

1 Thess 4:13-18 Learning About Dying (Part 1)

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, today I'd like us to turn back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and we're going to focus on the last paragraph of that chapter and we can read again from verse 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, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive and who are left until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an at-gangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first, when 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, therefore encourage one another with these words.

Now we're going to spend both our services today looking at these verses and the reason for that is that this paragraph at the end of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 is talking about a topic that affects every single one of us and which sooner or later is going to become the most pressing and urgent issue in the lives of all of us, because these verses are talking about dying.

And so today we are studying God's word in order to learn about dying. And we're going to focus on two areas as we do that.

[1 : 57] First of all we're going to think about dying in terms of our experience in this life. So by that we mean the fact, the process of approaching death and the experience of loss and bereavement.

That's what we're going to focus on this morning. And then the other area to consider is to think about the reality of dying in terms of what happens after we die in terms of eternity.

So we're going to look at death in terms of this life this morning and then tonight we're going to look at death in terms of beyond this life.

Now before we go into more detail I want us to spend a wee minute just looking at the context of Thessalonians because this is a really, really fascinating letter. And as we said Paul wrote this very early letter, he wrote it a year or two after being in Thessalonica and he is trying to provide help and support to this young church.

As you look through Thessalonians you see that in many ways it highlights two vital principles that are constantly found in the life of Christ's church.

[3 : 12] On the one hand there is great encouragement. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians he is so thankful for the faith of this young church in Thessalonica and he is rejoicing that they have come to faith and that they are following the Lord.

He is hugely encouraged and hugely thankful. An example of that is in chapter 2. He says we thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God which you heard from us you accepted it.

Not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you which is at work in you believers.

So there is encouragement. But alongside encouragement there are challenges. And Paul is writing because he is deeply concerned about their welfare and as we read in chapter 4 he is giving them instruction about various issues that are affecting them.

He talks about sexual purity in verses 3 to 8, he talks about the need to love each other and to do that more and more in verses 9 and 10. And then he goes on to discuss their daily lives, their conduct, their work and the interrelationship that they have with the world around them.

[4 : 23] And we see that here in Thessalonica we have evidence of this balance that is true of every single church including ourselves. There are great encouragements and there are

challenges.

That's true of us too. We have so many reasons to be encouraged. It is absolutely amazing that there is a church of Jesus Christ in Carlyway. If you stand back and you think about the fact that the church began with preaching in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, the fact that we are here today miles away from where it began and centuries later the fact that there is a church here is amazing. And we should never ever ever forget just how encouraging that is. But we also have our challenges and we have our own personal struggles with sin that we all battle with and we have our challenges as a church family to love one another more, to reach out to the community around us more effectively and to grow together in our personal and collective holiness.

Churches always have encouragements and challenges hand in hand and it's always healthy for us to remember that. Sometimes if we think that there's nothing but encouragements we don't address issues that need to be raised.

And if we think that there's nothing but just challenges then we become despondent. Every church from the very beginning faces encouragement and yet also faces challenge.

[6 : 02] And as we come to the end of chapter four we see that there was one particular area that was challenging these Thessalonians and that was causing them confusion.

They did not understand the whole question of dying. And simply the problem was that it appears to be the case that these believers in Thessalonica did not understand what happened to believers who had died before the second coming.

Now we probably don't really have that problem so much ourselves because it's so long and relatively speaking since Jesus' ascension.

And the last days have been so far at least 2000 years. But for the church back then they were expecting Jesus to come back very quickly and they were expecting to all be alive when Jesus came back.

And so when members of their congregation were dying they wondered what happened to them. Jesus has not come back but they are no longer with us.

[7 : 14] What is going on? And so they clearly don't understand to them this whole issue of dying did not make sense. And so Paul is writing to them to reassure them that no one will be forgotten and that whether we are alive on the day that Jesus returns or whether we are dead but still united to Jesus we will all be gathered together on that last day.

And so that's the main purpose of this paragraph and in doing this reassurance Paul gives some amazing theological teaching about our hope as Christians and we are going to look at that God willing tonight.

But he also gives some very, very practical and helpful teaching about how to deal with bereavement and with approaching death.

And that's what we are going to try and look at together this morning. So we can look again at verse 13 to 18 and in particular we are going to see three key words that we can focus on and they are highlighted there in red.

Uninformed, grieve and encourage. These three words highlight three things that Paul wants for these Thessalonians.

[8 : 36] First of all he does not want them to be uninformed. Secondly he wants to ensure that they do not grieve without hope and thirdly he wants them to encourage each other.

And so we can just have a wee look at these three together. Paul's first concern is set out in the first half of verse 13.

We do not want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep. Now basically speaking this verse is a verse about bereavement.

People in the Thessalonian church had died and Paul is concerned to help them in their bereavement. And some very, very important points arise and we'll just highlight two or three of these.

First of all in a general sense it is clear that as Christians we are to show concern for one another.

[9 : 41] Now that might sound so simple and it is simple but it is really, really important to remember. And when you read through any of Paul's letters one of the most striking features of these letters is not just the amazing theology that he said sets before us.

It is also the fact that Paul is filled with an abounding and almost overwhelming concern for his brothers and sisters in Christ. There's an example of this in the previous chapter.

Paul says, for when we were with you we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction just as it has come to pass and just as you know. For this reason when I could bear it no longer I sent to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempted attempted you and our labour would be in vain.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you. For this reason brothers in all of our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

[10 : 50] It's reminding us that when Paul left Thessalonica he never stopped thinking about these believers. He had left the Thessalonians but they had not left him and you see in the middle there he says I couldn't bear it any longer.

I desperately wanted to know how you were doing. He was so concerned, so worried, so anxious for the welfare of these Thessalonians.

And we have to just pause for a moment there and I have to pause and ask myself the question am I like that?

Am I like Paul? Do I have that concern for all of you and for everyone in our congregation?

Do I have that concern for other congregations? Congregations that are miles away like Thershal or the congregations in Edinburgh or Dundee or wherever.

[11 : 50] Do we have that same concern that Paul had? Now I should say that there are so many times that I have been absolutely amazed by the care that the people in our congregation have shown to one another.

It's a wonderful, wonderful thing but it is something that we must guard and something that we must cultivate because this is all part of the Christian church being different from the world.

Because when you look at the world so often you see that humans tend to be characterised by a deep, deep, deep concern for themselves and a lack of concern for others.

Christians of course are the exact opposite. We don't worry so much about ourselves but we are to be immensely concerned for other people.

That applies in every circumstance but it especially applies in times of bereavement. Paul is giving us a great example of concern for one another at a time of bereavement and loss.

[12 : 53] So that's just a general point that Paul makes here but more specifically Paul is teaching us here that we should think and talk about dying.

It's something that we should think and talk about. Paul says, I do not want you to be uninformed. I don't want you to be uninformed.

That's a fascinating word and a wonderful statement because it's showing us that as Christians we should be thinking and talking about dying and about bereavement.

And again that stands in total contrast with the world around us because the one thing that the world doesn't want to think about and the one thing that the world doesn't want to talk about is death.

Paul is saying, I don't want you to be uninformed. I want to talk to you about this. I want you to think about it.

[13 : 57] And it's reminding us that the Bible gives us vital information about dying. Tells us crucial things that we need to know. Tells us that life is short. One is like a breath.

His days are like a passing shadow and as much as we don't want to think about it, life is so so short that the issue of dying is going to very very quickly confront us all.

And that reminds us the other truth that the Bible highlights, the fact that life can end in a moment as the rich man was told, this night your soul is required of you.

Bible also reminds us that our outward body is perishing. Some of us can see that right before our very eyes. Our outward body is perishing.

We get progressively weaker. Our pain increases. Illnesses are harder to fight off. We get wearier and wearier.

[14 : 58] And perhaps most importantly of all, the Bible tells us that death is an enemy. And that makes perfect sense because that's why death hurts us so much.

So the Bible gives us crucial information about dying but it also tells us that Jesus has come to give life.

Jesus said to Martha, I am the resurrection in the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this? And of course that's why the message of Jesus is such astoundingly good news. The Gospel means good news because it is the most amazing information that we can ever receive.

The fact that though we will die, if we believe in Jesus yet we shall live, there is nothing that has ever been communicated in the history of the world that can compare with that.

[16:17] It is the greatest news of all. And all of this is reminding us of the absolutely vital point that this issue is raising.

It is the fact that the Bible tells you everything that you need to know about dying. Paul says, I don't want you to be uninformed and the Bible tells you everything that you really, really need to know. And again, this is crucial because so often the world is full of vagueness in regard to preparing for death. People are aware that death approaches and then they just drift into this kind of really vague way of thinking.

And they'll think, well, there'll be something after death. There'll be a presence, there'll be a place, there'll be a spiritual something.

Maybe there'll be nothing at all, don't know, but not sure. Maybe life just goes round in some sort of circle. It's all incredibly vague.

[17:19] The world's answers to death are just this hazy and indefinite and really just almost bizarre at times, understanding of what lies ahead.

And so the word approaches death with vagueness and yet whenever we do something really important in life, we make absolutely sure that we know what is going to happen.

If you imagine sending your child to school for their first day of school, you wouldn't just open the front door and say, off you go and see if you can find a school of some sort somewhere.

See what you might discover, there might be something out there. You would never do that. You would make sure you knew what time they had to be there, what clothes they had to wear, what they had to take in their bag, what they needed.

You would take them to school, you would put them probably in their seat and make sure that they were absolutely fine. You would ensure that you were thoroughly prepared.

[18:23] It applies in so many areas of life. Same if a surgeon was going to do an operation on somebody. An operation is never vague, optimistic guesswork. It is a moment for which precise preparation has been made and all the available information has been gathered.

A study of anatomy, medical records, scans, surgical procedures, nobody sends their child to school uninformed. Nobody performs a surgical operation uninformed.

So why on earth would you want to die uninformed?

In the Bible, God is telling us what is going to happen and God is telling us what we need to know. He doesn't want anyone to be uninformed and he wants to give you everything that you need so that you are ready.

And that, as Jesus told Martha, simply means trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ because whoever believes in him, though he die, yet he shall live.

[19:36] And I cannot exaggerate the importance of this. And please, if you have questions, if you don't understand them, talk to me or talk to an elder or talk to one of the women in the congregation.

Paul says, I do not want you to be uninformed. And in particular, Paul does not want them to be uninformed about their brothers and sisters who have died.

That brings us to the next keyword that's at the second half of verse 13. He says, I don't want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Now here Paul is talking about grieving. Now it's important to say that Paul is not saying that Christians don't grieve. As we said, death is an enemy.

And so when we lose a loved one, it is absolutely awful. Paul is not saying that we are to pretend that we don't grieve.

[20:41] And if you look through the Bible, you see that it is full of profound expressions of grief. When Sarah died, Abraham wept for her. When Rachel died in childbirth, Jacob set up a pillar at her tomb.

Later when Jacob thought that Joseph had been killed, he tore his clothes and mourned many days. When Moses died, the people of Israel wept in the plains of Moab for 30 days. And even Jesus, when he came to the tomb of Lazarus, he wept. And so as Christians, we do grieve, we do mourn.

And there are certain things that we are to do when we mourn. We are to mourn together. Paul writes in Romans 12, 15, rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. And sometimes that's all you can do. If you go to be with somebody who is grieving, you're not going there to take away their grief because you can't, nobody can.

[21 : 52] And you don't need to try to. All you're doing is showing that you are with them. And there's a togetherness there that we should always try to maintain.

So we mourn together. We also mourn for as long as we need to. Because so often in the Bible, the process of grieving lasts for many days.

And that's because it takes many days. It takes a long, long time. And God knows that.

And you may still feel the pain of grief after years. God knows that. And we must remember it.

And we are also to mourn with a concern for one another. Because sometimes grief can make us want to push people away. And sometimes it can make us unlookers feel as if we should keep away.

[22 : 54] Somebody goes through an awful tragedy and you think, oh, maybe I should just keep away. And it's easy to feel like that. But if you look at Paul, we see that he showed an active concern for his brother and sister, his grieving brother and sister in Thessalonica.

He didn't do nothing. He showed his concern and he tried to help. And there's a lesson there, I think, for us all.

Often when we face difficult circumstances, the easiest thing to do is nothing. And I find myself doing that. Somebody faces a difficult situation, some complex difficult circumstances have a lesson and you think, I should do something and then you think, I better not.

And you just think, I'll do nothing. The easiest thing to do is nothing, but very, very rarely is it the best thing. Sometimes yes, but not often.

As Christians, we want to always show an active concern. And here I'm going to say something to the younger people. Now, when I say young, I mean my age, the older generation are an outstanding example to us of this kind of active concern.

[24 : 13] And you see that in our community. When a tragedy happens, people, and very often it's the older generation, will do lots of things to help.

They'll send some food, they'll phone, they'll visit, they'll do something, they'll help. They won't do nothing. They'll always do something. So us 30-somethings, we need to look at the 60-somethings and beyond and learn from them.

So there are certain things that we should do when we mourn. We mourn together. We mourn for as long as we have to. We mourn with a concern for one another. But the main point of this verse is that as Christians, there is one thing that we are not to do when we grieve.

We are not to grieve without hope. And that absolutely transforms our situation when we grieve.

And that's brought out by the phrase that Paul uses. This contrast is brought out by the phrase he says, not as others do. Paul is making a contrast and he's telling us that there are crucial differences between the grief of Christians and the grief of others.

[25 : 36] And there are two vital things here to highlight and these are really important, really important things. First of all, Christian grief has hope.

Now that's a simple thing to say but that is one of the things that makes Christianity so absolutely amazing. Because if you think about it, in terms of this life, death ends hope, doesn't it?

It ends the hope of physical recovery. It ends the hope of life getting back to normal. It ends the hope of medical healing. It then ends the hope of avoiding the pain of grief.

It ends the hope of staying together. Death ends hope. But not if you are all Christians.

Because with Jesus Christ as your saviour, your grieving is never, ever without hope. And that's the whole point of the Gospel. Sin has brought death into the world.

[26 : 45] It's brought a desperate curse but Jesus has come to reverse that. He has come to put everything right and the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, it is all about giving you life.

That's what Jesus said, for this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, the opposite of death, eternal life.

And I will raise him up on the last day. And so the dying Christian and the grieving Christian, they have the most amazing hope.

Because Jesus has conquered death. Jesus has dealt with their sin. Jesus has gained victory over the grave and Jesus will come again to gather all His people to be with Him forever.

Christian grief has hope. But secondly, Christian grief is temporary.

[27 : 59] Christian grief is temporary. Imagine a Christian couple been together for many, many years and one of them dies.

And there is huge grief as a result of that separation. But that grief and that separation is temporary. Because these verses in 1 Thessalonians 4 describe a glorious reunion of God's people. Look at what it says. This we declare from you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

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. 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. Now the primary emphasis of that is the fact that we will be with the Lord.

[29 : 12] And that will be amazing. And we're going to think about more about that tonight. But these verses are also telling us that we will be with each other.

And that means that whenever a Christian mourns the loss of a Christian brother or sister, that mourning is only temporary.

That's why Paul says we do not grieve without hope. So Paul is saying to us, he doesn't want us to be uninformed about death and about grieving.

He's saying he wants us to grieve but not as others do. Rather we are to grieve in a way that has been transformed by the Gospel so that we grieve with hope.

And then as we just read in verses 15 to 18, he describes some of the glorious realities that await the believer after death. And we're going to look at them as I said in more detail tonight. But even a quick glance shows us that the Gospel gives us amazing, amazing promises for death.

[30 : 22] There is resurrection life. There is total security. There is intimate fellowship with God and with each other. And the whole thing is forever.

It is everlasting. It is never ending. And it's a reminder that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, which you can, even right now, then you have the most amazing, amazing future ahead of you.

And therefore it's no wonder that Paul says encourage one another with these words. Because this is where we see just how powerful the Gospel is.

Because it is only the Gospel of Jesus Christ that can bring real comfort and real encouragement in the face of death. That means that as Christians, we can comfort and encourage the grieving.

So when the Christian wife dies or the Christian mother or father or child or friend, we can encourage one another by the fact that these people whom we love so dearly, they are absolutely eternally safe.

[31 : 41] And in fact, they are enjoying something amazing. They are with Christ. Every Christian who dies goes to be with Christ, which is far, far better.

And so we can take comfort from the fact that when our Christian loved one dies, they are actually enjoying the best of the best.

And this is where we see just, again, how amazing God is. Because we lose a loved one and we think to ourselves, well, you know, we just wish we could bring them back.

You lose a loved one. You think, I wish, I wish I could bring them back. And yet if we just had a glimpse of what they are experiencing in the presence of Jesus, we would realize that what they have is so much better.

And we would think to ourselves, well, although we wish that they would be back with us, that's really not what's for the best.

[32 : 50] The best thing would not be to bring them back with us. The best thing would be if we went to join them.

And the amazing truth of the Gospel is that God says, that's exactly what's going to happen. That's exactly what I'm going to do for every single person who trusts in me.

God is good and God knows what is best. And so our loved ones in Christ don't come back.

But we'll go to them. And for that reason, we can not only comfort the grieving, but ask Christians.

And I want to emphasize the fact that all of these promises are for Christians, which I hope you all are, and I promise you that you can all be.

[33 : 50] We not only are able to comfort the grieving, we can also comfort the dying. And here we see an astounding truth, that if you are a Christian, if you're trusting in Jesus, or if you start trusting in Jesus just now, you do not need to be reluctant to die.

Jesus said, let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be awesome.

The promises of the Gospel are absolutely astounding. And as I said, we'll look at them in more detail tonight, but Jesus is saying, I will come and take you to be with myself, and to be with all God's people, forever and ever.

No wonder Paul wants us to talk about dying, because for the Christian it is the doorway to the most astounding hope, and it's the most wonderful encouragement for us as we battle our way through life.

[35 : 23] And that's why the Gospel is such good news, that's why it's such good news for you, because this promise, this hope, it's there for us all, and all you have to do is put your trust in Jesus.

It is as simple and as amazing as that. Amen, let's pray.

Lord our Father, we thank you for what your word teaches us, and we pray Lord that you would give us eyes that can see and hearts that can understand.

So often Lord, we just push the question of dying to the back of our minds. We want to forget about it, we want to pretend that it's not going to happen, but yet we know it is.

And you know that it's going to happen, and you've told us everything that we need in order to be ready for it. And so we pray O God, that each one of us would just hear that simple Gospel message that says whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish, but will have everlasting life.

[36 : 50] And O God may that be true of us all. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.