

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹³We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope. ¹⁴Indeed, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then in the same way we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.

¹⁵In fact, we tell you this by the word of the Lord: We who are alive and left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not go on ahead of those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

Hope

I.

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” Do you know who first wrote those words? It was Alexander Pope in his poem “An Essay on Man” written in 1733. The poem allegedly tried to describe the ways of God to human beings.

While hope is something that is universal in the human psyche, it is something that changes depending on one’s age. When you are young, you hope that you will grow up to be happy and successful, having a family and the job you really want and the things you desire out of life. As you get to be middle-aged, your hopes change and you look forward to having enough money to retire and being comfortable during your retirement. People who have hit retirement age seemed to hope that their health will continue and that their money set aside for retirement will be able to maintain the lifestyle they want to enjoy. As individuals become aware that they are getting closer to death, they hope that their death will be a peaceful one.

“Hope springs eternal,” but pessimism seems to have become the defining characteristic of hope. We plod along in our day-to-day activities, looking into our future with a certain degree of dread, wondering what the next disaster will be.

If “Hope springs eternal” is referring to *Christian* hope, then hope is no longer merely a *desire*, but an *expectation*. That is what Paul is describing in our lesson today.

A Christian’s hope is not based on some vague, esoteric, ethereal of vision of the future, but on Christ. Jesus has promised to supply our needs. He says: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” ³² For the unbelievers chase after all these things. Certainly your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31-33, EHV). When he taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer, he emphasized this expectation that God would provide for us when only one petition dealt with “things.” In the Fourth Petition we merely ask God to “give us this day our daily bread,” understanding that he will give us what we need for our survival.

Paul says: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, EHV). Christian hope goes well beyond the things of this world, and the things of this life. The Bible often describes those who have died in the faith as being asleep.

This is comforting for believers to hear. Sleep is something common. Sleep is something we know and understand. Death is facing the unknown. Sleep is something we often long for, while death is dreaded. A person wakes up from sleep, just as happened when Jesus raised a little girl from the dead, after he said to her parents: “The child is not dead but sleeping” (Mark 5:39, EHV). When a Christian says that a believer who has died is “asleep,” we are not merely trying to soften the blow, but truly and literally *explaining* the death of a believer.

On this Saints Triumphant Sunday we truly believe what Paul says about believers who have died. We expect that “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, EHV). We know and believe that: “The dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, EHV).

II.

God told our first parents, Adam and Eve: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17, NIV84). They ate from that tree in spite of God’s warning, and so the problem of death entered the world. Death is the consequence of sin.

Ever since that fateful day, death has brought sorrow and grief to everyone. Sooner or later, death takes those we love from us. Christians are not immune from the problems that sin brought into the world. We must face all the consequences of sin, hardship, pain, sickness, sorrow, and death. When those we love die, Christians also will grieve.

“We do not want you to be uninformed... about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, EHV). Christians do not grieve the way unbelievers do. Unbelievers grieve with no hope. In their minds, there is nothing to look forward to after this life. When life is over, it is over. But Christians know that our loss is only for a time. We will be reunited with our believing loved ones in the eternal joys of heaven.

III.

Jesus once said: “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24, EHV). Do you notice Jesus’ use of the present tense in this verse? The person who hears and believes Jesus *has* eternal life. Jesus does not say you *will have* but that you already possess eternal life because of him. Eternal life is not an esoteric desire, but an expected reality. Rather than a vague hope, it is a sure hope.

Because we already have eternal life, the return of Jesus on the Last Day will be a thrilling event for believers. It’s true, we will see him come in all his power. “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, EHV). But that display of power will not be something that causes fear in us as believers, for we know that he will have come to take us home. “The dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, EHV).

This is what gives us hope on Judgment Day. This is why “We do not “grieve in the same way as the others, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus’ return brings hope even to the hopeless.

IV.

Remember the various things we hoped for in the different stages of life? Sometimes the uncertainty of the future can fill us with anxiety. But knowing that Jesus is coming to take us to an eternal inheritance in heaven brings comfort to us even in the trials of this life.

Paul writes to the Romans: “I conclude that our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18, EHV). To the Corinthians he says: “Yes, our momentary, light trouble produces for us an eternal weight of glory that is far beyond any comparison.”¹⁸ We are not focusing on what is seen, but on what is not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18, EHV).

To be sure, there are bumps in the highway of life. The career path a young person thought they would go down may not materialize. The 401(k) or other retirement plan may not provide the same income a person originally hoped for. Illnesses and injuries and ailments may mean that the retired person has to slow down more than was planned. Yet in the midst of any of these trials, or any that may be even more severe, we have the comfort of the sure hope of the things to come in eternal glory.

“Hope springs eternal.” “Therefore, encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:19, EHV). Even while we wait for that eternal glory, we have a place where we get a taste of that glory — in the church. When we come for worship, the word of God is read and we hear the good news of what Jesus has done being preached to us. The sacraments are administered to us here. In the worship service we confess our sins, and are reassured that our sins are forgiven — we are reassured of the sure hope of heaven. It is all based on what Paul said: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, EHV).

It’s true, isn’t it? Hope springs eternal in us, because we know that Jesus died and rose and has ascended. Hope springs eternal because we know with certainty that he will return on the last day. Hope springs eternal because we know that we are going home to heaven to be with him forever. God grant you eternal hope and comfort as you await his return. Amen.