lost or be forgotten or be left out when Jesus comes to reign. And together we will always be with the Lord.

[17:04] Friends, this is our hope. The return, the resurrection, the reunion. And as we grieve Scott's passing, this is the hope that the Bible wants us to lean on.

This is what we should have as an anchor for our soul. That Christ will return. That he will make all things new. And we will dwell with him as his children forever.

Let me ask you, do you have this hope tonight? Or are you somewhat anchorless in the face of our very real mortality?

Are you adrift? We don't often like to think about death, do we? And then we get shocking news.

That someone that we had always counted on being there whenever the church doors were open will not be there again.

What is your hope tonight? The opening of the Heidelberg Catechism, which is an old summary of what Christians believe, begins with this question.

[18:16] What is your only comfort in life and in death, it asks. And it gives this answer. That I am not my own. But I belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.

In fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ by his Spirit assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Friends, can you say that tonight? Can you make those words your own and place yourself, body and soul, in life and in death into the hands of your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ?

Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And this hope stands ready for all of us tonight.

[19:28] This hope that our friend Scott lived and cherished and practically bled in all of his imperfection. This hope stands ready for each one of you.

For all of us who turn and take hold of the risen Christ for ourselves. So we grieve, but we also hope. And third, we encourage one another.

Verse 18, therefore, encourage one another with these words. You see, friends, grieving and hoping well can't be done alone. We need one another.

This Christian life thing is a community project. God has made us as a body, as a family. We need to encourage one another to grieve well, and we need to encourage one another to hope well.

And how do we do that? I think first just being present with one another is a good start. Just to be with one another, to spend time with one another, to be in fellowship with one another.

[20:35] The mere ministry of presence is an encouragement to us. Next, we can pray for one another. We can take our cares and concerns to God, and we can thank and praise God for our hope in Christ.

We can thank and praise God for the life of Scott, for what he meant to us, and for what we'll miss. Until that great reunion when Christ returns. And last, we can remind each other of Jesus' love for us.

We can speak of the great hope that we have in Christ to one another. With these words, Paul says, we're to encourage one another. Take these words and impart life and hope and encouragement to one another.

