



1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
 Living as Followers of Jesus  
 “The Hope We Have”

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It’s been said that there are only two things that are certain in life: death and taxes. I don’t know if that’s really accurate...in fact, I’d say it’s not...but let’s roll with it for a moment. Let me start by talking about taxes. (Silence)

OK...that’s probably enough on that topic. Actually, Jesus did say “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and the God what is God’s.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this. Paul says essentially the same thing in Romans 13. There are a couple other places where things can kind of be inferred or applied to taxes, but really Jesus’ teaching and that one from Paul are the most concrete teaching we get.

**The other certainty in life, according to the saying, anyway, is death.** No one makes it out alive. If you sit and think about that for too long, it could be a little depressing, you know? But the Bible doesn’t shy away from it. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that regardless of how you live your life, what your work is, what your economic situation is, and so forth...we all die. Psalm 103:15-16 reads, **“The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more” (Psalm 103:15-16).**

Psalm 23:3 – “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” – is maybe the most famous Bible verse on death. So, what, if any, hope is there in the face of death? Is life just a matter of “eat, drink, and be merry”? Enjoy it as best you can? Endure it as best you can? Do we try and make ourselves feel better about it by the legacy we hope to leave or by joking about it? My favorite joke is about the three guys who were at a funeral service for a mutual friend and they started talking about their eventual deaths and what they hoped people would say at their funeral services. One guy said, “I hope they say I was a faithful and good father and husband.” The second guy said, “I hope they say I was a courageous and loyal friend.” The third guy said, “I hope they say, ‘Look! He’s moving!’” 😄 But no matter how many jokes about death we make, which is probably just a poor psychological ploy to ignore or minimize the reality...**The thing we really**

**ought to consider is: Is there a real and sure hope for us in the face of death? Is there any comfort in regards to death?** Let's see what today's passage has to say about this, as we continue our walk through First Thessalonians, Paul's first letter to the church he helped start in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Today we are in **4:13-18**, and we'll take it all in one reading today. This is God's Word to you and me this morning...

So, the short answer, as we can see from verse 13 and 18 is that we have hope, and that this hope encourages us. In between those verses, are some verses that answer the question of why we have this hope and comfort, and yet these verses also likely raise some questions for us. So, let's see if we can address some of those before returning to the hope we have in Jesus.

**First of all, the word most often used in Scripture to describe what we call Jesus' "return" or "second coming" is the Greek word "Parousia."** This is far from the only place. We see it in verse 15 this morning when Paul writes about "...the coming of the Lord..." The disciples and Jesus use it several times in Matthew 24 when talking about this topic; Paul uses it fourteen times in five of his letters, including four times in this one, and it's used by other New Testament writers such as James, Peter, and John. And "Parousia" really simply means "appears" or "coming". It's the "appearance" of the Lord Jesus. It's his "coming" back. Now, to distinguish this from his life and ministry in the first century, we call it the "second coming" but Jesus doesn't actually call it his "second coming." It's just his Parousia, his appearance.

**Secondly, the first century Christians seemed to believe that Jesus' "Parousia" would be in their lifetimes.** Who can blame them? They had no compelling reason *not* to believe that. Some people over the centuries since then, use this obviously incorrect expectation as an argument against the trustworthiness of Scripture: because if the early Christians were wrong about the Parousia, how do we know they weren't wrong the idea that Jesus will *ever* return, or that they're wrong about other things? But it's not a question of being right or wrong about the fact of Jesus' Parousia. Jesus himself makes the promise, and that's where it comes from. As for *when* it happens, we'll see next week that Paul uses the same metaphor that Jesus

himself uses to explain that we don't know when it's going to happen. But Jesus will appear again, he will return.

**Paul then goes into some detail about what will happen when Jesus returns. Jesus gives the foundation for this in teachings found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21.** Those passages are where we get stuff you may have read about nations rising against nations, wars and rumors of wars, other people falsely claiming to be the Messiah; the “abomination that causes desolation” is a phrase Jesus uses in Matthew 24 and comes from the book of Daniel and its prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, particularly Daniel 9, 11, and 13. In Mark we see some quotes from Isaiah that Jesus uses that talk about the darkening of the sun and stars falling from the sky. And then of course, there's the book of Revelation. And the picture painted in these teachings is pretty wild.

**But: There's also a lot of symbolism in these things, which is part of what makes them difficult to understand.** But of course, people have tried to interpret and understand them. There are four main “schools of thought” on what we often call the “end times”, and there are another three or four schools of thought about Jesus' return within those end times scenarios, and other variables as well. You do the math, and there's a lot of possible combinations. I think this week I came across 15 of them, though there are four main ones. And the labels used to describe these positions all use big words with sometimes similar but different definitions – like amillennial, premillennial, post-tribulation, dispensationalism, and so forth. So, you could say, “I'm a premillennial, mid-tribulation, dispensationalist.” At least, I think that's a possible combination. But, try leading with *that* in the office break room tomorrow, right?

Look, I'm smarter than I am tall...more brain cells than hair cells...(I realize the bar is set low on both of those)... I've got a Master's degree in Christian theology and ministry...and this stuff makes my head swim. In spite of the questions and the differences of Biblical interpretation, there are some things we can deduce from Scripture about Jesus' Parousia, and Paul makes them pretty clear here, though there still are going to be questions. He writes, **“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. 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” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).**

The reason he wrote seems to be that the Thessalonian believers were saddened that someone in their church had died since Paul was last with them, and yet Jesus hadn't returned. So, they're wondering was the faith of this person(s) who died, in vain? Is there hope for the dead in Christ?

And Paul's saying, "No! There absolutely is hope. The dead in Christ will rise, and those who are alive at his return will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Which, if he returns while I'm alive, that ride up into the sky sounds a little intimidating, to be honest. Talk about a leap of faith, right? But Paul is probably using a word image that isn't necessarily *exactly* how it will go. **Scripture is filled with pictorial metaphors, including about God himself.** Psalm 18:2 describes God as a rock. If I get to eternity and God is a slab of granite or whatever, I'll be disappointed. Similarly, I don't think most Christians, maybe not any, believe that heaven is literally in the sky and that's where we go when Jesus takes us to be with him. I don't know...maybe he's hiding just outside our galaxy...but I kind of don't think so.

So, there's a certain degree of symbolism, but the fact that Jesus will return to take us to our eternal home is rooted in Jesus' own teaching, and in his resurrection. His resurrection is the part of his life that is hardest for some people to believe; and yet the first Christians, many who knew Jesus personally, would not let go of that claim even when facing their own persecution and death for making that claim. Why would they die for it if they knew it was a lie? So, Jesus' own resurrection backs up his promise to return.

So, by now, you may be asking, "What's the point?" If you are, I'm glad, because I want to answer that. The point is exactly what Paul writes here: **"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (verse 13).** Then after reminding them of Jesus' death

and resurrection and straightening out their understanding about death and being with God in eternity, he writes, **“Therefore encourage one another with these words” (verse 18).**

We, or at least some Christians, get all caught up in the Biblical interpretive debate about when, how, where, and so forth, of Jesus’ return...when: **The most important question is: What does this mean for us? Answer: It means that we have hope! The assurance of eternity with God through faith in Jesus gives us hope for then, and for right now.** This life is not all there is. Death does not have the final say. There is life on the other side of grave, and it is eternal, it is good, and it is in the presence of our heavenly Father, when we trust in Jesus. The other side of the coin is that some people don’t have hope. Paul makes that clear. We are to live: not as those who don’t have hope, but as those who do, *because of Jesus*.

There *are* people without hope. There are people who think that this life is all there is. So, eat, drink and be merry...the problem is: an awful lot of life is not all that merry. There’s a lot of pain, anguish, grief, heartache, and more. No one can avoid it, and for some people that stuff becomes overwhelming. Even for Christians, sometimes the devil gets a foothold and gets us consumed by this stuff and we struggle to find hope. A guy I knew in college and crossed paths with 2 or 3 times since...was an ardent follower of Jesus with a wife and two kids in college...about four weeks ago he committed suicide. He’d lost hope, or felt like he was a burden to others and was dragging down their hope or their sense of purpose. I don’t know. Maybe we never will know what really got him so down that he got to that place. Another friend of mine shared with me recently that he sat in his car for an hour one night a couple years ago, with a gun in his hand, ready to pull the trigger. He just didn’t feel worthy of his relationships, and that he was more trouble to them than he was worth. Thank God, he’s still alive; it was a Christian song that came on the radio as he sat in his car that changed the course of events. The devil will use whatever he can to suck hope out of us.

**Paul is saying: Jesus brings hope and encouragement!** It’s not hope based on some wishy-washy fairy tale...it’s not based on our efforts or money or talents...It’s hope rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in

his promise to return, to appear again, and take us to be with him in eternity. It's hope you can count on. So, while there may be Biblical interpretation debates about certain aspects of this stuff, the basic facts are simple, comforting, and hope-inducing. Comfort and hope are a very practical, needed thing for all of us. Maybe you're needing comforting and hope as you sit here this morning. Maybe you got bad news at work yesterday, or you ache for somebody close to you, or the politics of our country are causing anxiety and worry, or your health has taken a turn for the worse, or it's something from years ago that you did or someone did to you that keeps eating away at you, or it's what we started the sermon with: death and taxes. Whatever it might be that causes you to worry, stress, be anxious, or grieve: Let the fact of Jesus' death and resurrection and his eventual return bring you hope and comfort, because Jesus is a third certainty in life. Death, taxes, and Jesus. We can at least expand the phrase to that, right? Let the hope and comfort of Jesus be a certainty in your life – today, tomorrow, and for eternity. Let's pray...Amen.