

Easter Hope
1 Thessalonians 4
Pastor John Miller

I'm going to read this whole section, verses 13-18, and then we're going to go back and unpack it.

In verse 13, Paul says, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep..."—he uses that metaphor, a believer's death, as though we are sleeping—"...that you sorrow not, even as others who have no hope. For if we believe..."—here it is—"...that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also, which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those which are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Paul closes this by saying, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

In an old British cemetery, not far from Windsor Castle, there is an inscription on a gravestone which reads,

Pause, my friend, as you walk by.

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, so you will be.

Prepare, my friend, to follow me.

That would sober you up at a grave site. Someone saw that and added their own little epithet to that gravestone. They wrote the words,

To follow you, is not my intent,

Until I know which way you went.

My question to you is: "Do you know which way you are going to go when you die? The Bible is clear that you either go to heaven, or you go to hell. I know most preachers won't open the beginning of their sermons with saying that you can go to hell, but I'm here to tell you the truth of God's Word. When you die, there are only two places for you to go: one is heaven, and the other is hell. Where you spend eternity is based on your relationship with Jesus Christ. It's all about Jesus.

The hope of eternal life is based on an empty tomb; the fact that Jesus died, was buried and

rose again from the dead. In spite of all the great advancements in man's knowledge, we still do not know what lies beyond the bars of death. Scientists have speculated, and philosophers have talked about what happens when we die. Where do we go when we die? I know that we have people who have out-of-body experiences and people who say they died and have come back to tell us what happened, but I believe the only sure Word of God, which we will see in a moment, is the Bible.

The Bible tells us very clearly who Jesus is, why He died, that He arose and that faith in Jesus Christ—and in Jesus Christ alone—can give us the hope of heaven. In the book of Job, the oldest book of the Bible, Job asks the question: "If a man die, shall he live again?" So that is the question we want to look at now in this passage.

Why did Paul write these words, verses 13-18, to these believers in Thessalonica? Paul had taught these Christians in Thessalonica that Jesus Christ was going to come back. We believe that's what the Bible teaches; Jesus promised to return. But what was happening in the interim was that some of their Christian friends, loved ones and family members had died, but Jesus had not come back yet. So their fear and worry was that their loved ones who died would not be there for the Lord's return, and they would not get to go to heaven. The dead would be at a disadvantage to those who were alive when the Lord returned; that if you died as a Christian, you were lost, so you needed to stay alive until the Lord returned.

I want you to notice two things in verse 13 that Paul said. He first said, "I don't want you to be ignorant, brethren." Someone called that the largest Christian denomination in America—"the ignorant brethren." And certainly this is one topic that Christians are many times ignorant of. It never ceases to amaze me how many questions I get about what happens when you die. Where do you go when you die? What happens if you're a Christian? What happens if you're not a Christian? Where do you go? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there an afterlife? So Paul says that he's writing this because he doesn't want us to be ignorant. This very passage we're going to look at was written for the purpose that we be not ignorant about those who have died.

Then, secondly, Paul says in verse 13, "...that you sorrow not, even as others who have no hope." There's our theme. He says, "I don't want you to be ignorant, and I don't want you to sorrow, as others who have no hope." Now he doesn't say that we can't sorrow. When someone you love dies, there is sorrow. There is grief. And the grieving process is quite intense, and it can last a long time. It can come in waves. I liken grief to the waves of the sea; they just come. Sometimes at unexpected times you just begin to grieve over the loss of that loved one. But as a Christian, you do not sorrow without hope, and we're going to see in this passage that we have the hope, because of the Resurrection, that we'll be reunited with our loved ones one day. So we do sorrow, but it's not a hopeless sorrow. So he says, "I don't want you to be ignorant, I don't want you to have sorrow, because you, indeed, have hope."

In this passage, Paul gives us five reasons for the believer's hope. Number one, is the very foundation, and that is the hope of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Notice it in

verse 14. Paul says, "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also who have fallen asleep in Jesus..."—that's a description of a Christian dying in the Lord; his body only has gone asleep—"...will God bring with Him." So for those who die in the Lord, their bodies are sleeping, and their souls and spirit have gone to be with the Lord. The Bible says that when a Christian dies, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," 2 Corinthians 5. When a Christian dies, immediately they are in the presence of the Lord, even though their body is sleeping. Sleep is a metaphor for death; only used of Christians, only used of the body and never used of the soul. The reason is that we lay our loved ones in the grave in expectation and hope that there is going to be a great getting-up morning; there's going to be a resurrection. They will be reunited with their soul and spirit in a new, glorified, transformed body.

So Jesus Christ has done two things to give us this hope: Jesus died—His Crucifixion—and Jesus rose again from the dead. Both His Crucifixion and His Resurrection are clearly stated as the foundation for all of men's hopes. The Bible is clear that Jesus died. The Bible is clear that Jesus died by Crucifixion. The Bible is clear as to why Jesus died. He didn't die just to give us an example of sacrifice. He didn't die to just show us His love. He didn't die as a martyr by accident. Jesus actually died intentionally, on purpose, for the sake of our sins, for the reason of our sins. The Bible says, "Christ died for our sins." And the Bible says, "All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The Bible says, "There is no one righteous; no, not one." So when Jesus died on that cross, He actually paid the penalty for our sins.

He was the sinless Lamb of God, came from heaven, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life and then died a voluntary life, substituted Himself on the Cross for our sins. The Bible says, "The soul that sins will surely die," and "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." So when Jesus died, He paid the penalty for our sins. But Jesus also rose again from the dead, and He rose for our justification or salvation.

So we have here the Resurrection, and all four of the Gospels tell us the story of Christ's Resurrection. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record it. In Mark's Gospel, it says it occurred "very early in the morning" on the first Easter Sunday. The women were gathering together their spices. Jesus died on Friday afternoon, and the moment the sun went down, the Jewish Sabbath started. So the women couldn't work to prepare Jesus' body for burial because of the Sabbath. They would put ointment on it and wrap it in cloths. So they had to do a hurried job to have Him buried before sundown. So when the sun came up on Sunday morning, the women were going to go back to the tomb to finish the job of preparing His body. As they were on their way, the Bible says that the women talked among themselves and asked, "Who is going to roll away the stone?" The stone was very great; it was estimated that the stone weighted at least two tons. Because the women didn't believe Jesus' promise of the Resurrection, they were going to finish preparing His burial.

Do you know that the first unbelievers of the Resurrection were the believers, the Christians, the followers of Christ? The women, the disciples, others. They believed all their hopes were gone. Friday He's crucified. Saturday everything's gone. All their hopes are gone. But thank God for Sunday! Thank God for that Resurrection day. It meant the dawning of a new day, the

dawning of new hope.

So when the women got to the tomb, Mark tells us that the stone was already rolled away. Another Gospel indicates that it was picked up and thrown to the side. An angel was sitting on it. It doesn't say in the Bible, but I imagine the angel was huffing and puffing. "Man, that sucker's heavy!" It says that in the Greek. No, I think angels are so powerful that it just took their little pinky to fling it to the side.

Then the women went into the tomb—compiling the Gospels' records—and there were two angels, one at the head and one at the feet of where the body of Jesus had lain. The grave cloths were still there, because Jesus had passed right through them. Now the stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out, but that the women and the disciples could get in. The first Easter sermon ever preached and the best sermon ever preached at Easter was by the angels. They said, "Be not afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth. He was crucified. Behold the place where He lay. He is risen from the dead. He is not here. Christ has risen." That's the best Easter sermon I've ever heard preached. The women were filled with ecstasy, joy and excitement. They ran to tell the other disciples, and when the disciples heard them, they said, "You women are crazy. You're out of your mind! It didn't happen."

So Peter and John took off for the tomb. I love that story. They both left together. John, writing in his Gospel, said that he outran Peter. So he was younger and more athletic. "I run faster than Peter." He wanted to get that in his record. John got there first and stooped down and looked in and saw the linen cloth and believed, but Peter came flying right by him. Peter went into the tomb and he believed and he went away wondering. "I don't know for sure." That's the story of the Resurrection. The angel also told them, "Go and tell the disciples that Jesus will go before them into Galilee."

Some people say, "That Resurrections stuff—I don't really believe that. I don't buy this idea that Jesus died for our sins and that He rose from the dead and belief in Christ can save us." Then you have some things to contend with. First, we have the empty tomb. You have to explain the fact that the tomb was empty. A lot of times people—trying to explain away the Resurrection—say that the women and disciples probably got the wrong tomb. It's called the "wrong-tomb theory." The women weren't sure where they buried Jesus.

Listen, if you bury someone you love on Friday and you go back to the cemetery on Sunday, you remember right where you put them. You don't go, "Where'd we put Uncle Harry?" "I don't know. Just throw the flowers. He'll get them. He's out there somewhere." You know exactly where your loved one was placed. And even if the women got the wrong tomb, so did the angels; they were in the tomb. Can you imagine? "Gee, Michael do you think this is the right tomb?" "I don't know, Gabriel, the GPS said it was." Angel GPS. Then the Romans would have gotten the wrong tomb. And the Jews got the wrong tomb. They tried to stop the preaching of the Resurrection, so if they could have rolled the stone away, taken the body, put it in an ox cart and paraded it down Main St. in Jerusalem, they would have killed Christianity in the cradle. You want to destroy Christianity? Just prove that Jesus Christ did not raise from the dead. It

can't happen, because it did happen; Jesus Christ did rise from the dead.

Secondly, you would have to contend with the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. He was seen for 40 days. For 40 days, He appeared to His disciples; one time to over 500 brothers at once. One theory for this was that it was a hallucination; that they really wanted Jesus to rise so badly—which is contrary to the Gospel record—that they just thought they saw Him. Five hundred people hallucinating at the same time and seeing the same thing?! I don't think so. In any court of law today, 500 witnesses would be enough to get you convicted. Paul says, "They're still alive; I know where they live. You can talk to them. I'll give you their addresses, and you can find out they've seen Christ risen from the dead."

Thirdly, you have the changed lives of the disciples. They went from fear to faith. They went from fear to hope. They were changed by the power of the resurrected Christ. Thomas said, "I'm not going to believe unless I see Him and I thrust my hand into His side." Then Jesus appeared to Thomas in the upper room, and Jesus said, "Thomas, be not unbelieving but believing." That's when Thomas uttered those awesome words, "My Lord and my God," referring to Jesus Christ.

You also have the changed lives of believers. In the summer of 1971, my life was changed by the power of Jesus Christ. I opened my heart and invited Jesus Christ to come in, and my life has never been the same since. What a blessing. You have the same testimony; you were taken from darkness into light. You were bound by sin, but now you've been set free. You were living without hope, but now you have the hope of the love of Jesus Christ. So what a wonderful thing it is to know that Jesus Christ lives in my heart. Jesus said, "Because I live, you shall live also." The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the hope of humanity.

The second basis of our hope is in verse 15, and that is the hope of the revelation of God's Word. So we have the Resurrection of God's Son, and we have the revelation of God's Word. Verse 15 says, "For this we say unto you..."—here's the phrase—"...by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not precede them which have died." We who are alive when the Lord comes back are not going to have an advantage. We're not going to go ahead of those who have died in Christ. He's going to go on to say that they will actually be resurrected first, or, in reality, they are with the Lord.

There are only two ways to know what happens to you after you die. One is human speculation, and the other is divine revelation. God tells us, or we have our theories. One of the theories in human speculation is that when you die, you're just no longer in existence. You're just nonexistent. You live like a dog, die like a hog, and there it goes. You might as well get all you can, and live for the gusto, have a good time, go to Vegas every weekend. You might as well live life to the fullest, enjoy life, because you're only going to get older.

You know how vast life is? Remember when you were in elementary school? It seemed like it took forever to get out of the third grade. You never thought you'd be a sixth grader. You never thought you'd be able to play on that part of the playground where the big kids play. You finally

got there, and then you go into junior high. It took a little while, and then you got through that. Then high school. It was kind of fun, but it goes pretty quick. And right when you graduate from high school, you're in a rest home waiting to die. What happened?!

I only went to one high school reunion. It was mind blowing. The 25th reunion. It scared me to death. I'm like, "Look at that dude. Oh, my goodness! I don't even want to go find out who it is, because he's bad lookin'." People go, "Hey, John, how are you? I'm so-and-so." I'm thinking, "Wow. What happened to you, dude?" Scary. If they didn't have their high-school picture on their chest, I wouldn't know who they were. Of course, I was good looking, but they were all messed up. I'm kidding. But it was scary. I remember especially the guys who were the party animals, the guys who were drinking and doing drugs. Man, they don't have anything to party about anymore. They are really sad lookin'. And I had been a Christian for about 25 years; I got saved right out of high school. It's like, "Lord, thank you for saving my soul. Thank you for redeeming me and sparing me from that!" Messed up.

What does the Bible tell us about death? It says, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead." Death is the spirit and the soul—the real you—leaving your body. Your body is not you. Your body is just the tent. It animates who you really are. When you die, you move out of that tent. The Bible says that for the believer, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." For the unbeliever, Hebrews 9:27, it is "appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment." So every one of us will die.

The Bible teaches about the brevity of life—like a vapor of smoke that appears for a time and then vanishes. It's like a flower; it springs up fresh in the morning and then withers with the noon heat. The Bible also teaches that death is universal. Life is short; death is universal. We will all die, and we will go to either heaven or hell. But the Bible gives us the hope that we can go to heaven. So the Resurrection and the revelation of God's Word.

Thirdly, in verse 16, we have the hope of the Resurrection of those who have died in Christ. "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven..."—Now Jesus couldn't come back from heaven if He didn't rise from the dead. But He died, He was buried, He arose, He ascended and He's coming back from heaven.—"...with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God..."—and here's the statement—"...and the dead in Christ shall rise first." They were worried about their loved ones who had died. Paul said, "No. They will rise first."

Now you might be a bit confused, because you're saying, "Wait a minute, Pastor John. You just told us that when Christians die, they go immediately to heaven." That's true. "Then how can they rise from the dead, if they're already in heaven?" Good question; I'm glad you asked it. Here's the answer: The resurrection speaks of their bodies. It's talking about their physical bodies; that their bodies will be resurrected.

Do you know that because Jesus rose from the dead, every human being is going to be resurrected? Both the righteous and the unrighteous. Both the saved and the unsaved. The Bible says the saved will be resurrected to eternal life, and the unrighteous—the wicked—will

be resurrected to eternal damnation and judgment. The unbelievers will be resurrected, and they will stand before God. As Jesus sits on this great white throne, the books will be opened, their names will not be found written in that book and they will be cast into what is called Gehenna, or the Lake of Fire. It's a terrible thing to think of; a hopeless end.

But in Jesus Christ, we have hope for all eternity; that we will be with Him, which is our resurrection hope. Our bodies will be resurrected first. Jesus' resurrected body was a prototype. Do you think about that on Easter? Jesus raised from the dead; He was your prototype. Just as Jesus physically and bodily came out of the grave—He could pass through walls and appear and disappear, He could be touched and talked to, He could eat food, He could communicate with people and He could ascend bodily back into heaven—we will have the same glorified body. He is the glorified God-man in heaven throughout all eternity. We'll see Him in that condition when we get to heaven.

You and I are going to have the same resurrected body. Now I know what people are thinking: "What about decomposition?" The worms crawl in and the worms crawl out. You've been hangin' out under the ground for a long time. "What's God going to do?" It's not a problem for God. People ask me all the time about cremation. "What happens when somebody's cremated?" You think God goes, "Oh!! You messed it up"? "Oh, no! I was going to resurrect him, but they fried him! What am I going to do?!" It's not a problem for God. What about if you're eaten by sharks? Enjoy your trip to the beach tomorrow.

You know, if you plant somebody in the ground, and they plant an apple tree over the top, the apple tree sucks him up. It pops out in the apple, and you eat the apple, and you die and they bury you and the apple tree sucks you up, you know. You think God's freakin' out? Like, "Oh, no! Don't plant apple trees in cemeteries!" No. It's not reconstruction; it's resurrection. The Bible says, "Is anything too hard for God?" The answer is "No." God's going to resurrect our bodies.

You know, when I die, I'll be with the Lord waiting for my new body. If I'm "alive and remain, I'll be caught up to meet the Lord in the air." The Bible says, "This corruption will put on incorruption." The Bible says, "It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power."

One of the best illustrations of the Resurrection is a tulip bulb. Have you ever seen a tulip bulb? They're ugly. They're gnarly looking. But if you put a cold tulip bulb in the ground in the fall—put it in the refrigerator to get it cold—at the right time, right place, right depth, then in the spring time, out comes a tulip. Wouldn't it be sad if you planted a tulip bulb and a tulip bulb popped out? So our bodies are like that old, ugly, gnarly-looking tulip bulb. We're planted in the ground, but out comes a beautiful tulip. This corruption puts on incorruption. This mortal puts on immortality. Then shall be brought to pass the Scripture, which says, "Death is swallowed up in victory." We go to the grave weary, weak and sick, but we'll come out with new bodies.

The fourth basis of hope is found in verse 17. It's the hope of the Rapture of the living in Christ.

There's an order here: Verse 16, "The dead in Christ shall rise first..."—verse 17—"...Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we forever be with the Lord." This is what we call the blessed hope of the believer. Titus 2:13, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ."

Now I realize that this all might seem kind of a fairy tale. But it's a reality. That's why Easter has such hope. We have the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have the revelation of God's Word. We have the resurrection of those who have died in Christ, and then we're going to have the Rapture of those who are alive when the Lord comes back. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and one day He's going to catch us up to meet Him in the air. I'm looking for that event. If I'm still here, I won't have to die; I'll be caught up in a moment, "in the twinkling of an eye" to be with the Lord. We'll be reunited with our loved ones.

The words "caught up" in the Greek is "harpazo." It means to "snatch up" or "to catch up by force." The Lord will catch us up and take us to heaven. Jesus talked about it in John 14:1. He said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid; you believe in God, believe also in Me. For in My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you..."—catch you up—"...unto Myself, that where I am there you may be also."

Jesus promised that heaven is a real place. Jesus promised that heaven is a prepared place. And Jesus promised He'll come get me and He'll come get you and take us to heaven. I believe His promises. Do you believe His promises?

Now Thomas was listening, and Thomas was known as the doubter. Thankfully Jesus gave us Thomas' answer to his doubts. Thomas said, "We don't know where you're going. We don't know the way." Just like that. You have the Son of God speaking to you saying, "Don't let your heart be troubled. I'm going to heaven, and I'm going to come back and get you." "Wait. Wait. We don't know where you're going, and we don't know how to get there." Then Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." So Jesus is actually the way to heaven. He's the way, the truth and the life. He's the way; without Him, there's no going. He's the truth; without Him there's no knowing. He's the life; without Him there's no living. We need Jesus Christ to get to heaven, and the Resurrection gives us that absolute assurance.

Fifthly, and lastly, we have the hope of reunion. This is our Easter hope. In verse 17 notice two phrases: "together with them" and "ever be with the Lord." "Together with them" refers to our loved ones who have died in Christ. We will forever be with the Lord. Death is the great separator, but Jesus has conquered death, and through His Resurrection, we have hope of reunion with our loved ones who have died in Christ.

Whenever Jesus raised someone from the dead, they came back from the dead into a mortal body and had to die again—different than Jesus with an immortal body. But when Jesus

stopped the funeral procession of the widow's son—this widow had only one son, and he died—He raised the boy from the dead. He took the boy by the hand and gave him back to his mother. When Jesus went into the home of Jairus, He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. He took her by the hand and gave her back to her parents.

I believe that when we get to heaven, Jesus is going to be grabbing people's hands saying, "I've got someone for you to meet." He's going to connect families and loved ones. "Come here." He'll grab you by the hand and run across the golden street and say, "Look. I have someone here for you." Jesus will reunite people. Heaven is going to be a reunion.

You say, "Well, what do you base that hope upon? Wishful thinking?" No; the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the empty tomb. All of our hopes are based on the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. If you live long enough, someone you love is going to die. People around you will all die. But you don't need to despair. You don't need to sorrow as others sorrow who have no hope. You don't have to be ignorant. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. All those who are asleep in Jesus, God will bring with Him.

Easter means hope; the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's Word, the resurrection of the dead in Christ, the Rapture of the living in Christ and the reunion together with those who have died in Christ.

The only question which remains is: Are you in Christ? If not, you are without God and without hope. I want to give you an opportunity now to open your heart and to receive Christ as your Savior. Jesus wants to give you hope. He wants to forgive your sins. He wants to give you the hope of heaven. He wants to give you purpose. He wants to give you meaning. He wants to fill your heart with joy. He wants to take you to heaven when you die. That's why He died.

You say, "Well, how do I get in Christ?" How do I become a Christian? Number one, you have to admit that you're a sinner. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The Bible says, "There is not one righteous; no, not one." Our sin has separated us from God. The Bible teaches that we're all born separated from God; we are born in sin. You have to admit you're a sinner. Then, number two, you need to repent of your sins. This means you need to change your mind about the way you're living, and you turn from your sin. Number three, you trust Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Savior. So admit that you're a sinner, turn from your sin and believe or receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

I can't do that for you, your parents can't do that for you, your husband can't do that for you, your wife can't do that for you, your friends can't do that for you; you must do that. You have a little door in your heart, and it has a doorknob only on the inside. Jesus stands at the door of your heart, and He's knocking on the door. That's the little, still, small voice. And right now you're kind of wondering, "What's going on? What did I eat that's messin' me up?" You didn't eat anything, it's the Holy Spirit. He's knocking on the door of your heart, but you must open the door. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, and if you hear My voice and open the door, I'll come in and have fellowship with you."

Do you know that when you die you'll go to heaven? Do you know for sure that you have the hope of eternal life? Have you trusted Jesus Christ? You don't go to heaven because you go to church. You don't go to heaven because you've been baptized. You don't go to heaven because you try to live a good life. You don't even go to heaven because you just believe in God. You go to heaven because you trusted Christ to save you from your sins. You must reach out, by faith, and take His hand. The Bible says, "By grace you have been saved, through faith. It's not of yourself; it's a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." And the Bible says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes, trusts in, relies on Him will never perish but have everlasting life." If you haven't trusted Jesus Christ, I want to give you an opportunity, right now, right here to receive Jesus Christ.