

Our Blessed Hope

First Things

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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This morning, I want to invite you to turn in your Bibles to the book of 1 Thessalonians 4, somewhat toward the end of your New Testament. And I know today there are guests, there are visitors with us, there are some of you today worshiping with us that have not had the privilege of doing so in some time and so if you're new to us, I want to welcome you to a very important, a very strategic and very timely journey through a relatively small book of the Bible known as 1 Thessalonians. Now the question is, why would this book of the Bible be so strategic? Why would it be "so timely"? Because if we were to go back into a time capsule 2,000 years ago, that early church that experienced Pentecost, that early church that saw the world "turned upside down," this was the very first message. This is the very first of the letters of whom we refer to as the Apostle Paul to those early believers to us, the church, and the reason that strategic is this allows us to recapture, to recapture who we were originally called to be, how we were designed to navigate this thing called life because today, 2,000 years after the tomb was declared to be empty in power, when we use the word Christian or the term Christianity, it elicits a multitude of responses, opinions, preferences. In fact, over time, we've gotten together in small and large groups, we've formed creeds and confessions, we've had debates, and ultimately it's led to a whole lot of division. But today we go back into 1 Thessalonians and we discover not just what the Lord spoke to those first Christians, but there's a very important ratio that we're going to deal with today. It's at the beginning of verse 13 of chapter 4. We find ourselves in a section regarding what we collectively call the Second Coming. For those of you that like theological terms, this would be called eschatology. You say, "Why is this important?" Seventeen percent of what we know as the first letter written to the first Christians is about Jesus' Second Coming and if I do my math, that's, you know, that's almost one in five verses, that's almost one in five statements. And so when we talk about the Second coming I know oftentimes it leads to a lot of division, a lot of disillusionment and a lot of endless debate. But almost 20% of the first information that God communicated to his church is about the Second Coming. So today we need to heed it because when you go to the Old Testament, did you know that for every verse about the First Coming there are eight verses about the Second Coming?

And so today, as we begin in verse 13, chapter 4, it says.

13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. 16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

Now, if you've ever done any personal or even corporate Bible study regarding what we know as the Second Coming, you know there's a lot of different opinions. I tease all the time, you get two Baptists, you're gonna get three opinions in the room. Nonetheless, when it comes to this passage, there's a lot of discussion and there's a lot of debate, and oftentimes it centers on the "when" or the chronology of. And so I think because the passage has been looked at at so many different perspectives and so many different angles for so many years, let's just walk through the passage answering some pretty basic questions so that we can experience what verse 18 promises, the comfort, not the confusion, that should come from this passage.

So let's begin with the "who." Who's being addressed here? Now, collectively speaking, this entire passage is addressing those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. This is a passage to believers. This is a passage to those who've understood their previous sin condition, understood they cannot save themselves, they can't give or deed themselves into heaven, but Christ alone not only sacrificed himself and his blood for their sins, but as it said here, he rose from the grave to solidify that he is the only means of salvation. That's the collective whole. However, notice how it segments us: there are those that are asleep, and there are those that are alive.

Now, interesting that term sleep, biblically speaking, does not mean what it typically means in our concept and culture today. In fact, back in John 11, the famous story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus makes the statement that he sleeps, meaning that he was deceased. He was dead. This is the term the Bible often uses, but do not think that one who has passed from this life to the next, even as a believer, do not think they're taking a nap six foot under or in the urn on the shelf or wherever they "physically" may reside. In fact, it's much different. 2 Corinthians 5 talks about this earthly tabernacle that one day will transition to a permanent immortal one in the presence and the place of God, and in verses 6 through 8, a great promise to us, it says to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

So it speaks about those that are asleep, it's not as if they're in some type of nighttime dream state. No, they are in the presence of the Lord in the place of the Lord, however, their bodies, and this is important for the study in just a moment, reside in a physical grave, cemetery, urn, etc. And then there's that other group. That's us today, the alive,

those who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, but we are still navigating, we're still living this life. What's interesting is in 1 Corinthians 15, which by the way is a wonderful parallel passage to what we just read, it begins in verse 51 saying, "I want to show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall be changed in a moment. In the twinkling of an eye at the last trump, we shall be changed." And so what we discover here is this passage is about an event, it's about an occurrence that's going to take place at some point in the near future where the bodies of those that are already with Jesus are raised and those of us who are walking around on planet earth will be changed to "meet the Lord in the air."

That's the "where" of this passage. Notice that this doesn't happen on earth. It doesn't happen in the heavens. Where does it say that everybody congregates? Where does it say that everybody meets? It says, "we shall meet in the clouds, in the air." I think this is an important designation because it says that Jesus and those that already with him, they descend, those of us that are alive are changed to meet him "in the air." How many times do you see in the Bible talking about his appearing, or that look toward the sky so we see our Savior coming? All these references that we put in song are actually rooted in this passage that there's coming a day where all those that have believed in days past, all those that believe in days present, all have one big Christian family reunion "in the air."

Now, here's the big question. It's not where we're gonna spend the majority of our time today, but it's the question that everybody wants to talk about and can I give you a little teaser if you come back tonight, we'll even go into more detail. The "when." This is the discussion. This is the debate. This is what oftentimes leads to division. When is this event going to take place? There's a lot of people that think it could happen at any moment. There are others that say, "Well, until this or that occurs, we'll just have to push pause." I want you to notice what the scripture says in verse 16. This is the chronology we're given, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first." That's what we're given. That's the chronology that's given that there's going to come a point where literally God shouts and those bodies of the deceased and those of the alive shall be raised and shall be changed and meet him in the air.

Now there's another passage that comes into play here. It's found in Revelation 4. Now this is an important place in the book of Revelation. I know when it comes to eschatology and Second Coming things, we naturally think of the book of Revelation, but the previous three chapters have all taken place on planet earth. First chapter, island of Patmos. John gets the vision. Chapters 2 and 3 are the seven churches beginning with Ephesus, ending with Laodicea, talking about navigating this "Christian life" in the midst of a world of darkness. But in chapter 4, everything changes. The scene goes from earth to the heavens. In fact, we're transported in chapter 4 to the throne room of God where there are rainbows and thunders and lightnings. There's cherubim around the throne. This is that famous passage where it says they're crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who is who was who is to come." The reason that's important for today's study, the first three chapters they're on planet earth minding their own business. Chapter 4, we're in the heavens. At the beginning of chapter 4, the Apostle John on the island of Patmos records

this statement, "And I looked behind me and I heard a voice as the voice of a trumpet saying, Come up hither." What did we just read? The voice of an archangel, the voice of a trumpet declaring, "Come up here."

And so when we talk about the "when," what's most important to me in this passage is that we're not giving a whole lot of the chronology, and I think that's the key to it all. So I want to give you a statement today. This is one of the best statements I've ever heard in regards to the chronology of this event. It is not original with me. In fact, I must give credit where credit is due. A dear friend and mentor of mine, who, by the way, is currently one of the asleep, he's present with the Lord, his body is in the grave, this is his statement. But one of the things that he bequeathed me on his passing was he gave me ownership of this statement, okay? He said, "Take it. I can't use it anymore. I'll be with Jesus. It's yours, alright?" But I still want to give him a little credit. This just sums it up best: nothing has to happen before Jesus comes back for us, a whole lot has to happen before Jesus comes back with us. Some of the things that have to happen before Jesus comes back with us may, in fact, happen before he comes back for us.

Now let me explore that for a brief moment. First phrase, nothing has to happen before what we just read in today's passage. Oftentimes, we listen to podcasts, we read articles and say, "Well, until this prophetic event, until that prophetic event, until this or till that." No, it just says there's a day coming where he shouts and we rise. Now you fast forward to Revelation 19, Jesus comes again out of the sky with the armies of heaven, that's you and I behind him, that is on the backside of all of these prophecies that we talk about all the time and every single one of them need be fulfilled before we come back with him. Here's where I think the confusion comes in. Just because some of these prophecies are fulfilled before he calls us to be with him doesn't mean things have to happen before it happens. In other words, some of the things as we observe our world may take place before he calls us to be with him but there is nothing that has to take place before this event occurs. That is why oftentimes you'll hear when we talk about the Second Coming of the return of Jesus, the imminent return meaning at any moment, at anytime without warning. In fact, that parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 15 says in the twinkling of an eye. You blink your eye in one nanosecond, one one-millionth of a second.

Now the most important questions though, are not really the "when" it's the "what" and the "why." So what is taking place here? What's very particular because the Lord shouts and those that are dead and those that are alive are raised and changed to ever be with him. It's very particular, in fact it reminds me of Acts 9. If you're not familiar with the context, there's a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus. He is a Jew by birth. He has been raised up in the law of the Old Testament and worshiped in the synagogue. He is frustrated that there's a new group of people out, by the way he calls them people of the Way, later we would be called Christians. He goes to the high priest and says, "We've got to silence these folks." So he gets official letters from the government to go and persecute and if necessary, eradicate these individuals that believe in Jesus. On the road to Damascus, famous story, I'm sure you're familiar with it. There's a bright light in the sky. He meets the resurrected Jesus face to face right there on the road to Damascus. An amazing story. But do you know what happens? Verse 7, on their way after the fact, the

scales are upon his eyes, they won't come off for three days till Ananias arrives, those that were with him, this is critical to the text, say, "We heard a noise but we didn't hear the communication." In other words, the reason that's important is because here it says the voice of God will cry, those that are dead will be raised, those are alive that will be changed. The reason this is so particular is the world at large who does not believe in Jesus will just think it's another clap of thunder in the middle of the night.

So what's the process? What does it say? Together. It says that we will be raised together. Now I think this is important because the Bible says that when you believed on Jesus, you got a new spirit, no longer the spirit of man though it fights and it struggles with us but we have the Holy Spirit of God within us. Our soul is now destined to heaven rather than hell. But each and every one of us, there's one critical piece of the puzzle missing. The Bible says we're gonna get a new body. The Bible says that we will be clothed with that which is immortal, incorruptible, will not fade, will not pass away. It will not get sick nor decay. And the reason there's an important process when it says that we are caught up together, is that those that are already in the presence of the Lord, those that are already asleep, are they worshiping the Lord? Yes. Are they in his presence? Yes. Do they have their new body yet? No. In other words, we all get our bodies at the same time.

Now I think we're all going to be the same height, but that's just my personal prayer, but nonetheless that's an important process because those that have gone to be with the Lord and those that will remain when he returns in this fashion, we all get that experience of not only celebration but completion together. That's very prophetic. You say, "What do you mean it's prophetic?" There's a reason 1 Thessalonians is strategic. This is the first communication God gave the church in those early days. It's been about 20 years since Jesus rose from the grave which means that what I'm about to share with you, every person that was in Thessalonika had either been there, heard about it, or known somebody who had seen what I'm about to talk to you about because there was some prophetic events that occurred.

Matthew 27. We know it is the crucifixion chapter in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus has put upon the cross, he breathes his last dying breath, but there beginning in verse 51, it says that when he breathed his last breath, it said that the veil tore in two, the rocks quaked, by the way, did you notice the order? The veil doesn't tear because of the earthquake, the earth quakes because of the veil. And then in verse 52 and it says and when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, listen to this, many saints of old raised from the dead and walked around in the holy city with him. They had either seen with their own eyes, or they knew somebody who had seen somebody who they'd attended their funeral years before, but when Jesus rose from the dead, so did they. They had seen with their eyes that which was put in a casket and brought back to life again.

On the other side of the equation, Acts 8, one of the early believers, a man very influential by the name of Philip, he's sharing the gospel with the man who we call the Ethiopian eunuch. He shares the gospel. He responds appropriately. He is baptized, and there in Acts 8:39 it says that immediately Philip is caught up from one physical location and taken to another physical location immediately supernaturally. I want you to look at

verse 17 for just a moment, "And then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up." It's the exact same phrase that's used in Acts 8 which means a time where we are supernaturally immediately transported to a different place than we originated.

For those of you that enjoy studying this, I'll give you one guess what that word is. Rapture. We don't have it in English because it's not an English word. We've translated it "caught up," and so oftentimes all this discussion and division about this rapture event and people question is it even biblical? When will it happen? It has to be biblical because the words there. It says there's coming today where those who are alive, they're going to be caught up immediately, supernaturally, just like Philip did except rather than landing in another place on earth, they'll be immediately in the air with the saints of old.

Why? Why is this passage important? Why wade through all the debate and the division, the chronology and all the the rhetoric that's out there? Look at verse 18, one of the most important verses in your entire New Testament, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." That's what's so particular about it. In fact, many of you have been a part of this in days past, unfortunately, many of you will be in days future. Whenever the Lord gives me the opportunity to walk alongside a family through that burial process, funeral, memorial service, etc, any time that there is what we call a grave site where we go out there to the grave, the family and typically some friends gather at that final moment of closure, so to speak, of the service, this is the passage that I always read unapologetically, and I'll never read anything else. Why? Because it's those times in life we don't have a whole lot of comfort, do we? It's those times in life where we've experienced the last conversation, the last reunion, the last this and the last that, and the emotions at times can be overwhelming but what does the word of God say? There is comfort in this, that if that individual is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, they're not gonna stay in that casket forever. There's a day they're gonna come out and there's a day that those of us who are still alive will be changed.

I love the process that's addressed here. Notice what it says in verse 15, "We shall not prevent them who are asleep." Now there's an old preacher joke and I don't know if you know what a preacher joke is, but it's not really funny but it makes a really good theological point. Do you know why the dead have to raise first? Because they've got six feet further to go. We shall not prevent them. That's important because if you just look at it from a human perspective, to take that which is already alive and to change it to that which is immortal, yeah, that's only something God can do but how about taking that which has been deceased for years? Decades? How about this one: lost at sea? How about those that unfortunately met their physical demise on the battlefields of so many wars that have happened throughout life where at times we've placed a casket that was empty because there was no record of remains? Boy, that could be difficult, can it not? What does it say? We shall not prevent them. That's why those verses in the Bible where it says that he knows every hair of your head are important. That means he knows every fiber of your being, every cell of your body which means every piece of ash, wherever it may be.

So what we discover here is that you and I, if this event were to occur today, is not going to prevent those who died a year ago, a decade ago, a century ago, or even a millennia

ago. But it's also very prophetic. I'm gonna close today by calling your attention to one of the most famous stories in all of the Bible, probably if not one of the most, the most famous miracle Jesus Christ ever performed. No, not walking on water. Not multiplying the sack lunch of a small child to feed thousands. There was a day where a man by the name of Lazarus, a man who was walking and breathing just like you and I, got sick. Word got back to Jesus and his disciples that he was sick. Jesus said, "Don't worry about it. It'll be okay." And then they got word Lazarus had died. He had breathed his last breath. What's interesting, his word gets back that he is deceased and Jesus tells his disciples, "Let's go to Bethany for he sleepeth." The disciple said, "Oh, that's good. He needs his rest." He says, "No, you don't understand. He's dead." They get there and for four days his body lay lifeless in the family tomb. He has conversations with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, about one day when he will be raised. Jesus, make those famous statements, "Though a man die, he shall live. Though a man live, he shall never die. Do you believe this?" And then Jesus says, "Let's go to the grave." One of my favorite verses in all the Bible, one of the sisters says, "But Lord, he stinketh." Think about that for a moment. Four days. It's going to be what we call ripe in there. What does Jesus do? Verse 43, three of the most famous and most powerful words in all of your Bible, "Lazarus, come forth!" You know, there was no delay. There was no time for him. Immediately the tomb opens up and the Lazarus walks out.

Now that's impressive to begin with. Can I tell you what also is important? He called him by name. Have you ever thought of what would have happened if Jesus had just said, "Come forth"? Can I say it in Southernese? E'rybody would have come out. You see, when God says, "Come forth," it doesn't matter if you stink. It doesn't matter how long you've been dead. It doesn't matter where your ashes are. It doesn't matter. When God calls his own to him guess what happens? They come to life. "Lazarus, come forth!" Why is there a prophetic distinction? Where in this passage today do you find anybody's name? You don't. It just says the Lord comes with the voice of an archangel.

So the day is coming. Nothing has to happen before it occurs where the Lord himself is going to say, "Come forth," and everyone who's already with him in spirit, their bodies will be raised, those of us who are still alive shall be changed. We will ever be with the Lord. Here's the question. When that occurs, and by the way, we can't predict when it will because there's nothing that has to happen before it occurs. When the "roll is called up yonder," will you be there? Or will it be like those other men that we saw in Acts 9 where they said, "You know, we heard a noise. We really don't know what it means." The only distinction, and the only difference is that all those previously deceased and currently alive, as mentioned in this passage, have one thing in common. It's not the color of their skin. It's not their primary language. It's not even when or where they lived. It's that at some point they have believed in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. When that roll is called up yonder, will you be there?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Today as we come to this time of decision, you may be here in person, you may be watching online, you may be even listening on the radio and the Spirit of God took the word of God, and as it says in Hebrews 4:12, did a surgical procedure on your heart. Maybe you realize there's never

been that time, there's never been that place in your life as we talked about over and over and over again today where you've acknowledged your sin condition and you've asked Jesus to forgive you and save you. The Bible says in Romans 10:13 whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say whoever passes a test, whoever gets a certain percentage of proficiency, whoever does this or stops that. It says whoever calls on the name of the Lord. Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe that's you who needs to call on the Lord. Let me encourage you to do so. You don't have to do so out loud. You don't even have to say the same words that I or somebody else might say. This isn't about reading a script. This is about just a heart's cry before God, and maybe today your heart's cry would sound something like this. "God, today I recognize I've got a sin condition. God, there are so many areas and aspects of my life that have been contrary to you. God, I've been places I should have never been. God, I've participated in things I should have never been a part of. God, I've spoken words that should have never left my mouth and God, you and you alone know the thoughts that have been between my ears. Lord, your word says the wages of my sin is death and, God, I not only believe it, I own it. That's what I deserve. But your word also says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So today, I'm not asking to be forgiven and saved based on my merit, my deeds, my worth, but Jesus Christ alone. God, today I believe. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. He lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when they nailed him to Calvary's tree, he was bearing the price, the pain and the punishment of my sin. And God, today I believe that three days later, as we celebrated last week, when he rose victoriously over the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the struggles or the problems and the heartache of this world but there's one thing I know, that the only way I can be forgiven, the only way I can be saved for my sin is through Jesus Christ alone. The best way I know how I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed. Maybe that person today who had that heart crying to God. In a moment, I'm gonna pray for us. We're gonna stand and sing together. We just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We've got a team set aside. We've got a room set aside just to listen to your story, to pray with you, to pray for you, just to hear what God's doing in your life. Or maybe that person saying, "Pastor, I'm already a believer," but maybe you, as many others, need to follow in baptism, or maybe today you said, "I got that covered. We need to be a part of this incredible Bible believing church." Or maybe today you say, "You know what? I just need somebody to pray with me. I just need somebody to pray over me." That is what this opportunity is for.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, God, thank you. Thank you that we can have hope and we can have comfort in a world that is growing incredibly darker by the day, that there is coming a time where you will declare with your voice for your children to come and to meet you in the air. Lord, I pray today that we would be found with that relationship, that we would come as your word says in Luke 15, we would come to our senses and confess our sin condition and ask you to save us. God, today may we not wait another moment. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.