

THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND HOPE IN DEATH

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

I. Tomorrow is Memorial Day. This national holiday was established for the purpose of remembering those who have died in serving our country as members of the armed forces. My favorite president is George Washington, who was also our nation's first Commander-in-chief, and the first of twelve US generals who would serve as president of our country. During the course of his military service, he saw many of his troops die in service to their new nation.

I am convinced that Washington and his wife had a genuine Christian faith. I have read at least 15 biographies of Washington in my lifetime. The most recent one that I read is entitled *Washington's God*. In it, the authors cite a letter that Martha Washington wrote to a friend a month after George's death.

She writes, "...the good Christian will submit without repining to the dispensations of divine Providence, and look for consolation to that Being who alone can pour balm into the bleeding heart, and who has promised to be the widow's God." A bit later she added, "For myself, I have only to go with humble submission to the will of that God who giveth, and who taketh away, looking forward with faith and hope to the moment when I shall be again united with the partner of my life." (*Washington's God*, Novak and Novak, 2006, p. 209)

Death is no stranger to our congregation. I counted up last week how many funerals I have done during my time here and arrived at the total of 93. But we share the same hope that Martha Washington had. It is the hope of a healthy church in situations of death.

In recent weeks we have been studying Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. We have seen that Paul and his fellow missionaries, Timothy and Silas, visited the Greek city of Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey in about 49 AD. Paul initially preached in the synagogue. After three weeks, he was thrown out of there. He probably preached and taught the new Christians for a few more weeks before there was a riot and he was forced out of town. From there he went to Berea, then to Athens. Six months later Paul was in Corinth. In Corinth he got a report from Timothy about how the church in Thessalonica was doing.

Paul responded by writing this letter which we are studying. We have seen that he described the church in that city as a healthy congregation, in that it was exemplary in its display of faith, love and hope. Much of the first three chapters is spent in reviewing the good things that have happened there as the result of the work of God.

Last time we saw what Paul had to say about the importance of a healthy walk. In that passage there was an emphasis upon brotherly love and upon the pursuit of sexual purity. Now in the remainder of #4 the apostle describes the response of a healthy church in dealing with death.

II. First, in v. 13 of #4 Paul describes **THE HOPE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH FOR LIFE IN DEATH**. In #1 Paul also spoke about the need for hope. The context there dealt primarily with hope in the midst of the challenges of life, especially in the face of persecution. Here the context involves death. He writes in v. 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."

At the beginning of this chapter the apostle begins to respond to questions that the Thessalonian Christians had which they passed along to Paul through Timothy and/or to observations that Timothy made about the church in that city. The exact issue that Paul is responding to here is not clear. Certainly Paul would have talked to them about the destiny of believers when they died. It will become evident that he also told them

about the return of Christ. Perhaps there were some deaths in the church in the months that followed Paul's departure which prompted more detailed questions about life after death. Perhaps there were questions related to the status of deceased saints in regard to the return of Christ.

In v. 13 Paul speaks about "those who are asleep." The original Greek word is the root of our English word "cemetery." The early Christians called graveyards "sleeping places." The term in our verse is never used in the New Testament in reference to nonchristians who have died. But it is often used of Christians who have died. At the very least it implies that dead Christians are in a temporary situation. It suggests that there is going to be an awakening of some sort.

There are some who have looked at this term and have adopted the view that when Christians die, their souls as well as their bodies go to sleep. The Seventh Day Adventists believe this. Perhaps a few of you are familiar with the Anglican Bible teacher and writer John Stott. He also holds to this doctrine of soul sleep. Those who hold to this view argue that when Christians die, they go into a state of suspended animation. When the body goes to sleep in death, so does our conscious mind.

There are several New Testament Scriptures, however, that indicate that it is only the body which goes to sleep, not the soul. In 2 Corinthians # 5 vv. 6-8 Paul writes, "We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body--- and asleep? No! --- at home with the Lord." This seems to imply an active relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the Transfiguration the disciples saw Jesus speaking with the Old Testament saints Moses and Elijah. They were not asleep. Jesus told the criminal who believed in Him at the last moment, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The promise was not that he would be asleep, but that he would be enjoying the blessings of Paradise.

In the Book of Revelation #6 vv. 9 & 10 the Apostle John is describing Christians who have died in the tribulation. He says, "When he (Jesus Christ) opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" Were these tribulation saints talking in their sleep? I don't think so.

Back in v. 13 of our passage Paul implies that a word of comfort is coming. We Christians grieve at the death of Christian loved ones. But our grieving is different from that of unbelievers. They have no hope. When people die without Christ, they are lost for eternity. Paul did not believe that there were many paths to God, and that Jesus was just one of many. He did not believe that there was a second chance. He did not tell people to pray for the souls of the deceased so that somehow their condition in the afterlife would be better.

The reality is that when people die without Christ, they fall under the eternal judgment of God. That is a horrible fate to contemplate. It is a cruel thing to talk about--- unless it is true. If it is true, then we need to make sure that we have acknowledged our sinfulness and received the gift of eternal salvation that Christ offers to us who will simply put our trust in Him. Then also we should be reminded about the urgency of the job of evangelism.

The Greeks and the Romans among whom the Thessalonian Christians lived had little hope for life beyond the grave. A few of the Greek and Roman philosophers talked about an afterlife. But most common people had little assurance about their fate after death. In the second century a Greek woman by the name of Irene wrote this letter, "Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. and all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done... But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another." (*P.Oxy* [Oxyrhynchus]. 115) That doesn't sound like much reason for comfort, does it?

A Roman writer of this era by the name of Theocritus said, "Hopes are for the living, but the dead are without hope." (*Idyll* 4.42) Another Roman writer, Catullus, declared, "The sun can set and rise again, but once our brief light sets, there is one unending night to be slept through." (Catullus, *The Complete Poems*)

The pagan Greeks and Romans were without hope. There are many people around us who are likewise without hope for what lies beyond the grave. Often they give little serious consideration to what happens after death. We who are Christians have hope, not just hopeful wishes, but faith based in the promises of the God who is there and in His word.

The Bible does not tell us a lot about our status as Christians when we die. The Book of Revelation tells us more about what things will be like for us Christians after Jesus returns to earth.

In the meantime we have only a few brief passages in the New Testament that describe our destiny when we die. We have just heard the reminder from Paul in 2 Corinthians #5 that death for us means being at home with the Lord. We have the statement of Jesus that a criminal who trusts in Him will be in Paradise after he draws his last breath. We have the additional assurance from Paul in Philippians #1 v. 23 that to "depart and be with Christ... is far better" for us than life in this earthly realm. The hope and assurance from these passages and v. 13 of our text is that a healthy church can have hope for life in death.

III. Verses 14 -16 in our passage also tell us about THE HOPE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH FOR A BODILY RESURRECTION. Verse 14 assures us, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep..."

Paul says that what happens in the future to Christians who have died is based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus was both God and man. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for man's sin.

We do not have to bear God's wrath against man's sin because Jesus bore it as our substitute and representative.

Thus it is that Paul writes in Romans #8 v. 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Because of Christ's death for us, our death is merely sleep for our body. Christ's resurrection is the proof of His claims. It is also the basis of our hope of resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians #15 vv. 12-20 Paul gave us this additional information about resurrection from the dead: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Christ is the firstfruits of those who are asleep. In other words, His resurrection is a forerunner of our resurrection. It is also a guarantee that His followers will experience a bodily resurrection.

In the event that Paul is about to describe back in our text, Christ will bring with Him Christians who have died. According to v. 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." The word of the Lord that Paul speaks about is not otherwise found in the New Testament. Paul could be talking about an otherwise unknown statement of Jesus. Or he could be referring to a revelation that was made to him by Christ. He proceeds to describe the content of this word of the Lord.

Paul and the Thessalonian Christians appeared to believe that this coming of the Lord was imminent, that it could happen at any time, that there was

nothing more on the Biblical schedule revealed to man that had to happen before Christ comes back.

There are some Bible-believing Christians who think that the coming that Paul is describing here happens at the end of a seven year period of tribulation that is described in Matthew #24 and in the Book of Revelation. But if the events of this tribulation have to occur first, then the rapture that Paul has in view is not imminent. It cannot happen at any time. It must happen after a lot of bad stuff takes place during the tribulation. That does not seem to fit with what we have here, at least in my understanding of the passage.

If the Thessalonian Christians were concerned that those who have died may miss out on the good stuff involved in the Second Coming, then Paul puts that fear to rest. He assures the Thessalonians that living Christians will not precede the others who have fallen asleep. Just what exactly is going to happen?

Verse 16 tells us, "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."

Apparently there are three sounds that will announce this great event. One of them will be a shout, probably from Jesus Christ Himself. Then also there will be a voice of the, or "an," archangel. Jude v. 9 identifies Michael as an archangel. He is also mentioned in the Book of Daniel, but there could be other archangels. Then also there will be the sound of a trumpet. Trumpets in the Old Testament were used to call the people of Israel together for battle, for feasts and for other special events. The trumpet used was usually a ram's horn.

What happens in this event is that the dead in Christ rise first. The term "dead in Christ" seems to refer to Christians who have died. Saints of the Old Testament and saints who die during the tribulation will probably rise

from the dead at the end of the tribulation. Daniel #12 vv. 1 & 2 provide support for that notion.

Jesus Himself spoke of this coming resurrection. In John #5 v. 25, He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."

This rising of the dead involves a resurrection from the grave. The souls of Christians, according to v. 14, will accompany Jesus from heaven. They will be reunited with resurrected bodies. Somehow these bodies will be reconstituted.

What will they be like? The only basis of comparison that we have is the resurrection body of Jesus. We know from the four Gospels that Jesus in His resurrection body was recognizable, at least at times. His wounds were visible. The disciples could put their fingers in them. So there seems to have been physicality in Jesus' resurrected body. He was able to eat. But then He could also enter a locked room, and, at times, He suddenly disappeared.

First Corinthians #15 vv. 50-54 provide us with a little more information about this resurrection from the dead. There Paul writes, "I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'" Thus we will receive resurrection bodies that will have some resemblance to the kind of body that Jesus had after His resurrection. This is the healthy church's hope for a bodily resurrection.

IV. We come finally to THE HOPE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH FOR A UNION WITH CHRIST. In v. 17 Paul writes, "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."

The original word for "caught up" means "to be snatched, to be seized--- often by force." The Latin word is *raptus*, from which we get our word "rapture." This verse and 1 Corinthians 15:52, which we read earlier, and spoke about being changed in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet, are the only two specific references in the Bible to the rapture of the church.

Our verse indicates that at the moment of the rapture, Christians who are living will be caught up in the air to join other Christians who have just risen from the dead. Together we will be united with the Lord Jesus Christ.

This all take place in the air. Some have pointed out that Ephesians #2 v. 2 calls Satan "the prince of the power of the air." Perhaps this choice of reunion place is divinely intended to be a kind of slap in the face of the evil one.

What happens next? Where do these saints with resurrection bodies go after this? There is some debate among Christians. Amillennialists, who believe that there is no literal thousand year reign of Christ on the earth, usually say that the final judgment happens next and the eternal state begins.

There are some premillennialists, who believe in a literal seven year tribulation followed by a literal thousand year rule of Christ upon the earth who hold to a posttribulational rapture. In other words, they believe that the rapture of the church happens at the end of the seven year tribulation. Christians rise up to meet Christ in the air. Then they come right back to earth. The judgment of Christ upon the enemies of God happens, and then there is the thousand year rule of Christ upon the earth.

If this is the correct scenario, it would mean that Christians would have to live through the Great Tribulation, which is characterized in the Bible, especially in the Book of Revelation, as a terrible period when God displays His wrath upon sinful humanity. It seems to me hard to imagine that Paul would encourage the Christians at Thessalonica to look forward to the Second Coming if it meant that they had to live through this Great Tribulation. Then also in #1 v. 10 of this letter Paul speaks about the Second Coming, and he says that Jesus "delivers us from the wrath to come."

So having the rapture happen before the seven year tribulation makes the most sense to me. As Paul taught the Thessalonian Christians, this rapture of the church could happen at any time. Christ will come down from heaven, and in an instant the Christians who have died will be raised from the dead. We Christians who are still living will be caught up from off of the earth and will join our fellow believers in the air. In the process we will be given resurrection bodies that are similar to the resurrection body of Jesus. Then perhaps we will be given a judgment of rewards by the Lord Jesus. Then we will be taken to heaven.

Jesus declared in John #14 vv. 2 & 3, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

It is important to understand, then, that the Second Coming of Christ is a term in the New Testament that has different aspects. Sometimes it is focusing on the rapture and the events associated with it. At other times it seems to refer to the physical return of Christ to earth at the end of the seven year tribulation. Sometimes it seems to refer to this whole time period including the rapture, the tribulation and the physical return of Christ to earth. Chapter 5, which we will consider next week, seems to describe the tribulation that begins after the rapture. The placement of the discussion of the tribulation after the rapture in the text of 1 Thessalonians also suggests to me a pretribulational rapture.

The Apostle Paul concludes in v. 13, "Therefore encourage one another with these words." The prospect of the return of Christ at the rapture should be a comfort to Christians who have lost believing loved ones. The promise is that none of us will miss out on the glories of the Second Coming. At the rapture we will be reunited with one another and with Christ.

Ernest Shackleton was an Irishman who led a British expedition to find the South Pole in Antarctica in 1908. He and his companions got as close as 97 miles to it, but that was all. Six years later he led another expedition to Antarctica. This time, as they neared the polar continent in January of 1915, their ship was trapped by ice.

These are actual pictures that the crew of 28 took of their expedition. Remember that in the southern hemisphere the seasons are the opposite of what they are here. So it was summer in Antarctica when their ship got stuck. The explorers spent much of the following year trying to get their ship out of the ice. But it was to no avail. In November of 1915 their ship was crushed by the surrounding ice.

The men took their supplies off of the ship. They set up a temporary camp on the ice. In December they decided to drag their three smaller boats and their supplies and head toward the nearest island. By April of 1916 they realized that the floating ice had actually taken them further from their objective. But they spotted Elephant Island in the distance. They managed to haul their boats to the open sea and get across to Elephant Island.

Unfortunately Elephant Island was uninhabited. The nearest inhabited island was still 800 miles away. So Shackleton decided to take one of the boats and five of the men to get across what is perhaps the most stormy stretch of water in the world. After 17 days they successfully landed at South Georgia Island. Still, they had to go 22 miles over a mountain ridge to get to a whaling station.

Then it took Shackleton four different attempts on four different boats to get back to Elephant Island. Meanwhile the men waited, not knowing if Shackleton had even survived the dangerous journey to South Georgia Island.

Finally, Shackleton found a boat that did not have mechanical problems and was able to approach Elephant Island. On August 30, 1917, four months after leaving the rest of his crew, Shackleton approached Elephant Island. Unfortunately the path of the rescue ship was blocked by huge icebergs. Suddenly, as if by a miracle, a path opened up in the ice, and Shackleton was able to get through.

Shackleton's men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard the dinghy and made it to the rescue ship. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'The boss may come today.'"

Our boss could come back today also. Such is the hope of a healthy church for a union with Christ. We need to make sure that we are ready for Him. Most importantly, we need to make sure that we have trusted in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. Beyond that, we ought to be following His directions to us and accomplishing the purposes that He has for our individual lives.