

April 5, 2015
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Communion
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2015 David J. Whitcomb

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1. Do you really believe the promise found in this text?
2. Do you know anyone who is struggling with spiritual or physical difficulty?
3. Do you know anyone who is being persecuted?
4. Have you shared this promise or other of God's promises with these people?

BE ENCOURAGED WITH GOD'S WORD **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

The other day, representative John Boehner made an arresting comment in response to what he observed in his recent visit to Israel and the Middle East. He concluded, "The world is on fire." That might be an fairly accurate way to describe the current political and social condition of most of the cultures in the world.

So do we fear? Do we grow discouraged? Do we become anxious not knowing what the future holds? If so we should be able to sympathize with first century Christians who lived in Thessalonica. They too lived in uncertain times that caused them to wonder about the future. While their culture was edging into troubled waters for the believers, they also were not exactly what God's Word revealed about last time events. Or did the Word of God have anything to say

about resurrection and the like? We can take much comfort from Paul's reply and instruction.

Necessary Teaching (vv.13-14).

The opening thrust of this teaching is that hopeful brothers should grieve with understanding (v.13). We have understanding of the issues because we are not uninformed. That was Paul's desire for Christians. He reminded his readers, *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep (v.13a)*. Who was asleep and what did that mean?

There was a question about the fellow Christians who died. We must realize that Paul wrote this letter only a few months at the most after he had founded the church in Thessalonica. Therefore, there was not a lot of time for many saints to have died. And yet here we find some reference for saints to encourage others about a few saints who had died in Christ. It seems likely that this instruction serves more importantly to look forward to saints who would die in the future. That was going to be especially true with the coming of Roman persecution against the Church within less than twenty years.

To that end also the word *uninformed* probably identifies a section of teaching that reaffirms a previously established truth or expanding on that truth. It was probably not that the people didn't grasp the theological teaching Paul established at the founding of the church. Rather there is a difference between accepting doctrine by faith and practicing that faith in the face of reality. It is one thing to say we believe in the resurrection but something else to have genuine hope when a loved one passes away. These folks seemed to struggle, waver, or stumble at the truth that they would be reunited with their loved ones at the Lord's return and whether they would have glorified bodies.

The question centered on the sleeping ones. That might mean something different in the modern church setting. But in Paul's day, the present tense verb refers to the believers who are being overtaken by sleep. Yep, that sounds like a reference to Christians in a modern preaching service. No. "Sleep" was a common picture of death in the secular environment even before the founding of the Church. It refers to the sleeping body, not the sleeping soul. At death the soul leaves

the temporary housing and is immediately with the Lord. Paul stated the confidence like this: *For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (2 Corinthians 5:1)*. He went on to write, *Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)*.

There was some concern if saints will have a glorified body in the future like Jesus had at His resurrection. But the greater concern was whether we living saints will share glory with our loved ones. That is the kind of thing we think about when loved ones pass away. We are a lot like first century Christians in Thessalonica. Like them, we are to grieve with hope at times of loss. We should not be uninformed so *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope (v.13b)*.

This contrast ought to be easy to see if we briefly consider all the “no hope” theories of unbelievers. Muslims are taught that in heaven, all will have multiple wide-eyed beautiful companions. Mormons are taught that couples whose union is sealed in celestial marriage will continue to procreate in heaven. Those ideas don’t seem to cause human flesh to lose hope, do they? No, but these are hopeless teachings since they are the mere imaginations of unregenerate men. No one has come back from the dead to say it is so. More common is the conclusion that physical death ends it all. If that is true, life doesn’t have much purpose, does it? Or people think that beyond the grave is the big unknown. Or they believe that everyone gets a shot at presenting their good works at the judgment with the hope that they have done enough. Or as a man said to me recently, “When I get to the gate, I hope the man who is punching tickets will find mine valid.” No, such pie-in-the-sky promises do not offer hope.

The reality is found in the last words of some pretty bright people. Aristotle called death the thing to be feared most because “it appears to be the end of everything.” Jean–Paul Sartre said that death “removes all meaning from life.” Robert Green Ingersoll, one of America’s most outspoken agnostics, unable to offer any words of hope at his brother’s funeral, said, “Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights.” In Hamlet, Shakespeare describes the afterlife

as, “The dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.” It is no wonder then that they grieve when loved ones pass. They have no hope in the unknown.

In contrast, we who belong to Christ grieve at the loss of a loved one. But we do not lose hope. Of course we grieve to lose companionship. We count it a personal loss. But at the same time, we have hope. So why do we have hope? Our hope is firmly rooted in the authority of God’s Word.

We believe the precedent Jesus established (v.14). We sincerely believe that He died and rose again. That was Paul’s argument for hope. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again (v.14a)*. The assumption is that all Christians believe this. Jesus’ death and resurrection was foundational apostolic teaching. They were eye-witnesses. They once doubted that Jesus rose from the dead, like many who depend on human wisdom doubt. Of course such a miracle is hard to believe. But after the apostles saw the empty tomb, talked with and accompanied Jesus for forty days, and then were filled with the Holy Spirit, it all came together in their hearts and minds. The apostles were so convinced of the reason for Christ’s death and resurrection that they died rather than be silent about it.

In God’s perfect design, we the members of Christ’s Body, the Church, are built on these truths that the apostles taught. *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:19-21)*.

The wording of our text indicates that this was a creedal formula that expressed the foundational truths on which the Church was built, to which the early Christians subscribed. We firmly believe this truth because if there was no resurrection for Jesus, there is no object of our faith and no hope. It is as Paul wrote elsewhere, *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Corinthians 15:17)*.

We must, therefore, also believe that Jesus the Lord is in fellowship with brothers who have died. To that end we believe, *even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (v.14b)*. Through the work of Jesus, those who have fallen

asleep have hope. What was once the ultimate futility of life – dying – has lost its ability to cause fear and dread. Through Christ’s atonement, those who believe in Him are put to sleep like a mother putting her baby to sleep. And then in the last day God will bring those same people with Him. The moment they went to sleep, their souls, the real person, the eternal part of us, went into the presence of their Creator. At the Lord’s *appearing*, God will bring the eternal souls to earth to be reunited with their glorified bodies through resurrection like Christ’s.

That’s pretty fantastic! Is that kind of like a Si-Fi movie? No, it’s like real stuff that is going to happen. How do you know? The Bible tells me so.

Details of the Teaching (vv.15-17).

Yes, the resurrection sounds pretty fantastic, but our hope is rooted in the authority of God’s Word (v.15). The apostle made it quite plain that this teaching is from God. *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord (v.15a)*. Paul did not invent this amazing idea. Nor was it the brainchild of the apostles, a think tank, and definitely not the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. At some point, God graciously gave this instruction to Paul. There is nothing quite like this recorded in the Gospels as Jesus’ teaching. Nor is it likely that this was an unrecorded saying of Jesus, or Paul would have identified it as oral tradition. It is more likely that this is a reference to instruction the Lord gave directly to Paul or one of the other apostles. In that sense, it would be much like the direct revelation through inspiration Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15.

What is this amazing, authoritative teaching from Jesus? The wonderful reality is that saints who are living when Jesus comes again will not get a jump on dead saints. This is what the Word of the Lord says: *that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep (v.15b)*. According to this teaching, there will be two special groups of people directly affected by the Lord’s return: living saints and “sleeping” saints. The point of the instruction is that both groups will share the same blessing or destiny. “We” who are living indicates that Paul

expected to be alive at the Lord’s coming. We call this immanence, the ongoing expectation of Christ’s return that every generation of Christians has felt and should feel.

This is a promise for us believers who are still living at the *parousia* of the Lord. I like the way the Greek text refers to us. It says that we will be the ones who are *being left around*. The passive voice participle reveals that the people who are still on earth at that marvelous event are still here because it is God’s plan. We will be here at the Lord’s next coming, advent, bodily presence. But though we will still be around serving the Lord, we will not precede the believers who have fallen asleep while trusting Jesus. How is that going to work out?

Our hope in future events stands on detailed teaching. The Lord Himself will descend from heaven. *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 (v.16a)*. The Lord Himself referred to in this statement is Jesus Christ. He is the same Christ who came to earth the first time as a baby born of the virgin. He is the one who lived perfectly and did only good and showed only supreme love. He is the one who died and rose again in order to atone for our sins. He is the one who rose bodily in the presence of the eleven disciples. Luke told the story with these words: *And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11)*. So why should we be surprised to read Paul’s writing in this text? The same kind of thing has already happened.

When Christ returns, He will come from heaven with much fanfare. He will be accompanied by a cry of command. This is an authoritative shout. Jesus will not arrive with a meager announcement made by a weak or hard to hear voice. It seems likely that the Lord Himself will shout this command like a general shouting commands to his troops. Will it be similar to the shout, “Lazarus, come out!” in order to raise the dead in Christ?

Second, Jesus’ arrival will be accompanied by the voice of an archangel. Maybe this will be a separate authoritative sound. It comes from a chief angel like Michael. Is this a call to all the other angels to

accompany the Lord's return? Jesus promised in Mark's Gospel account that angels will accompany His return. *"For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels"* (Mark 8:38).

Third, Christ's return will be the sound of God's trumpet. This is the last trumpet mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52 connected with the "catching up" of the saints. Generally the trumpets were used, according to the Bible literature, not for music but for signals and warnings. Here the trumpet will serve as the clarion call to gather the Church both living and sleeping.

But here is the great point of the text. Saints who died in Christ will rise. Specifically, *And the dead in Christ will rise first (v.16b)*. They will literally precede the living saints (v.15). These are people who experienced physical death while in spiritual union through Christ, the new birth. The eternal soul that has been in the presence of God since death will be reunited with a resurrected, glorified body.

Saints who are living in Christ will join Him. *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 (v.17)*. In the blink of an eye (virtually at the same time), the living members of the Body of Christ will be caught up to meet them and the Lord in the air. We will be *arpazo*. The word means to be snatched away suddenly, carried off, seized. This is what has come to be called the rapture. When someone tells you the "rapture" is not in the Bible, they are only correct in that the English word rapture is not used to describe this event. But the event is definitely in the Bible.

This is the same event described in 1 Corinthians 15 when the mortal body instantly is clothed with immortality. *Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory?"*

O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-57).

You and I live in a strange day. It is a day in which Bible students delight to deny this plain teaching. They are happy to simplify what God was actually trying to tell us. They conclude that these messy and hard to explain details don't matter. We are just supposed to have faith that somehow the whole world is going to crumble into chaos and eventually Jesus will come and rule the world. Actually, this text claims there is an important reason and use of this teaching.

Use of the Teaching (v.18).

The purpose of this teaching is bound up in the command, *Therefore encourage one another with these words (v.18)*. Apparently saints need encouraging. I'm a saint. I know that saints need encouraging. It is not that God expects us to be happy with life's circumstances. This teaching is not intended to lull us into lethargy so that we don't seriously consider the circumstances of life. Rather, life is real serious and in life's circumstances God's people need a little encouragement.

It is easy for us to become distracted especially when we face difficulty, loss, and persecution. Last week in a men's Bible study, one of the men showed up in a visibly upset state. We asked what the trouble was. He unloaded about how angry he was about the media's trashing of new laws that states are trying to pass in order to protect religious freedom. At times like that we need this teaching.

God desires for His people to rest in His promises. Therefore, we ought to encourage each other with God's promises. The easy road is to encourage with human sympathy. It is good to listen and to encourage. But saints need something more than a sock in the arm or a pat on the shoulder. We need more than a sympathetic, "Hang it there; it could get worse, brother."

Saints need the encouragement of God's promises. To make the plan work, we all need to know God's promises. We all need to

believe God's promises. We all need to live in light of God's promises. We need to share this particular promise regularly, especially as the trials become more intense. Indeed, the world is on fire. Statistics clearly reveal that Christians worldwide are suffering more intensely than at anytime in history. American believers are on the cusp of persecution like we have never experienced. What will sustain us? The encouragement of God's promises. We will rise from the dead and live forever with Jesus.