

## INI

1 Thessalonians 4,13-18

Third Last Sunday of the Church Year — 6 November 2016

**Greeting:** To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson, which was read earlier:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.<sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

**So far the reading. Let us pray:** Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Introduction:** Sometimes when people buy what is called a big ticket item, there is what is known a buyer's remorse. That is, "Did I get the right thing at the right price?"

Buyer's remorse is common. You buy a house. You buy a car. You buy a 52 inch plasma TV. You buy life insurance.

The question remains: "Did I buy the right thing for me at the right price?"

From the sound of Paul's letter to the early Christians in Thessalonica, it sounds as if Paul is trying to allay their fear in regards to spiritual buyer's remorse.

It seems as if some in the congregation had doubts about the sure hope of the resurrection.

Now, Christians do not "buy" salvation. Nor do Christians "buy" the sure hope of the resurrection.

But all those in Paul's congregation came from non-Christian backgrounds — either Jewish or pagan. And perhaps they had doubts. Doubts about whether what they had left behind was still worth something. Doubts about what lay in their spiritual future. Doubts about this new “religion” — would it give what it promised? Was it worth having left family and friends for?

To these kind of doubts Paul offers a message of hope, and comfort grounded in that hope. This brings me to this morning's sermon theme: “**Hope In Jesus Always Gives Comfort.**” I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Hopelessness Apart From Christ;**
- 2) Hope In Christ;** and,
- 3) Hope In Jesus Always Gives Comfort**

**1) Hopelessness Apart From Christ.** As compared to what the ancient world had to offer in regards to a life after death, Paul gives us a sure hope in Christ. Paul tells his early readers and us:

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.

He told the early Christians in Thessalonica that they should not be as others, that they should not stand at the grave and sorrow “as others who have no hope.”

Paul knew that all around him the pagan world grieved their loved ones who had died. As a matter of fact, Christians grieved as well. But the pagan world grieved at the grave because it “had no hope.”

For the unbelieving pagan world, death was an end, and what laid beyond the grave was at best a shadowy world, — think of an old black-and-white television set, situated in the basement, and having only rabbit ears, and the reception is so poor that all you see is snow and static and shadowy figures. At the end, at worst, there was nothing.

We have a letter of condolence from the second century. A pagan friend is writing to a pagan couple who had lost a son, and the friend had

suffered a similar loss. The friend wrote:

I sorrowed and wept over your dear departed one as I wept over Didymus, ... but really there is nothing one can do in the face of such things, so, please comfort each other. (P. Oxy. 115)

What words could they have had that give comfort? Perhaps it was along the lines of, “Well, we still have each other”? But who knows? This couple stood at the grave of their son and as they looked into the hole, they too must have felt a hole in their hearts. They must have felt a hole in their lives. Such grief, Such emptiness. Such sorrow — a sorrow without end. A void that could not be filled.

There is a reason that people throughout the ages have felt such emptiness and sorrow when confronted by the death of a loved one. The reason is that death is not the natural state of things. Death is the product of sin. The Scriptures clearly declare:

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 8,23)

The soul that sins, it shall die. (Ezekiel 18,4)

Now without the clear teaching of Scripture, we would not know the cause of death.

People then and people today do not readily accept the nature of sin. They tend to deny sin and its wage.

People back in Paul’s day thought that perhaps if one died a hero’s death in battle, then one would live on in the memory of one’s comrades in arms. There are enough memorials throughout the ages to testify to that belief.

Some thought we might be reincarnated, and this is a false belief which still holds true today. Look at the number of books in which the author claims to have lived in a past life – usually as a prince or princess, completely ignoring the fact that the vast majority of people in the past were peasants or slaves.

But ultimately at the grave there is sorrow.

Catullus, a Roman poet of the first century, wrote,

The sun can set and rise again  
But once our brief life sets,  
There is one unending night to be slept through.

There is that hole in the heart. There is that hole in the lives of those left behind. There is emptiness. There is sorrow. What words can give comfort, what words can fill the hole, fill the emptiness, can span the unending night to be slept through?

Paul, however, shows us that there is:

**2) Hope In Christ.** But Paul has good news, he brings words of comfort. He brings words of hope. Comfort and hope not only for those early Christians but also for us. Listen to Paul's words:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

Paul is saying that something new has happened because of God's Son, Jesus, the Word become flesh.

To be sure, Jesus died. He died an awful death, a criminal's death, a tortured death, nailed to a Cross, and mocked and spat upon.

What put him on that Cross was not what He had done, but rather what we have done. We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And it is our sins, and the sins of the world, that put Jesus on that Cross.

Jesus, however, took our sins into death. He paid the price of the sin offering. In the words of John the Baptist, Jesus is "The Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world."

But Jesus not only died, He also rose again from the dead. He rose as the Mighty One Who has conquered death. And Paul gives hope to those whose loved ones have fallen asleep in Jesus, for on the last and great Day of

Judgment God will “bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”

Elsewhere Paul writes,

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through Baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life? For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection. (Romans 6,3-6)

This is why Luther can write that each and every day we are to remember our Baptism, what God has done for us, what great forgiveness Jesus has won for us, so that we might drown our old Adam, our old self, in the waters of Baptism, so that daily a new and forgiven me may arise and live to God by living for others.

Before we die, we have this word of forgiveness that gives life and salvation. And in the moment of our death we are assured of a continuing life with our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, because of what He has done for us. Jesus died to sin once, for all.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection we can stand at the grave of those who died in Jesus and know that even though the grave will soon be filled with a body — perhaps the body of a father or a mother, a husband or wife, a son or a daughter, some other relative, perhaps a friend — the fullness of that grave and the emptiness that it creates in our hearts, the hole in our lives, can be in part filled by the emptiness of another grave, a grave at the foot of Calvary's Cross, an empty tomb that could not hold Jesus.

Apart from Jesus there is no hope. In Jesus, however, there is hope, and:

**3) Hope In Jesus Always Gives Comfort.** In the Creed we confess that:

I believe in the ... forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

These words of forgiveness, these words sealed by the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, these words which promises life everlasting, are words of comfort.

Because of Jesus, death does not have the last word. But because this promise of Jesus is a word, a word we cannot see, there are times when sin, our flesh, and the old evil foe would have us doubt.

Doubt would be buyer's remorse — even though Jesus paid the price for sin, is the price of having left an unbelieving world worth it? Can Jesus really deliver what He promised?

But in Christ, the empty grave dispels doubt.

When we confront death, we must not confront this old foe with our own strength, but solely with the word of promise, the word of forgiveness, the promise of Jesus Himself.

I've noticed a trend in our circles to describe funeral services as a "victory service." Nothing wrong with that. But the implication is that somehow we should not feel the pang of loss or even cry or sorrow at the grave. There is something wrong with that.

Paul speaks of sorrow — but it is a sorrow that is tempered by hope, hope in Christ.

Let me use an illustration I've used before.

In Roland Bainton's biography of Luther, *Here I Stand*, Bainton tells of when Luther's daughter died. Bainton writes:

When Magdalena was fourteen years old, she lay upon her deathbed. Luther prayed, "O God, I love her so, but Thy will be done." And turning to her, "*Magalachen*, my little girl, you would like to stay with your father here and you would be glad to go to your Father in heaven?"

And she said, "Yes, dear father, as God wills."

And Luther reproached himself because God had blessed him as no bishop had been blessed in a thousand years, and yet he could not find it in his heart to give God thanks. Katie stood off, overcome by grief; and Luther held the child in his arms as she passed on. When she was laid away, he said, “*Du liebes Lenichen*, you will rise and shine like the stars and sun. How strange it is to know that she is at peace and all is well, and yet to be so sorrowful.”

In his mind, Luther clung to the promise of the word of forgiveness. He knew that his *Lenichen* was now with her heavenly Father, safe and secure, protected from sin, death, and the power of the devil, protected in the heavenly realms where there is no sorrow and every earthly tear shall be wiped away. And yet Luther still felt sorrow.

Indeed, at the death of His friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, Jesus, comforted Martha with the words,

I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies. (John 11,25)

But on seeing the tomb where Lazarus had been laid we have the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept” (John 11,35).

But Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He raised Lazarus just as He will raise “us and all the dead, and give unto us and all believers in Christ eternal life.”

These are words to which we cling. These are words that give comfort in the face of the emptiness of death, of the holes in our hearts and the holes in our lives.

**Conclusion:** Death was not part of God’s plan when He created the world. Death is the result of sin, the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, who brought sin into the world. But to counter that sin, and to counter death, and to defeat the power of the devil, God sent His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus, to live for us, and ultimately to die for us. He paid the price for sin which we could not pay. But He rose and promised that one day He would come for us.

At death, we sorrow. Luther sorrowed. Jesus wept. But sorrow does not last. It may take time, but as Paul says we have words of comfort. Comfort that we can give to one another. It is more than the comfort of realizing that when death creates holes in the fabric of our lives we have friends upon whom we can lean. This is the comfort of the promise of God in Jesus, and His words,

I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies.

This is comfort that grows and lasts. It is the comfort built on the hope that Jesus gives — that His victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil is our victory. In the face of death it is the only true and lasting comfort that we can give one to another. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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**SDG**