

Hopeful Grieving
1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, Matthew 5:3
First Presbyterian Church
November 12, 2017

Introduction to the Reading

Before I read the text I want you to know that the Apostle Paul meant these words to be words of comfort... that he was speaking as their pastor... using a letter to communicate his thoughts... and intended to calm their anxieties... to comfort their sorrows... and to answer some hard questions the Thessalonians were asking. That's how it started, anyway.

But over time, these words in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 have become a source of unending speculation among Christians... leading not to comfort, but arguments and divisions in the church. Because you see, it is these words... interpreted a certain way... that have led Christians to believe in "The Rapture". Maybe you've never read 1 Thessalonians – many have not – yet many HAVE READ Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* or Tim LaHaye's more-recent *Left Behind Series*... These books and the movies they have spawned are based on a certain interpretation of this and a few other passages.

Now the disagreements aren't over Jesus' promise to come again – that is clearly taught here in Scripture – Paul says that we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air when he returns. And if you want to call that the rapture, that's fine with me.

Where the disagreements begin is with the overall time line and where this rapture fits. The so-called "Dispensationalist Christians" teach that Christ will come back SECRETLY – undetected by all the unbelievers in the world... and that when he does his "believers" will just disappear from the earth. You may have seen the bumper sticker: "When the Rapture Comes, Take the Wheel!" This is where it comes from. So Christians will just vanish and what will follow is a long period of tribulation during which a great battle is fought until Christ makes a more decisive, public return to rule the world for 1,000 years from a throne in Jerusalem. Only THEN will the final judgment take place and God will fully usher in his kingdom on this earth.

That the Dispensationalist view... but there are others see it much more simply: Christ will return and gather his people – it will be a public event – and it will quickly set off a string of other events that will culminate in the promised dwelling of God descending from heaven to make its home on earth.

I tell you this even before reading the text – not to weigh in on the speculation – but simply to say that when many folks read this passage the first thing they think of is the Rapture. And I humbly suggest that when they do this they completely miss the point that Paul was a pastor trying to offer words of comfort to his flock. His words were not meant to be fighting words. They were meant to be words of pastoral encouragement.¹

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

¹ Scott Hoezee at http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-27a/?type=lectionary_epistle.

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, 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 be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

⁵Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 5:3

⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Sermon

When we read the book of Acts and the letters of the Apostle Paul we see that Paul "wore many hats". He was a powerful preacher... an insightful theologian... a tireless church planter... a passionate defender of the faith... and a man who was completely devoted to God. Today we remember that with all of those hats there was one more Paul wore – the hat of a pastor... the shepherd of a Christian flock. And today we have the rare privilege of listening in as he addresses the concerns and cares of members of his flock folks who were grieving the death of their loved ones and wondering if they would ever be with them again. I assure you these questions are still being asked.

The situation appears to be this. Someone sent word to Paul that folks in the church were concerned about their loved ones who had died before the Lord's return in victory. We can surely understand that so soon after Jesus' resurrection the earliest Christians had not yet wrapped their minds around this whole eternal life and heaven thing. In fact, there were some who believed that since Christ had defeated death, being a Christian meant literally NOT DYING... that believers would now not die. Or if not that, they would at least remain alive until Christ came back... which meant they expected him to return very soon. But then, time passed... and members of the church started dying...and the church began to hold funerals...

a whole slew of painful questions arose: questions that in some ways were more personal than they were theological. You see, they worried not so much about the *salvation* of their loved ones, but about whether they would be together again... would they be together again... or does death mean eternal separation from their loved ones simply because they happened to die before the Lord returned? It was a personal question which needed a pastoral response. What happens to my loved one after death... and will I be reunited with those I have loved on earth?

You might be interested to know that at the time there were varied beliefs about the afterlife... but almost no one believed in a bodily resurrection... neither did they believe in any kind of meaningful and lasting reunion once a friend or family member died. So you can see where these early followers are coming from: if this life is all one has... and if one's relationships in this life end at death... then death produces inconsolable grief.²

Well, hearing that his flock in Thessalonika is asking this, Paul puts on his pastor's hat and writes to them: "We do not want you to be uninformed, sisters and brothers, about those who have died so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."³ In other words, grief at the death of a loved one is real... and it hurts... and it may always be a part of you... but it does not have the final word. For if you believe that Jesus died and was raised then you can also trust that God will raise our loved ones (and eventually each of us) with him.

How will that be possible? Paul knew they would be asking. And still seeking to comfort his flock, he offers a wonderful vision of Christ's triumphal return... in which heaven and earth are suddenly and beautifully reconciled in an embrace ("caught up together") which takes place in a newly opened space between heaven and earth ("in the air") and which will never end ("and so we will be with the Lord forever"). This beautiful picture gathers together Paul's deepest beliefs about God's reconciling purpose in Christ⁴ it paves the way for what he wants to say next about how to live the time we have left... but most of all it paints a picture of HOPE for those who are now grieving.⁵

You remember earlier I mentioned how these words have been interpreted as predicting a "Rapture"⁶... which, of course, to those who interpret them this way is seen as a good thing just as long as you're IN rather than OUT... as long as you're a part of the group that is "snatched away" rather than the group that is "left behind".

Well, one thing I have learned as a pastor who has sat with many grieving families over the years is that that the most insidious and damaging "by-product" of this interpretation is that grief is shoved right off the table.⁷ The deep and abiding grief that we as human beings experience in this life is essentially ignored. Because in this view, those who grieve are those who have no

² Amy Peeler in her article on workingpreacher.org for November 9, 2014

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:13

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

⁵ See 1 Thessalonians 5:4-24

⁶ The meaning of the Greek word Paul used. Jerome, in his Latin translation, uses a word which leads to our word "rapture".

⁷ James Howell in "Hopeful Grieving", *Christian Century*

hope... those whose faith is lacking... those who didn't listen to the preacher who told them they could get caught up in the air too... if they just believed hard enough.

James Howell of Myers Park Methodist in Charlotte writes: "Believers... do not grieve at all. (Instead) with immense satisfaction they relish having flown away just in the nick of time. As horrors unfold on earth, they lick their chops, taking perverse delight that the bowls of wrath are being poured outright on schedule. (Now, I admit), he continues, (these Christians) may be more pious than I am. But when I see what's going on in the world, I veer from outrage to a numb, intense sorrow. (They) might say, "Rejoice and be glad! God knew all this would unfold, and if you're among the elect, then dance a jig: you'll be flying at any moment!" But Paul does not say this. Paul says: "Do not grieve as those who have no hope." And the question is how do those who have hope grieve?

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a Christian philosopher who has touched the lives of many grieving Christians. After his son Eric died in a mountain climbing accident at age 25, he wrote a book - *Lament for a Son* - in which he reflects on his grief as a father and a man of faith.⁸ One thing he said is that after his son died, he believed that for the rest of his life he would look at the world through tears... that he would look at the world through tears. This did not mean he was always sad or that he would cry at the drop of a hat. He meant that there are certain losses in this life that leave us looking at the world through tears... and now seeing things that dry-eyed you could not see. Seeing things now that dry-eyed you could not see. Wolterstorff continues: I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are those who mourn..." The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for the day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. . . The mourners are aching visionaries. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds... But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming."⁹ Do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.

Finally, what do those who grieve with hope DO while we wait for that day of peace? While we wait to be comforted? While we wait to be taken up? Two things. First, we just keep on keeping on... we grieve -- and when we grieve, we continue to love God completely and our neighbor as ourselves. In other words, through our tears we understand the message of another old bumper sticker: "Jesus is coming: Look busy." Paul's beautiful vision of what's gonna happen does not relieve us of responsibility down here on solid ground. So we hear of mass shootings and nuclear saber rattling... the clock of climate change is still ticking and countless millions still live on less than \$1 a day. We DO NOT say, "Don't bother, Jesus is coming soon," We say: "Jesus is coming, so let's get busy." The other thing we do is what Paul is trying to do with every ounce of his being - we comfort and encourage each other in our grief. I don't know if you noticed, but he says this twice in this short text - first after describing his vision of Christ's return, he says: "Therefore encourage one another with these words." And then later... after he calls on his flock to keep awake and live in the light and not the darkness... to put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation... after he assures them that God has not destined

⁸ Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Lament for a Son*, Eerdmans, 1987.

⁹ Wolterstorff again.

them for wrath but for salvation... he says: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up ..."

Tell me, has there ever been a moment in history when we humans did not need this kind of encouragement? We are living longer than ever and modern medicine is truly amazing, yet still we ask the ultimate questions about the meaning of life and death. In fact, perhaps all but the very young among us come to church on Sunday mornings with some variation of the questions that these earliest Christians asked of their pastor Paul. What happens after death? Will I be reunited with those I have loved on earth? And... will there be a time when I cease to exist?

We all die twice they say.¹⁰ First, there's that moment when our hearts stop and our brains go silent. Then second, there is that time in the not-too-distant future when we die again... as the last person who knew us and can remember us and talk about us also dies. Then what? Is this all that there is? Did I never matter? Will I never be heard from again?" I need encouragement in the face of these question... and I believe the Gospel gives it. In fact, we have heard it in our passage this morning. Once we are in Christ, we will never die... not finally. Eventually our bodies give out and those who remember us will be gone. But we will never die finally. We can't. We are in Christ. He remembers us. And he has a future for us. So friends in Christ, encourage one another with these words. And please... do it often.

¹⁰ Hoezee again.