**Real Hope**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (ESV)**

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

What a day; that day when the trump shall resound and we shall hear the voice of the archangel and Jesus will return and the dead in Christ will rise! Isn’t that a great day? Let’s long for it! Today we’re going to be in 1 Thessalonians. And that really is the topic of this morning. We’ve heard it through the singing, this topic that God is a God of hope. In this series through 1 Thessalonians, we’ve been examining what a real church is according to God’s Word. And today, one of the qualities that Paul presses practically against our soul is that a real church responds to trials differently, specifically to the trial of death. We respond differently than the world, and that difference is the difference between hope and hopelessness. And so, today the Apostle Paul is encouraging this church…and again, it’s a church that is only less than a year old. He’s been away from them just for some months now, as he writes. But they’ve grown concerned because when he was with them he taught them about the Second Coming and they presumed that it would come before any of them died. And in the midst of those months, some of the members of the church had died. And so they wondered, what now? What about them? So this is Paul’s answer to them. It’s his encouragement to them and to us today through the Spirit. So Paul writes

***13*** *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* ***14*** *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.* ***15*** *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.* ***16*** *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.* ***17*** *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* ***18*** *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

And what encouraging words they are!

Death is a daunting enemy. In past human history, only Enoch and Elijah escaped it. A number of others like Lazarus and Eutychus and the widow of Nain’s son endured death not once, but twice. Recent statistics tell us that over 150,000 people die every day. 6,300 people die every hour. 105 people die each minute and almost 2 people die every second. (Snaps fingers!) With physical death, a person’s soul is carried from this temporal world to the eternal realm where they meet God. Jesus tells us that most are carried by death to eternal death. That’s a sobering thing to consider. And a few, Jesus says, are carried by death unto eternal life. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 7.

**Matthew 7:13-14** “Enter (the kingdom of heaven) by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

The wide gate leads to destruction. That’s Jesus’ words.

Physical death is a sobering reality that confronts us, regardless of the efforts we make to hide from it. There is no human that is powerful enough to evade it. It is said that the French King Louis XIV, the Sun King, would not allow the word “death” to be spoken in his presence. He felt that it might bring it to him. But on September 1, 1715, the Sun King who reigned 72 years on the throne of France, could not keep death from entering the gate of his beautiful palace in Versailles to take him from this world. The philosopher Aristotle dreaded death too. He said, “Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end.” He considered death to be the end of everything enjoyable, everything meaningful, everything good in life. The poet Emily Dickenson wrote, “Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me.” Emily’s picture is a little bit more pleasant. She pictures Death as a taxi driver who stops for us even though we don’t call him. I don’t agree that Death *kindly* stops for us. But Emily is right. Death does stop for us without our invitation.

Someone might ask, in picturing this enemy, Death, “If God is good, why would He include the sadness of death in His realm, in His creation?” The answer takes us back to the Garden where God set the first man and the first woman, where life first blossomed.

**Genesis 2:15-17** The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

What a generous God we have! There was one test of worship, one test of obedience. Adam and Eve rejected God when they rebelled against His command. And death fell upon us, the whole of the human race, with violence. We cannot and must not lay the blame of death at God’s feet. We invite it every time we sin.

**Romans 5:12** Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

We can’t even point back to our first parents, Adam and Eve, and say, “Well, it’s their fault,” because we continue to hold onto that responsibility through our own sin. But please understand that Death would not have been part of our human experience had sin not entered the world. Adam opened the door for death to enter God’s good earth and we keep it open by our continued disobedience to God’s commands. So we need passages like 1 Thessalonians 4, and I invite you to turn there with me. It’s a passage that proclaims that for all those who believe in Jesus, that Jesus brings light into the darkness of death. Jesus brings hope into the despair of death. Jesus brings protection in the threat of death, the face of death. And He brings peace in the midst of the fear of death. So here’s the truth. It’s the truth of the Gospel that is proclaimed all through God’s Word. Jesus came to conquer death for us. We are powerless in the face of death. The grave holds every human being that it grabs, but not Jesus. It’s because of Jesus, that the grave doesn’t hold us. The grave couldn’t hold Him and it will not hold those who are found in Him. So as you’re taking notes, we first want to just think a little bit about

**The Sorrow Death Brings to All**

***13*** *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers,*

He’s talking to the Church, these few who have believed in Jesus. They’re brothers. And he says

***13*** *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep,*

That’s a word that describes death, physical death. He says, “So that

 *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*

Again, the Apostle Paul taught this church to live in this eager expectation of a future event, the event when Jesus would return. And Paul believed, and he taught the church to believe that this could happen at any time, and to expect it, to anticipate it, to live with a readiness for this event to occur in their lifetime. But some of the members of this church had died since Paul left them, since Paul had planted this church. And they’re left wondering, “What happens to our brothers and sisters who have missed out on seeing Jesus come again? We didn’t even envision this circumstance and we’re sad by the sorrow that death brings. And we’re wondering, what is in store for them?” The Apostle Paul wants to encourage them and fuel the hope that is found in them, and that’s why he writes this paragraph.

There are two ideas that stand out from this first verse. The first is that believers do grieve the earthly loss of their loved ones. So Paul isn’t saying, “I don’t want you to be uninformed brothers, so that no one would grieve.” He says, “So that you would grieve, but not like those who have no hope, not like unbelievers.” But he doesn’t say that “the information I’m going to give you is going to protect you from grief.” Our Christian faith does not shield us from deep pain that this broken world presses against us. And it’s important brothers and sisters, that we not feel guilty over our sorrow. Jesus wept at the funeral of a friend, Lazarus. In speaking of his dear friend, Epaphroditus, when he writes to the church at Philippi, Paul calls Epaphroditus, “my brother and fellow-worker and fellow soldier, the minister to me in my need.” He was a very dear friend. And this is what Paul writes. It’s very fascinating! He says

**Philippians 2:27** Indeed (Epaphroditus) was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

So here’s the Apostle Paul, who also in the very same letter is going to write “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21) In the very same letter he says that’s not incongruous with thinking of losing this dear friend that was a fellow worker. “And if I lost him to death, I would have sorrow upon sorrow.” This is godly Apostle Paul, who understands what it means to live with eternity in view. And he says, “I would have sorrow upon sorrow.”

It’s right for us to weep and to experience sorrow. Some believers are told, “If you have faith, you would not mourn so deeply. If you trust God, you wouldn’t cry so much.” Beloved, I just want to tell you that notion is contrary to God’s Word and to Jesus’ example. David speaks of God’s attitude toward his tears in Psalm 56 when he is mourning the oppression that is placed upon his life. This is what David said of God.

**Psalm 56:8** You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?

“I’m so troubled in my soul with sorrow, with distress, that you keep count. Every time I turn on my bed; there’s one, there’s two, there’s three. You know me that intimately, you care for me and you have put my tears in your bottle.” He doesn’t say God rebukes him for tossing. He doesn’t say God rebukes him for crying. He says, “My mourning is precious to you. You take notice of it. You take such great care of me that you write down every sorrow that afflicts my soul.” That’s the love of God. That’s the care of God. He’s our Father. He’s a good, good Father. We are loved by Him. So we’re right to let ourselves feel the searing pain of loss that death brings to us. When we lose a brother or sister in the Lord, we don’t weep for them. They’re rejoicing. They are where they want to be. But for us, because they’re such a great gift to us, this loss is substantial. We’re separated from them for a time.

But the second idea that Paul presses, and this is the main thrust of this, is that believers grieve with hope. We grieve, but we know that the light of dawn breaks over the night of our sorrows. We know that that’s true, and so it changes our grief. It doesn’t change the depth of sorrow. It changes our sorrow so that it doesn’t end in darkness. We always see that great light emerging at the end of it. The Psalmist says

**Psalm 30:5** Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

We know that! It’s not like this is just one eternal night that we’re going to have to suffer now that death has touched our lives. Joy comes in the morning. Our grief is in some ways very similar to the grief of an unbeliever. It hurts. It brings tears. But our grief is very different. It’s very different from the grief of the rest of mankind. Those who are outside of Jesus are outside of the power of His resurrection. They have no hope. They have no basis whatsoever to be confident about anything beyond the grave. Jesus makes all the difference. He fills our hearts with hope.

What is hope? We’re going to talk about hope quite a bit this morning. What is it? Hope is the confident expectation that God will faithfully fulfill every promise He makes to us. That’s what hope is. I don’t want to just believe those promises. I don’t just trust in those promises. I expect those promises. I yearn for those promises. Hope is the eager anticipation of this joyful future that is based on God’s promises. It’s that which allows us to taste the goodness of the future even before the future is here.

What difference does hope in Jesus make in the midst of our losses? Well, it removes despair, first of all, from the face of death. We’re not people who despair over death. The Gospel removes the fear in the face of death. We’re not afraid of death. We know what God does and how He cares for us in death. The Gospel removes the sense that because our loved one has died all is lost and there is no purpose for us to live in this world anymore. The Gospel says we have incredible purpose that God has left us behind. The Gospel keeps us from a concernthat our loved ones still need something from us, like we better do something for them even in their death or else they’ll be sad. No, they don’t need anything. They are completely content where they are. They have a joy that is unmitigated.

The Gospel keeps us from thinking of our loved ones as our angels who watch over us. No, they’re not watching over us. We don’t need them to watch over us. We need the Shepherd to watch over us. They’re in heaven. They’re worshiping God. They’re doing what saints who are perfected are doing. They’re not watching over us. God is watching over us. We need Him! The Gospel keeps us from the kind of fixation upon our lost ones that robs us of the joy of relationships still that are present. The Gospel removes the dread of future days, like every day is going to be terrible, and replaces it with an eager anticipation of the future; of God’s goodness now, but certainly of that which is forever and ever. The Gospel removes the paralyzing numbness that death wants to cast over our livesand moves us toward activity, active worship and service of God. The time is near. Let’s serve Him. “For me to live is Christ,” the gospel teaches us.

The Gospel enables us to remember our loved ones who are not here and enjoy their memory because we know that they are fully alive right now. So that memory, while again it does bring some pain, it’s not like they’re gone. No, they’re alive. They’re more alive than they’ve ever been! And one day there will be a future reunion. We await it. The Gospel draws us near to our Godin faith instead of driving us away from Him in resentment. We recognize that he’s a good, good Father and that we need Him. We don’t understand all of His ways. We don’t understand all of His workings. But we know that He loves us and that what He does is always good. It is always right.

We sang a song earlier this morning that said “He has done great things we will say together when we feast in the House of Zion.” Right now, we ask the question, “Is God doing something good, here? Man, I don’t feel like this is good.” But when we get in the House of Zion, we’re going to look back and we’re going to have the perception of eternity, a perception that is clear. “He’s done great things,” we will say in the House of Zion. And we’ll feast and we’ll weep no more. Some people say, “When I get to heaven, I want to ask God, ‘Why did you have this,’ and ‘why did you have that?’” I don’t think that’s true. I think when we get to heaven we’ll say, “Oh! You have done great things! We didn’t understand it while we were in this realm of shadows, but in the full light of your presence, we do understand. We have no more questions.”

You see, what a difference our hope in Jesus makes! Amen? (Amen!)The Gospel does all this when we who are in Christ suffer loss. The Gospel does not remove sorrow, but in the midst of sorrow, it fills us with hope. The main idea we trace here this morning is that real church experiences hope in the face of death. We do this together. It’s not just us individually. I know there are some parts of mourning that are individual, but God intends for His church to mourn together, to band together, to comfort one another.

***18*** *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

When one is weak, the other who is strong can feed hope. When that person gets weak, the other person who needed it before can feed hope. Encourage with the Gospel! We need each other. We need to speak into each other’s lives so that we can have hope.

So the question is, is it possible for a believer to mourn without hope? Is that possible? The answer is yes! That’s why Paul is writing this instruction. He says, “I don’t want you to be uninformed. If you’re uninformed, you will mourn like unbelievers who don’t have hope.” So it’s really important to press your lives, to preach the Gospel to yourself, to call to mind these promises that God made.We are weak and fragile people. We are prone to forgetting God’s promises. We are natural born Eeyore’s. (Laughter!) We are natural born Eeyore’s in the face of trials and tribulations and suffering. Paul calls us to preach the hope of the Gospel to ourselves, to encourage one another with these words. So we must not be passive. And this is not new. This is what the Old Testament saints understood as well. In Psalm 42 the Psalmist asks

**Psalm 42:5** Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.

Who is he speaking to? He’s speaking to himself. He’s saying, “Hope in God.” He’s not speaking to anyone else. He says, “Why are *you* cast down, O *my* soul, why are *you* in turmoil within *me*? Hope in God. Look to God’s promises. Claim them. For I shall again praise Him, my salvation.” For the Christian, we never ever need to mourn without hope, but it’s possible. So let’s feed our hope. Feed hope to ourselves and hope to our brothers and sisters. We protect our souls against hopeless grief by calling to mind the truth of the Gospel and trusting in it. But we must preach the Gospel to ourselves and to one another every day! I want to consider

**The Hope Believers Possess in Death**

What are these truths that protect us from hopeless grief? What are we to call to mind? There are four of them. I recognize in your notes, if you’re taking notes, that I only have three. So this first one, I think it’s the first one that we have that is not part of your notes. The first truth is

**1. The Resurrection of Christ**

***14*** *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*

We believe Jesus died. We believe He rose again. He died, but He didn’t stay dead. The grave couldn’t hold Him. Amen? (Amen!) The grave can’t hold Him. Jesus is too powerful for death. The boast of every tomb is this: “Once you enter here, you will never leave.” And it’s a boast that throughout human history was always true. Death was undefeated until Jesus died and He rose again. He resurrected. He said, “Death, you will not hold Me!” Jesus silenced that boast! He crushed death’s power.

When He left the grave, Jesus didn’t limp out in exhaustion after a really hard fight. No, when Jesus emerged from the grave, it was like a world champion boxing just an amateur junior. It wasn’t, “Oh boy! This was such a hard battle with death and I just barely made it. Give me a place to rest.” No, He came out glorious because there is no comparison between the power of death, which is the most powerful enemy we will ever face. It overcomes us every time, left to ourselves. We have no power to overcome. Jesus emerged from the grave without a scratch. It was glorious!

**1 Corinthians 15:54-57** “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I love that! Death is “swallowed up in victory.” Death no longer has power over anyone who is in Christ Jesus. It has no power to create despair. It has no power to create fear. It has no power to have the final word.

I love the word picture Paul uses here when he says, “O death, where is your sting?” Jesus removed death’s sting. When I was about 21 years old, I was working in a church up in Sparland. Bill Akright was part of that church. He was one of the guys in the youth group. I think you were in college at that time. But they asked me to put together a day camp for kids, so I was hauling canoes from one place to another. In the course of that time, there was a little bee that stung me and I slapped it off. It hurt just a little bit, but not much. I didn’t think anything of it. I continued to transport canoes from one location to another. I got to this farm where I was to drop off the canoes. I got out of the truck that I was driving, and I didn’t feel well. The farmer met me and said, “Ritch, you don’t look well.” And I said, “I don’t feel well. I have to sit down.” I sat down and my whole body started tingling. It soon became apparent that I wasn’t able to stand up again. Pretty soon, my arms just fell at my sides and I laid down.

I remember trying to sense control over my body and trying to show that by pumping my fist as fast as I could. I looked at my hands. My brain was pumping my hands, but my hands had barely any kind of movement. The farmer asked me, “Did anything bite you? Did you get stung by anything?” I hadn’t even thought of it. I didn’t know what was happening. I didn’t relate that bee sting to what was going on in my body at all until the farmer asked that. I said, “Yeah, I got stung.” He said, “Where did you get stung?” I told him it was on my hand. He looked down and the stinger was still in there. So he took his knife and he got the stinger out and then he put some plant on it that was supposed to help. By this time though now, my speech was slurred. So my tongue, I couldn’t speak. And I remember thinking, “I think I’m dying.” And doctors tell me that I was really close to dying. I was within a minute or so actually, if it had continued that way.

I do remember this amazing peace. I was surprised by it. There was this amazing peace that God gave to me and I thought, “I’m ready.” I was 21, and there was one thought I had. I thought, “Okay, Lord. I’m ready to see You, but I sure would have loved to have been married before I die. That would have been great. I guess I’ll never experience that.” (Laughter!) The farmer transported me to a doctor. It was taking the stinger out that really, I believe, was the rescue. Because by the time I got to the doctor, with some help, I was able to walk into the doctor. I wasn’t able to walk over to the car. They gave me a shot and it kind of allowed everything to go smoothly from then.

I use that illustration because what that farmer did to my body, Jesus did to death. The stinger, when it goes in, it still hurts. For believers, when we’re touched by death, it hurts. And some stings hurts really bad. But we don’t have to fear what happens after the hurt. The biggest thing that was a concern for me was not the hurt. It was what was happening to me after. It was going to destroy my physical body. And for an unbeliever, once they get stung, it’s not the sting itself, it’s what continues to happen. There’s no hope after that sting. For the believer, it’s a sting, but there continues to be hope.

The bite of the bee loses its power when Jesus is in a life. After the initial sting, that sting has no more power to bring any more loss. Its ability to produce loss, the loss of a future, the loss of joy, the loss of strength, the loss of life, everything that once it bites, that’s the last of the hurt we will ever experience. Jesus takes care of it. But for an unbeliever, a person who is not in Christ, the real pain is what the poison does. It is still coursing through the soul. And that’s why Paul is able to ask Death, “O death, where is your sting?” Yes, it hurts when you go in, but you lost all the poison for us. There’s no more poison. There’s nothing to be concerned about.

Jesus’ resurrection pulls the poison out of Death’s sting. There’s no more evil that follows that initial pain. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil. There is no evil that follows us after the sting because you’re with us. Your rod and your staff, they comfort us. (Psalm 23) This is why we insist that Jesus did die as an atoning sacrifice and He did bodily rise from the grave. You see, if Jesus didn’t bodily rise from the grave, He couldn’t demonstrate the evidence that we need in order to trust in Him. He conquered death. He removed death’s sting completely from us. We’re safe even in the face of death.

I love Vance Havner, who is in heaven now! He was kind of a homespun pastor. He said, “If the resurrection of Jesus is myth, then I am mythtaken, mythstified and mytherable.” (Laughter!) That’s really good! This is why, again, doctrine matters. Someone might say, “Well, whether it was a symbolic bodily resurrection or a real bodily resurrection, does it really matter?” Yes, it does matter! And that’s why God gives such emphasis all through the Scripture and emphasis through the historical record for us to know Jesus died and Jesus rose from the grave. We look at the empty tomb and we rejoice. It’s empty! Jesus’ resurrection guarantees ours. This is why the Apostle Paul could say triumphantly while he was in prison, perhaps awaiting execution,“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain!”

So what do we do when we feel the terrible pain of the bite of death? We grieve, but we grieve with hope. We don’t fear any more evil touching our loved one or us. We declare, “Death, you don’t have the final word. Jesus died and rose again. He has the final word! You are a defeated enemy.” Our sorrow becomes singing. We will be raised with Christ and we will forever be with our Lord! What a powerful Name it is, the Name of Jesus!

**2. The Return of Christ**

***15*** *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

So first he talked about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Now he talks about His return. This is the Second Coming of the Lord. When Jesus died and rose from the grave, He walked on this earth for a period of time. He ascended into Heaven. Before He ascended into heaven, both prior to His death and after His death, He spoke of His return. He’s going to come again. He spoke of this really specifically and at length in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and 25. Jesus says

**Matthew 24:30-31** Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

I think the Apostle Paul is meditating on this. He is also, I believe, receiving additional revelation as an apostle. But he’s been teaching this church in Thessalonica eschatology, the doctrine of future things. You might say, “Eschatology? Isn’t that for maybe after you’re five years a Christian or ten years a Christian?” He was only with this church anywhere from three weeks to three months at the most. And yet, he poured into them the doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It’s such a practical doctrine. It says this is what comforts us in the face of these great sorrows. It’s the fact that Jesus is going to return in glory.

**Matthew 25:31** “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.”

That’s His future, and when we’re in Him, that’s our future with Him.

**Matthew 24:44** Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

I would ask you, friends, when did you last think about Jesus’ return? It’s kind of a convicting question. I press it because this is what a real church is. A real church is a group of people who love Jesus for what He has done for us in the past; His death, burial and resurrection. A real church is also a church that says together, “We love Jesus for what He’s going to do in the future. He’s going to come again.” And we ask the question frequently, could it be today? Might it be today? There’s an expectation, an eagerness. The health of our soul depends upon our frequent meditation and longing for Jesus’ return. Why do I say that? Because that’s what the Scripture teaches. Let me read you one passage from 2 Timothy. Paul is at the end of his life. He says

**2 Timothy 4:7-8** I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Do you catch that? He says, “As I look at my life, I’m thankful that I lived it for Christ because Christ is the eternal king. I’m entering an eternal kingdom, and all that I’ve done for Christ is going to last. I’ve finished the race.” He is connecting our ability to fight a good fight, to run a good race, with our love for Jesus’ appearing. It’s inconceivable to Paul that we would be people who don’t love His appearing, and yet also fight a good fight and run a good race. These two are always connected together. When you have one, you have the other. And there is this great reward for all those who love His appearing. There are many reasons for us to love Jesus’ appearing. But chief among them is that we love Jesus. We want to see Him. We want to be with Him. We long for Him to receive the glory that is due Him. We long for every knee to bow and every tongue to confess that Jesus is Lord. So there’s the resurrection of Jesus, there’s the return of Jesus, but also this passage teaches us about

**3. The Rapture of Believers**

***16*** *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.*

Notice verse 17. When Jesus comes, and He is coming in the clouds, first what is going to happen is the dead in Christ will rise first from the graves and

***17*** *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*

So this is a meeting in the air. It’s not a meeting on the earth. God is being very specific with the details of Jesus’ coming, in this passage. If you’re looking for information about the Rapture of the church, this is the best passage, the clearest passage that describes it. It’s not the only passage, but it’s the best one. The Lord Himself descends, so His coming is very personal. When He returns, He doesn’t send a representative, an angel to retrieve us and to bring us to Himself. He comes personally. The Lord comes with an announcement, a trumpet, a voice. When the Lord comes, the dead who are in Christ rise first. And then after they resurrect with their new bodies, their resurrected bodies, they meet the Lord in the air. And then after they meet the Lord in the air, we who are still alive and remain on the earth at the time of this event, are going to be, the text says

*caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*

One famous translation early in church history that most of the church used in the western world was the Latin Vulgate. And in the Latin Vulgate, they translated this word “caught up” with the Latin word “rapto.” And that’s why we call this the rapture of the church. It’s from that Latin Vulgate translation. It is the catching up. The catching up of the church is perhaps not as pleasant to say as the rapture of the church. But it’s the catching up of God’s people at the resurrection of the body, to meet the Lord in the air. And from that point on, God’s people will never be separated from the Lord. We’ll always be with Him face to face, from that point on. There will be no more separations by death, no more deployments to foreign countries.

At a graveside service, I almost always read this passage, and I ask the question: Why do we come to a graveside as Christians to have another service, after we’ve just had a rather long service at a church or at a funeral home? Why do we do that? There’s a theological, Gospel reason for that. It’s because we believe that something is going to take place at that site. God’s promise of raising up bodily from the dead, this dear one who is now not with us, whose body has died, whose soul is present, there is something that is going to take place at this site. We commit this body to the grave in view of that promise. A memorial service or a funeral often speaks of just, we’ll say, the hope of God’s salvation. We emphasize to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8) So for the believer, the moment they take their last breath, they are immediately in their soul, in their spirit, present with God, rejoicing with Him.

But when God saves us, when He delivers us from the ravages of sin, the ravages of death, He saves all of us, our whole person. So how did God make us? He made us body and soul. It’s not enough for God to say, “Well, I’ll save the soul, but it’s too bad that I couldn’t do anything about that body.” That’s not what God does. God says, “I made you body and soul. I will rescue you body and soul from anything that death does to touch you, to hurt you.” So for the believer, we are immediately with the Lord. That’s what a funeral service is about. When we go to the graveside, we’re awaiting a future day when that work, the rest of this body is completed at the return of Jesus Christ. Here’s what 1 Corinthians says about this rapture.

**1 Corinthians 15:51-52** Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

We shall be changed! What a day that will be! Jesus tells us in Luke 12,

**Luke 12:40** “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Robert Murray McCheyne was a pastor a couple hundred years ago. And he would ask his people, “Do you think Jesus is going to return today?” Most of them would be set off by the question. “No, probably not today.” He would say, “Well, then you better be ready because Jesus said He’s going to come at a time when you don’t expect Him to come. And you’ve just told me you’re not expecting Him to come today. So you better get ready because it could be today.” That matches what Jesus says. The last thing we want to think about is

**4. The Reunion of Christ with Believers**

At the end of verse 17 and then verse 18, he says

*and so we will always be with the Lord.*

We together with those who are dead in Christ and then those who are alive and remain at the coming of Jesus, we are meeting the Lord in the air with these new resurrected bodies. So then we together will always be with the Lord. There is a reunion with Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, our Shepherd, our Sovereign. And there is a reunion with all those who have gone before us throughout all of church history, throughout all of time, the saints.

***18*** *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

Do you love reunions? Reunions with people that you haven’t seen for a long time but really, really, really love? Reunions are the greatest of things. They are a time of great joy. They’re to be anticipated. As you know, we’re praying for several in our church who are deployed. My son, just last week, came back from a deployment. I know there wasn’t a day of his deployment that I didn’t think about the reunion. And I’m sure that what was true of me and Kimberly was true of his wife, Lizzy. Every day she was not with her husband, the person she loves most on earth. They were separated. But taking a little bit of joy of thinking about that day when the plane would land and he would walk off the plane and they would be together. There would be an amazing reunion. The joy of that reunion was experienced by longing for it, by waiting upon it, by thinking about it. And when that day arrived, joy was unleashed with force and with abandon.



Isn’t that a great picture?! So there’s the plane in the background. Danny flew that plane in. And if we got more close, you’d see just joy unmitigated on his face. And Lizzy would say, she told us, “The only problem with the picture is that it couldn’t show my face, and my face was beaming even brighter.” Beloved, there is a reunion. It is worth waiting for and it is going to be awesome! We do grieve in the face of death, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Real church experiences hope in the face of death.

Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of Rome. He was the fifth out of five good emperors. That’s what historians say. He was the last of the good emperors. He experienced though, toward the end of his rule, a series of epidemics, probably smallpox that ravaged Rome. It was estimated that 2,000 people died every day in Rome during this plague. The totality of deaths are estimated to be around 5 million people, nearly a third of the population. Think of that! A disease sweeps along and one out of every three people die because of the sickness. Marcus Aurelius described caravans of wagons filled with dead bodies making their way through Roman cities. But he made an observation. He observed Christians. It was a new sect, a Jewish sect. And he observed them because they grieved differently than everybody else in the empire. He says, “When they carried their dead, they carried their dead as if in triumph.” Think of that! He sees all the other people without hope, just grieving. Either they’re grieving or they’re in fear, just backing away from burying their dead. “We have to get out of this city because we don’t want it touching us!” But the Christians, he saw, stayed around. And when they carried their dead through the streets, they carried their dead as if in triumph. Some historians say that Rome ultimately would become a Christian empire. It opened the door to Christianity because of this epidemic and because of the hope that the population saw Christians having and they’re wondering, “What is going on? How do these people do that?!” Jesus died and rose again. And even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. Amen and amen!

Our church, in the last five months or so, we’ve lost some very suddenly. I spoke to this last week. I just want to mention by name, as we as a church enter into this hope together and then we’re going to sing a song that is related to one of them. I think of Steve Clore. And sweet Ruth and Ben and Anna and Joey are over here. Bless you! I think of precious Levi Siebenthal. I think of Ryan and Rosie and Caleb and Ben and Jeremiah and Taliah. I think of Linda Hamilton. There’s Andy. I love you, Andy! I think of Mike Bricker. We just had his service yesterday. And I think of Carol and their family. Jesus died and rose again, and even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.

Little Levi, five years old, loved the song “How Great Thou Art.” He called it the “Thunder Song.” And the night before he died, he asked his daddy to sing it. They were sitting outside and I understand they saw some clouds forming. “Let’s sing the Thunder Song.” So I want us to sing together the “Thunder Song” because it is such a great, great message of hope to us.