

Happy Easter, Moon Valley!

We have an Easter tradition at Moon Valley, and I invite you to participate.

When I say, “He is risen,” you respond loudly, “He is risen indeed.”

So, here we go. “He is risen!”

Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. He is alive!

Which is ironic. Because right now many people are feeling dead.

Recent research findings from Gallup show that the incidence of depression in America is at an all-time high. Clinical depression had been rising slowly in the U.S. prior to COVID. But now, ever since COVID, depression is soaring.¹

In the past fifteen years, the number of American high-school students who say they feel “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” has nearly doubled such that roughly half of students have such feelings.² Now, one in five teen-agers have seriously considered attempting suicide, and one in ten have made the attempt.³

And there is emerging research that this rising despair is bleeding into public discourse, fueling misinformation, conspiracy theories and cultural conflicts.⁴

¹ Dan Witters, “U.S. Depression Rates Reach New Highs,” GALLUP, May 17, 2023.

² Derek Thompson, “Why American Teens Are So Sad,” The Atlantic, April 11, 2022.

³ CDC “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends: 2011-2021.

⁴ Maggie Haslam, “Q&A: Is hopelessness a US public health crisis?,” Phys.org, September 22, 2023.

Some researchers are calling it a crisis of hopelessness and are linking it to a deterioration of mental health. In an article published just this month, two researchers explain,

“Mental health and related psychological problems such as loneliness may prove to be one of the most significant barriers to human flourishing and progress in our time. Despite living in an age of material abundance, if people don’t adopt a hopeful mindset, they won’t fully utilize their ability to better their lives and address the major challenges we face today.”⁵

This raises an important question that I want to address today: How do you adopt a hopeful mindset when your life seems like a dumpster fire? How do you conjure hopefulness from hopelessness?

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. From this text, we are going to learn where to find hope when life seems hopeless.

Our current American crisis of hopelessness is not entirely unprecedented.

One word describes what many Christians were feeling in the ancient Greek city of Thessalonica in the first century. It is the Greek word λυπέω. It means to grieve, to be sad, to be sorrowful, to be under severe mental or emotional distress.⁶

⁵ Clay Routledge and Andrew Abeyta, “America’s hopelessness crisis may have less to do with the economy and more to do with Gen Z’s mental health, new survey shows,” Fortune, March 4, 2024,
<https://fortune.com/2024/03/04/america-hopelessness-crisis-economy-gen-z-mental-health-survey/>

⁶ BDAG.

A brief survey of the historical circumstances helps us understand the feeling. You see, the Christians in the Thessalonian church had experienced one loss after another.

- They lost their spiritual father who had led them to faith in Christ. Namely, the apostle Paul had been threatened and run out of town.
- They lost their social standing. Believing Jews were ostracized by unbelieving Jews as traitors and blasphemers. Believing Gentiles were ostracized by unbelieving Gentiles who found the claim that there is one true God to be offensive and dangerous to their polytheism.
- They lost their economic security. Christian businesses were boycotted. Christian employees were fired.
- And they were losing friends and loved ones who were dying. Our text does not reveal the causes of death. Some have speculated that Christians were being martyred, which is a reasonable idea, given that Paul's life had been threatened for his faith. And when you're already in despair, the death of a loved one can certainly multiply it, especially when the death seems senselessly premature or cruel.

Keep in mind that the believers in Thessalonica were new converts. Their new life in Christ was measured by months, not years. Their faith was vibrant, but time had not allowed the roots of their faith to run deep. The storms of loss threatened to uproot them.

So, put yourself in the sandals of these new believers who are burying their dead in Thessalonica. Grave markers or tombstones were

common in ancient Greece. And first-century Greco-Roman culture generally did not have a hopeful view of death. One ancient grave marker has been discovered that bears the following inscription: “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.” Another says, “Into nothing from nothing how quickly we go.” Yet another says, “When death comes, earth and fire consume everything.”⁷

Given their cultural situation and their grief, it would be understandable for the new believers to have questions swirling:

- Is there any hope for my deceased loved ones?
- Is there any hope for me?
- Paul said that Jesus would return and that it could happen any time. But Jesus has not returned. What if I have believed in Jesus for nothing?
- Is all this loss and grief for nothing?
- Am I going into nothing from nothing?
- And if Jesus does return, will my deceased loved ones miss out on something?

In our text, Paul writes to address questions like these. In □ 1 Thessalonians 4:13, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:13 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.

The term □ “asleep” is a nice way of saying, “dead.” It cushions the blow.

⁷ Gupta, Nijay K., *1-2 Thessalonians: A New Covenant Commentary*, ed. by Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 92-93.

The term □ “uninformed” conveys a lack of information or understanding. So, Paul wants his “brothers,” that is, his fellow believers, to have some important information about those who are dead.

Apprehending this information holds a key to being hopeful. Paul wants them to be informed for this stated purpose: □ “that you many not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

To grieve comes from the original Greek word I mentioned earlier: λυπέω. It means to be sad, to be sorrowful, to be under severe mental or emotional distress.

Paul is not suggesting that his brothers should not grieve at all; rather, that they should grieve differently. Namely, that they should “not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

The “others” are those who have not believed in Jesus for eternal life. Paul describes them as “outsiders” in the immediately preceding context, not because they are somehow less than believers, but because their unbelief keeps them outside the forever family of God known as the church.

So, we have two groups of grievers: those inside who have hope, and those outside who don’t. Those who have hope are to grieve differently than those who don’t.

This raises the question: What is this difference-making hope that believers need to apprehend?

Paul begins to explain it in □ verse 14, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Here, Paul mentions something central to the Christian faith; namely, □ “we believe that Jesus died and rose again.” The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are foundational to the gospel we preach. Jesus Christ died and rose again in payment for our sins. And on the basis of that payment, Christ alone promises eternal life to all who will simply believe in him for it. So, we are eternally saved through faith alone in Christ alone. There are no other strings attached to earn it or to keep it or to prove it.

Unfortunately, the refreshing simplicity of this good news is often obscured by all manner add-ons and conditions Christendom is prone to devise.

But Paul says, this is what we believe.

And that belief is connected to the second part of Paul’s statement in verse 14: □ “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

Not everyone agrees on what Paul means by this. Two interpretations are possible.

First, Paul may be saying that, when the Lord returns, he is going to bring with him the souls of all believers who have died. This interpretation would fit theologically with other scriptures that suggest the souls of believers who have died do indeed go directly to be with the Lord. It would make sense, then, that when the Lord returns, he would bring with him those believing souls.

Nevertheless, I am inclined to believe that, while this first interpretive option is theologically sound, it is probably not what Paul means here.

There is a second interpretive option that makes better sense to me in context. I suspect that Paul is simply saying that one day God will resurrect and take with him those Christians who have died. The original Greek word translated □ “bring” can also be translated “lead away.” So, I think Paul is saying that one day God will resurrect and “lead away” the dead in Christ.

This interpretation makes more sense of the connecting phrase □ “even so.” The Greek term translated “even so” is an adverb that means in this manner or in this way.⁸ So, Paul begins with the premise that we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And then he builds on that, saying *in this same way*, Christians who have died will rise again. The God who raised Jesus will raise our departed loved ones, too.

This interpretation also makes more sense of the phrase □ “through Jesus.” The preposition, “through” denotes agency. It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus, their agent, that deceased believers will rise again. It is Christ’s resurrection that guarantees their resurrection.

Finally, this interpretation more directly provides the assurance the Thessalonians were looking for. Their deceased loved ones are not hopeless; they will rise again just like Jesus did.

Well, how is this going to work?

Before Paul unpacks the sequence of events, he makes a preliminary comment in verse 15, saying,

⁸ Friberg.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:15 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.

Note Paul is careful to emphasize that what he is saying is not just his opinion, it is ☐ “a word from the Lord.” We can trust it. We have God’s word on it.

When Paul says we who are alive ☐ “will not precede” those who are dead, he is providing reassurance that, when Christ returns, the living will not get the jump on the dead. The dead in Christ will in no way be disadvantaged at Christ’s coming. They will not miss out on anything.

We don’t know for sure why the Thessalonians needed this particular reassurance. Perhaps those still alive were concerned that their dead loved ones were somehow going to miss out on the celebrative grandeur of Christ’s return.

Now, Paul lays out what’s going to happen in ☐ six sequential events. We will collect these events in a table on the screen.

First, there will be the ☐ return of Christ. In verse 16, Paul describes it this way:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:16 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. . . .

When Jesus returns, he will descend from heaven accompanied by sounds befitting his greatness. The advent of Jesus on the first Christmas may have been a silent night, but this coming of Christ for his bride, the church, will not be silent. Everyone will know.

There will be loud vocals, including a shouted command, perhaps from God himself, and the thundering voice of an angelic leader.

And a trumpet will sound. In that day, the trumpet was not used primarily as a musical instrument, but as a summons to hearers. The trumpet will call the dead to rise.

Second, following the return there will be the ☐ resurrection of the dead. In the last part of verse 16, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:16 . . . And the dead in Christ will rise first.

When Christ returns, only those who have believed in Jesus will be raised. That's what Paul means by the phrase ☐ "in Christ." Far from being disadvantaged, the dead in Christ will rise first.

You may be wondering, "Bob, I thought you said before that the souls of believers who die go directly to be with the Lord. So, how is it that they are now resurrected?"

Well, the dead in Christ have indeed gone to be with the Lord, but they have done so *spiritually*, not *physically*. When Christ returns, the dead in Christ will be resurrected in that they will then take on their resurrected, physical bodies.

Your first thought might be, "Oh, gross! Those old bodies?" And your next thought might be, "Oh, no! We had aunt Melba cremated. God's got nothing to work with! Melba's toast!"

Relax. We're getting new bodies. Which brings us to the third event connected with our resurrection: It is the ☐ redemption of our bodies.

Paul does not spell this out in our text, but it is certainly implied and taught elsewhere in Scripture. For example, in □ 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, Paul says,

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

We will instantaneously receive imperishable bodies—ones that always work perfectly and won’t wear out. Believe me, the older I get, the more I like this idea.

And by the way, I believe our resurrected bodies will be such that we will be able to recognize one another. As the first to rise from the dead, Jesus was clearly recognizable to his followers. He had flesh and bones, and he ate after his resurrection. I think we’ll be like that, too.

Fourth, there will be the □ rapture. Paul explains this in verse 17.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:17 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 . . .

The bodies of those alive will be transformed into the same kind of perfect bodies the dead in Christ got. They will be heavenly bodies.

Now transformed, these believers who are alive at Christ’s coming will be caught up unto his presence without experiencing death.

Strictly speaking, the term “rapture” refers only to these living believers who are caught up. Nevertheless, it is used popularly and theologically

to refer to all believers being caught up with Christ, both the transformed living and the resurrected dead.

This original Greek term translated □ “caught up” is ἀρπάζω (*harpazo*). It means to snatch or take away. Now, long before this was translated into English, it was translated into Latin. The Latin translation of the Greek term *harpazo* is *rapturo*. That’s where we get the English term rapture. So, rapture is a biblical term. So, if somebody argues, “Hey, the term rapture is not really in the Bible,” you can say, “Hey Bucko. *Harpazo* was translated *rapturo*. *Comprendo?*” (I realize “comprendo” should be “comprende,” but it doesn’t rhyme.)

Fifth, there will be the □ reunion. In verse 17, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:17 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.

First, there will be a reunion with loved ones, indicated by the phrase, “caught up together with them.” We will be together again with those who have passed. We will also get to meet new people like the apostle Paul. And I’ll get to ask him about his penchant for run-on sentences.

If, by nature, you happen to be a glass-is-half-empty person as I am, you may be wondering, “What about the Christians who were colossal jerks on earth. Am I going to have to live with them?”

A dark part of me would like to think that these jerks will have a special heavenly dorm all to themselves. One with bars and razor wire.

But the truth is we will all be leaving our sin behind. We will be sinless. There will be no jerkiness where we’re going, so even our reunion with the former Christian jerks will be good.

Greater still will be our reunion with the Lord. Paul says, together we will □ “meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” The reunion is not temporary. We will always be together. I looked it up. “Always” means always. At all times. Forever.

This helps us put into perspective how fleeting our grief is in this world in these earthly bodies. As Mother Teresa has famously said, “In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.”

Sixth, and finally, there will be the □ reveal. This describes our endless discovery of one glorious thing after another. How could it be otherwise in the presence of the Creator of all things?

Think about those last words in □ verse 17. What will it be like to “be with the Lord?”

My grandson, Jack loves astronomy. Think of the questions he can get answered. “Jesus, the diameter of the universe we have been able to observe is 93 billion light-years; what is the size of the whole universe you created? And how did the conditions first arise for anything to exist?”

Paul entices us in □ Romans 8:18, saying,

ESV Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Just one part of the glorious reveal will be when Jesus shows us our heavenly homes—the ones he has been preparing for each one of us ever since he ascended from earth.

Back when Jesus was on earth with his disciples, they were grieving because he had just told them that he was going away to a place they could not yet go. In □ John 14:1-3, Jesus gives them this reassurance:

ESV John 14:1 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. □ 2 In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? □ 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

The day when Christ “will come again” is the day Paul describes in our text. It is the day when Jesus will take us to himself. And among the many glorious things that will be revealed to us is the place he has prepared for each one of us.

You’ve seen home improvement shows where a house is fixed up according to the tastes of the owners, and when everything is ready, there is finally the exciting reveal.

Well, Jesus is preparing your place and mine right now, according to his perfect knowledge of what will delight us. It will be glorious. And he has already paid for it.

Paul concludes our text in □ verse 18, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I began this sermon by talking about a modern crisis of hopelessness in America. But hopelessness is not a new thing. In this fallen world, people have struggled with it throughout history.

But in our text, Paul exhorts us, as Christians, to encourage one another with these words of the hope. Yes, in our suffering, we grieve. Yes, we are at times subject to severe mental or emotional distress.

But we are not without hope.

Paul's big idea from our text is this: □ As he is risen, so we will rise!

Our rising unfolds in the □ six sequential events with which Paul encourages us. This is our hope.

The biblical concept of hope is not wishful thinking. It is confident expectation.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again. Even so, this is our hope: the return of Christ for his people, the resurrection of the dead in Christ, the redemption of our bodies; the rapture of the living in Christ; the reunion of all who are in Christ to be with Jesus forever; and the reveal of our heavenly home.

Let us encourage one another with these words.

He is risen!

Let's pray. Thank you for dying for us and rising again that we may have this hope of rising also to be with you. For those who came today without hope in Christ, I pray that you would draw them to faith in Jesus that they may leave with hope. For those of us who are

already in Christ through faith, may these words of hope provide the encouragement we need to flourish. Amen.