

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. In the first section of this letter, Paul reminds them of the gospel and of his love for them, and he defends himself against his critics' accusations and slander. In the section we are currently in, Paul transitions to instructions about how to live as a Christian. He mainly focuses on three areas of life: sex, work, and death. We have already looked at God's vision for our sexuality and our work, so this morning we'll look at death, Jesus' return, and the Christian hope. We will be in this passage for a couple of weeks:

***1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11** - Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who **have fallen asleep**. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with **these words**. ^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 5:1** Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and **children of the day**. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our **Lord Jesus Christ**. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether*

we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Remember that Paul is writing this letter in response to what he has learned from Timothy about issues facing the church in Thessalonica. And so, as we read this passage, we should try to read between the lines in order to understand what questions he is answering. As I read it, it appears that Paul is answering two questions:

What will happen to my loved ones who have died?
How should we be preparing for the day of judgment?

We'll save what he has to say about judgment and preparing to meet God for next week. This morning, we'll focus on what Paul has to say about death, Jesus' return, and the hope that we have in the face of death.

Look first of all at verses 13 and 18:

***1 Thessalonians 4:13,18** - Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope... Therefore encourage each other with these words.*

Notice how Paul does not want them to be ignorant, but instead to be informed about death and life after death and Jesus' return, and once he has explained it to them, he says, "therefore, encourage each other with these words." A lack of understanding about death and how to face it and what happens after death can understandably be a source of great anxiety and confusion. But the truth brings encouragement, courage, and an increase in peace. I pray that as I clear things up regarding death, that God's truth would encourage you today.

Three things regarding death and Jesus' return from this passage:

1) Death is an enemy

***1 Thessalonians 4:13** - Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

He does not tell them not to grieve, but not to grieve as those who have no hope. The implication is that grief is very appropriate in the face of death, because death

is an awful and painful thing. In fact, even Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

John 11:33-35 - *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.*

Jesus was angry and weeping at the tomb of Lazarus as he saw the grief of those gathered to mourn Lazarus. This is because it was not meant to be this way in the beginning of God's good creation. In the beginning, there was no death; it came about as part of the fall, Adam and Eve's rebellion against God. Death is not a natural part of life. It is an intrusion into God's good world, an enemy.

1 Corinthians 15:26 *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

When someone dies, it should not feel natural. It should hurt, because it was not meant to be this way.

The first thing you need to know about death is that death is an enemy that comes for us all. One by one, you will lose everyone you love to death, until eventually everyone you love who is left will lose you.

2) **Jesus has overcome death by his death and resurrection**

1 Thessalonians 4:14 - *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Three days after Jesus died on that cross for our sins, He rose again, conquering death. And so, Paul says, God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. **Notice how death has become falling asleep to Paul** – falling asleep and waking up in the presence of God. This became the Christian way of talking about the death of a believer, for the soul would depart to be with the Lord while the body slept, awaiting its final resurrection. In fact, the word "cemetery" means sleeping place. Death is not annihilation or ceasing to exist; death is an enemy who has been conquered by Jesus. As the writer of Hebrews put it:

Hebrews 2:9,14-15 - *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy*

him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Jesus tasted death for everyone, destroying him who holds the power of death, the devil, and freeing us from the fear of death. The word used in this passage is the Greek word for “champion,” the one who represents the people on the battlefield, winning the victory that becomes the people’s victory, even though we never had to lift a sword. And so, Paul can write:

Romans 6:22-23 - *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Our sin separated us from God, and we had every reason to fear death. But now we have eternal life, because Jesus has overcome death. He took our punishment on the cross and gives us eternal life, and has transformed the enemy of death into simply falling asleep.

3) We will be with God forever

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 - *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

Remember that Paul is answering the question of what happens to our believing loved ones who have died. If you go back to Jesus’ ascension into heaven in Acts 1:9-11, you might see why they would have questions:

Acts 1:9-11 - *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? **This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.**"*

As Jesus ascended, angels told the disciples that He would one day return in the same way he left. Certainly many expected that day to come soon, and so when their loved ones died, they were confused, thinking that Jesus would have returned before they died, and unsure what this meant. And so, in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul encourages them that those who have died “in Christ,” trusting in Him for their salvation, will rise with Him and join Him at His return, and that we who are still alive will meet the Lord and be with Him forever.

So what happens to our believing loved ones who die? The souls of those who have died are with God presently in heaven, which is a place of rest and tranquility for the souls of believers on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body:

John 14:1-3 – *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”*

In this context, the disciples are concerned because Jesus has told them he is going away. Jesus assures his disciples that he is leaving to prepare a place for them, and that he will come back to take them to be with him forever. Think as well of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43 - Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Paradise is the blissful garden of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day, the renewal of all things. But we do not spend the rest of eternity as disembodied souls in paradise. Go back to 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 - *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

There are a few terms in here where it is worth understanding the Greek. The word caught up is “harpazo,” and the Latin translation “rapio” is where we get the word rapture from – to be violently snatched or taken away.

The coming of the Lord is the term “parousia,” which referred to the glorious coming of a deity or the official visit of a sovereign to a city. It was an event of great celebration.

And the phrase translated “to meet” is the Greek phrase “eis apantesin,” which is a technical term here that refers to sending a delegation outside the city to receive a dignitary or conquering king and join the procession back to the city. For example:

Acts 28:14-16 - There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. ¹⁶ When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

My understanding is that this passage is meant to encourage believers that we will be with God forever. Those who have died, who are in paradise with God, will be joined to their bodies, while those of us who are still alive will be snatched up to join Jesus in triumphal procession as He returns to this world, as He destroys evil, perfects the world, and dwells with us forever in the new heavens and new earth.

Revelation 21:1-5 - Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

In the end, heaven and earth are one. Heaven – the dimension where God dwells – merges with earth, and God will dwell with resurrected believers in this renewed heaven and earth.

Anthony Hoekema – “The new Jerusalem does not remain in a heaven far off in space, but it comes down to the renewed earth; there the redeemed will spend eternity in resurrection bodies. So heaven and earth, now separated, will then be merged: the new earth will also be heaven, since God will dwell there with his people. Glorified believers in other words, will continue to be in heaven while they are inhabiting the new earth.

Please notice that Paul's focus in this passage is to encourage the believers that their loved ones who have died are not lost, but are with God, and that all who die in Christ will be with God forever, and that if Jesus returns, those who trust in Him will also be with Him forever. That is his focus. His focus is NOT on the specifics of how all of this will happen. Some of you probably know that there has been a whole theology known as the Rapture created mainly out of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that teaches that believers will be snatched up to heaven so as to avoid the tribulation, the terrible things that will happen on earth. This view was popularized first by the Scofield Reference Bible, which was one of the first study Bibles ever published in 1909, and popularized in recent years by books such as The Late Great Planet Earth and the Left Behind series. As I said earlier, my understanding is that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is using a technical term to communicate that when Christ returns, we will go out to greet Him and welcome Him to our world like the conquering King that He is. I could be wrong, of course, but I do not believe the rapture is a Biblical doctrine. I do not believe this is teaching that at any point, believers could be snatched up to heaven. But more importantly, I think that such debates are a distraction from what really matters: Christ will return, and those who have trusted in Him for their salvation will live forever with God.

Titus 3:9 - *But avoid foolish **controversies** and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.*

My experience has been that debate about the end times can often turn into foolish controversies and unprofitable quarrels and arguments that often lead to pride, not love or greater devotion to God.

Again, Paul's focus is not on the specific of how Jesus' return will happen. Nor is it on WHEN it will happen:

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 - *Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

Paul is very careful to say that it is futile to try to predict his return, for it will come when you least expect it, like a thief in the night, or like labor pains on a pregnant woman. Jesus said a similar thing:

Matthew 24:44 - *So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*

I can remember as a new Christian seeing a book on the clearance rack at Majesty Bibles and Books called 1994? by Harold Camping, who some of you may remember also predicted the end of the world in 2011. He is not the only one – the Jehovah’s Witnesses have predicted the end of the world in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975, and 1994. You can be sure that if anyone is telling you they know when Christ is returning, they are wrong.

The important thing is that we will be with the Lord forever in the new heavens and new earth. And this means:

1) Evil will be destroyed and everything will be perfected

He will judge the earth and destroy all that is evil and perfect everything that is left. There are a lot of “re” words in relationship to the second coming:

Revelation of the sons of God & redemption of our bodies - Romans 8:19-23 - *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be **liberated from its bondage to decay** and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

Reconciliation of all things – (speaking of Jesus) **Colossians 1:19-20** - *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Restoration - Acts 3:19-21 - *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus. ²¹ He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.*

Renewal - *Matthew 19:27-28* - Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

The word for renewal is *Paligenesia*, which speaks of a new genesis, of coming back from death to life. Some day, **all that is not of God will be judged and destroyed**, and the Earth will be renewed, restored to the way it was meant to be.

All that is not of God – including suffering and death – will be judged and destroyed, and all that is of him will be liberated and restored

Redemption is liberating what has become enslaved from what is distorting it. It's not just things getting better or scrapping it.

2) We will be with God forever

If you've been paying attention to the Bible, God coming down to earth to dwell with us should not be a surprise. Remember that throughout the Bible we see God mercifully coming down to His people.

It begins with God dwelling with Adam and Eve, walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

It continues in the time of Moses with the Tabernacle, God dwelling among his people.

It moves on to the Temple under Solomon, again God's presence in their midst.

And then, of course, there was Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us, the Word become Flesh.

And then the giving of the Holy Spirit, God with us, God dwelling in the midst of His people.

So this ending should not surprise you – God is always coming down for us, to dwell with us, to mercifully come to us. Heaven is not about us earning our way up to him but God graciously coming down to us.

Matthew 6:9-13 - *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. One day Jesus' prayer will be answered.

Revelation 11:15-17 - *The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."*

We will be with God, and we will have perfect community, perfect occupation, perfect relationship, perfect love, perfect balance between work and rest. You need to come to terms on some level that what you are looking for will not be found in this world. One day I will suffer no more. One day I will be His bride. One day I will have perfect community. One day I will be doing perfectly that which I was created to do. One day I will have the perfect balance between rest and work.

Don't keep thinking the grass is greener elsewhere.

Let me close with the words of JI Packer:

JI Packer – "Hearts on earth may say in the course of a joyful experience, "I don't want this ever to end." But invariably it does. The hearts of those in heaven say, "I want this to go on forever." And it will. There is no better news than this