

Pastor Graham Pfeffer Sermon for 12th November 2023

Text 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ¹⁶ *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.*

Do you have hope for your future. Do you wonder what lies ahead for yourself, your children, your grandchildren. If you would like the Apostle Paul to write a letter to this church, what topic would you like Paul to cover.

1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament. It is the first of the letters of Paul, written before any of the Gospels. Paul is writing to these early Christians who have a dilemma. They have put their hope in Jesus' return, but some of the early believers have died, and now they are wondering what that means for their loved ones. What has happened to that hope they had of Jesus return, now that they have died before his return.

Here we are over 2000 years later and Jesus still hasn't returned. Talk amongst Christians and you will find differing views on what is going to happen when Jesus comes again. This bible reading from 1 Thessalonians 4, we read, "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. 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,"

It is this bible verse that is used as the basis of what has been labelled the rapture, though the word rapture is not in the bible. The word "rapture" is simply the Latin-based word for "caught up." In other words, when Jesus comes again, Christians will be "raptured," "caught up," to meet Jesus in the air.

A book series called "left behind" has at their core the idea that the Rapture is the moment when all the Christians will be taken up and disappear, and everybody else, all the unbelievers, will be left behind. Even the 'left behind' movies show people left behind in cars and airplanes, with those still sitting in the cars and planes, wondering what happened to the people sitting next to them just a moment ago. Some believe that what happens next, is a seven-year great tribulation, where God will finish His discipline of Israel and finalize His judgment of the unbelieving world. But Christians will be spared that period because we will have already been raptured. This understanding is developed by the compiling together of snippets from apocalyptic bible passages.

But the thing is we already see Satan at work in the world don't we. Therefore, we are already living in the end times. No one really knows exactly what will happen when Jesus returns. It is all an interpretation of visionary, apocalyptic language. So, let's focus on why this letter is written in the first place.

Paul writes: "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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."

The believers in Thessalonica have heard previously from Paul, Silas and Timothy that Jesus is coming again. They have been taught just as we are that Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ has ascended, and Christ will come again. We say in the Apostles Creed, 'From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead. It's the foundation of faith.

But the problem confronting the Thessalonians is, Jesus has waited too long and now they are worried. Because they still hold onto the thought, that once someone dies, that's it, they're gone.

And to a certain extent, that makes sense, doesn't it? Those of us who have had loved ones die, do not hear from them anymore, we do not see them anymore. So where is the hope.

Therefore Paul, teaches them and us, for people who believe in Jesus, we do not grieve like others who have no hope.

Have you been to a funeral where there has been no good news of the hope we have in Jesus. Where at death, what is left are the memories of the loved one. Without the hope of life after death, of rising from sleep into eternity, death can bring a feeling of hopelessness, despair and deep grief and loss. A wondering of where they have gone.

But Paul is writing to assure Christians that death is not a permanent loss, and it need not produce grief without hope. Rather, we do have great hope when it comes to facing the death of those who fall asleep in Christ. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him all those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection have an intimate connection to the believer's life. Since Jesus paid for all of our sins and served as the first-fruits of the resurrection, we know that those who have fallen asleep in the Lord will awaken from their death-slumber on the last day.

Death and the world, while they may seem eternal, will one day pass away. Revelation 21:1 tells us there will be a new heaven and a new earth, whatever that will look like. The cross for us reminds us there is hope, even for those who have died. This is the good news for all of us who have loved ones, children, siblings, spouses and even, elderly parents. who have died before their hope is fulfilled.

The word of hope is Jesus is coming again. God does not abandoned his children to the realm of the dead. God will raise them up and we will see them again. God is God of the living, not the dead (Mark 12:27).

As we live our lives, we live in expectation that Jesus can return at any moment, but also with the expectation that Jesus return will not happen in our lifetime. So how do we prepare ourselves for his return. We be like the wise bridesmaids; we be prepared for what could be still the long haul by keeping the fire of faith burning in our hearts. We keep ourselves topped up by reading the good news of the gospel, which tells us do not despair, Jesus is coming again.

There is the possibility we will die before Jesus comes. There is also the possibility Jesus can come while we are still alive. Paul describes that day like this. 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."

That is the rapture this bible reading speaks of. The day of Christ's return. This will be the return of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead. The good news is, the Judge is also our Savior, who, at his first coming, came as our brother, to fulfill the law for us and to bear our sins on the cross. This is the basis for the hope we have: the forgiveness and righteousness through the redemption won for us by Christ. When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was with the promise that he will come again, in glory. When he does, he will raise from the dead all those who have died with faith in him. No one knows the day or the hour, but when he comes, we will all be caught up together in the true Rapture, to meet our Savior and be with him forever.

Therefore, Encourage one another with these words. Amen.