

## *Grief, Hope, and the Resurrection*

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

2/17/2019

Randy Lovelace

This past Thursday, February 14<sup>th</sup>, was Valentine's day. I came to the office as I normally would on a Thursday morning. I went into the office where all of our mail boxes are, and I found there a Valentine's card. Exactly, this one. Now, I wasn't the only one. The other two pastors also had a card in their boxes, and they had different animals on theirs. But let me describe for you for just a minute, it says, "Pastor Randy, happy V Day. Love, MOPS." And a donkey and lip balm.

Now, I know MOPS. I get nice e-mails and encouraging stories of what's happening in MOPS, and so, I had to think about that for a minute and think, did I offend someone? Have they noticed something about my lips that my wife hasn't told me? So, I went into my office and I thought about it for a while and I realized by Friday night that I had my sermon illustration because now I'm going to give you a lesson in what theologians call hermeneutics.

Because of the context – being a pastor of this church and having a very good relationship with MOPS – I thought, knowing I wasn't the only one to receive such an animal, that it was sent in good humor. Put in that full context, I understood that this was meant to be a humorous way of saying happy Valentine's Day. At its simplest form, understanding the context, understanding the relationship and the background, it couldn't mean anything other than: happy Valentine's Day, enjoy some lip balm, it's the middle of winter. That's great. But I then began to think about if this fell into the hands of someone that didn't know me, doesn't know the church, and didn't know MOPS, you could take this message about six different ways. And in polite company, I'm not going to mention what one could go straight for, but it's there if you're looking for it.

Now, imagine years in the future, I'm long gone. You're no longer here, either. And someone who's a part of an archaeological dig finds this thing because the plastic has not biodegraded, it's still there. And they find this and they try to decipher in their language, what in the world is V Day? This animal is now a glorious animal in their culture, but they don't know what this means. And so, they try to come up with a very complex possibilities of what this could mean and around it creates a myth.

This is what we call hermeneutics, the choices that you make when you find something like this and the story which you try to create around it, the reason for why you create such a story whether you go to find out in the historical archives who Randy Lovelace was and who CPC was and what V Day was and who MOPS was. If you're willing to go that route, that's one choice that you can make with regard to hermeneutics. Or, you can pick up what you bring to the passage, what you bring to this. And you project onto it what it could mean. That's another choice that you can make in hermeneutics.

Such is the case when we come to the Scriptures. Hermeneutics plays an important role, the choices that we make to uncover, what is the message? Now, the passage on which I will be preaching today, I want to tell you I'm going to do it in two ways. First today is one that is going to go for, what is the heart of the matter? Grief, hope, and resurrection. Then in two weeks – because next week we're going to have a guest preacher – we're going to return to this passage along with the verses that follow in chapter 5 and we're going to do a deeper technical dive into the questions that these verses have raised over the generations and how, through various applications of hermeneutics, we've come up with a whole series of interpretations for what we believe will happen when Christ returns.

That is not my goal for today. My goal for today is to do what I believe is the correct hermeneutical decision. In fact, Paul is not concerned here about elaborate systems of apocalypse or about the mechanisms, per say, of how it's going to happen. But the fact, the promise of it happening and what import that has for those he's writing to. And this does have application for us today for many of us who will gather this afternoon for a memorial service for Janice Hidey, who has gone to be with the Lord. And

so, we need this comfort because that is how Paul intended it. But know I know this is going to raise questions which I will not address today, and that's on purpose. So, come back in two weeks and we'll do that together. Fair enough?

So, let's turn to the Lord's word this morning. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 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. 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, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. [ESV]

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please, let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for this word. We ask that you would use this word to strengthen us, to encourage us, and to give us hope for we are in need. And we need your grace to minister to us. In Jesus's name. Amen.

You will find in your outline there are simply three points: grieving with hope, the Lord's return, and giving courage. Together as we look at this passage, it is fitting that we are celebrating the Lord's supper together today because it serves as a perfect way to end this time in God's word because what Paul is doing is he's drawing them to what it means to live as those who walk in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have been converted and are now believers who were once following in the ways of Greek philosophy and Greek thought but now are figuring out what it means to walk with Jesus.

Now, in the preceding verses, what Paul has been about is he's been explaining what it looks like for Christians in ethical forms of life. Together, we've looked at what it means to have biblical sexual ethics. We've looked at what impact the gospel has on the way we view work, on the way we view human relationships. And all of it is a desire for Paul to draw us unto the ultimate end, and that is, we are declared holy through the work of Christ for us, but we're also headed towards glory and towards perfection. That is, we will perfectly reflect the holiness of Christ when he comes again and we will be holy. And so, he intends for them to understand that they are identified now as the people of God. As such, it has a whole range of impact on how they live.

Up until this point, Paul has been using a phrase. He says, "I need to remind you of this," or, "I've warned you about this before." But here in these verses is something new when he says to them, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers." In this phrase, Paul is indicating, I'm teaching something to you that I've not yet taught to you before. We don't know all of the reasons, but in looking at the historical data, we know that as a part of these letters, we're prompted because Timothy had returned from visiting Thessalonica with a report of the churches. He has said as much. And it is clear that what has happened in their midst is that there are some who had been converted to the Lord Jesus Christ walking with the Lord but who had now passed away. And so, they were concerned.

And this is what Paul says when he says about "those who are asleep." The word "asleep," this English word, is the same word in Greek which was used to represent what it meant to die. And so, he says to them, "I do not want you to grieve that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." His intention is that they grieve with hope. This is not in any way, shape, or form a criticism towards grieving as it has sometimes been used. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grieving is a very Christian practice for those who have passed. The issue is, how do we grieve? What characterizes our grief? And he

intends for it to be hope. The reason for that is because of its contrast. The contrast is the Greek culture which they had come from in which they were still living.

For centuries, the Greek thought and philosophy simply taught, according to Homer, that when a person died – here, I’m reading from some historical data – that a person’s vital breath, or what they considered to be their psyche, left the body and entered the palace of Hades, who was considered to be the lord of the dead. The psyche, once it had fled the body, existed merely as a phantom image, perceptible but untouchable. The wall separating the living from the dead was virtually impenetrable, a concept of punishment for the wicked and for those who were good did not develop until later Greek thought had developed. And yet, death still played an important part of Greek culture because unlike today, we are very separated from how prevalent death actually is. Part of it is because of policy and law, we can’t have dead bodies lying around; they have to immediately be cared for, and so forth. But during this time, death was very prevalent, and you were very close to it.

And so, they had to understand and figure out ways to explain what happened with regard to death and what happened on the other side. All kinds of ethical considerations grew up within Greek thought. Part of that is translated as piety, this idea that if you lived a pious life, if you followed within Greek pious, moral code, then you earn for yourself good rewards in the afterlife with regard to your psyche although your body was considered unimportant and simply went to the grave. And I’ll get to this in just a little bit, but the only way that you could keep someone alive was to remember them. So, remembering those who had passed away, creating stories and hieroglyphics, and creating all kinds of space so you could actually remember what this person’s life was like. That’s how you kept this person eternally alive.

But there was absolutely no way, no sense, no category, for resurrection. And certainly, no category, whatsoever, for a physical resurrection. So, we don’t want to imprint our understanding of death onto them. But there is a sense in which though death was very present, it wasn’t necessarily that they looked at death with an existential dread. In other words, that there was this dread about death, and they had to do everything they could to avoid it. At best, there was this sense where they weren’t going to allow it to ruin them, they weren’t going to get terribly down about it, but instead try to live a good, ethical, pious life. Remember those who have gone before and try to do more good than bad.

But depending on your view of human nature, there is no hope in that. And this is what had happened to those believers at Thessalonica. Though there were those who believed who had died, they didn’t yet have a category now as Christians to understand, how are we to respond to this? And so, Paul simply says to them in these words, verse 14, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” And then in verse 15,

For this we declare to you by 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. 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.

His point to them, and what he does in verses 14 through 15, he then expands to much longer passages in his letter to the Corinthians later. Now, some would suggest that Paul has some sort of development in his thought with regard to the resurrection. But that doesn’t seem to be clear if you’re allowing Paul to speak for himself. What he does here is he summarizes what his main thought is. And what he demonstrates for us is that Paul’s view of resurrection placed him exactly in the middle of a pharisee in the second temple Judaism of his time. They believed in a resurrection at the end of the age, at the end of time. So, Paul shoved himself right in the middle of that thought. The difference on which everything hinges is exactly what pastor PD pointed out to us in the middle of the service. That Paul took

this belief and this teaching of a resurrection at the end of the age and said, it has a pattern. We know what it's going to be like because of what Jesus has done.

You see, in Paul's coming to the Lord and then the direct revelation which he received from Christ and then being called as an apostle, now received this from the Lord and he now passes it on. It's not that he's waiting for what it might be like. No. We now know that Jesus Christ died for our sins as a sacrifice once and forever. And that His body was laid in the grave, but that His spirit was given up to the Lord. But on the third day, the body was raised again by the Father and as such was now reigning fully God, fully man, victorious over sin and death making an appearance to the other disciples and to many others. And then as it is recorded in Acts 1, He ascends. And so goes this teaching, that Jesus died and rose again and because of this, God the Father, by His will at the last day, all those who are dead in Christ who are believers but have died prior to His return, their bodies will be raised united with their spirits and they will be resurrected with perfect bodies. And those who are alive along with them together will be, as he declares in this passage, together with the Lord forever.

This is what made Paul so controversial. It's not that he believed in the resurrection. It's that he believed in a resurrection which had a pattern in Christ Himself. And this is the point of the Lord's return. And he's saying to them in essence, those who have died will not miss out on anything. And because he goes particularly to that point, that seemed to at least be the genesis of their concern. Because, you see, the Thessalonians as did Paul believed that Christ would return imminently. He never imagined that this letter would last this long and have to be translated into languages which did not exist yet because they believed that the Lord's return would be imminent. This is why he goes into the ethical teaching. He says why you can't just loaf off of other people and not work. He says why your sexual ethics matter. This is why our relationships matter. This is why we love one another because of the promise of the Lord's return.

But this is the calling. This is what is important, that because the Lord returns, the dead or those who are still living at His return have no advantage over one another. But more importantly, it is this. That in the Lord's coming – and it tells us this in verse 15 – that until the coming of the Lord, this is a Greek word “Parousia,” and it's a very technical word that has been appropriated from its original Greek usage now to refer to the coming of the Lord, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. But then he says something else. So, first, the coming of the Lord and His return – which I'll get to in a minute – and then verse 17, “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.”

So, if you have a pen and you want to square off or circle two important phrases, it's these: the coming of the Lord, and then another word translated in the English as “meet.” So, meet the Lord. What is this referring to? It gives us some sense for what Paul's getting at with regard to the return of Christ. You see, “Parousia” and “meet” were two technical words that were used specifically for when there was the expectation of a visiting dignitary. And when a visiting dignitary would come, the city leaders and governors would gather together, and they would go outside the city walls to meet the dignitary and gather with them there. Then together, they would escort the dignitary back into the city to welcome him. And so, you begin to get a picture of what Paul is teaching with regard to the return of Christ.

In a couple weeks, we'll look at the apocalyptic language, but now let's get to the central issue. So, now, what Paul has done by using Christ as the model and the belief of the resurrection at the end of the age, he says, this is the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings, He is the most dignitary of all dignitaries. He is the Lord of heaven and earth and He has defeated death. He has squashed all of our enemies. Death, where is your sting? For Christ in His sacrifice and His beating sin once and forever and being laid in the grave and being raised again now has been vindicated. He is not just a martyr. He is the Lord. He is the Messiah. And as such, He has promised to come again, and when He does, in His coming those who are dead in Christ and those who remain alive will go be gathered with Him. And we, together, will meet the Lord and will escort with Him back into the earth and heaven will meet earth, and it will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This is what is happening, that when the Lord comes again, we will be with Him forever. And the King will make this place on earth as it is in heaven. Isn't that how He taught us to pray? For your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, as we worship today, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, as we look at the word today, as we sing today, every worship service is patterned on heavenly worship. And we do so in expectation and waiting that when He comes again, we will gather for worship. And we will be with Him forever. And when we come back into the city, we know there will be a wedding banquet feast of which this is merely a preparation but an important preparation.

And so, he says, dear friends, the dead or the alive have no advantage. That is not what it is about. What it is about is that He will come again. The end of the story is not death, it is life. And we will be reunited. Our relationships change. There will not be marriage in heaven. But we will be brothers and sisters in Christ alike, united to Him forever. And there will be no more tears, there will be no more sin, there will be no more brokenness. There will be the glory of the Lord in the midst of everything.

And this is his point when he tells them in verse 18, "Therefore encourage one another with these words." Literally, give courage to one another. Not cheap words of shallow consolation, but great truths of comfort strength, the faithfulness, the love, and the hope we have in Christ that when we grieve our friends, our loved ones, our family members as they go from us, we as a congregation are acquainted with this grief. We have been hit hard over these last number of years. And we have wept together. We have remembered together. We have sung together. But the words of comfort, and hope, and strength, and faithfulness is not of those that we love that have now gone on to be with the Lord, it's the comfort, strength, love, faithfulness, and grace of the One who has greeted them, of the One who will raise them. The One who will give them new life in the resurrection.

See, what's interesting is that in ancient Greek thought, the only way to keep someone alive is to remember them. In fact, you can go today – I went, and I photographed around the Acropolis in Athens. At the foot of the Acropolis right next to the museum, now actually on the grounds of the Acropolis museum, is a space where they have now dug up under the ground through archaeological digs. They've been able to find what looks to be actual physical living models of someone's living room. But they weren't models of something that was once there. Meaning, it wasn't constructed in modern times. It was constructed in ancient Greek time to remember someone important who had passed away. Because remember, the only way to keep someone alive is to remember them. And so, they would go to great lengths of actually creating what their life might have been like whether it was true or not. And you can go there and you can see what looks to be someone in a living room of what their domestic life might have been like. And that's the only way they can be remembered. But it's a museum. It's made out of dirt. It's valuable historically, but there is no hope.

We are to grieve, friends. Our hearts ache at Janice going to be with the Lord because we miss her. We miss so many. But we grieve as those who have hope. And this is what we are to speak to one another. Hear the words of the psalmist. "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. The Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. He will bring back on them any whose iniquity, and he will wipe them out for their wickedness. But the Lord will come again."

The consolation of the Lord is that He is faithful to His covenant promise. And Jesus said, I will come again. And when I do, I will take you to be with myself. And He will make a new heaven and a new earth. And so, we're to encourage one another with these words, that we will be with them and with Him forever. And this is what we sing. As we've already sung this morning,

"Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Naked, come to thee for dress. Helpless, look to thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die. While I draw this fleeting breath, when my eyes shall close in death, when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgement throne, rock of ages cleft for me, let us hide ourselves in thee."

Give courage to one another, for the Lord is coming again and we will be with Him and with one another who are in Christ forever. This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your word. May you give us encouragement and strength through your word as we speak to one another, as we love one another, as we encourage one another. So, Lord, be with us, we ask. Comfort those and comfort us who have lost loved ones and those who are dear to us. And Lord, as we grieve, we ask you that you would also remind us of the hope we have in Christ, that the end of the story is not death but life. Through Jesus Christ alone we pray. Amen.