### “The Dead in Christ” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 12, 2023

**Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16**

12Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. 13 She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. 14 One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. 15 To fix one’s thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, 16 because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought.

**First Thessalonians 4:13–18**

13But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This weekend is a time of remembrance of those who have gone before us and who served our country. We are thankful for all they gave us, and the effort they made to bring peace. There are places now that have no peace, but there is hope that peace may come. We have seen peace and civility come to Germany, South Africa, and Ireland, where there had been severe violence previously. Peace may be possible in some of today’s battlegrounds. If you believe in God, you tend to have hope available to you. Today’s passages have something optimistic to say about life and truth, and the truth about the persistence of life beyond this world.

The passage from the Wisdom of Solomon gives us some theology about this divine reality, Wisdom, that was understood to be God’s co-worker at the time of creation, and that was thought to be an emanation of God. Using similar imagery to what occurs in the Book of Proverbs, the author has Wisdom sitting at the gate, ready to be approached. Fix your mind on her, and she will deliver you from care; she will meet you in every thought. She may be considered synonymous with God, or as an emanation of God. Some think she is equivalent to the Holy Spirit.

Given that it is speaking about one of God’s principal characteristics and gifts to humanity, this is a text that could match up with almost any other biblical text. The First Thessalonians passage, however, is very specifically focused, seeking to answer the questions that had been coming to Paul from the Thessalonian congregation regarding what would happen with people who had recently died. Paul describes what is sometimes called a dispensational resurrection, the raising of the dead at the end of a dispensation, or a long period of time. Another term for it is the general resurrection, to distinguish it from Jesus’ own resurrection.

Paul gives some details, some of which are unique, some of which can be found in other texts. He says God and Jesus will come, and “God will bring with him those who have died” (4:14), which could mean holy people from previous epochs who have been raised. Paul says this resurrection happens “with the archangel’s call” (4:16).

This partly overlaps with something we find in the Epistle of Jude, where the archangel Michael contends with the devil regarding the resurrection of Moses (Jude 9). Paul also says that this general resurrection is accompanied by the sound of God’s trumpet. This matches what we find in another letter of Paul’s, 1 Cor 15:52. There he says we will all be changed “in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable.” There is also a line in Matthew, after “the sign of the Son of Man [appears] in heaven,” then the Son of Man will come on the clouds (Matt 24:30), and the angels will blow on a trumpet, and “gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:31). This might refer to raising the dead throughout the world (which would correlate with Matt 13:41, 49; 16:27), or the reference to heaven might mean that there are saints asleep in heaven who are raised up at this time. As in the Thessalonians passage, a general resurrection is associated with the return of the Son of Man.

In three New Testament passages, then, a trumpet announces the general resurrection. Paul expects believers who are still alive at the time of Christ’s return to be “caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). Paul never returns to this image again, after this occurrence in his earliest surviving letter, and some scholars think that he changed his teachings somewhat when the expectation that Jesus would return soon started to fade away with time.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the discussion of the general resurrection is not associated with Jesus’ return, but focuses on the life vehicle that believers will receive. Paul contrasts the old clay-like physical body with the new, spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44–49) which will “bear the image of the man of heaven” (15:49). “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” he says (15:50), but we will take on an imperishable body (15:53).

Once we leave earth we are gifted with a new, improved form with greater capabilities. We will see the beauty of the heavenly realms. This will be a fantastic moment, Paul says, and he calls it “victory,” when death is “swallowed up” (15:53, 57). Faith in this promise makes us “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord”; your hope is not in vain, he insists (15:58).

I hope your faith includes belief in your future resurrection from the dead, and your receiving of a spiritual body. As we have seen, this promise draws on material in Matthew, First Corinthians, and First Thessalonians, but we also have the phrase “eternal life” that occurs in the other gospels, in Acts, Romans, in some of the shorter epistles, and six times in the First Epistle of John.

John wrote “God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11). I hope this is part of your faith repertoire. God wants us to grow, to love, to learn, to thrive, both in this lifetime and in the life to come. “Encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18), Paul says.

There is joy in the morning. Fear not the change that will come to all of us, but build up your reward, your treasure in heaven. There are also joys that can be shared now with one another. Be a witness of the love of the Father in your daily lives, letting Wisdom meet you in every thought.

Let your inner light be like a beacon of peace in the world’s sea of troubles. Peace can begin with us.