Hope in the Face of Death
1 Thess 4:13-18

Last week we saw how these Christians in Thessalonica were living out a very real sense of love for one another. But that kind of love can be dangerous can't it? I mean, there's a danger when you love someone deeply. And that is, how do you cope when you lose them? As many of you have probably experienced, when you lose someone whom you love deeply, that deep well of love you feel for them can become a grief and a pain and a hurt that is just as deep. It can rip through your heart like a landslide through a village, forever changing your life.

And that was what some of these Thessalonians were experiencing. And so what Paul writes next, he writes to help them cope with that grief.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Grief of Death
Now, I think one of the most harrowing things I did when we were still in the UK was to take the funeral service of a grandmother of a family who weren't Christians. And as this very normal English family entered the chapel for the service, and saw their grandmother's coffin, I'm not exaggerating when I say that screams and howls erupted from them as their grief overwhelmed them. I can tell you, it was deeply sobering. As Paul puts it here in v13, they were grieving as those 'who have no hope.' Their mother, their grandmother, who had always been there, like a rock in the family, who had loved them and who they had loved, was gone, and they had no hope of ever seeing her again.

You see, if you were to go on to the streets and ask people what happens when you die, many, in the West, would either say, 'well, I hope we go to heaven' in a wishful-thinking-I-hope-this-happens-but-I'm-not-really-sure kind of hope, or they will say that nothing happens, and we just cease to exist. Richard Dawkins, the atheist, was once asked what happens when we die, and his answer was, 'we rot'. And if that is what you face in the death of someone you dearly love, it is no wonder you break down in tears and sobs and screams. As someone once said, 'death is a terrible thing, for it is an end.' And how can you comfort someone when you have no comfort to bring? When there is no comfort? How can you find hope in the face of death, when there is no hope in the face of death?

But of course Dawkins and those like him did not invent this view of death as being final, did they? The gravestones and epitaphs of ancient Greece and Rome tell us that this pessimism in the face of death is nothing new. One ancient Greek gravestone reads 'if you want to know who I am, the answer is *ash and burnt embers*.' It's just a more poetic version of Dawkin's 'we rot' isn't it? A Greek poet described death as 'the never-ending night'. Seneca, the Roman philosopher and statesman, described hopes of life after death as being 'human pipe dreams'. Theocritus, a Greek writer wrote, 'hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.' So, Dawkins and the new atheists did not invent the idea that death is the end, as though they have grown up and outgrown the immaturity of the Judeo-Christian worldview of heaven and eternity. They have simply reverted to what the vast majority of people would have believed in Paul's day. In fact, they would have been very much at home in first century Thessalonica, where everyone would have agreed with them.

And that's why Paul had seen and knew what it was for people to grieve with no hope.

And yet, Paul does not tell these Christians *not* to grieve their loved ones, does he? He tells them not to grieve 'as others who have no hope.' At no point does Paul say that to grieve deeply is wrong. In fact, Leighton Ford, the Canadian Evangelist, who lost his own son at an early age, said that 'when you love deeply, you hurt deeply.' And so to grieve the loss of those you love is not a sign that your faith is weak, it's a sign that your love was strong, the very love Paul has been urging and praying that these guys and you and I would grow in.

And yet, maybe from something he has seen in them, or heard about them, Paul finds himself having to address how these new Christians grieve. Verse 13, 'we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep.' So Paul realises that the reason these guys are grieving as those without hope is that their thinking, their understanding about death and what happens after, was faulty. Like so many problems in our own lives, they were failing to see this through God's eyes. They were failing to see death, and the death of their loved ones, through the eyes of the Lord of Life.

And you could see how that could happen couldn't you? I mean, just think how it works in your own life. You know something to be true, theoretically, but it hasn't quite got to the level of your heart so that it impacts the way you feel about something or the way your respond to something. You face some serious challenge in your life, maybe at work, or in your health, or in a relationship, and you become more and more anxious and worried about it. It weighs on your mind. Now, imagine that was me and someone were to come along and say, 'you don't need to be afraid or worried, Martin, God has everything in control' and I replied, 'yes I know God's in control, but I'm still afraid, I'm still worried', then you could legitimately say that I don't really believe that God is in control, do I? You know truth in your head, but you don't know it deep down, where it matters, where it influences how you respond.

And so whilst these guys knew, at least in part, what Paul goes on to talk about, whilst they knew the hope of the gospel, in reality, when faced with death, they wavered. The truth that Paul tells them had not hit their heart when it came to death. And when you and I face the loss of someone we love, or we face suffering in our own lives, we can struggle to match our faith to the reality of what is happening to us. We struggle to reconcile our faith to our loss or our pain. We are like a ship caught in a storm of emotions, with this great gaping hole that has been ripped in the side of our hull, and our faith sometimes struggles to fill that hole, and bring us through that storm.

But what's remarkable is that Paul says that whilst we grieve for loss, and for what might have been; whilst we grieve for relationship cut short and for the deep hole left by love, we don't have to grieve as those without hope. That whilst death is a terrible thing, for it is an end, it is not the end of the story for the Christian.

The Next Chapter
Now, if you know CS Lewis' books The Chronicles of Narnia, you'll know that the final book is called, The Last Battle. And in it night finally falls on Narnia, and the Pevensey children say goodbye to it and to this world, a world which Lewis calls Shadowlands. And they enter Aslan's land, a land where everything seems clearer and brighter and much more wonderful and much more real than in this world, and where they are reunited with everyone they have ever loved. It's a picture of the New Heavens and the New Earth the Bible speaks of. And in Aslan the Lion's words, 'The dream is ended, this is the morning.'

But listen to how Lewis finishes the story in the last paragraph of the last book: 'For us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning chapter one of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: *in which every chapter is better than the one before*.'

And Paul says neither these Thessalonians, nor you and I need to grieve as those without hope because something much better and much more wonderful than life or death lies ahead. Much better chapters have been written for your life and those of the ones you love, than the chapter titled Death.

And Paul says you can find comfort in the face of death for two reasons:

And the first one is the fact of ***the resurrection***. Verse 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.'

You see, the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. If Christ simply died for us, but stayed dead, you would not have a clue whether his death for you was effective or not; whether God had accepted it or not. But by raising him from the dead, God has vindicated all that Jesus said and all that he did. When on that first Easter Sunday morning, the stone was rolled away and Jesus walked out of the darkness of the tomb into the light of the dawn, it was God saying, 'the curse of sin and death has been broken, your sin has been paid for, my Son has made the way for you to come back to me.'

And yet, incredible as it seems, it was more even than that. Paul describes Jesus' resurrection as 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). So imagine going to an apple tree, covered in hundreds of apples, but only one of them is bright and red and ripe, all the others are still green and unripe. And you pick that one apple and you taste it and it is wonderful, what are you going to feel as you look at that tree covered in fruit that is going to come right? You are one happy gardener, because you know that the rest of that crop is going to be just as wonderful as its firstfruits. And Jesus' resurrection was the first, but not the first and only, it was the first of many. And his resurrection guarantees that on the last day you and I, and those we love who trust in him, will also be raised from

the dead. His resurrection from the dead is the proof that when he says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25) he really is; that when he says, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live", we really will.

And so as the truth that God raised Jesus from the dead moves from our head to our hearts it does something to our grief, because we know that in him, death is not the end of the story. There is a chapter coming called the Resurrection from the Dead. And it's in that chapter that death turns into life and tragedy turns into triumph and glory comes out of the grave, the darkness of grief turns into the light of joy.

Because just notice how Paul describes those who have died: they are 'those who have fallen asleep' (V13, 14, 15). Now by that he doesn't mean that you die and go into come kind of soul-sleep until the last day. Jesus told the thief on the cross, '*today* you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43) Paul said that if he died he would be 'with Christ, for that is far better' (Phil 1:23). No. The point about sleep is that it's temporary. Unless you're a teenager, of course, in which case it seems to go on forever. But if you're a young parent you know sleep is only temporary. No sooner have you gone to sleep than someone is waking you up again. And that is death for the Christian.

And Paul tells us whose voice it is, what sound it will be, that will wake our sleeping bodies on that last day. And it's the second reason he gives why we don't have to grieve as those who have no hope: it's ***the Second Coming of the Lord***. Verse 15-16, '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. 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.'

Now, in civilised parts of the world, we still have kings and queens: the Dutch, the Swedes, the Brits, even the Australians, though I'm not sure the word *civilisation* can be stretched quite as far as Australia, and when a King or a Queen visits a city it's a big deal. And it was in Paul's day, in fact there was a word used specifically for the occasion when a king or a high up official came to a city, and it's the same word Paul uses here in v15 for the 'coming of the Lord.' That just as Caesar might come to Thessalonica and the whole city would be ready, so the Lord Jesus will one day come again as King to the world that is his. And remember that it was exactly this claim that got Paul into trouble in Thessalonica in the first place, that he was accused of saying 'that there is another king, Jesus' (Acts 17:7). That, ultimately, it's not Caesar you should bow the knee to, but Jesus. And one day this King above all kings will return. And on that day his voice will call the dead from their graves. His voice, full of power, the voice that brought creation into being, will summon our dead bodies to life, as Paul says in v16, 'and the dead in Christ will rise.'

But of course, what happened when a king visited a city in those days was that when the king was still some distance off, a great welcome party would go out to greet him with great fanfare and celebration, and they would accompany him on

the last leg of the journey into the city. And that, Paul says, is exactly what will happen when Christ returns. Verse 17, 'Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them [those who have been raised back to life] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.'

Now, we have a couple of families, one in South Africa – the du Plessis, who many of you will remember, and one in the UK, who have kids the same age as our girls, and who we all love very much, and who we don't get to see very often. But when we do, when we get together with either family, it is crazy. There is this melée, this scrum of hugs and handshakes and kisses and smiles and laughter, and we sing and we tell stories and we laugh till we cry. But if those reunions are great, what will it be like at this, the greatest reunion ever? When we are reunited with all those we have ever loved who loved Jesus; when life and joy erupts from the grave; when we discover that death, after all, does not break this bond of brotherly love we are called to, as the dead and the living form the welcome party for our coming and returning King.

And yet, did you notice, that the greatest joy, and our greatest hope, will not be that we will be reunited with each other and with those we love, but that we will be with Jesus: v17, 'So we will always be with the Lord.' And you and I can know hope, real hope, not wishful thinking hope, but strong hope in the face of death, because one day He will return and call us to himself, and nothing will ever separate us from him again. Not grief, not death, nothing.

So why do you not need to grieve as those without hope? Because one day Christ will return and call us from our graves and we will be reunited with each other, but more especially with him, forever.

But what if you hear that and think, 'nice in theory, but I'm not so sure, what would that really look like, when someone really close to you dies?' Well, I'm going to ask Dan and Jacquie Stroud to come and tell you:

- Tell us about yourselves, where you're from, what you're doing in Suisse etc

- Could you tell us about your family, and about Dave.

- Could you share a bit about how Dave's and your faith in Christ, in his resurrection, in the goodness of God, and eternity gave you strength to face what you've faced, how you put all this theory into practice.

I want to end with one last point:

Encourage One Another

You see, when it comes to subjects like the end of time and the return of Christ, there is this danger that we start to argue. And often we argue because Paul and the other writers, don't tell us all the details, so we fill in the blanks, and then start to argue about what we fill the blanks in with.

But look what Paul says here in v18, 'Therefore *encourage* one another with these words.' That's why he writes this. The resurrection of the dead and the coming again of Jesus are not stuff to argue over, they are truths that in moving from our heads to our hearts, should so warm our hearts that they comfort us in our grief, truths so real to us that we encourage one another with them.

But maybe you're sat here and you listen to all this and you're honest enough to know that you don't know this hope or this encouragement for yourself. And maybe the thought of your own death scares you and you know that you don't know Jesus like this. You don't trust him like this; that you're not yet a Christian.

Well, Paul also writes this for your encouragement. That in repenting of your sin and putting your trust in Jesus this can be true for you, and you can know this deep certainty that comes from faith in him.

You see, for those who put their trust in him, you don't need to fear in the face of death, you don't need to fear when you feel like you are dying daily in whatever you are facing now, because you know what's written in the chapters to come.

So where is the hope you need in the face of tragedy and trial? It's in Christ's defeat of death, in his eternal rule now and his coming again as King, and in his promise that you will always be with him. Nothing else can give you that kind of hope.

It's why as Christians we can say with Paul, 'o death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting' (1 Cor 15:55).