

Easter Hope
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Pastor John Miller

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul, writing to the believers in Thessalonica, said, "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep." This repeated phrase "fallen asleep" or "sleeping" refers only to Christians and only to their physical bodies. Nowhere in the Bible does it teach "soul sleep." So this is a metaphor for the death of a believer; when a believer dies, their body is sleeping. Why? Because they will be resurrected or awakened in the great resurrection.

So Paul wants us to know the truth, "lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." So we aren't to worry about those who have died in Christ; when the Lord comes back, He will bring them with Him.

Verse 15, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep" or "who have died." "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

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

"Pause my friend, as you pass by,

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, soon you will be;

Prepare, my friend, to follow me."

Someone added words to that epitaph that said,

"To follow you is not my intent,

Until I know which way you went."

So here are my questions to you: Do you know where you will go when you die? Do you know if you will go to heaven and spend eternity with the Lord? Do you have the hope of everlasting life?

In spite of all the great advancements in man's knowledge, we still don't know scientifically what happens beyond the grave. Only God, in the Bible, can reveal to us what lies beyond the bars

of death. In the book of Job, which is the oldest book in the Bible, this question is asked: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" It's actually not so much "if" as "When a man dies, shall he live again?" That's what Job asked.

Knowing the background and setting of our text in 1 Thessalonians helps us to understand why Paul said, "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." Paul didn't say that they shouldn't sorrow; he said that he didn't want them to have hopeless sorrow, like unbelievers or non-Christians.

This is why Paul is writing to them: the Christians in Thessalonica had Christian friends who had died before Jesus came back. They had been taught that the Lord was coming back—and rightfully so—but they thought that those who had already died would be at a disadvantage to those who would be alive when Jesus returned. They were worried about their loved ones who had died before the Lord returns; they thought their loved ones had missed out.

So Paul said that they were not going to miss out; he makes it clear that the Lord would bring those who died in Christ with Him when He returns. Their bodies will be resurrected, and those "who are alive and remain..."—meaning us—"...shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord." This is talking about the rapture of the church. And interwoven in that is the basis for which we have hope beyond the grave.

The believers were worried that their Christian friends who had died would miss the coming of the Lord. They worried that if Jesus came back, they would miss it, so they needed to stay alive until the Lord returned. But Paul said that what they thought was not correct. He said, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren."

One of the questions I am most asked is about what happens after you die. This passage is very clear in saying that when we die, our spirits go to be with the Lord, but our bodies are buried, awaiting the resurrection, when they will be reunited with our spirits and we'll go to heaven for all eternity.

In this passage, Paul gives us five reasons for hope beyond the grave. What could be more important than knowing you're going to go to heaven when you die?

When the Bible uses the word "hope," it doesn't mean that you cross your fingers, grab your rabbit's foot and say, "I hope, I hope!" It means a steadfast assurance; "I know." People think that is arrogant and proud, but we will see the basis for our confidence lies in Jesus Christ and not in ourselves. We can know, beyond any doubt, that when we die, we'll go to heaven and spend eternity with God in His presence.

Reason number one for our hope is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation of all our hope is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 14 says, "For if..."—or "since"—"...we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep..."—or "died"—"...in Jesus."

I want you to note that Paul is answering this problem, and he indicates that by beginning verse 14 with the word “for.” And verses 15 and 16 start with “for.” And verse 17, the conclusion, starts with the word “then.” So Paul is basically saying, “This is the reason...this is the reason...this is the reason...then” and he wraps it up.

If we believe, verse 14, that Jesus Christ did two things—“died and rose again”—that He died on the Cross for our sins, was buried and three days later He rose again, which we celebrate on Easter, then that is our hope. This verse is a reference to His Crucifixion and death through His Resurrection.

When we think about Jesus, we need to understand who died. The Bible says there is one God, but the one God is manifested in three Persons. Not three Gods. One God. The three Persons are one in essence or nature in one divine being. The three Persons are God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father drew out salvation's plan. God the Son came and brought that plan down to man. God the Holy Spirit makes salvation happen when He convicts you of sin, regenerates you, gives you new life, indwells you and makes you a child of God. So all three Persons of the Triune Godhead are involved in salvation.

God the Son came from heaven. God the Father sent God the Son. John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” The Son is Jesus Christ. “Only begotten Son” means the “only unique Son.” Jesus is one of a kind. It doesn't mean that He was generated or created or came into existence; He is eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

So the second Person of the Godhead, God the Son, left heaven and came down to earth. How did He enter earth? The Bible tells us. He came through the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Bible teaches the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. That's the Incarnation: the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and that which was conceived in her was the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was fully man and fully God. He was not two people—God and man—but one person with two natures, divine and human. He is unique. There was no one before Him and no one after Him that would become the God-man. There are a lot of men who try to become gods, but there is only one God who became a man.

Jesus took on humanity through the Virgin Mary so that He would not inherit a sin nature from Adam. If Jesus had been born of normal parentage like the rest of us, then He would not be sinless and thus His death on the Cross would not be able to take away our sins. But Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life and then died a substitutionary death. That's the Incarnation and the Crucifixion.

When Jesus died on the Cross, it was a display not only of His love for us, and that we should love others, but He was actually dying in your place and in my place. The Bible teaches that the death of Jesus Christ was a substitutionary death. He died for our sins. “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that

we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” God would transfer Christ’s righteousness to us and our unrighteousness or sin to Christ, for which He paid the penalty on the Cross. So this is what it means that we believe Jesus died for us; He died for our sins on the Cross.

Then secondly, Jesus “rose again,” verse 14. As glorious and as wonderful as the Cross of Jesus Christ is, it would mean nothing if He hadn’t risen from the dead. When Jesus died on the Cross, He said, “It is finished.” He used the phrase “Tatelestai” or “Paid in full.” Then He was buried.

And how do we know that our sins were paid for in full? Because three days later, God the Father said “Amen” to “It is finished” and raised Jesus from the dead. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was God the Father’s stamp of approval on the finished work of the Cross. Praise God! Jesus Christ arose.

So we have His Incarnation, His Crucifixion and His Resurrection.

And Jesus is recorded as having risen in all four Gospels—in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Whenever you have a story in the life of Christ that is in all four Gospels, it means that it is very, very important.

And all four Gospels harmonize. People say the accounts differ. They do differ because they are eyewitness accounts. The writers share different facets of the Resurrection, but none of them contradict; they complement.

So all the Gospels record the Resurrection of Jesus Christ very early in the morning. And the women said, “Who’s going to roll away the stone over the door of the sepulcher?” They said, “We’ll figure it out.” The men were back calculating that it couldn’t be done. But the women just said, “Well, let’s just go and get it done.” So the women went to the tomb, and the stone was already rolled away. The Bible says an angel just moved that stone away.

The stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out but so Mary, Martha, Salome and the other women could get in and see that Jesus’ body was gone and had been resurrected. And also so that Peter, James, John and the other apostles could get in to see that the tomb was empty. But the grave clothes were still in the tomb in the shape of the body, like a cocoon. Jesus just passed through the grave clothes. So Jesus didn’t need the stone to be removed in order to get out; He was in a new, glorified body. He could actually pass right through the stone slab.

And Jesus Christ physically, bodily, literally rose from the dead. His Resurrection was not metaphorical or symbolic; it was an actual, literal resurrection. The same body that Jesus died in and was buried in was resurrected. He still bore the scars after His Resurrection, and He still does to this day. When we get to heaven and see Jesus, He will still bear the scars of our redemption.

In the Incarnation, humanity was fused with divinity for all eternity. Jesus is the exalted God-

man who sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. And Jesus “always lives to make intercession” for those who call on the name of the Lord. He lives to save. So Jesus died, He was resurrected, He ascended and He is exalted at the right hand of God the Father.

Now how do we know that Jesus rose from the dead, verse 14? Number one, the tomb was empty. Number two, Jesus was seen in post-Resurrection appearances. Number three, the lives of the disciples were changed. They didn’t believe that Christ would rise. He prophesied that He would; He said that He would rise in three days. He said, “Destroy this temple...”—referring to His body—“...and in three days I will raise it up.” Sometimes He would take His disciples aside and say to them that He was going to be handed over to wicked men, would be crucified, but three days later, He would rise from the dead. But it went in one ear and out the other.

No one believed that Jesus Christ had risen until He appeared to them. Luke says in his Book of Acts, “...by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days.” After His Resurrection, they ate with Him, they talked with Him, they heard His teaching, they saw His commission and they touched Him. Thomas said that he wouldn’t believe Jesus had risen unless he touched Jesus. Then when Jesus appeared before Thomas, he said, “My Lord and my God!” So all the post-Resurrection appearances indicate that Christ had indeed risen from the dead.

In 1 Corinthians 15:6, it says that “He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present.” Five hundred eyewitnesses saw that Jesus had risen from the dead, and most of them were still alive when Paul wrote this verse.

And you might add that we know Jesus rose from the dead because, number four, our lives as believers have been changed. My life has been changed. It doesn’t mean we’re going to be perfect, but the Bible says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” We become new creations in Christ.

Jesus said, “Because I live, you will live also.” The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the hope of humanity. The empty tomb is the hope of all humanity. It’s as simple as that. That’s what we celebrate at Easter: Jesus is risen.

Let me give you the second reason for hope beyond the grave. It is the hope of the revelation of God’s Word. Verse 15 says, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord.” Paul was saying that what he was telling the Thessalonians was not his own thoughts or ideas but “the word of the Lord,” which is Scripture.

And Paul continues, “...that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” In other words, those who are alive when the Lord returns are not going to go before those who had died. So if you die before the rapture, it’s going to be alright. If you are in Christ, you are secure in Him, and He is coming back for you and for His own.

There are only two ways that we can know what happens after death. One is human speculation, and the other is divine revelation. I bank on divine revelation; that the Bible is the Word of God. There is evidence to believe that, rather than believing in human speculation.

Some people say that when you die, it's just "poof," you're gone. You're no different than the elements of the ground. You're dead. You decay. And some say that when you die, not to worry; you'll come back in another form.

Isn't it interesting that people believe in reincarnation? In a former life we were kings, queens, Vikings, warriors, racecar drivers, Hollywood actors. No one was a lizard or a horny toad.

The Bible does not teach reincarnation. And the Bible does not teach universalism; that we're all going to go to heaven, that we're all children of God. That isn't taught in the Bible. The Bible does teach that only those who are "in Christ"—a repeated phrase in our passage—will be with Christ for all eternity.

The other option is divine revelation. The Bible does tell us about death. Number one, it tells us that life is short. Have you ever noticed that? You finally get to go to kindergarten. Then you get to go to elementary school. You finally get to third grade and you say, "I want to be a sixth grader!" It seems so long before you can go to middle school and play on that playground. Then you get to middle school and time seems to go a little faster. Then you're in high school and it's cool. But it goes by quickly. Then it seems that as soon as you graduate, you're in a rest home waiting to die. Bummer. As you get older things seem to go faster, because you've reached the top of the slide. And as you go down the slide, it goes faster.

Life is short. It's like "a vapor which appears for a little time and then vanishes away." It's like the California poppies that bloom in the spring but then wither in the summer heat. And life is so frail. The Bible says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." So the Bible teaches us the brevity of life.

Number two, the Bible teaches us the certainty of death. The statistics on death are impressive; ten out of every ten people living will die. The Bible says, "What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?" "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Everyone has an appointment with death, and after that we will stand before God and be judged whether or not we have a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

The options are heaven on one hand and hell on the other. The Bible reveals the existence of two eternal destinations—heaven and hell. You can go to either one. What determines where you will be for all eternity is where you stand with Christ. Jesus is the only provision for salvation. If you are drowning and the life preserver is thrown to you—Jesus Christ—and you grab it, you're saved; if you reject it, you're lost. So if you don't go to heaven, you have no one to blame but yourself. That's because you rejected God's free gift of salvation through the person of Jesus Christ.

The third basis for hope beyond the grave is the hope of the resurrection for those who die in Christ. This is the heart of our passage. We know we're going to heaven because Jesus rose, we know we're going to heaven because God's revealed it in His Word—"To be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord," 2 Corinthians 5:6—and we know our bodies will be resurrected just as Christ's was. Verse 16 says, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." So there is an order to this.

But where it says, "And the dead in Christ will rise first," some people stumble over this passage. "You just said, Pastor John, that when a Christian dies, he goes immediately to be with Christ, 2 Corinthians 5:6."

"Yes, that's true."

"Then if you die and go with Christ, why are you being raised from the dead?"

This resurrection from the dead for believers in our text is talking about their bodies. Their spirits are already with Christ. It refers to the physical, material, actual resurrection of their body—just like it was for Jesus, who became "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Jesus was the prototype of our resurrection, just as Jesus' body was resurrected.

People ask, "Well, what about people who have been eaten by sharks?" Do you think that's a problem for God? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" No.

This text doesn't talk about reconstruction; it talks about resurrection. If God can speak into existence the entire cosmos by the power of His Word, He can resurrect your body. If you're a Christian, your actual body will be redeemed.

You say, "I don't want my body; it's messed up!" I hear what you're saying, but your body is going to be new and improved. Praise God! Your body will be amazing. It will be glorified like Christ's body was when He rose from the dead. And it's all because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the empty tomb.

Let me give you some verses to back this up. 1 Corinthians 15:20 says, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Jesus is our prototype. In Romans 8:23, it says that we are "eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." And 1 Corinthians 15:42 says that "The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption." Or they are sown in dishonor but are raised in glory. They are sown in weakness but raised in power. I like that.

The older I get, the weaker I get and the more messed up I get. The Bible says our bodies are like tents. My tent is leaning and flapping in the wind. The tent stakes are pulled up, and it's about ready to blow away. It is "sown in corruption...raised in incorruption." And it's because of Easter.

Easter is so marvelous. Christ has risen from the dead, and our bodies will be resurrected too. At the rapture of the church, the Lord descends “from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel,” and the bodies of those who died “in Christ” will be resurrected and reunited with their spirit and soul and have a glorified body for all eternity. How marvelous! So this is the doctrine of the rapture of the church.

Why do we have hope beyond the grave? Reason number four is because of the rapture of those who are living in Christ. We have the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's Word, the resurrection of the dead in Christ and we have the rapture of the living in Christ. This is our hope.

This rapture is not the Second Coming, which is at least seven years later. Before the Lord comes back visibly, bodily and sets up His kingdom on earth, we will see the Lord come from heaven to catch up believers in the rapture. If we're alive when that happens—that could happen literally before I finish this sermon. Then “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up...” The Greek word is “harpazó,” which means “to snatch up” or “to take up by force.” And the Latin Vulgate translation renders that “rapturous” or “rapture.”

Continuing, “...together with them...”—that is, “with those who have died in Christ”—“...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” And not on earth. “And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” So there is the comfort of knowing we can be “caught up” in death to be with the Lord.

Jesus spoke of this in John 14:1-3. When He was with His disciples and was going to go back to heaven, He said, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.” Why is that? “In My Father's house...”—which is “heaven”—“...are many mansions.” The Greek word for “mansions” is actually “abiding place,” because in those days they would build one, big house, and all the kids would live with the rest of the family in one house. One translation says “apartments.” No thank you. The King James translation says “mansions” are in “My Father's house.”

Verse 2 continues, “If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” I like this promise.

Believe in Jesus, believe in a place and believe in His promise. Don't let your heart be troubled; He's going to heaven, He's preparing a place for us and He'll return to receive us and take us to heaven. That's the blessed hope of the believer. Titus 2:13 says, “...looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

The moment Jesus promised to go to heaven and come back, Thomas said in verse 5, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” He was like one of

those students in class who said to the teacher, “We don’t know what you’re talking about.” Then Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus was saying that He’s the way to heaven, He’s the truth about heaven and He’s the life of heaven. Without Jesus there’s no knowing, going or living; Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Amen.

So we are filled with hope at Easter because Jesus lives, and we shall live also. He’s preparing us a place, and He’ll come back and receive us to Himself.

The fifth reason we have hope beyond the grave is the hope of reunion. Verse 17 says, “... together with them.” Who is “them”? They are “the dead in Christ.” And the end of verse 17 says, “And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” One day when you die or the Lord comes in the rapture, we’re going to be in heaven together—your mom, your dad, your brothers, your sisters, your aunts, your uncles, your friends.

In all the years of my ministry, I’ve conducted a lot of funerals. I’ve buried a lot of people. I’ve stood at a lot of open graves. I’ve sought to comfort grieving hearts. There is no greater hope and no greater assurance than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you lay your mother, your father, your grandparents in the grave—I’ve watched parents bury their children with broken hearts. But because of Christ, we will be together again.

This is not a fairy tale or pie in the sky in the sweet by and by. It’s historical fact. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Jesus lives. And He’s promised to come again. I believe with all my heart that we’ll see our loved ones again who have died in Christ. And we’ll know them.

Quite often people ask me, “You think we’ll know each other when we get to heaven?” Charles Spurgeon said, “You think we’re going to be dumber in heaven than we are here?” Can you imagine? “Hi, what’s your name?”

“I’m your wife, you dumb!”

“Oh, sorry sweetheart.”

Every time Jesus raised someone from the dead, He brought people back together. He raised Jairus’ daughter, which is one of the most moving stories to me, when she was 12 years old. I have three daughters, and I have several granddaughters. They’re awesome. Many times I preached from this story, and several times I did have a 12-year-old daughter at that time. I couldn’t imagine losing my 12-year-old daughter!

Jesus went to Jairus’ home and looked upon that 12-year-old daughter, and He said this: “Little lamb, arise.” He actually said, “Talitha, cumi,” which means “Little lamb, arise.” He reached out and took her hand, and she sat up. She said, “Mommy, I’m hungry.” Jesus took her hand and brought her to her mother.

I believe that when we get to heaven, Jesus will be grabbing people’s hands and saying, “I’ve got someone for you to see!” You’re going to be running over and saying, “Look who’s here!”

We'll be introducing family members to one another when we get to heaven. What a day of rejoicing that will be!

What a blessing to know that Jesus rose from the dead. Death is a great separator, but Jesus has conquered death. Through His Resurrection we have hope of reunion with our Lord and with our loved ones who have died in Christ. Verse 18 says, "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

So Easter means that Christ rose from the dead, that God has revealed to us the truth of heaven in His Word, that we have the resurrection of the dead and the living in Christ at the rapture and that we have the reunion of those who have died in Christ.

Now the only question that remains in closing is, "Are you in Christ?" If not, you're without God and you're without hope.

How do you get "in Christ"? Number one, admit that you are a sinner. You ask, "For me to go to heaven, I have to admit that I'm a sinner?!"

"Yes." You have to become humble like a child and admit that you're not perfect. Admit that you've lied. Admit that you've lusted. Admit that you've stolen something. Admit that you have pride. The Bible says, "The proud He knows from afar." No one has been perfect—only Jesus. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And God knows our secret sins. He knows our thoughts before we think them. Nothing is hidden from God.

So the first step in getting right with God is doing what the Bible says: admitting that we're sinners separated from God. The second step is to repent. It's the Greek word "metanoëó." It means to change your mind about your sin—admit you are a sinner—and turn and go the other direction. When you've run from Christ, you then turn back and pursue Christ.

The third step is believe in or put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. So you admit you're a sinner, you repent of your sins and you believe in Jesus Christ. "To believe in Jesus Christ" means that you trust Him. "To put your faith in Jesus Christ" means that you rely upon Him.

It doesn't mean that you believe in your brain that there's a God in heaven or even believe that Jesus died on the Cross and rose. You might believe in the Resurrection and still not be saved, because you haven't trusted Him, you haven't committed to Him, you haven't put your faith in Him. It's not enough to just believe; you must put your faith in Christ, which is what it means to believe.

The Bible says, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." It's not your good works that save you, because none of us are good enough.

But you do get to heaven by admitting that you are a sinner; receiving Jesus, who died on the

Cross for your sin; believing that He paid your penalty; and that you believe and trust in Him. Then the Holy Spirit forgives you and comes into your heart and takes up residence there. You become a new creation in Christ and are on your way to heaven. And not only do you go to heaven when you die, but you can have heaven right now while on planet earth.

So your sins can be forgiven, your life can have purpose and meaning and you can have the hope of heaven.

I want to give you an opportunity right now to trust Jesus. I'm not only here to preach an Easter message; I'm here to give you an opportunity.

I ask you, "Have you repented of your sins? Have you believed in Jesus? Do you know, beyond any doubt, that if you died right now, you'd go to heaven?" If not, "Will you trust Christ today?" Get right with God.

"Do you know that your sins are forgiven? Do you know that you are a child of God? Do you know that when you die, you would go to heaven?" If not, why not? You're not ready to live until you're ready to die. Easter means that you can be forgiven, and you can have purpose and power. You have the promise of eternal life.

So if you haven't trusted Jesus Christ, I want to give you that opportunity. Trust Him, put your faith in Him and be forgiven. Don't let this day pass without knowing that you are His child, and that when you die, you will go to heaven.