

Grieving with Hope

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 February 2021

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the book of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, if you have a Bible with you? We're going to look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 through 18 this morning. As Pastor Matt mentioned in his pastoral prayer, many of us are grieving this week. We held the funeral for our brother in Christ, Kevin Jang here at Trinity Yesterday. So we're going to pause this Sunday from our sermon series in John, and we're going to look at a passage that points us to the hope that we have in Christ.

1 Thessalonians is a letter by the Apostle Paul to a church in a city called Thessalonica. And this church that Paul writes to, they had lost some of their loved ones, and they were shocked, and they were grieving as well. And so Paul writes to them about our hope in Christ.

And God in his good providence has preserved this letter for us to continue to give hope in each generation. You see, God in his great love for us speaks to us in the Bible often in the most direct and relevant ways. And here's a passage written to a church living some of the same experiences that we are. It speaks right to us in our need. How do we face the loss of a loved one, of a friend, of a fellow church member, of a parent? And what difference does it make as we face the reality of death? What difference does it make to know Christ? So why don't we read Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians, and we'll find out. And before I read for us, let me pray. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we pray that your Holy Spirit would come now and give light to our minds and give light to our hearts, that we would be able to hear and receive the message that you have inspired for us in your Word. Jesus, you tell us that the Holy Spirit's ministry is to take the things that are yours and make them known to us. So we pray that the Spirit would be at work to take the hope that is you and make it known to us. Lift our hearts to you again, Father, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. All right, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 through 18. Let me read for us. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that is those who have died, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

[2 : 51] For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 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.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Well, in the face of loss, what do we do? And there are three things that the Apostle Paul is telling us to do in the face of loss. He's telling us that we must grieve, and we must hope, and we must encourage one another. The Apostle here gives us the permission to grieve, he gives us the deepest ground for hope, and he gives us a call to encourage one another. So this morning, let's look briefly at each of those three things that we can and must do in the face of loss. First, we must grieve. Look again, if you have the passage there, look again at verse 13. Paul says, we don't want you to be uninformed, brothers, and by brothers he means brothers and sisters. We don't want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep. Again, that means those who have died. Why doesn't he want us to be uninformed?

So 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, 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, Paul's assuming that they will grieve, and he wants to write to them so that they can grieve with hope, so that they can grieve well. So you see, Paul acknowledges and affirms their grief and ours. When we lose someone we love, it's expected, it's natural, it's right that we grieve. After all, in doing so, in grieving, we follow the example of none other than Jesus himself. When his friend Lazarus died, what did Jesus do?

Jesus wept at his tomb. Do you remember? And Jesus didn't just weep. The apostle John tells us that he got angry. He raged. He sighed deeply in his soul at the ravages of sin and death in God's good world.

So grieving a loss isn't just right, it's Christ-like. It's following in the steps of our Savior. And in fact, as Christians, when we're thinking and we're feeling rightly, you know, we ought to grieve more deeply than anyone else. There's a kind of depth to Christian grief. Why is that?

[5 : 39] Well, because we know that death is not 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. It's not natural that things die. It's very unnatural. It's because of sin that death has entered God's good creation.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians, in another one of Paul's letters, he will call death an enemy that's invaded God's good creation. So it's right to grieve and it's right to grieve deeply because this isn't how it's supposed to be. This isn't what God created us for. And that means Christians are not sort of stoics. We don't simply bite our lip and say, well, we just have to move on. We don't say death is just the natural way of the world. No, we grieve. So friends, let us grieve. For those of us who have lost loved ones in this life, let us grieve. And if you have lost a loved one, you know that kind of bitter sting that separation of death brings. C.S. Lewis once wrote that when one of his friends died, what he lost wasn't just his friend, but he also lost what only his friend could bring out in other people. He writes, speaking of his friends, he says, I'll never see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Now that his friend Charles was gone, he was never going to see that particular smile, that particular laugh in his friend Ronald again that only Charles could bring out.

And don't we experience that when we lose loved ones? We don't just lose them, but we lose everything that they could bring about, everything that they could draw out of us and of others. We lose so much in this life when we lose those that we love. So friends, let us grieve.

But our text doesn't just leave us there, does it? It doesn't end there. We grieve, yes, but we don't grieve as those who have no hope. Grief isn't something that just takes us down and leaves us there for the Christian.

And that brings us to our second point in our passage. First, yes, we grieve, but second, we are to hope. And Paul's description of our hope is found in the long kind of central section of our passage this morning, from verse 14 all the way to verse 17. Paul here gives kind of a thumbnail sketch of the Christian hope. And you see right away in verses 14 and 15, again, if you have it there before you, that hope for Christians isn't merely just wishful thinking.

[8 : 27] In other words, hope for Christians isn't just a verb, I hope this will happen, I hope that will happen. No, hope for us is a noun, it's a substance, it's a thing, it has shape and form and content and reality. Hope for Christians is planted firmly in reality in the event of Jesus's own life, death, and resurrection. What God did in history through Jesus's Son, this is the bedrock of our hope.

In Hebrews chapter 6, our hope in Jesus is described as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. If you've ever seen an anchor, you know, this summer we were at a seafood restaurant, and do you see this sometimes? Outside of seafood restaurants, they'll like throw these old anchors for decoration. But it was kind of cool, it was the first time I'd ever like been up and close with an anchor, right? And they're huge, and they're weighty, and they're solid, and my kids were climbing on them.

It was something that they didn't have to hold on to, it was almost holding on to them, it was so big and weighty, so real and firm. And Hebrews says, that's what we have in Christ.

We have an anchor of the soul that keeps us stable in the storm. That's our hope, not wishful thinking, but a thing with weight and depth.

So 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.

[10 : 05] I want us to notice in this verse the deep connection between Jesus and his people, between Jesus and all who trust in him. In his incarnation, in his death, in his resurrection, Jesus took hold of us in our humanity. God took hold of our humanity, and he dealt with our sin so completely that our fate now is utterly tied to his.

Again, the book of Hebrews in chapter 2 puts it like this. Hebrews says, since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, that's you and me, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things, that through his 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. We're enslaved to fear and to death, but Jesus took a hold of our flesh and blood, went down into death for us to liberate us from that fear of death and from death itself.

In other words, what Jesus did, he did for us. He died our death that our death may die, and he rose to life that we might live. Later on in the Gospel of John, we'll hear this in our John sermon series. Jesus himself will say, I'm the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

So friends, the Christian hope, first and foremost, is all about him. It's all about Jesus. Jesus. And it's a firm and weighty anchor. And this hope that we have in him, as the Apostle Paul unfolds for us, it kind of unfolds in two stages. Our hope in Jesus has kind of two parts, two chapters, one now and one to come. And we need both of these chapters to kind of understand the fullness of our Christian hope. Chapter one of this hope that we have in Christ is this, that all who die in Christ at the moment of death are with the Lord. Notice in 1 Thessalonians, Paul will say, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ are with Jesus. Paul will make that clear again in Philippians chapter one.

He says that for the one who trusts in Christ to depart from this life is to be present with the Lord, to be with him in glory. Again, in 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul will say, to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. And that's the first stage. That's the first chapter of our Christian hope, that right now the saints departed are with Christ in glory. Their sorrow's gone. Their afflictions relieved. Their faces beholding the face of Jesus. They are, as Paul says, at home with the Lord. And so when we grieve, we grieve with hope that our loved ones are not lost. They are with the Lord. But that's not the end of the hope. That's just chapter one.

[13 : 13] There's an even greater climax to come. There's a second chapter. There's a second part of our Christian hope. And what is this part two of Christian hope? And that's what Paul describes here in detail in 1 Thessalonians. He lifts our gaze to the completion of God's promises to come.

And he says, in summary, if I can summarize it, he says, there's coming a day when the King will return, when all of our bodies will be raised, there will be a great reunion, and we will reign with Him forever.

I couldn't resist the alliteration there. Return, raised, reunion, and reign. That's our hope. That's our hope in full. So let's look at that together as we look at chapter two of our hope.

In verse 16, Paul writes about Jesus' return. He says, for the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

What Paul is describing here is the return of Jesus Christ. It is the royal arrival of the world's true king in glory, God coming to earth in splendor. You see, friends, Jesus' first coming was a coming in humility. He arrived quietly in a manger. But His second coming will be a coming in glory.

[14 : 43] And it will be loud. It will be unmistakable and unavoidable. Paul in here, Paul in this passage kind of piles up these auditory images to make a point. There's a cry. There's a voice. There's a sound of a trumpet. In other words, you're not going to miss it. Christ will return. The king will arrive. And that's good news. That is good news of hope. The psalmists say that when the king comes to reign, when the Lord comes in glory, the trees will clap their hands. The hills will sing for joy. Creation that has been groaning for God to come. The king, the Lord will liberate it from its death and decay. And yes, God will come. And when God comes, it will be in the person of Jesus in glory.

Now, perhaps we find the bodily return of Christ a little strange. But consider what that means. Consider what the bodily return of Christ teaches us. It means that the one who took hold of us in His incarnation has not ever let us go. When God came the first time, He took on flesh. And if He is to come again, He will come in that same flesh still united to us. He has not abandoned us. When He took up our humanity, He has taken it up for all time. So when He returns, He will return in the same body that loved us and died for us and was risen again for us. Christ will return in glory and the king will come. And when the king comes, when He returns, verse 15 of 1 Thessalonians tells us what will happen.

Verse 15 says, the dead in Christ will rise first. Paul here is speaking about the resurrection of the body. Christ will return and the saints will be raised. The dead will be raised. The resurrection of the body. Now, I wonder if you've spent much time thinking about what that means, the resurrection of the body. Do you realize that the ultimate future that God has for His children is not merely one of our souls in heaven, but of our very bodies remade and perfected and transformed in glory?

Just as Jesus emerged victorious over death in His body, the same will be true for all who trust in Him. And this makes Christianity very different from nearly every other kind of religion or every other sort of source of hope that we look for. One person who noticed this was the French philosopher Luc Ferry, who himself is not a Christian. And he made this observation talking about the belief in the bodily resurrection. He wrote this. He said, the Christian response to mortality, that is the resurrection of the body, is without question the most effective of all responses, other sort of ways we can deal with death and look for hope. He says, it would seem to be the only version of salvation that enables us not only to sort of transcend our fear of death, but he says, but also to beat death itself.

Now, do you see what he's saying? He's saying that the resurrection of the body means that God ultimately beats death.

[18 : 13] Death is not the last word. The separation of body and soul that death brings will be undone. God, in the resurrection, will give us back all that sin and death have stolen.

And this ultimately is the Christian hope, especially in the face of tragedy. When tragedy strikes, where do we turn? When we're asking God, why do these things happen?

To what or to whom do we look for answers? Well, ultimately, we turn to Christ. And in Christ, we see first, we see first Christ's crucifixion. Here's a God who knows what it's like to experience the depths of human evil and suffering and injustice. God is not far off, but near to all those who suffer and who mourn. We first see his crucifixion, but in Christ, we then see his resurrection. God overturning the evil and death and injustice. God giving us back life in its full. We grieve because death separates us from the ones we love. We grieve because death separates us from the embraces that we should have had with that loved one, from the dances that we should have danced, from the laughter that we should have laughed. But the resurrection of the body beats death and gives life back to us. It gives back to us the lungs that laugh and the feet that dance and the arms that embrace. God will make them new. And our regrets will be undone, and our sadness will be swallowed up, and our guilt will at last be cleansed. And on that day, we will meet face to face the very bodily presence of Christ and the ones we love in Christ.

And this leads us right into the third part of this hope that we have. Chapter two of our hope, return, resurrection, and then reunion. 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.

And so we will always be with the Lord. You see, when Jesus returns, when he 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 reunited forever around Jesus as he comes to reign.

[20 : 49] In other words, there's a great reunion that awaits us. When Christ comes to make all things new, we will embrace one another again. Every brother, every sister that we have had in the Lord, not one will be lost, not one will be left out when Jesus comes to reign.

And together, Paul says, we will always be with the Lord. Not just me, but we. Paul says, we'll meet the Lord in the air. And the image there is that we meet him as he's coming down.

And when he comes down to reign, we reign with him. As Revelation chapter 22 says, we will see God face to face and we will reign with him forever and ever in a healed, perfected, cleansed, cleansed creation. So friends, this is our hope. The return of the king, the resurrection of the body, the reunion of the saints, and the reign of God in a healed creation forever. Now, at first, this can seem a little too good to be true, can't it? Maybe a little hard to wrap our minds around. But as we sit with it for a second, doesn't it speak to that deep longing in our souls? That longing that we have, not just for some sort of otherworldly afterlife, which doesn't usually sound all that appealing when you think about it for a long time.

What we long for is the healing and restoration of this creation. We have a longing for God to overturn the ravages of sin and death once and for all. Not just to ignore them or to sort of give us a consolation prize, but for God to overturn the wrong and to undo it. We have that longing for justice, for tragedy to be reversed and undone. And that longing that we have in this life, the longing that we have that life right now is not in vain, that it's not just a waste, all these things, the Christian hope, the return, the resurrection, the reunion, the reign, it fits those longings so well, doesn't it? It fits the deep desires of our hearts so well that, friends, it must have come from the one who created us to begin with, the one who knit these desires in our hearts from the beginning, the one who continues to kindle these desires for healing and justice and life in our hearts, even though so much seems stacked against them.

These desires have come from the one who loved us with an everlasting love. The love of God that was deep enough to send His own Son to rescue us. And again, this hope, as Hebrews says, isn't some mere flight of fancy, but an anchor for the soul.

[23 : 56] We can lean into it. We can hold on to it. And we will find that it holds on to us. He will keep us steady when the waves of sorrow and when the tides of trouble come.

So let me ask us this morning, let me ask you, do you have this hope? Or are you anchorless?

When sorrow comes, what have you tied yourself to that will hold you fast? The opening of the Heidelberg Catechism, which is an old summary of what Christians believe, begins with this question. The very first question it asks, it says, what is your only comfort in life and in death?

Sort of gets right to the point, doesn't it? What is your comfort? What is your strength? What is your hope? What is your stability in life and in death? And the Catechism gives this answer, that I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, and life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Can you say that today? Can you make those words your own and place yourself, body and soul, and life and in death, into the hands of your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ? Jesus has come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[25 : 26] And this hope stands open and ready for all who turn and take Christ for themselves. Do you have the hope?

If not, take hold of it today in Christ. Or rather, realize that He is taking hold of you. And give yourself into His hands.

And if you do have this hope, if this is the hope that's kindling in your soul as a believer, then the application for us is this, and this is where our passage in 1 Thessalonians ends. First we grieve, next we hope, and third and last we encourage one another.

Verse 18 says, Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Encourage one another. You see, grieving well and hoping well, these things can't be done alone, by ourselves.

We need one another. All of this is a community project. We need to encourage one another to grieve well, and we need to encourage one another to hope well. So how do we do that?

[26 : 31] How do we encourage one another? First, I think being present to one another is the best start. To be with one another, to spend time together, to be in fellowship.

Now, of course, the pandemic has made that very challenging, hasn't it? To be present to one another. But many of us have found ways to do it. Whether over Zoom, whether over the live stream on Sunday, or taking walks together outside, or making a phone call.

We can continue, and we must continue, to be present to one another. So we can encourage one another to grieve well and to hope well. And next, we can pray for one another.

We can encourage one another by praying for one another. We can take our cares and concerns to our Heavenly Father. We can thank and praise God for our hope in Christ. We can thank and praise God for the lives of the loved ones that we've lost, for what they've meant to us, for what we'll miss.

We can pray and thank God for that great reunion that we look forward to when Christ comes. So we encourage one another, we strengthen one another by praying for one another, praying with one another.

[27 : 41] And last, we can remind each other of Jesus' love for us. We can speak of the great hope that we have in Christ. Paul says, encourage one another with these words.

So we're present, and we pray, and then we can, and we must use words to encourage one another. Sometimes we feel kind of awkward when we're with one another, trying to grieve and trying to hope, don't we?

We don't really know what to say. But you know, when the time is right, the Spirit will give us words to encourage one another, to lift one another up, to speak to each other about the great love of Christ.

That Christ has loved us even in our sin. That Christ has conquered our death on the cross. That he's rose again and will return to make all things new. That God is faithful and will not leave us or forsake us.

To grieve well and to hope well, we have to keep these words alive for one another. And keep speaking them and reminding each other of them.

[28 : 47] And not be afraid to speak them. So brothers and sisters, this is the message of our text today. That we would grieve. And that we would hope.

And that out of that grieving with hope, we would encourage one another with these words. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the hope that we have in Christ.

God, we ask that you would be near to all who mourn today. May they find comfort in you, Lord Jesus. And help us as a church to encourage one another.

To grieve well and to hope well. We do look forward to your return, Lord Jesus. We look forward to the reunion of your church, all our brothers and sisters who've gone before us.

May your sure and steadfast promises continue to be that anchor for our souls in the days ahead. In Christ's name we pray.

[29 : 50] Amen. Amen, friends. Well, we've said that Christ is the center of our hope. So let's stand and let's sing about the hope that we have in Christ alone.

Amen.