

# Clarity and Comfort

*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. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)*

*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)*

## Encourage One Another With These Words

September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

I was able to tune in online last week and to listen along with you as Ryan unpacked the first half of chapter 4. He did an excellent job, and he reminded us that the second half of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians – the half that we are working through right now – was written to fill up that which was LACKING in the young Thessalonian church. At the end of chapter 3, Paul made that desire clear. He wrote:

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God,<sup>10</sup> as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face **and supply what is lacking in your faith?** (1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 ESV)

This Thessalonian church was vibrant! They were fearless! Their faithfulness in the midst of opposition was causing the rest of the Mediterranean church to marvel in awe and wonder!

And yet, they were lacking.

In spite of all their strength, there were still deficiencies. There were blind spots that needed to be addressed and areas of ignorance that needed to be informed. They were healthy, but Paul knew something that we all need to keep front and centre in our minds: No one is done growing.

We all LACK in some form or another. Your pastor is lacking. Your elders are lacking. YOU are lacking. And if you're not growing, you're dying. John Owen famously said:

be killing sin or it will be killing you.<sup>1</sup>

Ours is not a passive faith. We are called to be active and to grow by the grace of God. The need for holiness was the emphasis in the first half of chapter four. The church was lacking in their BEHAVIOUR.

Now, in today's passage, Paul is going to address another area of lack in the Thessalonian church. Here, we discover that the Thessalonians were lacking in their BELIEF. There was a deficiency in the theology of the church and that deficiency was causing a great deal of confusion and pain.

So, what happened?

It appears that, in the months since Paul was last with the church, some of the Thessalonian believers had died. This new experience – the death of a fellow believer in Christ – was something that this brand new church in Thessalonica had never dealt with. This new circumstance exposed some holes in their doctrine. Apparently, there were some details that Paul had not yet taught this young church, and this is why Paul was so eager to get back and to supply what was lacking in his first visit. As one commentator notes:

The form of the disclosure formula used in 4:13 suggests that the apostle is about to present something new and previously not taught to the Thessalonians.<sup>2</sup>

So that's what we have in front of us this morning. The Thessalonian church has some grieving Christians in their midst, and they don't know how to process the passing of their loved ones. This is Paul's instruction to a grieving church. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, Kelly M. Kapic, and Justin Taylor eds., *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 307.

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. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we unpack this letter, I first want to make it crystal clear what Paul would have us do with this information. Thankfully, we don't need to spend any time speculating because Paul states plainly what this information is for. He says in verse 13:

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. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So, the first thing that are supposed to do with this information is to find comfort in it. Paul is calling us to allow these truths to change the way that we grieve. But let's not assume that this passage is only for the grieving. In verse 18, Paul concludes this passage with a command:

Therefore **encourage one another** with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18 ESV)

So, who is this text for? It is PRIMARILY for the church as a whole to PREPARE us to give encouragement to those who need it. When tragedy strikes a brother or sister in the faith, Paul desires that each and every one of us would be able to come alongside them and to comfort them with these truths.

Nancy Guthrie has written a brilliant book: *What Grieving People Wish You Knew*, and I've encouraged you a number of times to buy that and to read it carefully. As we process through our text this morning, I want to borrow from her title because here Paul is teaching us:

**What Grieving People Need You To Know**

So, let's dive into the text. The first thing we learn here is that grieving people need you to know that:

## 1. Christians WILL grieve, but they should grieve differently

Paul says that in verse 13:

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.** (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

Notice that Paul's desire is not for the church to stop grieving. No, Paul's desire is for the church to stop grieving "as others do who have no hope."

Christians grieve.

One of my driving ambitions for us as a congregation is that our gathering will be a place where people are free to express their feelings. When we read the Psalms, we find expressions of exuberant joy alongside almost-suicidal despair. We see celebrations of spiritual maturity and lamentations of spiritual failure. We see prayers for righteous kings and imprecatory pleas for revenge against the wicked. Every time I read the Psalms, I come away freshly reminded that Christians can and will and SHOULD feel a wide array of emotions! Christians are not called to be robots. We are not meant to feel ashamed of our emotions. God invites us to express our complicated feelings to Him.

But it doesn't always feel that way in the gathered assembly, does it? I've had numerous conversations with people who have told me that they can't come and worship with us because they're afraid that they will cry, and they don't want to do that in front of us. And I know that fear is shaped by our culture and I know we can't simply snap our fingers and change these societal hangups, but MAN! That breaks my heart! What better place to weep than in the midst of your brothers and sisters as you worship God and sit under the preaching of His Word? O that this would be a place where we would all feel permission to present ourselves to God. I've told this story once before, but we recently reupped our first aid training as a staff team, and one of the lessons really struck a chord with me. Percentage wise, where do most people wind up choking to

death? The bathroom. People begin to choke, and their response is to withdraw from the people who can help them into the solitude of the bathroom. We do the same thing with our grief, don't we? I pray that no one would ever feel that they need to hide from us.

What a helpful reminder this is. Christians grieve!

But we do it differently.

The difference is found in the last word of verse 13: Hope.

The Greco-Roman culture that the Thessalonians lived in offered very little hope in the face of death. For example, the famous Greek poet Theocritus wrote:

Hopes are for the living, but the ones who die are without hope<sup>3</sup>

Inspiring, isn't it? Or consider this ancient tomb inscription that was discovered in Rome. It states:

We are nothing. See, reader, how quickly we mortals return from nothing to nothing.<sup>4</sup>

That was, by and large, the sad conviction that shaped the Greco-Roman world. They taught that, if there is a life after death, it PALES in comparison to the life we have now.

This same sentiment has carried on through the ages. A quick Google search will provide you with a plethora of cleverly crafted quotes by the spokesmen of our culture repeating the same mantra. Of course, these quotes are meant to be courageous and inspiring. They say: "You have 80-90 years to do something worth remembering in this world, so stop thinking about your fairy-tale afterlife and do something with the life you HAVE!" Isn't that the anthem of our culture? It's empowering, isn't it?

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<sup>3</sup> Theocritus as quoted by G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 130.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 315.

It IS empowering. Until you're standing over the body of your loved one. Then it doesn't feel very empowering any more. If this life is all that there is, then I have no hope of seeing my loved one again. That's not uplifting. That's crippling. That's debilitating. That leads to a deep, hopeless grief.

But not so for you, Christian. Your grief is meant to be different.

Yes, you grieve. You grieve because you feel with every cell in your body that death is an aberration and an abomination! It is NOT natural. 80-90 years is NOT all that we have! There is a longing for ETERNITY in our hearts because God made us to live with Him FOREVER! But sin introduced death into this world. We make no peace with death. Death is our enemy.

We grieve because the enemy has taken the life of our loved one. We grieve because the enemy has taken these bodies that were meant to be flawless and filled them with cancer and pain. We grieve because we long for the day when Christ will return to vanquish our enemy and to restore to us that which we have lost.

And we grieve with HOPE because Christ is going to do just that! Amen? God's word says:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.<sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:25-26 ESV)

Death WILL be destroyed, and the curse WILL be reversed and so, while we grieve this temporary pain, we know that the victory is sure! We're going to talk about HOW that victory was secured later, but for now, let's remind ourselves that Christians DO grieve. But we do it differently. We grieve with hope.

Second, grieving people need you to know that:

## **2. Bad theology hurts people**

This is true in every arena of faith and practice, but it is particularly true when it comes to the death of a loved one.

It's hard for us to reconstruct the exact situation in Thessalonica that led to the confusion and discouragement in the church. The most likely scenario is that there were some in the church who believed that deceased believers would miss out in some way on the excitement of the return of Christ. It doesn't appear that they doubted the resurrection of their loved ones, but it does appear that they believed that resurrection would come AFTER Christ returned to the earth. They feared that their deceased believers were going to have a second-rate experience of that glorious moment.

If that feels like a stretch to you, we find evidence for this bad theology reflected in the pseudepigraphal book 4 Ezra. Now, I want to be clear, 4 Ezra is NOT a book of the Bible. It DOES, however, provide us with a glimpse into some of the theological confusion that was already creeping into the early church. And in 13:24, the author seems to describe the exact doctrine that was causing so much heartache in Thessalonica. He says:

Understand therefore that those who are left are **more blessed than those who have died.**  
(4 Ezra 13:24)

According to this bad theology, deceased believers were like second-class believers – they would be blessed, but not nearly as blessed as the living.

Now, we're going to unpack all of that a little later, but first I think it's worth noting how even the smallest defect in theology can lead to real pain for those around us. You can almost imagine a husband in Thessalonica weeping as he gathered with his church after his wife's passing. "What's wrong?" they ask him. "It's just that my wife was SO EXCITED for Christ's return! We often discussed what it would be like on that day when Christ appeared and when we would be able to meet him face to face! We dreamt together about how glorious it would be to meet him in the sky and to accompany him on his return to take his rightful place as King! ... But now she's going to miss all of that..."

What does he need in that moment? He needs the brothers and sisters around him to understand right theology! He needs to hear TRUE things that will be like medicine for his heart and that will disperse his fears and concerns.

Unfortunately, I've been to some funerals where that medicine was never applied. I've watched as heartbroken families desperate for hope sat in silence and listened to ramblings and musings when what they needed was to have their feet placed back on the rock! I've heard it from ministers. I've heard it from eulogies. It's almost always said with sincerity and, I believe, with good intentions. But – as good as your intentions might be – grieving people need more than empty platitudes. They need the truth! They need the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus! Isn't that exactly what Paul says here?

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...<sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another **with these words**. (1 Thessalonians 4:13,18 ESV)

Encourage one another with THESE WORDS! Encourage one another with THIS TRUTH! In these words, and in this truth, there is HOPE. If you want to love and serve the grieving brothers and sisters around you then open up your Bible and do your homework. Read Matthew 24, and 1 Corinthians 15, and 2 Corinthians 5, and the book of Revelation and 1 Thessalonians 4.

Bad theology hurts people.

So, let's start unpacking some of the theology that Paul outlines for us here.

Grieving people need you to know that:

### **3. The resurrection is the sure foundation of our hope**

We see this in 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV)

“Since we believe.” All of the hope that we cling to is completely contingent on the resurrection. All of it. If Jesus remained in the grave, then we will remain in the grave. But if Jesus rose, then we will rise! In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul fleshes out this same doctrine in greater detail. He wrote:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.<sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.<sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup> But in fact **Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.** (1 Corinthians 15:17-20 ESV)

If Jesus stayed in that tomb, then we have no gospel. We have no reason for confidence. We have no hope.

But Jesus DID rise! Hallelujah! The Thessalonian church, apparently, had no doubts about this. Paul doesn't need to lay out an apologetic argument to try to convince the church of the resurrection – they're already all in and in full agreement! What they needed was a lesson on the implication of that truth.

Much of Christian discipleship consists of drawing lines from theological truth to lived experience. It is one thing to know that X is true. It is another thing to know how THAT truth speaks to THIS situation in my life.

Paul is drawing a line from the resurrection of Jesus to the grief in the Thessalonian church and he is reminding them that, because Jesus rose from the grave, we can have absolute confidence that we will also be raised! As he said to the Corinthians, Jesus' resurrection was like the "firstfruit" in the harvest. The green thumbs in our church will understand Paul's analogy here. My extended family used to own a large apple orchard in Collingwood. Hundreds of thousands of apples grew in that orchard every season, but before 99,999 apples could grow, there was a first fruit. When the farmer sees that first fruit, he exhales a sigh of relief because he knows that the harvest is coming.

Here, Paul says: "Look at Jesus and give a sigh of relief! His resurrection was the firstfruit, and THROUGH Jesus, every believer who has ever lived and died will rise again. Jesus rose out of that tomb by himself, but he has a train of followers coming behind him. In that train are our loved ones who have died in Christ. One day, when Christ returns, our loved ones are going to rise up in their resurrection bodies and they are going to stand with us once again. We'll see Norma looking more radiant than ever. Henry will likely be doing cartwheels to celebrate his freedom from that

wheelchair. It will be glorious! And we can look forward to it with certainty because Jesus Christ died and rose again.

He conquered death!

He reversed the curse!

There is no such thing as a Christian who rejects the resurrection because there is no Christianity without the resurrection. It is the foundation for our hope. Grieving people need you to remind them of that truth again and again.

Finally, grieving people need you to know that:

#### 4. “Sleeping” believers will have a front-row seat for the return of the King

As I mentioned earlier, it appears that the primary concern in Thessalonica was not as to whether or not deceased believers would share in the resurrection. They knew that. They delighted in that. So, what was their question? Read this text carefully and notice all of the temporal markers.

<sup>15</sup> 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.** (1 Thessalonians 4:15 ESV)

<sup>16</sup> 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.** (1 Thessalonians 4:16 ESV)

<sup>17</sup> **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. (1 Thessalonians 4:17 ESV)

The real question wasn't IF these deceased believers would experience the resurrection... the question was WHEN? Would their deceased believers miss out on some of the glory and excitement of Christ's return? The thought of their loved ones missing out on that glorious moment was unbearable for the church.

As an aside, I want you to think about that for a moment.

Do we share their excitement for the return of the Lord? I don't know about your experience, but I saw lots of sensationalist stuff when I was growing up that almost soured me on the topic. I saw the billboard on highway 26 that gave an exact date for the Day of the Lord (a billboard that looked very awkward the day following this "return"). I saw the Christians who were so caught up in speculation and anticipation that they stirred themselves up into a frenzy. As a young man watching all of that, it looked like absolute nonsense. And I think, subconsciously, I decided somewhere along the way that being excited about the return of Jesus was a game for immature Christians to play, but that mature Christians ought to be beyond it.

This text exposed that prejudice in my heart.

I'm not saying we should buy another billboard. I'm NOT. But could we reclaim some of that anticipation and excitement? Please? Could we daydream together about how glorious that day will be? Could we sing about that more? Pray about that more? Find more comfort, more joy, more delight in this doctrine? JESUS IS COMING AGAIN! Can you even begin to imagine what that will be like? Listen to the scene that Paul describes:

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 ESV)

Paul was clearly drawing from Old Testament imagery as he described this scene. Are we to understand from this text that Jesus will literally *descend* from heaven and that his coming will be accompanied by literal trumpet blasts and that he will meet with him in literal clouds? While I wouldn't be opposed to any of that, I am inclined to believe that these poetic, Old Testament images are being used to paint a picture for us of something that is beyond human description.

When Christ returns, every single person will see and marvel. Rather than an image of Jesus floating down over New York city, in my mind's eye I envision something more like what we see

in 2 Kings 6. Do you remember that story? The King of Syria was continually being thwarted by the prophet Elisha, so he sent an army of chariots to capture him. Elisha's servant awoke early in the morning and, when he looked out his window, he saw that they were surrounded by the Syrian army. The servant was horrified, and he thought that Elisha would share his concern. But Elisha calmly said to him:

“Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”<sup>17</sup> Then Elisha prayed and said, “O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16-17 ESV)

There is a spiritual reality all around us that we are blind to.<sup>5</sup> There is a King who is currently reigning over us who we do not yet see. In the great commission, Jesus told us “All authority on heaven and on earth HAS been given to me.” Notice that he didn't say: “all authority WILL be given to me”, or “all authority MIGHT be given to me.” Jesus is right now THE KING and he possesses ALL AUTHORITY. But our world is currently blind to that spiritual reality. In our arrogance and our disbelief, we rebel before his watching eyes every day. We commit cosmic treason every day.

But there will come a day when, like Elisha's servant, our eyes will be opened to the spiritual reality that we have been blind to. The veil over our eyes will be torn and every single person on the planet will see King Jesus in all his glory. Presidents will fall to their knees and kings will tremble. Some will rejoice. Some will cower. But every knee will bow.

The text says, he will call with a loud voice and all of the dead Christians will rise up in their resurrected, glorified bodies. And the Christians who are still alive at this time will be transformed into their resurrected, glorified bodies, and together we will go to be with our King. I love the way that the Patristic Father John Chrysostom describes this scene. He writes:

For as when a king ceremoniously entered a city, certain dignitaries and city rulers, and many others who were confident toward the sovereign, would go out of the city to meet him; but the guilty and the condemned criminals would be guarded within, awaiting the sentence which the king would deliver. In the same way, when the Lord comes, those who are

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<sup>5</sup> This connection is made by G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 138-139.

confident toward him will meet him in the midst of the air, but the condemned, who are conscious of having committed many sins, will wait below for their judge.<sup>6</sup>

The return of the King will be a day of great fear and trembling for many – Paul is going to address that reality in our passage for next week – but for those who are in him – those who have turned from their sin and who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour – this will be a day of unparalleled joy and glory. With our resurrected loved ones at our side, we will go to be with our King. All of the mocking, the doubts, the persecution, the struggle – it will all be replaced with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

And our loved ones who have passed away before us will not miss a single second of it. God has a plan for them to take part in this glorious day. Perhaps you feel like the world has forgotten about your loved one. Perhaps the world has. But God hasn't. And He knows how much you love that person, and so He has pulled back the curtain to give you a glimpse into His plan.

Isn't that amazing? He didn't have to reveal any of this to us. He could have just said, "Trust me." In fact, He does that all the time! But in this instance, on this particular subject, into this particular grief, God says: "Let me show you what I'm doing. Let me show you that your loved one is still very much a part of my glorious plan."

Christian, you need to know this truth. Go back and read it again. Meditate on it. Delight in it. Because there will come a day when someone will look to you for comfort. Don't give them sentimental fluff. Don't give them your favorite poem. In that moment, I pray that the Holy Spirit will bring this command to your mind:

Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18 ESV)

This is the medicine for weary souls. This is our hope. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom as quoted by Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 334-335.