



**"So We Do Not Lose Hope"**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Field**  
**1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11**  
**9:15 AM Service**

Maybe you, like us, are down to a few leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast. The Black Friday deals have everyone clicking away on their digital devices, the Hallmark Channel is well into its lineup of Christmas Specials, and we're making the turn toward the happiness and the hassles of the Christmas/New Year season.

For some of us this year, however, and for all of us at one year or another, our season is marked by sighing and sorrow more than excitement and happiness. There's an empty chair at the table this year. In fact, it might be for several years or a lot of years – but we have a case of grief. For some of us it is so acute that it squeezes the breath out of us; for others it is a chronic dull ache that clouds the soul.

I'd like to take the moment during this Sunday, a day which Christians of certain liturgical traditions call *Christ the King Sunday* to bring our attention to the difference the final victory of Jesus makes ...not only on the days of death and dying but also in our days of life and living.

We turn to a Letter from Paul to the Christians in Macedonia (the same general area which had our attention last week in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9). This week it is a letter written to a particular congregation of believers in a particular city: Thessaloniki. You can go there to visit today. There is a beautiful wide promenade along the north edge of the Aegean Sea.

It helps us, I think, to note that at the time this letter was written, Thessaloniki was the largest city in the province of Macedonia with about 200,000 residents. It was a commercial seaport and also the intersection of the Ignatian Way, a Roman highway constructed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC that went east and west, through modern Albania Greece, Macedonia, and Turkey, and the road leading north to the Danube River. The Apostle Paul had a brief and chaotic ministry of evangelism and planting a church. He was essentially run out of town by the authorities with the fledgling congregation left behind that seems to have included Jews from the synagogue, new gentile or non-Jewish background believers who had a background in Greek or Roman paganism.

That historical context doesn't actually seem to be all too important in this case because the existential situation connects them to us immediately and directly. If Jesus brings life eternal, what shall I do when someone I love dies? And if Jesus is actually Lord of everything, when is he coming to clean up the mess of the world, the suffering and injustice, the pain and the purposelessness, in which we so often find ourselves? Remember, the majority of the people to Paul was writing didn't have the whole history of the Jewish people behind them, with slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, and a lot of twists and turns in their fortunes that schooled them in the long-suffering way of faith in a God whose patience can sometimes be so exasperating to mere mortals like us.

The first letter to the Thessalonian believers takes these two matters up directly. The Scripture is clear enough on its own. You might not have been in this section of the Bible before or maybe not recently. So, let's take some time to study it together today.

*13 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. (2 Thessalonians 4:13)*

Paul uses "sleep" as a metaphor for death. This is not a euphemism; just some pretty language to repress the pain of loss. Sleep is a "temporary condition". Likewise, for Christians, death is a temporary condition. The doctor might say our condition is terminal, but Christ-followers know our terminal condition is temporary.

Paul doesn't want his readers to be uninformed, other translations are more direct: "I don't want you to be ignorant when it comes to death". As we sometimes say, what death did to Jesus is *nothing* compared to what Jesus did to death.

So, when Jesus himself is called to the little village of Bethany, near Jerusalem, because his friend Lazarus has died and Lazarus' sisters, Jesus' friends Mary and Martha have sent for the Lord, Jesus says the most remarkable thing:

*"I am the resurrection and life."*

*Martha, the sister of the dead man, gives sort of a seventh-grade confirmation class reply: "Yes, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*

*I'm editing just a bit here because Jesus' response seems so emphatic:*

*"No, no, no, Martha. This is not "someday", it is certain right here and right now. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-27)*

We should note at the time of Lazarus' death that there were a lot of tears: his sisters, of course, and his friends, certainly, but also Jesus himself. The shortest verse of the Bible has such a profound poignancy with just two words: *Jesus wept.* (John 11:35). There is, by the way, another equally short verse in the New Testament which happens to occur in 1 Thessalonians: *Rejoice always* (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

The observation here is that grief is normal for us. Loss is a part of life and grief is our normal and painful response to grief. The Scripture, however, wants us to know that in our grief Christ-followers have the underlying and indestructible gift of hope.

*14 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)*

This is not some sort of fond wish about the immortality of the soul or the circle of life, the separation of spirit and body, or our body returning to compost of one sort or another. Our hope is anchored in the rock solid historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus' victory over death through the resurrection and his promise to bring with him all those who die trusting in him.

*Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust God – and trust me, too," Jesus said. "There is plenty of room to live in my father's house. If that wasn't the case, I'd have told you, wouldn't I? I'm going to get a place ready for you! And if I do go and get a place ready for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, so that you can be there, where I am forever. (N.T. Wright translation of John 14:1- 3)*

That, of course, was Jesus speaking to those who had signed up and believed in him. But even at the time of his own death, with a thief being executed on the cross next to him, when the thief, just at that moment, asks for Jesus to save him, the Lord says what? "Today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43)

The arrival of Jesus means the Kingdom of God is coming close to us and our world. *And when the Kingdom comes close, the era of death is coming to an end.*

How will this happen? We've walked through, driven by, and been part of the sad procession to so many cemeteries. The dead sure seem to us to be dead and gone.

*<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)*

Paul references the teaching of Jesus himself. This is not a teaching we have recorded in the gospels. The gospels, of course, are not an audio recording of everything that Jesus said everywhere all the time. As we read in the Gospel According to John, and which, I'm sure, would also be true of the other three gospels, the writer of the gospel selected particular teaching, miracles, and events out of larger reality of other teachings, miracles, and events (John 21:25). Paul is assuring us based on Jesus' own word, not something he's making up on the fly.

Jesus will return from heaven.

This won't be something happening in secret with only a few people aware of it. A loud command. The voice of the archangel. The only archangel named in the Bible is Michael (Jude 9, Daniel 10:13). The trumpet of God will sound...and we don't really know what that is. But then, and this is important as we think of those who have gone before us in death, the dead in Christ will be raised. Not resuscitated into the life they had before, but resurrected. Like Jesus – recognizable, but a different kind of body. So that in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the description of what Christ has done is to provide his people with no more pain, no more sorrow, no more death...every tear wiped away from our eyes (Revelation 21:3,4) The clouds rolled back for an uncloudy day. Rather than the stench of injustice, the clash of warfare, and the moaning of despair, all day long the fragrance of the tree of life. Instead of wondering if God is for us or against us, we experience the smile of Jesus upon his children. Hallelujah!

*And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)*

This is the blessed assurance: that Jesus is mine. Even more, that I am his!

At the time of my death I will be with the Lord. At the time of committing those dear to me to the Lord, they will be with the Lord.

This is why, when we are at a graveside, our liturgy – the formal prayer of committal that provides words when we may have trouble finding the words – includes these:

*Give us such faith that by day and by night, at all times and in all places, we may without fear commit ourselves and those dear to us to your never-failing love, in this life and in the life to come.*

And it goes on with these familiar words:

*Almighty God, into your hands we commend your child, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

This assurance does not completely remove the pain of grief, but it does take away with the taunting, mocking sting of death.

But questions remain.

How long will this era of death and grief continue?

When will the final victory of Jesus be plain to all everywhere for all time?

*Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, <sup>2</sup> for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)*

There are any number of schemes, calculations and blueprints various believers at various times have conjured up to know when Jesus will return in final victory. Jesus himself warned us not to attempt these kind of calculations (Matthew 24:36-42). What we do know is that in the midst of what seems to be the normal course of events, getting up and ready for the day, the local news, business reports, ESPN Sports Center, heading to our daughter's soccer game, our son's recital, our next business meeting, or meeting up with a friend for coffee...right in the middle of what seems to be "just another day" the Lord will return and history will come to an end. As Paul writes here in 1 Thessalonians, it will be like the surprise of a thief breaking in during the night.

The end will come suddenly at a time when it is not expected.

But the point is that Christ-followers won't be caught unprepared because even in the darkest times we are daytime people. We are the people of the uncloudy sky. If your future is certain, your present has purpose. We know where we are heading, so we live the life of God's Kingdom here and now.

*But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and*

*sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. (1 Thessalonians 5:4-8)*

Whether we are dead or alive, we will be with the Lord.

Elsewhere, Paul put it this way:

*Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep in death, 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.... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your love and labor for the Lord is never foolish or useless; in fact, it is the very sign that you are on the winning side. (adapted from 1 Corinthians 15:51-58)*

Friends, we are going on because we are going up!