

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Sermon: “Have Hope In Christ”

As the end of the Church year, our pericopes now turn toward end of life matters, death, and the afterlife. That is the duty of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and the verses which follow: ***“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”***

Like many today, the Thessalonians did not know how to think or talk about death and what happens after death. With that in mind, Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians what is going to happen at the return of the Lord. He has a practical, pastoral purpose for venturing these deep waters. Some Christians in Thessalonica have died, and the others are not sure what to believe about where these people are and what has or will happen to them. They thought only those alive at the return of Christ would be saved.

So, naturally they feared their dear friends and relatives who were already dead had forfeited any share in the coming glory, that they were out of luck, and missed the boat of everlasting life now they were dead.

For this reason, the Thessalonian Christians were going around grieving like their pagan neighbors, “*Who have no hope.*” So, Paul corrects their errors to comfort them with the truth of sound doctrine. He is concerned they learn appropriate Christian grief, instead of the wild and hopeless mourning that typified the desperation of pagan funerals. The pagans were right to despair, but Paul says to the Thessalonians, there can be no Christian comfort without Christian faith. He is essentially saying, “Get back to the truth about Christ’s resurrection and glorious return and you will not have to sink into the funk of depression or the errors of speculation.”

Paul is going to draw a contrast, not with natural and excessive sorrow, but between Christian hope and pagan hopelessness. Hardly could a lesson be more needed today.

The finality of death filled the heathen with a feeling of blank despair. It was a sorrow which was unrelieved by any hope of a future reunion with their loved ones, because there was no future for the dead. They were obliterated and the cremation of the body was the outward expression of that hopelessness.

What Paul needs to do for this bunch of downtrodden believers is re-describe the moment when God makes His new world. He says, in the best way he can, “It is kind of like this,” and then flashes a few slides.

To start with, he recaps the foundation of Christian facts which are the reality for those who die in the faith. Mindful that the pagans’ understanding of death is a finality (a terminal point where the spirit which animated the person is extinguished and the worthless, cursed shell of the material body is burned), Paul says, “NO!” Death is not the end of humanity in God’s new world.

The pagan thinks so, and that is why they cremate their bodies. And why not? Dead means dead, right? Paul breaks in and says in verse 13: ***“I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who are asleep.”*** Paul’s starting point echoes one of the earliest Christian creeds, the short verbal formula in verse 14 which sums up what the Church believed: “Jesus died and rose again.” But this creedal line, that, ***“Jesus died and rose again,”*** is not just info about the past. It reveals what will happen to those who belong to God’s Messiah. Each of them and their dearly departed were united to Jesus through Baptism.

They were once dead in trespasses and sins, but now God made their spirits alive in Christ (Ephesians 2). As for their bodies, they too have been washed by the Word of God in Baptism. What is more, their bodies were regularly united to Christ’s resurrected body and blood in Communion. If they die untied to the risen Christ, they will also rise again. When Christ comes on the Last Day, He will bring them with Him.

So, the Christian understanding of “sleep” is not like the pagan one. For the pagan and today’s materialists, “sleep” is a mere euphemism for an obliterating death. But behind the Christian understanding of “sleep” lies all the knowledge of the saving facts that make death nothing more than a cozy sleep-state for the body. This sleep applies only to the body of the dead believer and not to their spirit, which is ushered into the presence of God to be comforted by the His angels and Christ Himself (Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 6:9).

Paul not only helps them to understand that the resurrection of the departed saints was secured by the rising of Jesus, but also states God will bring them with Jesus upon His momentous, permanent return.

So, stop acting like the hopeless when we should be basking in confident assurance. Plant their bodies in the ground and let them rest in peace.

Jesus endured the full horror implied in the death He suffered as the wages of sin, which transformed death for those united to Him into a good night's sleep. But in an hour we do not know, those transformed bodies will be reunited with glorified spirits.

The basic point Paul makes in verse 15 is that Christians who are still alive when the great day dawns will not find themselves at an advantage over those who have died. He explains this by using a picture which has misled many Christians into supposing it was a literal description of what will one day occur.

What Paul does is join several pictures from the Old Testament and says in verses 16-17 that the Lord will come down from Heaven, accompanied by various dramatic signs.

One of these is how the dead will rise and those who are left alive at that time will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Sadly, verse 17 has derailed huge swaths of Christians who believe "being caught up" is a "rapturing" of believers off this planet.

People being suddenly snatched or raptured out of homes and jobs, cars, and airplanes, leaving the rest of humankind suddenly jilted, so no one is behind the wheel or no one piloting the plane.

The key is to realize what resurrection itself means! It does not mean disembodied life in some mid-air “heaven,” but the re-embodiment of God’s people to live with and for God in the anew in heaven. Christ saves us in the totality of our humanity, body and spirit, just like Him.

When Christ comes on the Last Day, the bodies of dead believers will rise and the bodies of living believers will be transformed, so we may be as Christ where He shall reign forever and ever.

Amen