

Going Home
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
February 22, 2009
FBC Waynesboro

Listen to these words from Job 14:1-14. In a book that makes very plain the absolute sovereignty of God in the midst of the most penetrating pains in life, the most ever present question concerns the foundation and focus of our hope. In whom or in what do we hope? If a man dies, will he live again? That was a most perplexing question to the people in the ancient world to which they gave a variety of answers.

The traditional Jewish view of life after death can be captured in the concept of Sheol. This term that is found in our Bibles refers to the region of the dead. The Jews believed that everybody went to sheol after death and were kept there until the day of resurrection of the dead when all the dead would stand before God in judgment with some being sent to paradise while others were cast into the outer darkness of the pit of hell. The pagans of the period simply believed that death was the end and that after death there was nothing. Perhaps no one has captured as succinctly the predominant feeling of the pagans like William Barclay who writes, "in the face of death the pagan world stood in despair. They met it with grim resignation and bleak hopelessness." One of the Greek philosophers would write, "once a man dies, there is no resurrection." And one of the tombstones carried this epitaph, "I was not, I am not, I care not." The Jewish view of death produced an emphasis on works during a persons so as to gain heaven at the judgment; it produced a kind of legalism that expressed itself in various ways. The Greek view of death produced an aggressive approach to money and material things since they saw this life as all there is. And Job asks, "if a man dies, will he live again?"

We know that in the New Testament era that the Corinthians were confused about this issue. Paul addresses it specifically in 1 Corinthians 15 (15:12-20). Some in Corinth were saying that there was no real life after death. They had combined some Christian teaching with a lot of pagan philosophy and created the concept of a soul that dwells in humans that is immortal. It is this soul they said that went to be with God at death, but our bodies or what makes us the unique human beings we are no longer exists SO they concluded that since the soul is

immortal and cannot be corrupted by sin and since the soul of all humans are going to be with God at death anyway why worry about how we live here and now. Eat, drink, and be merry; they taught, because tomorrow you may die. And Paul makes it plain in Corinth that this kind of understanding is more than horrible, it is heresy. Jesus died and rose again as Jesus and thus it will be for all who belong to Jesus. He is the pattern for what happens for His people after death.

There is also in Thessalonica a concern about the Christians who were dying. Where are they going? What is happening to them? What is going to happen to us when we die? And Paul speaks directly to the issue to give them knowledge and to bring them hope. He sets at the center of what he says the anticipated coming of Jesus and he communicates clearly that the reality of what happens to the believer after death and the reality of the coming of Jesus are sources of great encouragement for all believers in the body of Christ.

Paul begins by giving them the knowledge they need about fellow believers who have died in the Lord. The word translated “uninformed” means “without knowledge.” The direct implication is that we can know what happens with those who die in the Lord and it give us great encouragement. What can we know. We can know that death is coming and we can know that death is not the end. In fact, the word for the dying here is the word from which we get cemetery the meaning of which is simply “the place of the sleeping.” Paul says that that wages of sin is death and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord and he reminds us that it is appointed or destined for mankind to die and after that the judgment. Do you know as you sit here today that you sit here in the face of death? Do you know that death is the outer boundary beyond which you cannot pass as a human being in your current state and just beyond death is that judgment of God that determines your eternal destiny either in heaven or hell and it all hangs on the reality and validity of your relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ? Would you examine your heart before God right now concerning the reality and validity of your relationship with God because if it is real, He is real to you and if it is valid, it is because you know that you have connected your life to a body of believers and along with them you see God changing your life to make you more of what He wants you to be. Death is coming and just beyond it is the judgment. We can know this for sure.

And we can know that we are going to grieve when loved ones die. That is normal and natural. But when someone dies who is a believer and when we are believers we do not grieve without hope. Our grief has a solid foundation under it and that solid foundation is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is this knowledge that gives us hope. It is this hope that is known and experienced only by believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Others do not have this hope.

The word for hope in its noun form is found forty-eight times in the New Testament and none of them in the Gospels. That is so important because the center and source of hope was visibly present among them during those days. He is no longer visibly present among us but even more powerfully present among His people in the person of the Holy Spirit. That is why Paul says here that our hope is based not on what we see but on what we believe. Listen to the associations found in relationship to this word hope in the New Testament: Hope in the promise of God (Acts 26:6), Hope in the glory of God that causes us to rejoice (Romans 4:18), Hope does not disappoint (Rom. 5:5), our God is a God of hope (Rom. 15:13); we have the hope of the calling of Jesus (Eph. 1:18), This hope is my hope and our hope (Phil. 1:20 and 1 Thess. 2:19), we have the hope of the gospel (Col. 1:23); it is a blessed hope (Titus 2:13) and a living hope (1 Peter 1:3) and it is this hope (1 Jn. 3:3). Study the texts and what emerges is this kind of understanding of hope: Hope is focused on the future glory of God in the face of His judgment from which by His grace we are delivered so that now we experience suffering and trials with joy in the assurance that we will one day begin an eternal and unending celebration in the presence of God because of the Son of God through the Spirit of God with the people of God forever. And this hope belongs to every person in this place today whose life has been transformed by the reality of the death of Jesus for you to take away your sin and the resurrection of Jesus for you to give you eternal victory over death. Do you know Him? Do you really know Him? If you do then this hope is yours today so that you can stand in the presence of death with the assurance that through the death and resurrection of Jesus when life gives way to death, death will give way to unending victory in His presence. And there is more!!

Paul speaks to the concerns that the church has about her members who are dying but he wants to set their death and ours in the context of the coming of Jesus. Now I do not stand here today oblivious to the fact that there are different views on the rapture and the return of Jesus, nor am I deaf to the debate about

whether Jesus is going to come for His church prior to the Tribulation, at the middle of it or at the end of it. I think the best off among us at this point are those of you who have no understanding of what I was just talking about; you just know that Jesus is coming back. That is the main thing. And Paul speaks to it here on the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself. He has a word from the Lord and this word from the Lord is about the ascent of the redeemed, the arrival of the Lord and the always of this great reunion. Now it is important to note that the ascent of the redeemed frames here the arrival of the Lord: Verse 15 is about the dead in Christ leading the way on this day when the Lord comes and then verse 16b-17 is about the same thing with the arrival of Jesus being right in the middle. This literary structure sheds light on a great historical and biblical truth. This coming of Jesus is only for those who are His. He is coming here to get His church. He is here pulling His people out of the world and taking them to heaven. Now this is an amazing concept in the midst of American individualism that believes that we can be believers apart from the church, that we can live as isolated and insulated individuals and still be in love with Jesus. The phrase “the dead in Christ” means those believers who were committed to Christ as communicated in their connection with other believers in the body of Christ, so this passage is about Jesus coming to get His church, His bride.

The dead in Christ will rise and that which is the essence of who we are that is already with God in heaven. That is what the word “soul” means both in Hebrew and Greek. It is not some part of us that is isolated from the rest of us. I do not have a soul and I am a soul and who I am as a soul is housed in a body. This body will be laid in the earth whether as it is or as a crumbled up bunch of bone and ash due to cremation and on that great getting up morning, what will rise is that body that God is going to make for me that is a whole new body connecting with the essence of who I am joining Jesus and all who are His on the trip to glory. Jesus is going to appear; that is what the word means (parousia). Verse 16 reads this way: The Lord Himself with a shout. There are only three shouts from Jesus in the New Testament: when He raised Lazarus from the dead, when he was in agony on the cross and here. Oh we will hear His voice and respond to His call. He is the shepherd and we are His sheep. The Lord Himself with a shout and with the voice of the archangel. Jewish literature lists seven archangels but we only now Michael whose name means the mighty one of the God and then the trumpet is blown or the shophar sounds which happens either for worship or for war and here for both. And here it is both because this trumpet

sound takes the saints to heaven to begin the eternally perfect and everlastingly glorious worship of God while the hell of war is rampant upon the earth. The people of God are gone. The Spirit of God is at best restrained. And people rule the earth in the pride of their fleshly desires. There has never been nor will there ever be a darker or more desperate time than this. And who will be there? You could be there if you do not know Jesus. But you don't have to be. You can turn in repentance and faith to Him today.

Paul gives us these words for our encouragement, 18. He wants us to know that if we know Jesus death is the door to life and that one day when Jesus returns He will receive us to be with Him forever. As I ask you today to examine your heart in relationship to Jesus I want at the same time to encourage believers to be very careful about giving hope to people for whom there is no hope. I watch people who have no relationship with God go through tough times and I watch believers try to give them what they cannot receive and thus do great damage to the work of the Gospel. Give them the Gospel of Jesus and then they can begin to receive what alone will give them what they need.