

## Such Encouraging Words

24<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 11/12/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 13 [Paul writes, on behalf of Silvanus and Timothy as well,] **“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.”**

v. 18 (literally from the Greek) **“Therefore come along side one another with these words.”**

### **Introduction**

✘ Paul starts this text before us today by saying, “We do not want you to uninformed...” (v. 13). The Greek word that is translated as “uninformed” literally means “to be without knowledge”.

→ We’ve all experienced this before, right. The old saying is, “You can’t know what you don’t know unless somehow you learn what you need to know.” That truth applies to countless things every day in our lives.

✘ I had an example of it in my life just yesterday. Now understand, I am no expert auto mechanic, but throughout the years I’ve grown in my knowledge of the basics of how a car works and I’ve done quite a bit of my own auto repairs. And even though I’ve done my own tune ups – replacing spark plugs, plug wires, distributor caps, starters, alternators and batteries numerous times, there was always one part that I knew nothing about until yesterday – the ignition coils.

→ But yesterday, when our daughter, McKayla called to talk with me about some trouble she was having with her car, she said, “Dad, the mechanic says that I need to replace my ignition coils...does that sound legitimate?” I think I went down a few notches on the “Dad knows everything” scale when I had to say, “I don’t really know what the coils do.”

→ But after a little bit of time researching and learning about the coils on good old “You Tube University”, I said, “Ah-hah! That makes perfect sense.” Now I’m no longer “ignorant” or “without knowledge” on that topic. So my confidence was much greater and I was able to comfort McKayla and give her the assurance she needed that this issue with her car was not going to make her unsafe nor would it break the bank to get it fixed.

✘ Here we are today, entering into the time of the Church Year that we call the final Sundays after Pentecost. It’s on these last three Sundays that our Scripture Readings teach and talk about the End Times; about the earth’s final days of existence and about Jesus’ promised, physical return on Judgment Day.

→ But, because we live in a culture that works overtime trying to avoid thinking or talking about not only death, but especially the Last Day many, or most of us are sorely ignorant, or as Paul says, “without knowledge” in this area.

→ I mean, honestly, are we truly prepared for Jesus’ second coming? Do we even know what will take place when our Lord does return? We are quick to say, “I want to be with Jesus in heaven”, but do we really know what the Bible teaches about how and when and what happens when that time comes?

✘ Well friends, Paul comes to us today in God’s holy Word with some very encouraging words; words that bring us true comfort, confidence, and everlasting hope!

### **I. Lack of Knowledge brings Deeper Grief**

✘ He addresses a significant concern there among the Christians in Thessalonica; one that is still the source of great concern, and frankly unnecessary grief among people to this very day.

→ Remember, they were all just beginners in what was to them, the new Christian faith. They had mostly come from paganism, so they were a lot like what is becoming the majority of the people around us in our world today. It wasn't long ago for them that they had no faith; no understanding at all about what would happen to them at death; no knowledge at all about the one true God; about Jesus; about heaven and hell and their part in all of it. "They couldn't know what they didn't know until somehow they learned what they needed to know."

✘ And that's why Paul writes what we have here in our text today. They were learning from Paul about the work of Jesus and the promise of eternal life with Him. But they were all mixed up about the timeline of everything. Their initial concern was about the believers who died before Jesus' promised return. Would they somehow lose out being saved since they would not be around on that Day?

→ Paul refers to them in verse 13 as "those who are asleep", referring to the idea that their bodies were "resting" in their graves, and so, according to what they could see; according to what their human minds could grasp; according to the understanding of their unbelieving friends and neighbors, those people's souls were now just dead. Their conclusion was that they were lost forever; that they had no chance at heaven; no chance of existing with this new Jesus they were hearing about who was supposed to be their Savior.

✘ If that's all a person knows about what happens when a person dies, then as Paul says, there is "no hope" (v.13). And if there is no hope of life after death; no hope of forgiveness from sin or a resurrection of our earthly flesh or a reunion of our souls and bodies with our Creator and God in everlasting Paradise, then absolutely that person's grief for his/her loved one at death is going to be magnified many times over.

→ And I don't know about you, but I have seen this countless times – that the people who have no faith in Christ, and often those who have a very weak faith-connection to Jesus, struggle much more deeply and much longer at the death of a loved one than those do who are well informed and well connected to Christ and His Church.

## **II. The faith of those who believe**

✘ Before we go any farther, I want to make sure you don't misunderstand me here. Paul is not saying that Christians cannot or do not grieve. Jesus Himself wept at the death of His good friend Lazarus, even as He knew He was going to raise Lazarus back to life in a matter of moments.

→ All death grieves God, because death was never God's plan when He created mankind in His righteous and sinless image. However the sorrow that Christians experience at the death of our loved ones is still altogether different from the grief that unbelievers experience, because as Paul says, unbelievers have "no hope" (v. 13).

✘ Starting with verse 14 Paul tells us exactly what the difference is. The others have no hope because they not only have no knowledge of what happens at death, far more important they have nothing that they can count on; nothing to believe in except for themselves and like all people, they have learned well that every person's life eventually comes to an end.

→ But Paul points us to that which is an accepted fact for all Christians. For us there is no doubt! "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again," Paul says, "even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep" (v.14).

✘ Paul goes right to the heart; the foundation of our certainty and the reason why our Christian hope is so unwavering. Before God could raise us to life in heaven, Christ had to die and rise again – for without His bodily resurrection, there would be no hope. Dust and ash would be our only future, and death would be the final outcome for our souls and bodies due to our sin.

→ In 1 Corinthians 15:19-20 Paul put it this way, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

→ You see, the first and greatest thing that gives us hope; that which makes our grief as Christians so much more bearable is the undisputed Scriptural truth for us who have faith in Jesus. Yes, Jesus died on the cross and yes, Jesus was buried in the tomb as the penalty for all of our sin. But Jesus rose from the dead as Luke writes in Acts 10:40-41, “God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.” And Acts 1:3 says, “He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

✘ Those are the foundational, historical facts of our faith. On top of that we have God’s promises in Scripture like Romans 5:1 that says, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.” And of course we have Jesus’ own promise to Martha at the death of Lazarus, the promise that applies to all whom He has gifted with faith, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25–26).

### III. Timeline and specifics of that Day

✘ Since you and I believe these facts about Jesus as our Savior, Paul then comforts our concerns about those who have already died before Jesus’ return, including any concerns about our own eternal outcome if we die before that Day. He says in verse 15 that these truths have come to him “by a word from the Lord”. So, these are truths that we can count on 100%.

→ And let’s just be honest, most of what God gives us here to “know” about the Last Day is entirely beyond our human imagination, let alone our ability to understand. Any attempts to speculate about, or rationalize these things will only fall short and frustrate us. So the best we can do is praise and thank God for the knowledge He has given us here and then just believe in it all with great anticipation; with the certain hope and joy of the glory that is to come!

✘ Paul gives us a series of five facts:

→ Fact #1, He addresses those who will be alive at Christ’s return, saying that they “will not precede those who have already died before that day” (v.15). In fact, if that happens to be you or me, we will be blessed to witness all of the events of that day firsthand.

→ Fact #2, “God will bring with [Jesus] (the souls of) those who have fallen asleep” (v.14), whose bodies are buried here on earth. But rest assured, the promise Jesus gave to the thief at His side on the cross who came to faith, absolutely applies to every believer in Christ at the moment of his/her earthly death. Jesus told him, “today You will be with Me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). So, those souls who have been with Jesus from the day of their death, they will come with Him in the Spirit on that Day.

→ And fact #3, “The Lord Himself” – with the souls of those in Paradise, “will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (in other words it will be obvious to all people who are on earth at that time) that this is Jesus the judge and the Savior of all (v.16)

→ Fact #4, “And the dead in Christ will rise first” (v.16). So, not only will those whom the Thessalonians were concerned about not miss out, their bodies will be raised and glorified and rejoined with their souls before the ones who are alive on earth at that time.

→ Then fact #5 will come, verse 17, those “who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”. That, dear Christians is the great reunion for which we are all so eager; the celebration that we are privileged to celebrate today in Holy Communion as the foretaste of the feast to come where we sing in the Sanctus “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”, “Holy, holy, holy Lord; God of power and might; Heaven and earth are full of Your glory!” (LSB, pg. 161).

## Conclusion

- ✘ All of this leads us to the certainty and joy and expectation and over-arching comfort of the bottom line for St. Paul and all of us as Christians, “so we will always be with the Lord!” (v. 17).
  - That’s the culmination of Jesus’ promise in Matthew 28:20 when He ascended to prepare our home in heaven, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Well, the “end of the age” is the Day Paul is teaching us about today. It’s then that the concept of “always” is removed from any semblance of time and enters into the things we cannot grasp right now; the one thing that we long for and believe in with every ounce of our being – eternity!
- ✘ Life in perfection with Jesus and with all of our loved ones who also believe in Jesus and with all believers of all time; celebrating and praising and singing and serving and enjoying the fullness of God’s glory where Revelation 21:4 promises, “[God] will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Yes, that means no more grief – ever; ever again!
  - This is why Paul finishes, exhorting us in verse 18 to “come alongside one another with these words”.
- ✘ Now you are informed folks. Don’t keep all of this to yourself, but spread it and use it to remind each other; to embrace and comfort those who are grieving without hope, or with a weak hope. Be patient and understanding with yourselves and with each other in grief, yet always remain confident in the truths that Paul has given to you here today. For you – you have the hope and the joy of Jesus Christ...forever! Amen.