

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Sunday, November 12, 2017

Hope for those who have died in the Lord

1. As I think most of you are aware, a little over a week ago I was in Pittsburgh for my Uncle Barry's funeral. He died unexpectedly of a heart attack, though he had been having heart problems recently. I am glad I was able to go to the funeral to be with his family, and with my mother for whom this is the second brother now that she has lost.
2. One of the really nice and refreshing things about the funeral was seeing the strong faith of my Aunt Grace, Uncle Barry's wife, and their daughters, Jennifer and Jamie. On the day of the grave side service, my cousin Jennifer and her 10-year-old son CJ each stood up to read something. One sentence in to her statement, Jennifer began to cry so she paused, quoted Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." To most people I believe this looked like part of what she wrote. But it wasn't. It was her calling upon the scriptures as God's word in order to find strength to do a difficult thing. I was very moved by her faith.
3. At funerals, there are different types of people. There are those who understand the hope that we have in Christ. There are those who think that everyone is fine no matter what. And there are those, whether Christians or not, who face a sense of uncertainty, or even hopelessness about what lies ahead.
4. It is easy to say, "It's ok, they are in a better place now." But are they? How do we know? What determines if someone is in a better place after death or not?
5. We may struggle with these questions. If we don't, many around us certainly do. Paul also recognized that the community of Christians in Thessalonica struggled with these questions. Apparently, Paul was forced out of Thessalonica before finishing his instruction there, so the people were left without a full teaching on death, the second coming, and the resurrection of the dead.
6. This passage begins by Paul telling them that he didn't want them to be informed about the Christian dead- those who have fallen asleep, so that they don't grieve as those without hope. Yes, we do grieve as Christians. My Aunt Grace and cousin Jennifer were both grieving. But neither of them grieved as those without hope. Imagine the feeling of hopelessness that one must have apart from Christ when someone important to them dies.
 - a. Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to avoid grief, but to have a tempered and healthy grief because of the knowledge of the resurrection. Death is not the end for the Christian.
 - b. It appears that the Thessalonians were worried about those who died before Christ's return, afraid that it would cut them off from the blessings that are to come. Paul wrote this passage to assure them that this is not the case.
 - c. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." (vs. 14)
7. There is no worry that the dead in Christ will miss out on the future blessings of the second coming, as they will be brought with him. Everything hinges on the resurrection. We can trust in this future promise because our hope is in the resurrection.

The final resurrection

1. When we look at verse 14 and what follows, what we see is a picture of the final resurrection. When we die in Christ, our spirits go to be with the Lord. However, this is not the final state. Heaven is a holding place until the fulness of God's plan has come.

2. “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” (vs. 16)
3. For the Thessalonians, they didn’t need to worry that the dead would miss the return of Christ, because the dead in Christ will rise and meet with Christ first, before the living Christians.
 - a. That particular issue may not be our most pressing concern- whether the dead in Christ will miss out. But we may have concerns about the end and what happens. We may have uncertainty. I know that many don’t actually realize that heaven is an intermediate place until the final resurrection.
 - b. We can take hope in knowing that death is not the end. That for the Christian, not only do they get to be with Jesus in heaven immediately upon death, but they get resurrected and get to dwell with him for eternity on the new Earth.
 - c. Also worth noting is that everyone will rise, the Christian and the non-Christian, and will then face judgment and go to their respective final homes. But that is beyond the scope of what Paul is getting to here.
4. As one little aside, a very popular theology has been built off of this passage. There are those who view this passage as describing something called the Rapture- something that, quite frankly, isn’t taught in the bible. The idea of the Rapture is that Jesus comes and takes the dead in Christ and the living to be with him and then we are protected from the coming tribulation. This passage seems to be where people get the idea of the Rapture.
 - a. There are only two problems with that. First, this passage is talking about the second coming and the final resurrection. If we just follow Paul’s reasoning, he is addressing the concern about what has happened to those who have already died. He isn’t addressing a concern the people had about facing some coming tribulation. He is, quite simply, and I believe straightforwardly speaking about the final resurrection.
 - b. This points to the second problem. Jesus tells us that he will come again; that there will be a second coming. The bible teaches nothing of a third coming. If a Rapture event was being described, where Jesus comes and takes people away to avoid tribulation, then there needs to be a third coming where he finally comes and establishes the new heavens and the new earth. The bible never speaks of a third coming.

Let this be an encouragement

1. Paul’s conclusion is, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” That is the point of the teaching. It is meant to be an encouragement that those who have died before Christ’s return will not be forgotten. And to encourage us that there is, indeed, something greater in God’s plan- a bodily resurrection for us all.
2. Funerals make me sad. I don’t want to die; at least, not yet. I don’t want to lose anyone from this earth. But we should not grieve as those without hope, but be encouraged that God does indeed have a future for his people, and that future includes those who have died, and those who are still alive at Christ’s return. That future will be glorious, and we should all be encouraged as we wait, and even long for the final fulfillment of all God’s plans.