

Jesus: The One Who Is, Who Was, Who Is To Come
“He Will Return” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 4/21/2013

Introduction

- ❖ Three dead and 176 injured from a terrorist attack in Boston. Fourteen dead and more than 200 hurt from a plant explosion in West, Texas. Eight dead including seven infants born alive yet brutally killed in an ongoing murder trial for a Philadelphian abortionist. 179 dead after an earthquake strikes China’s Sichuan region.
 - ▶ All of this went down in the span of a week. This week. My gut reaction was simple, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come.” Come and bring peace. Come and bring comfort. Come and bring justice. Come and bring your kingdom.
 - **A painful week like this turns our eyes heavenward in hope of a coming King and a kingdom come.** I believe it’s providential that we’ve been in a series on Jesus, where months before we planned to address today his return. This is a message providentially timed. **[PRAY]**

- ❖ Everyone knows we're mortal and everyone knows death could befall us at any moment. But our culture – for reasons owing to God’s providence and common grace – has been spared from having to face the bare truth of this reality on a regular basis.
 - ▶ Truth be told, news of a terrorist bombing in the streets is a just part of life for many cultures in the world. But not for us. We are not used to seeing or hearing about such carnage. We have the luxury of ignoring death, the privilege of ignoring our mortality.
 - And even when that uncomfortable thought creeps into our minds, our culture has plenty of distractions to keep us busy and blinded to reality.

- ❖ There is a lot to mourn this week, but there is at least one thing to be thankful for. Be thankful that the illusions are gone. **Be thankful that for a moment, in the collective consciousness of our nation, all pretenses of our invincibility are gone.** All illusions of being completely safe and secure are gone. Who knows how long it will last. Who knows what will pop up next to distract us again, so that we put the blinders back on.
 - ▶ **But so long as we’re in this moment, let’s talk about death.** In this moment of clarity, let’s get serious with death. And not just in the abstract. Let’s talk about the death of loved ones who have gone before you.

- ❖ I know some of you are in the grieving process. You’ve lost someone close to you, and you’re hurting. No matter how firm your faith might be, the loss of a family member or friend can cause tremendous pain and grief. You feel like a part of you has died with them. It’s going to take time to process. Meanwhile you have a bunch of questions. Where are they right now? Are they okay? Will I ever see them again?
 - ▶ Which makes me wonder what will happen to me when I die? It's uncomfortable to think about your own death, but we bring it up in order to bring comfort.

- ❖ Look with me at this morning’s passage in 1 Thessalonians 4, particularly v18. “*Therefore, encourage one another with these words.*” That could also be translated as comfort (console) one another with these words (cf. 3:7). So these words we’re about to study were written to address death and were intended give encouragement and comfort.

- ❖ **In today's passage, Paul speaks directly to the grief we feel when a fellow Christian dies.** At the end of v16 he says he's addressing those who have died in Christ, which means those who have died as one redeemed by the blood and righteousness of Christ.
 - ▶ So this message is for those who are grieving the death of believing fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives, sons and daughters. I would even include those who have lost the unborn, the stillborn, and the infant. This message is also for those who feel the pain of losing Christian friends.

- ❖ The question before us is this: *When faced with the death of a beloved Christian relative or friend or even the prospect of your own death, how should a believer grieve?* Grieve we must, but how do you grieve as a Christian? I want to offer three answers that come from our text: 1) Grieve with hope. 2) Grieve with good theology. 3) Grieve with others.

Grieve With Hope

- ❖ First, Christians should grieve but with a particular kind of grief. Look at v13, "*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.*" Paul wrote to believers (*brothers*) in the Thessalonian church with the intent that they may not grieve their dead as other do who have no hope.

- ❖ Note that Paul is not prohibiting grief. Some people think Christians shouldn't grieve. That if a Christian grieves it's a sign of weak faith. That is not what Paul is saying. What he is saying is that if you do grieve, then as a Christian it should be with a different kind of grief than the rest of the world. **It should be a grief filled with hope.**
 - ▶ Tim Keller says Christians are those who rub hope into our grief just as you would rub salt into meat to keep it from going bad. **Likewise, Christians take the hope we have in the gospel, and we rub it deep into our grief.** Otherwise, without that hope, our grief can quickly sour the soul and turn it bitter.

- ❖ So when you're bereaved of a loved one, don't say to yourself, "I can't have grief. I'm a Christian." No, that's Stoicism talking. The Thessalonians probably had Stoics teaching that grieving is bad form. That those who are truly enlightened are indifferent to pleasure or pain.
 - ▶ That's not Christianity. Christianity grieves with hope. Just consider our Lord Jesus. If Jesus could weep at the graveside of a friend (Jn. 11:35), then surely we can too. He grieved Lazarus' death *with hope* because he knew Lazarus would be raised. Likewise, we can grieve our dead in Christ *with hope* because we know they too will one day be raised. That is Paul's point. **Grief is not bad. Grief is human.** It's healthy. The only thing Paul is against is a "hopeless grief".

- ❖ There is a big difference between hope-filled grief and hopeless grief. You see this clearly when you compare Christian funerals to non-Christian funerals. Those of you who have attended both know what I'm talking about. Non-Christians can celebrate a past life, but they can't offer much in terms of hope for the future. They can speak of the deceased living on in our memories, or in vague terms of an afterlife, but with no rock solid comfort.

- ❖ Paul is saying to Christians, “You don’t have to grieve like those without hope.” Christian, you have a hope. You have a tangible real future with new resurrected bodies on a new restored Earth. And that goes for anyone who dies in Christ. **For a Christian, death is not the sad ending to a life unfinished. Death is the beginning of a new and grander story.**
 - ▶ C.S. Lewis said this life is only the cover and title page. Upon death a Christian begins “*Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*”¹

- ❖ This is why “falling asleep” is such a good euphemism for death (cf. Mt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:20). Notice Paul uses it in v13. The point is that death, like sleep, is only temporary. **Just as sleep leads to an awakening, death leads to a resurrection.**
 - ▶ For the Christian, death is not something to be feared. Death is like the experience of falling asleep because when a Christian closes his eyes to this world, he opens them next in the presence of God in paradise.
 - Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*” (Lk. 23:43) When he entered Jarius’ house, Jesus said his dead daughter is sleeping. People laughed. That is, until Jesus raised her from the dead as if he was just waking her up with his gentle voice (Lk. 8:51-55).

- ❖ Some of you have specific Christian friends and family members in mind. It may have occurred years ago, but their deaths are still heavy on your heart. But now with the eyes of faith, I hope you see that they fell asleep. When they closed their eyes to this world, they opened them next to the face of Jesus, stirred awake by his gentle voice. Take comfort in this.

- ❖ Now before we continue on I want to address a nagging question. ***What about those who died too young – the unborn, stillborn, infant? Can I grieve with hope for them?*** Yes, I believe this passage applies to them. And yes, I say that while recognizing its focus is on those who have consciously trusted Christ before their death.

- ❖ I know my position is based primarily on scriptural inferences, but I believe they’re legitimate inferences. **I believe those who die too young are presently with Jesus, and they will be reunited with their believing parents at the coming of the Lord.**
 - ▶ I am not saying these infants were *not* born with a sin nature deserving of God’s condemnation. But I am saying that, because of their inability to comprehend divine revelation much less reject it, God, in his mercy, won’t hold them accountable for the sinfulness of their sin nature. I think you can infer from Scripture what is commonly called an “age of accountability”.
 - I won’t go through all the relevant passages right now, but I will attach them to my manuscript, which will be made available this week on our website. There I’ll explain my position further.²

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 228.

² See Appendix: Will we be reunited with those who die young?

- ❖ **My whole point is that Christians have hope in the face of death.** Whether it's their death, or the death of a fellow believer, or that of one who died too young, Christians have hope that they can rub deep into their grief – a gospel hope that can preserve their soul through the painful process of bereavement.

Grieve With Good Theology

- ❖ *But what does this hope consist of?* That leads to our next point. When faced with the death of those in Christ, how should a believer grieve? Grieve with hope. Secondly, grieve with good theology.
 - ▶ Notice back in v13 how Paul says, “*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.*” **Notice how Paul is connecting hopeless grief with being uninformed of truth.** If your mind is not shaped and informed by God's truth, then you are ill prepared as a Christian to handle the harsh realities of life, especially death.
- ❖ The truth is many of our fears and troubles are attributable to ignorance of good theology. This is why Paul writes to the Thessalonians what he does in vv14-17. It's to inform their thinking with good theology, specifically about Jesus' return and the events that follow.
 - ▶ The truths he lays out fit under the category called **eschatology**, the study of last things, which includes the end-times.
- ❖ I've met Christians who could chew on these topics all day. They know their eschatology inside and out. But Paul would ask them just one question, “***Can you take your end-times theology and preach it in a funeral?***” If you can't, then it's a waste of knowledge.
 - ▶ According to Paul, your eschatology is meant to bring encouragement to others, especially to those bereaving. So make sure you're informed with good theology, but make sure as well that you put it to good use.
 - So let's walk through vv14-17 and consider five theological truths that Paul addresses: Redemption, Return, Resurrection, Rapture, and Reunion. These five theological truths form the hope that Christians are to rub in our grief.
- ❖ First, we find hope in **Redemption**, that is, the redemption accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ. Look at v14. Paul says we can grieve with hope, “*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.*” This is the very foundation of our hope in the face of death – that Jesus died and rose again.
 - ▶ When sin came into the world, death came with it. And from the Garden, death spread to all men because all sinned (Rom. 5:12). And death defeated every man, woman, and child it has faced. No one can escape its grips. No one *has* escaped.
- ❖ Save one. There was one man who did escape the grips of death. His name was Jesus. He died on the cross in place of sinners, but death could not hold him down. On the third day, he broke free of its grips and rose from the grave, and now all who trust in him have the hope of redemption, of sharing in his death and resurrection.

- ▶ In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says Jesus has taken the sting out of death (vv55-56), and he identifies that sting as sin. In other words, by dying for our sins and rising from the dead in triumph, Jesus made it possible for his followers to face a stingless death.

- ❖ Donald Barnhouse once told of how he comforted his three young children after their mother died of cancer. On the day of the funeral, he was driving them to the service when they stopped at a traffic light. Ahead of them was a huge truck. It was a bright day and the sun was shining at such an angle that it cast the truck's shadow across a snow-covered field beside it.
 - ▶ Dr. Barnhouse turned and asked his children, "Look at that shadow of the truck there in the field. If you had to be run over, would you rather be run over by the truck or by its shadow?" His youngest replied, "The shadow, of course. It couldn't hurt anybody."
 - "That's right," he said, "and remember, children, Jesus let the truck of death strike him, so that it could never hurt us. Mother lives with Jesus now – only the shadow of death passed over her."³
 - For the Christian, death is only a shadow. It's only sleep. On the other side is hope. On the other side is Jesus.

- ❖ Second, we find hope in Jesus' **Return**. Look at the rest of v14, "*Through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*" So why should we grieve our loved ones with hope? Because we know when Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who died in him.
 - ▶ Like I said in the beginning, there are a lot of reasons to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, Come." There is a lot to look forward to in his return, but the one mentioned here is the fact that he's bringing people with him – those who have fallen asleep.

- ❖ Now far from being a secret event taking place in a tiny corner of the world, the coming of the Lord will be announced by a great amount of noise. Look at v16, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and the with the sound of the trumpet.*"
 - ▶ What is this trumpet announcing? What is this cry of command? It's the same command our Lord shouted to Lazarus in the grave. "Come out!", he said. And again he'll say, "Come out!" And the dead will obey. They will rise from their graves.

- ❖ That leads to our third theological truth, the **Resurrection**. Here we're not talking of Jesus' resurrection in the past but of a general resurrection of the dead in the future. Paul alludes to it at the end of v16, when he says, "*The dead in Christ will rise first.*"
 - ▶ Scripture teaches that when Christ returns there will be an event where everyone who has ever died (Christian or not) will be resurrected. It was a Jewish concept based on **Daniel 12:2**, where it says, "*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*" Notice again the use of sleep as a euphemism for death. Again, the point is no one will stay dead forever. Everyone will wake. Everyone will be resurrected.

³ Found in Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 199-200.

- ❖ Jesus reaffirms this idea in **John 5:28-29**, “*For an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*”
 - ▶ If you’re grieving a fellow Christian who has died, put your hope in the promise that an hour is coming – a glorious day – when they will rise to the resurrection of life. This is the hope of the Resurrection.

- ❖ Now for some reason, the Thessalonians needed assurance that the living – we who are alive when Jesus’ returns – will not precede the dead in Christ in the Resurrection. Paul felt it necessary to emphasize that the dead in Christ will rise *first*.

- ❖ The reason why is tied up with this concept of a **Rapture** in v17, “*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.*”
 - ▶ This is the key verse where we get the idea of an end-times rapture. The word is Latin, meaning “to seize or snatch up”. Here it says those still living when Jesus returns will be caught up (snatched up) with the dead in Christ to meet the Lord in the air. This is the Rapture.

- ❖ The whole idea has been popularized in the *Left Behind* books and movies. But the kind of Rapture found there is based on a particular view of Jesus’ Return, namely that it will occur in two stages – a rapture first and then an actual coming.
 - ▶ So in this view, the dead in Christ rise bodily and, along with living believers, we all ascend up from earth to meet Jesus who is coming down from heaven. We meet in the air. And then Jesus turns around and takes us with him back up to heaven.
 - It’s taught that there will then be a seven-year tribulation period, after which Jesus actually returns with his Church to establish his kingdom on earth. This is a popular view among American Christians, which is amazing since until 1830 not a single Christian believed this or even heard of this idea.

- ❖ I think there is a simpler and more profound way to understand this passage as describing one event and not two. Focus on that phrase, “*to meet the Lord in the air*”. The Greek for “to meet” is *apantesis* (ah-pawn-tay-sis), which is a technical term in those days for the public welcoming of a dignitary to a city.⁴
 - ▶ Typically, citizens would go outside the city gates to meet a visiting dignitary in order to accompany him back into the city. If it was a visiting king, then there would be pomp and pageantry, singing and sacrifices. There would be a grand parade.

- ❖ The other two occurrences of this verb in the New Testament are used this way. In **Acts 28:15** as Paul was traveling to Rome, it says brothers came out to meet (*apantesin*) him and accompany him into the city.

⁴ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 168.

- ▶ In **Matthew 25:6** we have a parable of the Second Coming where the wise virgins go out to meet (*apantesin*) the bridegroom, who is on his way to the feast, only to return with him to the feast.

- ❖ Seen in this light, the Rapture is that event where those who are alive in Christ will be caught up together with those who have died in Christ to meet the Lord in the air. And there we will welcome him. But we won't head up to heaven. Instead we'll accompany him back down to earth where he'll establish his messianic reign.

- ❖ Now with this idea in mind, let's go back to the issue of why it was so important for Paul to stress that the dead in Christ will rise *first*. Most commentators suggest the Thessalonians were afraid that only those alive at the time of the Return would have the honor of going out to meet the Lord in his triumphant return. They feared their deceased loved ones would be forgotten or excluded from this grand celebration.
 - ▶ So Paul makes a point of stressing that their friends who have died in Christ will not only be remembered – they, in fact, will enjoy the place of honor in the grand parade. They will be first in line. So don't grieve for them as one without hope.

- ❖ But the real point of this passage is to encourage bereaved Christians with the hopeful reality that one day there will be a **Reunion**. You will be reunited with your loved ones and together you will share in the glory of King Jesus' triumphant return.
 - ▶ *Can you imagine the joy of that day?* I love watching videos of returning soldiers who film a surprise reunion with their wives or children. It's so beautiful to see the tears in their eyes and the joy on their faces.

- ❖ It makes me wonder what it'll be like to be caught up in the air with those who have gone before us. Reunions will be happening left and right. Fathers and sons reunited. Mothers and daughters. Brothers and sisters. Husbands and wives who shared an earthly union.
 - ▶ You'll see that familiar face again. You'll feel their touch again because you both will have new resurrection bodies. You'll embrace again and real tears will flow from real eyes. Joy will overwhelm.
 - But that's not all. For the real joy, the real comfort, the Great Reunion will be with Jesus, and the point of the passage is that together with our loved ones we will enjoy him forever.

- ❖ Friends, I know the separation hurts. But remember it's only temporary. **Separation from those we love in Christ is but a passing night's sleep.** An eternity of joy together awaits you on the other side.

Grieve With Others

- ❖ This is what good eschatology is supposed to do. Not to fill your mind with facts and dates but to fill your heart with hope and joy. So grieve with that hope, grieve with good theology, and lastly grieve with others.

- ▶ Notice finally in v18 how Paul ends by pointing the Thessalonians to each other and says, "*Therefore encourage one another with these words.*" In other words, Paul did not expect himself to be the primary comforter for the church. Rather he was equipping the members with good theology, that they might become comforters and encouragers for each other.

- ❖ Likewise I, as the preacher, am not the primary comforter. If members are grieving, you shouldn't send them all to me. My primary job is to teach members the words of God, so that you can use them to comfort one another – to take each other by the arms, to offer your presence and embrace, to help each other rub gospel hope into grief.

- ❖ **Now I realize, for some, your grief is due to the fact that your loved one died without trusting in Jesus.** So what about them? Can I grieve with hope for them?
 - ▶ I personally know how difficult this is, but this passage only applies to the saved because the hope Paul speaks of is the very hope of salvation. Obviously this hope won't apply to the death of a non-Christian otherwise he would be a Christian.

- ❖ The only scriptural encouragement I can give you in this case is the assurance that God is good and righteous. That he is just in all he does and decides. Abraham once asked, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*" (Gen. 18:25) The answer is yes.

- ❖ **This should wake us up to the spiritual state of our loved ones who are still alive.** Do they know Jesus? Do they share in your gospel hope? Are you fervently praying for their salvation? Are you seizing every opportunity to talk about the gospel and the hope it offers?
 - ▶ *And how about you personally?* Do you have the hope and confidence that you'll be caught up to meet Jesus on the day of his return? Are you certain you'll be reunited with loved ones to enjoy Christ together forever?
 - *How can this hope be yours?* Repent and believe. Turn away from your sins and ask Jesus to save you. Bow your knee, receive his mercy, get up, and begin a life of following him.

Appendix: Will we be reunited with those who die young?

What does Scripture teach concerning the fate of those who die young (toddlers, infants, stillborns, the unborn)? What solid rock of hope can we give to grieving parents? Though Scripture does not directly answer our question, we can infer a position that harmonizes with the overall teaching of Scripture. It is possible to hold a doctrine of original sin and still believe those who die in infancy are presently with Jesus and will be reunited with their parents at the coming of the Lord.

1. We affirm that all humans, regardless of age, are born under the Adamic curse and are guilty of his first sin (Rom. 5:12). We are all dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1) and by nature objects of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3).
2. So the question is not, "Are infants born with a sin nature deserving of condemnation?" The question is, "Does God hold infants accountable for the sinfulness of their sin nature?" I would answer: No.
3. Why? Because Scripture teaches in various places that the very reason God holds sinners accountable is due to their conscious rejection of divine revelation. Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." So creation itself is enough revelation to hold sinners accountable. But notice how the phrase "that men are without excuse" is predicated upon having a clear perception and understanding of God's existence, beauty, and worth from what has been made. But clearly infants are incapable of such perception and knowledge.
4. Romans 2:14-15 argues that Gentiles who don't have the Mosaic Law are still guilty of the law since they show that the law is written on their hearts (v15), while their consciences and thoughts are said to be accusing or defending them. So the law of God is clearly written on every baby's little heart, but at the same time, their undeveloped consciences and thoughts are unable to accuse them of guilt.
5. In John 9:41 Jesus responds to the seemingly rhetorical question posed by the Pharisees, "Are we also blind?" by saying, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains." So speaking in terms of spiritual blindness, Jesus says that if a person is incapable of seeing the light of God's revelatory truth then that person's guilt would not remain. Infants would fit that category.
6. From an Old Testament perspective, David believed that he would see again his dead son that he conceived with Bathsheba. He said in 2 Samuel 12:23, "But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." We can assume that he believed his son will be in the presence of God because David believed that when he died he would behold the face of God (Ps. 17:15).

In the end, I lean heavily on God's mercy being deep and wide. That leads me to believe God has made a way for those who die young to be saved without denying or overlooking their depravity. I believe the blood of Jesus was shed for them just as it was shed for all of God's sheep. Will they come to a conscious knowledge of their Savior? John Piper suggests that perhaps these infants will *"grow up in the kingdom (either immediately, or over time) and will by God's grace come to faith so that their justification is by faith alone just like ours."*

Some Christians wonder if this position is consistent with the doctrine of election. Charles Spurgeon thought so. He believed those who died in infancy were elect of God. He taught that did not God elect an individual because he foreknew that he/she would die in infancy, but rather God has ordained, in his sovereignty, that only his elect will be allowed to die in infancy.

Christian parent, take comfort in your grief and put your hope in God. I believe your child, who died much too young, is elect of God and is with Jesus even as you read this. Rejoice, for there will be a sweet reunion for you on the day the Lord returns.