

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS



1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Fifth Message

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

The current pandemic has brought months of enforced isolation. One of the tragedies of this isolation is that loved ones have been dying in hospitals and nursing homes, unattended by family and friends. Care-givers and health-care workers do what they can, but it's not the same as the comfort of family. This happened to our next-door neighbor, who entered an assisted living facility last Fall. During lockdown Sue would drop off things for her, and chat through the window, each on their cell phone. In June she was diagnosed with COVID and died in hospital two weeks later.

Family and friends who have lost loved ones are themselves isolated in their grief, unable to receive visitors to wrap them in a comforting hug. We have been unable to gather around to weep with those who weep, to mourn with those who mourn. We have been unable to hold services for those who have passed. A few funeral and memorial services are held on Zoom and YouTube. But it's just not the same. And now the fires are isolating us further because we don't want to be outside, given the air quality.

Our Scripture reading was drawn from John 11, the death and resurrection of Lazarus. When Lazarus died, many Jews came to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany "to comfort them in the loss of their brother" (11:19). Finally, four days late, Jesus came. Martha went to meet him, and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (21). Then Mary hurried out to meet him and said the same thing, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (32).

"If only you had been here!" If only we could have been there! How often have these words been said during this pandemic? These were words that Paul was saying 2000 years ago. "If only I could be there with you!" How he longed to visit Thessalonica to see the young Christians face-to-face. Unable to visit, Paul had sent Timothy to see how they were doing. The report he brought back only intensified Paul's longing: "If only I could be there with you!" "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess 3:10). "Supply what is lacking in your faith." Paul wanted to give them remedial instruction in areas in which they were falling short in their faithfulness to Jesus, their Lord and King. And he wanted to do it in person. But his way was still blocked. He couldn't be there.

Furthermore, Timothy had reported that some of the Christians in Thessalonica had died. How Paul longed to be there with the saints to comfort them in their grief. Instead, he had to do so by letter. In the two sections of the letter that we will look at today and next Sunday, Paul provides two words of comfort. He ends each section with the same words, "Therefore encourage (or comfort) one another" (4:18; 5:11). Yet these two sections have generated much speculation about end times, about the so-called Rapture and about the timing of Jesus' return like a thief in the night. They have generated fear and fascination rather than comfort. Can we read them in such a way that they are the words of comfort that Paul intended for his beloved Thessalonian brothers and sisters?

Our passage today is the last paragraph of 1 Thessalonians 4:

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. For 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. According 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. 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13-18 NIV)

Paul writes concerning those who sleep, a common metaphor in both Testaments for God's people who have died. Why have these people died and why are the living grieving them? The prevailing view used to be that Paul had so raised expectations of the imminent return of Jesus that they were taken by surprise when believers died before Jesus returned. But the current view is that these are Christians who had died under the tribulation and hostility of opponents of the gospel. This makes more sense. Paul has several times mentioned their affliction and suffering. He has praised their faithfulness, their loyalty to Jesus in the face of opposition. He has praised their endurance in the face of this hostility, "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). And he has hinted already that some have died in tribulation (2:14). Those who have died are martyrs, killed for being faithful to Jesus. They are "the saints, who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed."

We grieve when someone dies, because death tears the fabric of life. Death severs the deep connections among family and friends. But we all must die; we are all mortal. Some die in good old age, some die young. We die because our bodies wear out. We die from disease or illness or accident. But we all die. The pandemic and now the fires have made us more conscious than ever of death.

Much more problematic is the death of the righteous at the hands of the wicked. Such death tears not only the fabric of life but the moral fabric of the universe. Evil triumphs over good. Evil kills good for being good. The cry over such injustice has been rising from the ground ever since Cain killed his brother Abel. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants" (Ps 116:15), we heard in our call to worship. But why? How long, O Lord? This is the martyr's cry, and the cry of those who grieve their unjust death. What comfort can Paul give?

It is alright for them to grieve. When he saw where Lazarus was laid, "Jesus wept." And the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

(11:35-36). Humans are relational creatures, and we grieve because death severs relationships. But there are two ways of grieving: as those with hope and those without hope. My parents are buried in a public cemetery in Edinburgh, first my father then my mother. Walking around the cemetery, looking at the gravestones, I've been struck by the contrast between the older graves and the newer ones. Many of the older stones are inscribed with Scripture, expressing hope and confidence. But that reliance on Scripture has passed; we're in a different age. The most common motif on the newer stones is the crest or shield of the deceased's football (soccer) team. This emblem testifies to their loyalty and hope: loyalty to a football club, and hope that it will win the championship. That's an inadequate hope to sustain life. It's an inadequate hope to carry beyond the grave. It's a sorry testimony summing up a human life that is capable of so much more. On our father's stone we put a Scripture verse as a testimony to his loyalty and hope, and as a proclamation to all who would walk by: "Blessed are they who die in the Lord" (Rev 14:13). Ten years later our mother was laid to rest under that same testimony and proclamation.

So how can the Thessalonian Christians grieve with hope? What is the hope that Paul wants them to have? He gives them two reasons for hope.

1. The Creed (14)

Paul's first reason for hope is the Creed, the common Confession of the Church (14). We believe. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again." This sounds like a credal statement of the very early church. We affirmed the same when we said the Apostles' Creed together. The majority of the Creed, whether it be the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, is a statement of facts of history. First, a short statement about God: He is the Maker of all things. Second, a fuller statement about Jesus Christ: he was born; he suffered, died and was buried. He descended into hell, that is, into the realm of the dead—he really died. He rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and God seated him at his right hand as Lord and King. It is good to affirm this together regularly. Doing so shapes our thinking. It forms us spiritually.

Based on this credal statement about the past, we believe something about the future: "and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." The Apostles' Creed turns to the future with the statement about Jesus: "from there he shall come," that is, from the Father's right hand he shall return to earth. And, Paul states, we believe that he will bring the Christian dead with him. They will not be left behind!

2. The Word of the Lord (15-17)

Paul's second reason for hope is the Word of the Lord. He has this on the authority of Jesus himself. He is confident that when Jesus returns, "we who are still alive...will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep." The Christian living will not have priority over the Christian dead. The dead will not be left behind when Jesus returns. And the living, who are currently left behind on earth, will not jump to the front of the line, leaving the dead behind. No one is left behind!

In verses 16-17 Paul lays out a sequence of four events when the Lord returns. This, presumably, is the word of the Lord that Paul received.

The first event is the descent of Jesus from heaven (16a). This is

what the angels had told the disciples as they were peering into the sky trying to see where Jesus had gone: "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). His descent will be marked by a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God. That is, the cry of command from the archangel is God's trumpet-blast. Notice that there are two pairs of trumpets in our window, one pair in the Israel panel, the other pair in the panel of the new heavens and the new earth.

The second event concerns the dead in Christ, the sleepers, those who have died before Christ's return (16b). They shall be raised first, before the next event. Resurrection! Just as Jesus died and rose again, so will those who participate in him, who are "in Christ." They have died, but they will rise. The archangel's call of command on God's trumpet summons this resurrection of the dead. They are re-embodied on earth. In Paul's stirring words, made so famous in Handel's *Messiah*:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:51-55)

The third event concerns the Christian living, those left behind on earth until Christ's return (17a). Then, only after the resurrection of the dead, "we together with them." We, the Christian living, together with them, the Christian dead newly-resurrected. We together with them. Here is the first reunion: the Christian dead and the Christian living. Together we are caught up into the clouds, the same cloud into which Jesus had disappeared and through which he reappears, the cloud which so often in the OT represents the glory of God's presence. We together with them are caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Here is the second reunion: all Christ's people will meet the Lord as he returns.

But here there has been much misunderstanding. This reunion doesn't stay in the middle of the air. It goes somewhere, but where does it go? Who turns around? Is it Jesus who turns around? Or is it his people? In what has long been the popular view, it is Jesus who turns around. He takes his people back to heaven with him. He doesn't come all the way to earth. Those still alive on earth, the non-Christians, are Left Behind! This sudden snatching of Christians out of the world is the so-called Rapture. The word "rapture" is derived from the Latin word used to translate "caught up": "we will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (17). There is a rapture: the living and the resurrected dead will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. But where does this reunion party go? In which direction? This is the big question.

The popular view of the Rapture misunderstands two key words in this passage: the *coming* of the Lord and the *meeting* with the Lord. Both words had specific meanings in the first century. Both were used as technical terms to refer to two aspects of the same event. The arrival of a senior dignitary, such as the emperor, to visit

a city was described as his *parousia*, his coming. The word *parousia* means “presence”: the dignitary arrived so as to be present. He didn’t approach the city only to turn around and go away. He came to the city so as to enter and be present with the people. As the dignitary approached the city, the leading citizens would come out of the city to meet him and escort him into the city. Such a meeting is described elsewhere in the NT.

When Paul approached Rome the Christians came out to meet him—some one day’s journey, some two. After meeting Paul they turned around and escorted him into the city (Acts 28:15). The word “meet” covers all three actions: coming out of the city, meeting, and escorting back in to the city. Likewise, in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), the bride’s attendants were woken at midnight by the cry, “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” Five wise virgins had their lamps ready, went out to meet the bridegroom and escorted him back into the bride’s house for the wedding banquet.

When the Christian living and the resurrected Christian dead meet the Lord in the air, it is we who will turn around to escort the Lord to earth. It is not the Lord who turns around and leads us into heaven. He is the returning King coming to earth. He is the bridegroom coming for his bride. His people go out to meet him and escort him in great joy.

The fourth and final stage: “And so we will be with the Lord forever” (17b) And so, in this way: the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the Christian dead, the reunion with them of the Christian living to meet the arrival of the Lord and escort him to earth. In this way we will be with the Lord forever. All who are in Christ will be with him. None will be left behind.

What is the basis of Paul’s confidence, of his hope? It is the creed: the confession that Jesus died, Jesus rose again. Everything is based upon this. Jesus rose as the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:8; Rev 1:5). He was dead but now lives. He has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18), and is able to release from that realm all who are his. He is the forerunner (Heb 6:20), the one who has gone before us. United to Christ, participating in him, we follow him in death and resurrection. This is what baptism represents: our death and resurrection. This is what the Christian life is about: death and resurrection. The daily and life-long process of dying to self and rising in Christ, of putting off the old and putting on the new. At the end we shall put off the corruptible body and be re clothed in the incorruptible. Those who have died will be resurrected into an incorruptible body. Those who are still alive will be changed, will be transformed into an incorruptible body. Just as in the middle of time Jesus rose in an incorruptible body. In all this we follow Jesus Christ our Lord. He is our pioneer, the forerunner.

Now this is a word of comfort! “Therefore encourage (comfort) one another with these words” (18). Those who have died in the current tribulation will not be disadvantaged at the return of Jesus. The Christians can take heart in the communion of saints, the communion of the saints who have died and those who are still alive; the communion of the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant, of the saints who have passed victorious, often through martyrdom, and the saints who maintain the struggle here on earth to be faithful amidst tribulation. The Church Militant commemorates the Church Triumphant every year on All Saints Day, November 1. On this day the church sings the hymn I asked James to play for our offertory. “For all the saints who from their labors rest, Who

Thee by faith before the world confessed.” Verse 5: “But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day, The saints triumphant rise in bright array, The King of Glory passes on his way. Alleluia!”

We can continue to persevere in hope under tribulation. We can continue to be faithful to Jesus, even in the face of death. We can be quiet, still, serene, unperturbed. We can get on with living our lives as faithful presence in the midst of a hostile world. We can endure because we have hope.

There is a timeline here, but it looks nothing like many of the timelines that have been developed from this passage. The popular idea of the Rapture arose about 200 years ago, first in the UK with J. N. Darby, then it spread here to the USA where it was popularized especially by the Scofield Study Bible. It was taught in many Bible schools and countless churches, including PBC in former days. This popular idea of the Rapture has caused considerable damage. I want to point out just four areas of its negative impact.

1. The Rapture breeds an escapist mentality. If our hope is that we are going to be snatched out of this world, then the only thing that really matters is to get people saved so that they have their ticket on that day and they won’t be left behind. It is reductionistic.

2. The Rapture fails to prepare the church to endure under suffering. The Rapture removes the church from the world before the supposed seven-year Great Tribulation. The idea of the Rapture could only have arisen in a society that was not undergoing great tribulation. But tribulation was the expected lot of the early church. The Thessalonian church was under tribulation. In many parts of the world today the church is under great tribulation. The church is called to be faithful and to endure in the midst of tribulation, not hope that it will be snatched out of the world and not have to face tribulation.

3. The Rapture breeds a negative attitude to the earth and creation care. We will be removed from the earth, which is not our home, we’re just passing through. The earth will be destroyed first by the violence of the Great Tribulation and Armageddon, then in a final cataclysmic judgment. Therefore Christians shouldn’t do anything to make this world a better place. I’ve heard this so often!

4. The Rapture is not conducive to a quiet life. It breeds either fear or fascination. Fear of not being ready and thus being left behind. Back in the 1970s when people watched the movie *Like a Thief in the Night*, or read Hal Lindsay’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, many Christians were terrified and very anxious. Or fascination with prophetic timelines and with all the violence and military hardware that will be unleashed during the Great Tribulation. But Paul has called the Thessalonians to live a quiet life.

The return of our Lord Jesus is indeed our great hope. He will return to earth as its rightful King. Meanwhile, we live out our lives as a colony of heaven on earth, a metaphor that Paul uses twice in his letter to the Philippians. As a colony, we seek to extend the footprint of heaven on earth, until heaven descend and fill earth. God cares about this world he has made. He loves it. As his created and redeemed people we are to care about this world also. We are to be good for the world, both the people and the earth itself. Let us live quiet lives in faithful presence, engaged in work produced by faithfulness, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3).

Earlier in the service we said the Apostles’ Creed. I would like us to say it again, hopefully now with more meaning and under-

standing. The creed is in three sections. First a brief section about God: he made all things. Then a longer section about Jesus Christ: what he did in the past followed by what he will do in the future: he will come again from the Father's right hand. In the third section of the creed we affirm our belief in the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. I encourage you at home to teach your children the Apostles' Creed. It is a great thing to commit to memory.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell;

the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thess 3:16)

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