

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022 - 'A Community of Hope'. Tom Yacomeni

## 1 Thessalonians 4 Believers Who Have Died

*<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. <sup>15</sup> According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

As midnight passed and the world welcomed in the New Year on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000, an extraordinary decoration lit up the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia. A giant word 'Eternity' was emblazoned across the structure, to be seen by billions around the world as Sydney was one of the first big cities to usher in the new Millennium.



The word was written in a distinctive style which had become well-known on the streets of Sydney, all because of the evangelistic efforts of a rather quiet man named Arthur Stace. In August 1930 Arthur walked into a church looking for cup of tea and a cake, but he left profoundly changed. He said 'I went in looking for a rock cake but instead I met the Rock of Ages!' His new-found Christian faith gripped him and after hearing another preacher called John Ridley say 'I wish I could shout 'Eternity' through the streets of Sydney!', he simply began writing the word 'Eternity' in chalk on the pavements around the city. After doing this almost daily for over 30 years, Arthur died in 1967. But his legacy lived on in Sydney and no doubt he would have been delighted to see his word up in 50 foot lights bringing in the year 2000.

Ecclesiastes 3v11 says God has made everything beautiful in its time, but 'he has also set eternity in the human heart.'

One of the distinctives that sets humanity apart from the other species is that we think about time and eternity, and we contemplate what will happen to us in the future. We don't just react to life as it happens, we try to prepare ourselves for what is to come.

Advent is a special season of preparation. And it being Advent Sunday today it is worth just stopping to think what we are preparing for. Traditionally Advent is not only about preparing for Christmas and Christ's coming into the world, but it is also about preparing our hearts for the second coming, when Christ returns to complete what he started and ushers in his eternal Kingdom.

In earlier centuries Advent was a time of fasting or penitence and there was much more emphasis on preparing for judgement. Thankfully for us the reformers encouraged a more positive approach with thankfulness and anticipation which is why we start off lighting the candle of Hope on our Advent wreath.

The Apostle Paul wrote 'we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.' (2 Corinthians 4:18)

Our passage of scripture today deals with the whole subject of eternity, life beyond death and the second coming of Christ.

Paul's letter to the Church in Thessalonica was among the first letters he wrote to young churches, and he wrote it after Timothy returned from a visit to see them. Paul was relieved because there was much to be thankful for and Timothy reported that the church was going strong and growing in faith. But as the letter develops we discover that clearly there were also some challenges to deal with. It wasn't just the threat of persecution that was troubling, although Paul needed to explain this was to be expected. But earlier in chapter 4 we see Paul had to challenge some sexual immorality going on and also a bit of laziness too. The early Christians lived in full expectancy that Jesus would be returning imminently – so perhaps it is understandable they might be tempted not to bother working too hard, starting new initiatives or taking on new responsibilities.

Which is also one of the reasons it came as a bit of a shock to the system when some church members started to die – either from old age or from other causes. 'So what happens to them?' No doubt their questions came back to Paul along with Timothy's report.

We still ask the same questions today. 'What happens when you die?' is one of the questions that makes us human. In fact Google reports this question is surprisingly high on its 'Adword planner' rankings!

In tackling this subject Paul seeks to get behind the simple question about what happens when we die and address three deeper issues which can cause us all anxiety, and still do today:

- Fear of death itself
- Fear of being left behind
- Fear of losing loved ones

These are still very real fears, that challenge us all.

Paul addresses each of these fears in turn and he starts with the source of all Christian hope: The resurrection of Christ. If we are to overcome our worries about this area, focus on the resurrection of Jesus.

‘We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.’

Firstly our Christian hope is that death is not the end. Christ conquered death and proved it when he rose from the dead on that first Easter day. The fact of the resurrection is so critical that Paul wrote in Cor 15v14 ‘if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and so is your faith!’ In other words If Christ has not been raised, then don’t bother! Where are you in your understanding of the resurrection? If we don't have that conviction in the deep core of our being - the understanding that Christ conquered death, then our Christianity our faith will not grow. If we want our faith to grow, get it in you, understand it, look into it.

Dwelling on the death and resurrection of Christ is the central focal point of power for the believer. We cannot prove it scientifically. We cannot fathom it morally, it is a struggle to understand it rationally. Yet believing that Jesus died and rose again unlocks the resurrection power of God in your life both for now and the hereafter.

Charles ‘Chuck’ Colson was a political advisor jailed following the Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon’s administration in America. But he became a Christian whilst in prison and wrote this:

‘I know the resurrection is a fact and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured if it weren’t true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world and they couldn’t keep a lie for 3 weeks. You’re telling me 12 Apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.’

Now we get a lot of mistaken theology from movies like Ghost, or TV fantasy movies. The Christian hope of life after death is not about living some shadowy ghostlike existence. Let's put a few things straight today. Jesus explicitly said when he appeared to his disciples after his resurrection ‘a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have!’ In other words, look at what I'm like, for your future hope.

Instead the bible suggests there will be a new blend of spirituality and physicality that we haven’t experienced yet. Jesus’ resurrection appearances give us some clues, but we cannot fully fathom what it will be like. We don't even know how to put it into words, Paul struggles in the New Testament to describe it. All we can do is when we get the hints that the Bible gives us.

When I go into school sometimes classes like to ‘grill the vicar’ and one of the questions I get frequently is ‘what is heaven like?’

Well the answer of course is that heaven is not a place but being with a person. Jesus told the thief on the cross ‘today you will be with me in paradise’. So I tell the children to imagine the biggest hug from the person they love most. Being with the Lord is something to look forward to like that.

I picture Heaven as a momentary waiting room until Christ returns to fix creation, heal hurts and sort out injustice. He's outside time. He comes from past, present, and future. We can't even think of a linear way of time when we're conceiving of eternity but the second coming is nearer now than it ever has been. We just don't know when exactly that will be!

Which leads us to the next fear that Paul goes on to tackle.

What about when Christ returns and the fear of being left behind? We call it FOMO. The fear of missing out.

What if I am asleep when Christ returns? What if I am busy at work or on the toilet? Could I miss out?

Well Paul's well-meaning attempt to reassure the Thessalonians that no-one will inadvertently miss Christ's return has itself led to a whole other bunch load of eschatological confusion, because it gets difficult when he's trying to describe something that's outside of our experience.

Verse 16 says <sup>16</sup> 'For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.'

Paul was trying to reassure everyone – don't worry you can't possibly miss it!

There were rumours going around at the time which interestingly still circulate on the internet today under the title of Preterism which suggested that Jesus had already returned, gathered just a bunch of his favourites and gone off already. So you can appreciate why Paul would want to challenge such a destructive view.

But then because Paul used the Greek word ἀρπάζω 'caught up together' a whole load of ideas started to circulate about what became known as 'the Rapture'. The idea that true believers will be snatched away at the second coming leaving everyone else behind. Indeed Tim Lahaye's novels and multimedia 'left behind' franchise have caused many Christians to panic that they have somehow been left behind at one time or another. Mims' sister is still traumatised from returning to find the house empty a half drunk cup of tea and Mims hairdryer still going in the bedroom! Actually Mims had just popped next door and somehow forgotten to switch the hairdryer off!

The point of Paul's writing is to reassure us not to worry. No one will inadvertently miss the second coming! Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved – and just like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, even in our last moments there is grace for all who turn to him for help. The thing to concentrate on is that it's not about our qualification, it's about Jesus' grace. And when we thrust ourselves upon him, when we asked him to come in and rescue us, he does that. He longs to do that. It's not about our qualification. He will gather us to be with him forever.

Which leads me to the final fear that Paul addresses. What about loved ones who have died? Well they won't be left behind says Paul. In fact they get priority to meet with the Lord first.

The key word is in verse 17. Together.

We will be *together* with them.

So many people whose loved ones have died long for some assurance of their right standing before the Lord. Well don't let your hearts be troubled. As Jesus said, in my Father's house there are many rooms and he has prepared a place for us and for all those whom he calls. God is compassionate and just and longs that no one be lost. I am not a universalist but I know that God is universally kind and compassionate. I have to trust that those we love, he loves infinitely more. So we just have to trust and pray that all will be well in the end.

But we hold out the invitation in the here and now so that no one will miss out on present blessings and that future assurance and hope that is ours in Christ. The best gift we can give people this Advent is to say don't worry, God is coming and so all will be well as we trust him.

That is what it means to be a community of hope. Let's stand to pray together.