

STUDY 5 – 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

We are still in the section of the letter where Paul is instructing the Thessalonians to *“live in order to please God”* (4:1), and now he focuses their and our attention on the return of Christ. Unlike the previous section on sexuality and brotherly love Paul appears here to be filling in teaching that he had not had time to bring them when he was in Thessalonica.

There is much speculation in the commentaries as to whether the return of Christ was such a big issue in the early church because they expected it to happen immediately. As a result, some people argue, the fact believers started dying before Christ’s return caused a great pastoral problem which needed to be dealt with.

That may be the case, but if we read the letter in that way we need to be careful that we don’t start thinking the early church were naive to expect Jesus to return. Paul lived with a constant focus on the last day – think back to 2:19 and 20. It is expected that all Christians should be looking forward to the day Christ returns, and to live ready for it. Perhaps the fact that we don’t struggle with the issue that Paul deals with here says more about us than it does the Thessalonians.

The concern of this section is how we grieve when fellow Christians die. Notice, we are not told not to grieve (verse 13). We can and must grieve. Death is horrible and painful. Of all people, Christians see that especially clearly as we recognise that it is not the way things are supposed to be. Death comes as a result of sin – it is an alien invader in our world, and a horrible punishment on our rebellion. We must never pretend it’s not painful, or expect that Christians should just smile in the face of the loss of a loved one to death.

However, the way we grieve is very different to the world around us. As Christians we have *“hope”*, rather than *“no hope”*. Back in chapter 1 Paul has spoken of hope being one of three key marks of believers (along with faith and love). We know that death is not the final voice to speak, it is not the end. That is already hinted at by how Paul describes the death of a believer. They have *“fallen asleep”*. This is not a euphemism like the sentimental things we hear around us today (*“they are only in the next room”*). It is an illustration of what’s

happened. The important thing about being asleep is that it is a temporary state. You wake up!

Why do we have this hope? In verse 14 Paul reasons with us to show us. We believe *“Jesus died and rose again”*. He really, physically died, he really, physically rose again. This is the basic statement of faith for all Christians. So – think about the consequences of that fact. When Jesus returns he will bring with him all Christians who have died. One fact proves the other.

Why? Obviously the fact that Jesus rose again physically shows that God has power over death (if he can raise one dead body, he can raise billions), but the logic is much closer than even that. Notice how believers who have died are described. They are *“those who have fallen asleep **in him**”*.

Paul’s favourite description of a Christian is that they are IN CHRIST. United to him – in such a close way as to say that when Jesus died, we died, and when he rose again, we rose again (see Romans 5:8-10). Where Jesus is, so are his people, so if he is going to return in power to this earth, then so will all those Christians who have died.

In verses 15-17 Paul goes on to reassure us that those who have died before Christ returns will not lose out. He gives teaching *“according to the Lord’s own word”*, probably referring back to the general teaching Jesus gave to his disciples about his return. When Jesus returns he will come in power, he will be un-avoidable, and his authority will be irresistible.

How can Jesus bring his people with him (verse 14) and yet raise those same people from the dead (verse 16)? This is not a contradiction, just two sides of the same event. The souls/spirits of the dead (safe with Christ at death in *“paradise”*, see Luke 23:43) will be united with their resurrected bodies.

The focus of our hope is on Jesus Christ himself. We are not looking forward to heaven – in the sense that our hope is not just a place which is full of all the things we love doing. Our focus is on Christ. *“The Lord himself”* comes (verse 16), we will all *“be with the Lord forever”*. Heaven is real and physical – we will have resurrected bodies in the new heavens and new earth. Yet the content of our hope is Christ himself. Why the mention of meeting Christ in the air? It may

be because that we where the demons were seen to be. See Ephesians 1:2. When Christ returns he will be seen to be the one who has defeated the evil one and we reign with him.

What do we do with this teaching? We are to encourage each other with it (verse 18). This was an important part of what Paul did when he was in Thessalonica (see 2:12). There is an obvious need for this in the face of death itself – when fellow believers die. But we must not restrict the application of these verses for just those times. These are verses which fuel our hope – hope which leads us to endure (1:3) and keep going particularly in the face of suffering. We need to remember that we are not trusting Christ just for this life, and that death is not the end. Eternity is what counts.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How is our reaction to the death of Christians the same as the reaction of the world to the death of those they love? Crucially, how is it to be different?

Why is it so vital that we are seen to be people with “hope”? Look back at 1:3.

Why? What is it that we believe? What is the consequence of that belief? Can you see how and why those are connected? (Verse 14).

Will Christians who die before the return of Christ be any worse off than those who are still alive when he comes again? (Verse 15-16)

Will anyone miss the return of Christ? Can anyone resist it?

Where are we all heading when Jesus returns (verse 17)? How does this affect your view of what you are hoping for?

What are we to do with this teaching (verse 18)? Practically, how can we do this:

- When someone we love in the church has died?
- In day to day life when death is the last thing on our mind? Why might we need this encouragement especially then?

Does the fact that this issue does not seem to a pressing worry for us say anything about how much (or how little) we think about the return of Christ?