

March 2023/ Central Baptist
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18/
Message #6
LIVING AT THE END OF TIME

WHAT HOPE DOES IN OUR LIVES

By Tom Cowan

(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 01 as Tom walks up) Something I am always trying to do each Sunday in this series in 1st Thessalonians is demonstrate principles of good Bible study – that means attention to context, word meanings, division of thought -- Whenever we want to do good disciplined Bible study – there are 2 words that we have to understand. They are in tension with each other.

(SHOW SLIDE 02) EXEGESIS – it means that we accurately get OUT of the Scriptures what is there – we read and study a passage with accuracy – with precision, with exactness.

(SHOW SLIDE 03) EISEGESIS – we read INTO a passage what we want to be there – we add to it truths and emphasis that are our preferences.

Obviously – our proper choice must be for EXEGESIS – It is a little bit like the oath we may hear in a law court – the truth – the whole truth (= we do not ignore some information) – nothing but the truth (= we do not add bits of information) to distort its essential meaning.

This week's study is a great passage – it excites us as it should – but it can also stimulate our imagination – we do not have the liberty to embroider Paul's teaching with fanciful speculations of our own or other people. I shudder to think what some Bible teachers have done with the truths of eschatology – the teaching about Christ's return. We must stick to the discipline of exegesis – what does the passage say. Its goal is not to excite our imagination – but to speak to our heart.

In a previous time – In Canada perhaps in the 20's and 30's - there were church conferences about these questions of eschatology – churches split and divided over these issues – people became absorbed by the trivia and lost in the details and in the minutiae of a prophetic maze. They argued over where the millennium fitted – pre- or post – or a-. If you are about 40 or under – you probably do not know what this means. Different schools of thought developed their own set of charts and diagrams about when all this would happen – defining the exact sequence of events. We tried to create a prophetic time-table – a detailed schedule or calendar for each event in precise order and sequence. We demand a dogmatic theology while only having relative knowledge.

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Perhaps our struggle today is not that we are arguing about these things – our struggle is that we are hardly thinking about them – it seems that heaven has almost faded from our minds – even from our hymns – destiny is a perplexity rather than a goal – hope has dimmed – and with it has faded a great deal of persistence, passion, initiative and above all, hope. We are building the good life here and now.

Our task today - and our struggle - will be to keep the main point – the main point. Paul uses broad brush strokes in this passage – there are other Scriptures that speak to different parts of this topic –such as 1st Corinthians 15, - This is not the whole picture – the main point here is to hear the words that will bring us encouragement and comfort at the death of a loved one.

Bereavement is a very poignant human experience –many of you may have lost someone close to you –Some of you perhaps have lost parents and grandparents – perhaps a brother or sister – some of you may have lost a spouse – you started your intimate pilgrimage with a promise – to love one another till death – and now you have experienced that sad moment. You walk the rest of your life on your own.

Some of you have lost a child – in the sad perversity of life as a parent - you have had to bury one of your children – this is life at its most upside-down - it is life's greatest contradiction– because children should bury parents.

When Leighton Ford lost his son Sandy – he wrote in his book about the combination of tears, questions and silence he felt – he said - when you love deeply, you hurt deeply. Harriet and I hurt deeply when we lost our 36 year old daughter-in-law – It still hurts.

So may I invite you very gently this morning to bring to your heart and mind to that time you stood at a graveside – perhaps you felt the warm salty moisture of your tears run down your cheeks – perhaps a hymn was sung – words of hope were read as you stared down into that dark bottomless slit in the ground – people embraced each other – held onto each other for support. And then you left and went home.

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Our struggle in those moments is to reconcile our faith with our emotions – the words that are read are comforting – but as we walk away from the graveside – we cannot avoid the honest questions that lurk in the shadows of our mind –

- what has happened to them?
- where did they go?
- will I ever see them again?

When Paul wrote to these Thessalonian Christians – they were struggling with similar questions about their loved ones.

What would happen to the Christian dead when Jesus came back? Would they miss the blessing of the Parousia? The Thessalonians had addressed these kinds of questions to Paul either directly or perhaps through Timothy. This is his answer. This was the pastoral situation in the Thessalonian church and among the Christians there that needed to be addressed. They are also our questions.

There are two groups in this passage and also in our lives.

First – our Christian friends who have died –

Next – we who are still alive – The Christians still living.

The point and purpose of this passage is actually at the end.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) Verse 18 – therefore encourage each other with these words.

Encourage = same word used for the ministry of the Holy Spirit – to come alongside each other with these words.

Let's exegete Paul's answer to them and see how he comes to this pastoral encouragement.

(SHOW SLIDE 05) 4:13 – we do not want you to be ignorant.

This phrase occurs a number of times in Paul's letters. Perhaps it is his way of underscoring his answer.

2 things about which he wants them to be clear.

(SHOW SLIDE 06) #1 – those who fall asleep.

This is a metaphor for death which is more at home in a Christian context than anywhere else. In John 11 – Jesus says that Lazarus has fallen asleep – but I am going to waken him up. It reminds us that death as sleep is only temporary. As sleep is followed by waking up in the morning – so death will be followed by resurrection.

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On the walls of the catacombs in Rome, where Christians were buried - they found the inscription – Good night! The morning comes!

(SHOW SLIDE 07) #2 – (verse 13) do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.

Grief and mourning is natural – often emotionally necessary – If Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus – then we are at liberty to do the same – but our grief is not hopeless grief – we see beyond the grave to the hope that lies in Christ and his coming.

Christian hope – in contrast to pagan hopelessness – knows that death is followed by resurrection. This Christian confidence is not based on fanciful good feelings – but on a sure historical foundation.

So here is the foundation of Christian faith and hope. (vs 14-15). **(SHOW SLIDE 08)**

¹⁴For 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. (SHOW SLIDE 09)

¹⁵According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

3 movements of thought.

(SHOW SLIDE 10) #1 Jesus died and rose again =- this is the irreducible core of the Gospel. He died for us – but he did not remain in death. He conquered death through the power of the resurrection.

(SHOW SLIDE 11) #2 - But then – those who have died in him will rise with him. God did not abandon Jesus to death – and so He will not abandon Christians who have died either. He will raise them up as He raised Christ – so that when He comes they will come too.

(SHOW SLIDE 12) #3 – we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Paul assures us that there is an unbreakable solidarity which the people of Christ will enjoy at his coming – and death has been unable to break it.

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This Christian hope is the belief that when Jesus comes – those Christian believers who have died will come with him and that those Christians who are living will join them. Death has been a painful separation from those whom we love – Paul assures us that this separation caused by death is not permanent.

The Thessalonian Christians wondered – and perhaps we do also – will we ever be together again with those who we loved but who have fallen asleep in death – Paul says that on the Lord's own word – no one who has believed in Jesus will be left behind or left out.

Paul gives us 3 great eschatological truths;

(SHOW SLIDE 13) THE RETURN:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven...

It is the Lord Himself who will descend. There will be one word – one shout from the archangel – one blast from the trumpet -- it is a fanfare to announce the start of the Parousia – the arrival of the King!

(SHOW SLIDE 14) THE RESURRECTION:

...and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Paul does not explain how or in what form those who have died will accompany Christ – but he is clear to state this truth – the dead in Christ will rise first.

Remember the Thessalonians have been worried and agitated that those who have died ahead of them will miss the events of this great day. Paul assures them and us that they will be very prominent.

(SHOW SLIDE 15) THE REUNION.

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.

Paul has talked about the Christian dead - now he talks about the Christian living -- We who are still alive – or literally = the living ones. The reunion with those who have died is often overlooked – but to Paul it is clearly important.

Three different words for life in the New Testament --

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BIOS – it is ordinary life – gives us words like biology. It is all the stuff we have collected. Everything that is living has bios.

Psyche – this is life as soul – our psychological being. We might use words like personality.

Then there is **Zoe** – this is life as God is – the kind of life which the Father experiences – which he gave to Jesus – and which Jesus gives to us.

John 10:10

I have come that they may have life, [zoe] and have it to the full.

We are to live not just in the sense that blood flows through our veins – but to live alive to God – alive to life – alive to people – alive to ourselves – alive to the unique purpose we have in life – we know who we are and why we are here – Paul in Philippians – I have laid hold of why Christ Jesus laid hold of me – all that and more is ZOE.

We are the people with this kind of life – we are people who possess Zoe. There is something that each of us who have ZOE – the life of Christ is us – also must know – may we not live like those who have no hope – because we have Christ in us, the hope of glory.

There is an unbreakable solidarity among the people of God – between those who have already died and those who are still alive which death cannot break. The embryo of community that starts on earth will be finalized in heaven – what has started here will be completed. Here we see through a glass / we peer through a window which is distorted and fuzzy – stained with all the mud and dirt of this world -- then we will see perfectly – face to face.

Not only that – Paul says – on this day of Christ's return – he does not come alone – God will bring with Jesus all those who have fallen asleep in him. They will not miss out on anything – they will be included in this cosmic intervention.

It answers the question – will we see them again? The word of the Lord is YES!

Then Paul's great finale -- **And so we will be with the Lord forever.**

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Now you see his purpose of this passage – verse 18 -- **(SHOW SLIDE 16) therefore encourage each other with these words.**

One of the great privileges Harriet and I have had over many years in pastoral care has been to sit with people and a family as someone died – as they moved silently from this world to the next. Now I know that may not appeal to some of you – but can I tell you – that is one of the great gifts God has given to us. It is a great honor and privilege to be with people at these intimate times.

If at all possible - no believer should die alone – there should be someone with them – and if possible we should sing believers from this world into the presence of God. A doctor once told me that hearing is the last sense we have. So don't be afraid to read. That is our last gift to them. Don't be afraid to sit with a person – read – join others and sing together as someone moves quietly and peacefully into the presence of God.

Marg's story - asked to come to hospital – help them - Tossing and turning – restless – fighting – we started to sing – What a friend we have in Jesus – Jesus loves me – we read – Psalm 23 – John 14 – in my father's house... Children's prayer- this night I lay me down to sleep – I pray the Lord my soul to keep – Marg settled down.

Death is that thin veil between this world and the presence of God. I understand very humanly why we try to hold onto people – we want them to stay with us – so we hold on to them. Yet there will come a time when we have to let them go – we do not have a choice -- and we have to give them permission to cross over. People sometimes need permission to move on – and we need to grant it.

Remember C. S. Lewis –The Narnia Chronicles -- the wardrobe door was the opening between this world and the world of Narnia and heaven is so much more than Narnia. Use your imagination carefully with me for a moment – on our side of the door as we see life – we are holding onto to someone's hand for the last few moments – humanly we do not want to let them go -- they seem to be falling asleep - but on the other side of the door – a cry goes out through all of heaven – it is time to welcome a new child of God home – angels come from the four corners of heaven to form a guard of honor – their name is announced – and as they step through that gossamer veil – to us they fall asleep – yet on the other side - they become fully alive – more alive than they have ever been.

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We have to let them go for them to be welcomed home – angels line the streets and at the end of this road into heaven – stands one whom they have worshipped all of their lives. His name is Jesus. We see the word Nike on running shoes and shirts – but did you know NIKE is the Greek word for Victory – the word that greeted the winning runner as they rounded the final curve towards the finishing line with the crowd on their feet cheering them on. Nike! Nike! Nike! Perhaps it is the cry that greets us as we make it at last to the finishing line --

CS Lewis – at the end of Narnia – calls it the Great Story which goes on forever in which every chapter is better than the one before.

I always find it a challenge to bring a message to a close – something that will tie up all its ends as it were – so about 10 days ago was working on this message for today – Harriet was out – I was just by myself - A passage come to mind to finish this message – so I looked it up - it is from the Apocalypse – the last book of the Bible -- One day – a man called John saw a revelation of Jesus as He is now in glory - I started to read it to see if it might fit -- and I started to cry – I felt tears running down my face – I will try to read it this morning without crying -

WORSHIP TEAM UP/ STAND

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

When I finished -- I realized that I was on my knees -

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So as we sing a final hymn – I am just going to come and kneel here -- I invite you if you wish just to come and kneel here on the stairs in a simple personal act of worship – it is not about performance –it’s not about anyone else – just slip out of your seat - come down from the balcony – I will not do anything to embarrass you – you just come and kneel and quietly worship - if you are on line with us - you can kneel at home -- it is just a simple act of response --- one day we will all bow the knee to Jesus in worship – this is a rehearsal for that day.

If kneeling is too hard as it is for some – I understand that -- you can just come – and stand as we sing.

Closing Song:

Benediction –

Revelation simply ends – Amen, Come Lord Jesus.