

Encourage
By Grace . ✓ . One Another
 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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~For our faith to survive Christians must encourage one another that Christ rose and is returning~

In the broken world we live in the reality is that pretty much everyone has brushed shoulders with Death. Whether that was the loss of a friend, a grandparent, a parent, a sibling, a spouse or sometimes a child, Death always strikes closer to home than we are comfortable, and often leaves the survivors with a sense that something isn't right about the world we live in.

And particularly when Death strikes unexpectedly, and especially to the young, we say things like "that shouldn't have happened" or "he was too young."

And of course the fact that these words don't have any foundation in reality isn't comforting – they play off of the faulty notion that we deserve life and a certain amount of it which no one has every promised. But as we say these words we bear witness to the fact that something feels wrong when people die.

And in the midst of mourning many Christians experience doubt, and some lose their faith altogether.

But this is a message titled "encourage one another", not depress one another, and so while the context of the passage we are looking at today includes dealing with bereavement, I am happy to tell you that the content is abundant life.

So if you have your Bibles please open them to 1 Thessalonians 4. This is almost at the end of your Bible, after Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians and if you get to Timothy, Titus or Hebrews you've gone too far. And as you turn there would you please pray with me?

[Pray]

If you are visiting today you've walked in on sermon 8 of 9 in a series looking at the "One Another" commands that are scattered throughout the New Testament.

These texts define how life under Christ, in the local church, is supposed to work. And what we have seen throughout the series is that the biblical standard for our behaviour towards one another is nothing short of Christ-likeness. Without overstating anything, to join Jesus' church is to commit to dying to ourselves in preference of each other at every opportunity – that's what it means to become a member of the church. And that is because Jesus is the standard. Jesus said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34)

So that means every time we interact with another member in the church we need to ask ourselves a crazy question “Have I done everything in my power to use the gifts and abilities I’ve been given to serve my brother or sister.” Ask yourself that question in relation to your involvement here at the church... Are you happy with the answer?

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Loving one another like Jesus loved us is Jesus’ plan for how the local church will reflect His glory to each other and the world.

So Christ-likeness is the standard. But when the standard is perfection it could be easy to get depressed or grow apathetic because we fall so short – right? Certainly if you have been around any church for any period of time you know that we are infamous for eating our own. But the fact is Christ-likeness is possible in the local church – it is possible right here at Fort George. Do you believe that?

You see, every command Jesus gives He also empowers us with the grace necessary to obey. He enables the miracle required to do the impossible. That’s good news!

But make no mistake, a miracle is required. Only when Jesus’ Holy Spirit fills us and consumes our passions are people like you and I capable of loving each other the way Jesus loves. Without a miracle all we can do is be “nice” like the people in the world are nice, we can’t be Christ to each other. So friends, Fort George needs a miracle.

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Now perhaps as I say that it hits you as being a bit overstated. I mean certainly things aren’t that bad here. To say we need a miracle sounds desperate. Surely we are going to be okay...

But friends, if you are tempted to think thoughts like these know that any church that doesn’t feel desperate for the involvement of God is a pathetic and sickly church. It is the godly, both as individuals and churches, who see their great need of the miraculous, and are fueled by this need to give themselves to praying and preparing for it with all their energy.

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So the standard for life among one another is Christ-likeness, and grace is the way to achieve it. But once we have been empowered by Christ’s grace we must give ourselves to this venture with real hope. We must “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit”¹ and use all our gifts and abilities to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling.”² And Jesus says if we do the reward will be worth it – we will find ourselves in right relationship with Him and each other.

¹ Ephesians 4:3

² Philippians 2:12

Now the Thessalonian church was empowered to love each other like Christ loved them, but now they were struggling to act this out. Specifically they didn't know what to say as people in their group died and others wavered in their faith because of it.

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Just to give you a little background on the church of Thessalonica, it holds a special place among the churches of the New Testament as being among the first bodies of believers to receive a letter from Paul.³ 1st Thessalonians was written in around 51 AD and at this time every church was young and inexperienced, and so struggled with questions of how to live out their new relationship with God. But the church in Thessalonica was particularly young.

Acts 17 gives us the story of how this church got started. It says:

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. (Acts 17:1-4)

So Paul was only in Thessalonica three weeks and a church of new Christians was the result. And right from the beginning it was a multi-ethnic, diverse gender roles congregation – it was full of Jews, Greeks and prominent women. Can you imagine the issues this raised?

On top of this the Christians there also experienced severe pressure and persecution from the surrounding community. This was a church under fire. Earlier in the Epistle Paul commended them saying:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

So Thessalonica was a diverse church full of true disciples who were seeking to understand how to maintain their faith in light of the persecution they were facing.

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Now our church isn't facing any persecution, though it is conceivable that it isn't far off. But at present we might find this hard to relate to. That said, along with the rest of Canada's churches, we do live under a cultural pressure that seeks to undermine Christ in every way.

³ Galatians was likely written in 50AD. Other than that Paul may have written other letters, but if he did they have been lost.

In Canada it is okay to have faith as long as it just makes us nicer people and as long as we keep it to ourselves. But if we start talking about the supernatural and the miraculous and how our faith affects the world around us and prepares us for life after death. Then we are weird at best, and dangerous fundamentalists at worst. If you don't believe me just start a conversation about miracles in the line up at Save On and see how people look at you.

And as a result of this pressure we have dropped these topics from our conversation. And when we cease to speak of them we cease to believe them. And in this way our culture threatens to steal our faith. We aren't so different from the Thessalonians after all.

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Now losing faith looks different for different people. For some, certainly it means forsaking Christ and having nothing to do with His church – and we know people like this. But for others it can happen while we continue to attend church. Friends, there are people here today who are losing or have lost their faith.

This is you if you're hedging your bets. While you might not use these words you are saying to yourself "well just in case there is no resurrection, and Jesus isn't coming back, then I want to make sure I still get to enjoy life." So the way you live, the things you spend your time and money on make sense to your secular neighbours.

Now it is true you pursue Christian virtue, but you do this as long as it doesn't require you to give up any comfort. So you spend most of your money on yourself and your family, and you save for the best retirement possible just like everyone else. And you never risk stepping out in faith on anything. And as a result, instead of aiming to be an imitator of Christ you are shooting for entry level eternity if eternity exists.

This describes some of us, but this is a terrible strategy. The Bible teaches that without faith in the resurrection of Christ and His immanent return – faith that leads to action – it is impossible to please God.⁴ And so it is with everything on the line that Paul pens these words. So look with me at verse 17 and 18.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18]

This is an unbelievable passage about flying into the air at the return of Christ, but if you doubt the miraculous this a hard text. In a nutshell Paul's main point is: **For our faith to survive Christians must encourage one another that Christ rose and is returning.** We have to talk like this so it gets in our bones. Because this is how we love each other with the love of Christ. A brother doesn't let another brother's faith grow cold. So we have to encourage each other to live expecting Christ' return.

⁴ Hebrews 11:6

Let's dig in back at verse 13:

[Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14]

Now the word "ignorant" or "uninformed" in verse 13 isn't an insult. Rather it is a simple realization that this group of people is brand new at following Christ so there were lots of things they simply hadn't understood yet. And while many of us have been in church our whole lives, the fact that we haven't talked much about the return of Christ recently has made us ignorant in many ways as well. But Paul says the resurrection and return of Christ is absolutely central to everything we believe.

Now the specific reason the Thessalonians were concerned was that some of their people had already fallen asleep – they had died. Now we don't know whether this was a result of their persecution or simply natural causes. But regardless they were concerned that their dead friends were going to miss out on Christ's return. And so whenever someone died they grieved without hope.

Now we know grief in itself is not sinful. Jesus grieved when His friend Lazarus died, and He was only dead four days! But the problem in Thessalonica was that they were grieving just like the rest of mankind – without hope!

So what does it mean to grieve without hope?

In 1st Corinthians Paul sheds a little light on this question. He writes:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied... And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day... If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (1 Corinthians 15:13-19;31-32)

So the Corinthians had asked Paul why he was willing to endanger his life for what he believed and he responded: "well if there is no resurrection then you are absolutely right. Let's live for today because this is all we get. Without the resurrection it is foolish to dedicate our lives to Christ. It would be foolish for missionaries to waste their lives spreading the message of Christ.

In fact without the resurrection it would be foolish even for us to gather to pray at 7am on Tuesday or come out to be part of the prayer vigil on Friday. Don't waste your sleep... if there is no resurrection. And of course this is the way the world lives, but when their loved ones die the only option for those left behind is to grieve desperately because everything they shared with the deceased is gone.

And this is grief without hope. And Paul says this is what the Thessalonians were doing because they didn't understand the absolute linchpin of Christianity.

So Paul says, we believe Jesus did in fact did rise again. And since Jesus rose again then the words He spoke are credible. He said:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die (John 11:25)

And so those who die in Christ will rise too. And because of this the way we grieve has to change.

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As a side some have claimed the words "fallen asleep" in these verses imply that after believers die their souls "sleep" until Christ returns. This is what Jehovah's Witnesses believe.

But this is an abuse of the text. Throughout the Bible the word "sleep" is used as a colloquialism to describe death similar to the way we say "passed away." It is just a sensitive way to say "dead".

Instead of "soul sleep" the Scriptures teach that when those who are in Christ die we immediately go to be with the Lord. This is what Jesus affirmed to the repentant thief on the cross. He said:

Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise. (Luke 23:43)

And in 2nd Corinthians Paul says the same:

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

So when we die, and are separated from our body, if we are in Christ we go to be with Jesus immediately.

Let's keep going. Look at verse 15.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17]

In these verses Paul responds to the details of theological error that the Thessalonians had fallen into. They not only had questions about the resurrection, but they thought that it would be superior to be alive when Christ returned than to be dead.

One of the things Nikki and I discovered when we lived in South Korea was that if we stood in line like good Canadians we would never get anywhere. In a country with 50 million people crammed into a space three times the size of Vancouver Island you need to be proactive. And so everyone pushes to the front of the line and holds their elbows a bit out to make sure no one buds in front of them. Of course the idea is that to be at the front is good and if you are at the back, and especially if you are a Canadian, then you might never get anywhere at all.

And this is what the Thessalonians were concerned with. They believed Christ was going to return but anyone who had died would miss out like a Canadian trying to get on an Asian subway.

Now we might think this is a bit comical, but Peter had the same concern. One of the times Jesus appeared to His disciples after rising from the dead he told Peter:

Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then He said to him, "Follow Me!" Peter turned and saw that the disciple [John] whom Jesus loved was following them... When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow Me." (John 21:18-22)

So Jesus told Peter he was going to die by crucifixion – which is what “stretch out your hands” refers to – and Peter felt he was getting a raw deal. And so in a classically Peter way he looks over at John and wants to compare himself – what about him, is he going to make out better than me? And Jesus’ response probably wasn’t much comfort to Peter in that moment. Peter thought for sure it would be better to stay alive than to die.

Now Jesus didn’t actually say John was going to live until His return, just that it wasn’t Peter’s business to know.

And the humor in all this is that Peter was so very wrong about living being better. Tradition tells us Peter was crucified by Nero around the same time Paul died – so 30 years after Jesus rose. John on the other hand lived 60 after the resurrection spending his last days up on the island prison of Patmos.

It was there, after having watched all his friends die, that John was given Revelation, and saw the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.⁵ And I can just imagine him, sitting in rags, old and hungry, and gazing intently into that Golden City. And noticing in some small window the coy grin and wildly waving arm of Peter, now very content that he had finally beaten John at something.⁶

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⁵ Revelation 21:2-4

⁶ Paragraph adapted from pastor Bob Deffinbaugh <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-good-grief-1-thessalonians-413-18> (accessed November 12, 2015)

And so in verses 15 and 16 Paul works to put the minds of the Thessalonians at ease. He stresses that living long is not better than dying, even dying young, when it comes to the kingdom of Christ.

Now here Paul challenges our limited perspective. Because we spend all our time in this world we have grown to love it, but there is so much more! It is as though we are living in a dream. And while everything feels real we aren't aware of how bazaar and broken it is until woken up. And that is what it will be like for those who are in Christ. Once the heavens are peeled back and the New Jerusalem descends, the "reality" we have been living in will show itself for what it is, a mere copy of what things were designed to be from the beginning.

And at that moment the fact that we didn't get married or didn't get to see our grandchildren graduate or didn't get to travel Europe or didn't get to buy the vacation home by the beach will be seen for what they really are – mere illusions of happiness in the light of God's reality. And in fact many of those illusions will have lulled church attendees to contented sleep and will cause them to miss out on God's reality all together.⁷

But Paul says if you live for Christ you won't miss out on anything by dying before His return. In that moment both the dead and the living will be reunited with Him. At the sound of the trumpet those in the grave will be given new bodies and ours will change and together we will blast off to meet Jesus as He descends.

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I want to touch briefly on one matter of confusion that verse 17 raises. Paul very intentionally writes without detail, and when this happens we are tempted to fill in what isn't there.

So notice that Paul does not say where Christians go after we join Jesus in the air. Specifically the text does not say that at Christ's return Christians disappear from earth to continue their eternity in heaven. Do you see that?

Now I know that the "Left Behind" books among others have popularized the idea that it is going to be the secular who are left behind while we are taken, but in fact that isn't what the Scriptures teach.

Instead we learn that the world is going to be destroyed by fire and re-created.⁸ And the New Jerusalem is going to descend to earth and we will live in it with Jesus. So Revelation reads:

I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. (Revelation 21:2-3)

⁷ Mark 4:18-19

⁸ 2 Peter 3:7-10

But what of those left behind texts? For example Matthew 24 where Jesus says:
 But about that day or hour no one knows... As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. (Matthew 24:36-40)

Now we often focus on the men in the field and the women at the mill, and we assume that the righteous one is taken while the other is left, but those verses don't indicate who leaves. Instead the hint comes with Noah where it says "the flood came and took them all away." So let me ask you, in the flood who got swept away and who got left behind?

So Jesus is coming back, and if we are prepared then we will meet Him in the air. In that moment many will be swept away, but we want to be left behind! Now if you really aren't happy with that come and talk to me and we will look through the tests together.

But I want to close by going to where every text about the return of Christ goes, and the most important point. And that is that we make sure we are ready.

So immediately after the verses we are looking at today we read:

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you... So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)

Here Paul makes a play on the word "asleep." He has been using it to mean dead, but now it means "passive." So Paul says don't get distracted by the cares of this world – if you get lulled to sleep it will kill you! Instead let Christ's imminent return motivate you to prepare yourself today. Choose to live in a way that will provoke Him to pleasure. Live with your eyes on the prize to come, and encourage one another with these words, so that as many of us as possible might be ready when Christ returns.