

We'll be looking at 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 13-18. Again, that's 1 Thessalonians 4, beginning at verse 13. In our sort of big picture outline that we've been walking through that I've been trying to remind you of, partially for y'all so you can kind of get a sense of where we are in the book, but also for me so I can remember where we are in the book, we've been looking at our major headings.

The first major heading we looked at was Thanksgiving, as Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians and the good work that God the Holy Spirit has been doing among them. Then we move to explanation, as Paul has been explaining his conduct among them in the view of accusations, as well as explaining where he's been all this time. And last time we wrapped up with our third heading, exhortation, as Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians how to live a God-pleasing life. Well, now Paul is moving from exhortation to consolation, from commandment to comfort.

This is important for us to remember. God's word is there to challenge us, absolutely. God's word is there to expose our sin, to point us to Jesus, yes. But the word of God is also here for our comfort. God speaks to us like a father to his children. And yes, a father commands, a father has expectations, a father wants to instruct his children, at least a good father does, and we have a good father. but a good father also seeks to comfort his children, to comfort them in the midst of struggles that they're bound to face.

And that's really what we have in this passage. This is a passage of comfort. The very last verse tells us, comfort one another with these words. So as you read this text, be thinking about the comfort that God wants you to experience from this passage.

So let's read this text together, but before we do, let's ask God's help in prayer. Our Father and our God, as we come to hear your word, we ask that what we know not, you teach us. What we have not, give us. What we are not, make us. For the sake of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, beginning at verse 13.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep. that you may not grieve as others who do not have hope. For since we believe Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 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. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God. and the dead in Christ will rise first. 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. Therefore, comfort one another with these words. This is the word of the Lord. May he add his blessing to it.

You know, passages like this that address death, the resurrection, they're always relevant. I mean, the Bible's always relevant, obviously, but certain passages are more obviously relevant at different times. But there's never a time in someone's life, never a time in a community, never a time in a church where passages on how to deal with death are not relevant. And there's good reason for that.

Death in this world is our constant companion. We don't have to look that far back to know that death touches all of us. Since I've come here, we've buried, I haven't been here that long, we've buried several members of this church, have we not? We also know that death is no respecter of age. Some of us lost family members at a ripe old

age like Abraham. Others were cut down in their youth like Josiah. Speaking from personal experience, I lost two little nephews not even a few days old, just a year and a half ago. Death is no respecter of age. It's no respecter of place or of time. Because of sin, it's everywhere.

And the world, it's not really sure how to deal with death. Especially the world in America, because the world of America is at least vaguely familiar with the Christian teaching on death, at least in part. And it really likes the comforting parts. It really likes the idea of an afterlife, of a heaven. But since it rejects God's word, since it rejects the Bible, it can never really be sure. It's always vague. Haven't you noticed that? It's always these vague platitudes. Oh, you'll probably see them again someday. I'm sure they're watching you. Oh, don't worry. I have a good feeling about it, is basically what it breaks down to.

But Christian grief is different. Christian grief is not a vague hope out there somewhere. Christians grieve extraordinarily. Christians grieve with a sure hope. Christians grieve with hope. That is the main thing I want you to understand from tonight. Christians grieve with hope. And we're gonna look at that under three major headings. First, Christians grieve with hope because we will rise with Christ. Christians grieve with hope because we will rise with Christ. Look at 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. When Paul speaks of those who have fallen asleep here, this is a common euphemism in the ancient Greek world for death. We see writers using it all throughout the ancient Greek world.

Therefore, there's no backing here for an idea of soul sleep, if you've heard of that particular teaching. that somehow, and when believers die, their souls sleep, and that the souls are in this sleeping state, this hibernation state, until Christ comes again to awaken them. That's not what Paul has in view here. A, he's using a very common euphemism, and two, even if he has some theological bent to it, it's probably more just showing how their death, the death of a believer, is temporary. they will one day rise as we will see. So Paul is dealing with this issue of death and he wants the Thessalonians to know about the fates of those Christians who have died, that the believers may not grieve as others. Now you may ask, Well, hold up. I don't want you to be uninformed. Paul, did you not tell them about the resurrection? Didn't you tell them about this very important teaching? It seems like pretty important stuff for believers to understand.

Well, one thing we have to remember is that Paul was not able to finish his regular teaching in Thessalonica. He had to leave very quickly and unscheduled because of persecution. Thus, there were holes left in his teaching, not intentionally, but only because as he was expounding God's word, as he was teaching them, he did not have time to tell them everything to proclaim the whole counsel of God because, well, he had to leave unexpectedly. We get a hint of that in 1 Thessalonians 3, verse 10. as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith. There were some holes in the Thessalonians doctrine that were not yet filled. Now, Paul had probably spoken vaguely about the resurrection, vaguely about the fate of those who have fallen asleep, but without a full teaching on it, without a full systematic, if you will, on what happens to the believers who have fallen asleep.

So there was confusion. And this particular confusion was particularly difficult for the Thessalonians because of where they came from. The Thessalonians, remember, most of the believers in this church are Gentiles. And as

Gentiles, they were coming out of paganism. And paganism did not offer much hope for those who have fallen asleep, for those who have died.

There were really three major fates that they would probably have had in mind. One is a sort of a sort of vague afterlife. You get this with some of the Egyptian teachings there, some of the mystery cults, probably a minority of people in Thessalonica would really have bought it, but that there's this vague afterlife, this disembodied experience, that if you're really, really good, if you perform all the right rituals, then you can sort of experience that, but you know, it's a little vague. Others might have held on to an even more vague sort of hope, a view of death as, well, you go down to Hades and there's this dry place, this waterless place where you kind of just exist. Not particularly hopeful. But for many in Thessalonica, at least if the inscriptions and the letters we have are accurate, there's really no hope at all. There's one particular letter that I thought was very interesting. A family member is writing to a friend of theirs concerning the unexpected death of their daughter.

And this is how he comforts them. He comforts them by saying, well, nothing could be done, so comfort one another. You're not to blame. It just kind of happened. Therefore, be comforted. That's the kind of comfort that the Thessalonians would have from paganism. And you know what? That doesn't sound that off from what we experience today.

As we've already seen, there's a vague sense of an afterlife that people have, but nothing very solid. And I believe many in the United States who might even give vague platitudes deep in their soul have this sense of, well, maybe this is just the end. Maybe I've eaten by worms, and that's it. It's a mystery. And thus, they grieve differently. And Paul wants the Thessalonians to grieve differently. This is the problem. that he wants to focus on. And the first bit of the solution, the first bit of the solution he wants to tell them, why Christians grieve extraordinarily, why Christians grieve with hope, is because we will rise with Christ.

We will rise with Christ. Look with me at verse 14. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who are fallen asleep. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again. Paul begins with this very simple syllogism. If we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again. Notice how so many Christian teachings come back to that. They go back to the basics. Everything connects with the life of Jesus, with his death and resurrection. That is the ground for all Christian homes.

Therefore, I want to ask you, do you believe that? Paul's assuming the Thessalonians believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again. This is probably a very ancient, simple creed that he had taught them. Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus truly died on a cross, a substitutionary death for your sins? and that he truly rose bodily on the third day and now lives and reigns to all eternity. Do you actually believe that?

Because if you don't, then the comfort of this text is not for you. This text will offer you no comfort at all if you don't believe that. First and foremost, because if you don't believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, then you will not rise again. Then you have no hope. in the afterlife, you have nothing but the vague platitudes of the world. And secondly, you have no hope because if you don't believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, then you are not one of his people. Then you are not saved. Then you are not one who is going to be raised unto life.

You're one who is going to be raised unto judgment. Therefore, ask yourself, do you really believe this? If you do, listen to what he says. If we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. This is the second part of the syllogism. Through him, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Notice, there's a hidden premise here. In every argument, you have three basic premises. You have premise A, which is, if we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, and then we have our conclusion, then through Christ, we will be raised with, and God will bring us with him when Jesus comes, essentially. What's the hidden premise? The hidden premise is union with Christ. That's what Paul was hinting at when he says, through Christ, through Jesus. Let me see if I can explain.

So why is it that our hope of the resurrection is so grounded in Jesus' resurrection? Is it simply that Jesus' resurrection proves that resurrection is possible? No, it goes much deeper than that. Paul hints at it in Romans when he says that Jesus was raised for our justification. You might say, hold up, I understand Jesus dying for our justification. I mean, he atones for our sin. He gives us his righteousness, the great exchange. That's the grounds of our justification. Why is the resurrection tied to our justification? Why is the fact that Jesus Christ is raised tied to our status before God? Well, what was the resurrection for? Again, not simply just to prove the resurrection's possible.

God can do all things. No, the resurrection of Jesus was Jesus' vindication. It was God proclaiming to the whole world that though the penalty for sin is death, though Jesus died our death on the cross, he was innocent. And thus, God reverses the verdict and says, no, Jesus is righteous and all his people are righteous. Therefore, I will raise him from the dead.

Proclaiming, this is my beloved son, one last time, in him I am well pleased. And the good news is that if you are in Jesus, if you are a true believer in Jesus Christ, then that verdict, that resurrection verdict has been transferred to you. If you are in Jesus Christ, all that he has is given to you. All of his righteousness, all of his status before God has been given to you.

See, before Jesus, before we were in Christ, we were in Adam. And when Adam sinned, he took all of us with him. All of us, all of us were in Adam, in union with him. He was our representative. So when he sinned and when he chose death, he chose death for all of us. All of us received His condemnation, His nature, His destiny. But in Jesus, in the Lord Jesus Christ, we receive His verdict, His righteousness, His destiny. We are in Him. That is why Paul says that our resurrection is tied to Jesus' resurrection.

See, on the last day, When you are, if the Lord tarries, when you are raised from the dead, it'll be a proclamation to all the world that you are righteous. God has revealed through his word that you are justified. The verdict has already come down. You have received this verdict. But on judgment day, when you are raised from the dead, it'll be the vindication of that judgment. It'll be saying that judgment is true. Here's the proof.

There rise from the dead, just like Jesus. And what that means for us, what that means for the hope for those who have died in Christ, is that for those who are in Jesus, their resurrection is as sure as Jesus' resurrection. As surely

as Jesus rose from the dead, so they will rise from the dead. It is as much in doubt that they will rise from the dead as it would be in doubt that Jesus rose from the dead.

Why? Because the same verdict leads to both. The same verdict of God, his Christ justification is our justification because we are in him. That is the first reason that Christians grieve with hope. Why? Because as surely as Jesus rose from the dead, we will rise from the dead. This is a sure hope, not a vague expectation. So we grieve with hope. Christians grieve with hope because we will rise with Christ, but also because we will reign with Christ. We will rise with Christ and we will reign with Christ. Look with me at verse 15.

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. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of a trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Here we get a hint at one of the other spots of confusion for the Thessalonians. Many of the Thessalonians probably understood that there would be a resurrection. especially those who had a Jewish background. But they were confused about the order. They'd heard that Jesus was coming again, that he was gonna come with glory, he was going to reign, he was going to come, he was going to put all his enemies in subjection under his feet. But they thought, what's the order here? Because if Jesus needs to raise the people from the dead, then that means he has to come first. So Jesus will come, we'll have the whole ceremony, Jesus comes on high, he's glorified, then people get to rise from the dead.

Oh, that stinks. My cousin Billy died and now he's not gonna get to see Jesus come. Now that may sound like a trivial concern to us today, but that's because we're living in a different culture. The culture of of the ancient world was very focused on honor. And if we have received Christ's status, we receive all of Christ's honor. Thus, for those who have died to be deprived of that honor, to be deprived of seeing the Lord come, would be a great travesty.

And to be honest, I hear some Christians talk like that today. Some Christians say, yeah, you know, I really hope he comes in my lifetime. You know why? Because I really want to see it. I don't want to tell that person. No worries. You will see it. This text promises that you will see it. You will surely see it. Why? Because the resurrection precedes Jesus coming again. All the dead in Christ will rise first. Then Jesus comes. Then we are gathered up to meet him in the air.

Now, one of the other things we have to deal with here is when Paul talks about this as a word from the Lord, a word from the Lord. What does Paul mean by that? Well, Paul likely isn't giving a reference to a prophecy here, saying he's giving this as like a word from the Lord like Isaiah would give, as though it's being revealed to him like an oracle. Nor is he likely referencing a, like directly quoting a teaching of Jesus, rather, He seems to be summarizing the teaching of Jesus in passages like the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13 and Luke 21.

Now, and when he says, we who are alive, he's not thinking that, he is not assuring his audience that he's actually going to be alive when Jesus comes. He's speaking as one of the church. He's saying, we Christians who are alive. This is what our fate will be. However, we don't want to slam the door on that too hard. Because I think there's a

good chance that Paul thought, you know, maybe it'll be in my lifetime. Because that's how Christians are supposed to be, right?

What does Jesus say again and again, like in the parable of the virgins? Watch. Be careful. You don't know the hour he's going to come. We're all to live our lives in expectation that Jesus could be at the very door. It's to drive us to faithfulness. So, now Paul proceeds to describe this coming of the Lord. He does so in very graphic imagery. Now, there's been a lot of ink spilled on this imagery, but one thing you have to remember is that that is exactly what it is. This is imagery. This is apocalyptic imagery. Paul is describing something that is completely outside his audience's experience. None of us have seen the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. It is an event that defies space and time. It is the end of the world as we know it.

Therefore, in order to describe it to the Thessalonians, he makes use of terminology and of images that they were familiar with in order to give them a sense for what he's talking about. Now look at verse 16, you'll see what I mean. So first, the Lord himself will come.

Jesus is not going to send an agent. He's not going to send a representative, not going to send a prophet. Jesus himself will be coming. And he himself will give a cry of command. He's going to come, and the day of the Lord will not come on a whim. It won't be determined by anything we have done. It will come at Jesus' command from God the Father. So it will come at Jesus' command, and he says it will come with the voice of an archangel. This is likely a reference to the archangel Michael. and the presence of the archangel is meant to imply that there will be all the other angels with him. Jesus will not come unattended.

He will come with the hosts of heaven. In his first coming, he came with weakness. He came and he did not, and he said to his disciples, I could call a legion of angels right now, but he didn't. In the second coming, he will come with his legions of angels.

Finally, we have this image of the sound of the trumpet of God. Trumpets were an important part of the culture in ancient Israel. They were used to announce the beginning of feasts. They were used at the temple. They were used in religious settings. They were also used in royal settings. They could announce the coming of a king. They were often used even in war settings. At the time of war, they would be blown to cry out for the charge. That battle had come. And the coming of the Lord is really all three, is it not? It's the coming of our God. It's the coming of our King. And he's going to come with the sharp sword to judge the nations. So a trumpet is very fitting.

And one final note on all these images. One thing I just noticed about all of them, they're all very public. None of these are quiet. I don't know if any of y'all ever had someone practice a trumpet before in your house. Maybe you had a band student or something. But if you ever experienced someone practicing with a trumpet, you're not getting any sleep when someone's practicing with a trumpet. Those things are loud.

And that was certainly true even of the trumpets of Jesus' time, of Paul's time. These were loud instruments. This is the cry of an archangel, the voice of a command, coming with legions of angels. Thus, when Jesus comes, it's not going to be secret. It's not going to be hidden. It'll be something that all the world will see. So Jesus comes in this

very public way. But look what else Paul says about this. What is Paul building up to here? Look at verse 17. That's what he's building up to.

He's saying those who are dead in Christ, those who are alive in Christ, all of them will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Now, much has been said about this word caught up. One thing we have to keep in mind is that Paul's point is not so much about, his focus is not so much about where they are caught up from as much as where they are caught up to. He doesn't say they're caught up from a tribulation, they're not caught up from all the different nations and whatnot, though that part's certainly true. His focus instead is they are caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Now something very interesting, and we missed something, in this terminology because, you know, we're not ancient Greeks.

This meeting of the Lord in the air was a technical term used for when a royal figure of some kind would go to visit a city. And when that royal figure, like the emperor, for instance, would go to visit a city like Thessalonica, he would first send messengers ahead of him saying, hey, I'm coming. Get the place prepped. And so they would start decorating the city. Everyone would prepare. They'd prepare feasting. They would prepare a place for the king. Everything set up and ready for the arrival of the emperor.

And then as the emperor approached the town, when he drew close, those who were leaders of the city, those who were his friends, would go out and they would meet that king and would proceed with him in that royal entourage. as he entered the city and would receive the honor of that emperor with him.

That's the image that Paul has in mind. Paul has in mind how believers will be caught up to meet Jesus, not to escape a tribulation, not to escape from a time of trial, but instead to receive the glory and honor of Christ. Again, this goes right back to what we said about union with Christ. In our union with Christ, all that Jesus has is ours. Thus, just as we were raised with Christ, as we received that vindication of our justification, so we share in his glory at his coming. We proceed with him.

And the book of Revelation confirms this. How does it picture Jesus coming? Well, he comes on that white horse with that robe dipped in blood, with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth, but who's behind him? Those robed in linen, white and clean, who have their robes washed in the blood of the lamb, and they ride with him as he strikes down the nations. That is what Paul has in mind.

And the good news for you tonight, is that you, if you are in Christ, will be in that train. As surely as Jesus is coming again, you will come with him. You will be caught up to meet him in the air and you will ride with him as he comes down from heaven. You will not be a spectator at the last day. Far from it. You will be a part of the royal entourage. That's good news. That's good news. Even the terminology Paul uses points to this. He says, we're caught up in a cloud to meet him in the air. How was Jesus ascended into heaven? In a cloud. Everything that Jesus has is ours in him. We receive his glory.

Why do Christians grieve with hope? Well, Christians grieve with hope because we will rise with Christ and because we will reign with Christ. If you have a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord, Remember that. They might be riding beside you. And that royal entourage. So from this text we see Christians grieve with hope because

we will rise with Christ, because we will reign with Christ, and finally because we will be with Christ. We will be with Christ. Look with me at the second part of verse 17. And we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together to meet them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. And so we will always be with the Lord.

Notice that Paul adds this. This is what the whole Bible is ultimately about. It's being with Jesus. It is Immanuel. God with us from the very beginning. What's the story of Genesis about? Well, Genesis begins with God creating man in his image, placing him in that garden temple in order that he might walk with them, in order that he might be with them in the cool of the day. Emmanuel, God with us.

But then man chooses death. Adam chooses to forsake God, and he is cast out of the garden, cast out of the presence of God. And what happens with Cain when he murders his brother? What is the greatest part of the curse inflicted on him? And he went out from the presence of the Lord.

And then what's the story of Abraham? Abraham is given this great promise. What? That God will be his God. That he will bless him. And what happens with the people of Israel? They're taken out of Egypt, out of slavery to Pharaoh. They're brought to Sinai. Why? For what purpose?

That God might dwell among them, that God might give them the tabernacle, that they might have all these ceremonies, all these sacrifices. What is the ultimate point of all the sacrifices? That God might dwell with them. That he might dwell, that he might be their God.

And then what happens with David? David, he subdues Israel's enemies. He subdues Jerusalem and his son Solomon builds the temple. Why? So that God might dwell with his people. But once again, Israel, God's people sin against him. And they are cast out just like Adam and Eve out of the garden. And then what happens in the New Testament? In the New Testament, we have Emmanuel himself, Jesus Christ. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Immanuel, who comes down, who is God enfleshed, who is the temple of God, who dwells with his people, dies for them, ascends to heaven, but he sends his Holy Spirit, why?

To dwell with us. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. How does the Bible end? Behold, The temple of God is with men, and he will dwell with them. See, that's our ultimate hope as Christians. Our ultimate hope is being with Jesus. That's why, that's why every Christian has this hope. Every Christian looks forward to heaven.

See, there are some believers, some I know, who have family members, dear friends, who are not in Christ. And most of those family members, most of those friends have passed on. And while they pray, while they hope that perhaps maybe God did a work in their lives, they don't have much hope in that regard. And you might think, well, how can they really look forward to heaven then if they don't have anyone in heaven to meet them? Oh, they do have someone. Someone far greater than any family member. Someone far greater than any friend. They have Jesus.

That is our ultimate hope. If you see heaven primarily, primarily, mind you, as a place to meet your loved ones who have passed on, then you're missing the point. The point of, yes, we look forward to meeting friends and family. I look forward to meeting characters from the Bible. I'm looking forward to maybe having a heavenly beer with Martin Luther. That'd be great.

But that's not what heaven's about. Heaven's about Jesus. Heaven's about dwelling with our Savior. That is our hope. And it is the hope of every Christian. And that hope cannot be taken away. If you are in Christ, that is your destiny. What a glorious destiny it is. That's why we grieve with hope.

When a loved one passes on who is in Christ, we don't grieve like the world. We don't give a vague platitude. We don't say maybe we'll see them again someday. We don't say maybe, maybe there's a reincarnation. Maybe, maybe we can see them. Maybe, maybe they're looking down on us right now. No, we say they're in Christ. They're with Christ. They're happy. They're happier than they've ever been. And one day they will rise with Christ. One day they will reign with Christ, and together we will be with Christ forever and ever.

Is that your hope? If you've seen Christianity as somehow a get-out-of-jail-free card, or as an escape from hell, as a place as insurance card that you might meet your loved ones someday, that you might have a nice afterlife, And I would question whether even in Christ, whether we've even gotten the point. It's in the name. Christianity is about Christ. Let's close with a word of prayer. Our Father and our God, Jesus is our only hope in life and in death. Help us remember that. Lord, sometimes we get distracted. Sometimes we view passages like this as places to argue, places to speculate, but it's meant for our encouragement. Help us, Lord, to encourage one another with these words. In Jesus' name, amen.