

Caught Up in Christ

Proper 27

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1 Thess. 4:13-18

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hope. It's one of the big three: faith, hope, and love. It's a term that Paul used several times in his epistles. So just what is hope?

Hope, from the Greek *elpis*, is “confident trust in what is not seen (ESV Study Bible, p.1903).” It’s “(g)rounded in Christ’s resurrection, with patient expectation,...in the promise of His return in glory (ESV Study Bible, p.1903).”

Yes, we think about and hear the word “hope” in various ways and meanings today. One might hope for a raise, a cure for cancer, or to get a particular something for Christmas—but that is not the hope referred to us in the Epistles like our text this morning.

Likewise, the antithesis, or opposite, is true as well. The idea of “losing hope” as we use it today, as in losing hope in a doctor or in others, is not the same usage as when Paul wrote about “others...who have no hope.”

Again, hope, as Paul uses it, places all of its trust and encouragement in Jesus alone—Christ crucified and risen.

We will explore this meaning further as we hear from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter four.

Verse 1

Paul wrote to those living in Thessalonica, “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.”

Jesus Christ will be coming again. That is the scariest, worst possible thing for those who do not believe and who do not, therefore, have hope. Death is a close second. For them, because of their lack of faith—because they persist in their sins and do not repent, because they refuse to hear the Word and believe it—death is the living, breathing enemy. That’s why many today fight so hard against death. They desire to live forever—even in such a sinful, murderous, thieving world as this—rather than face it. And when their families who also do not believe succumb to death, there is no hope. There is no hidden joy. It’s all over. They are gone forever; and so they grieve. They cry and they wail and they give the funeral directors a hard time. Or they bottle it up inside and let it eat away at them from within. They harden their hearts against whatever, and ultimately Whoever—Whoever with a capital “W”—has taken their loved one away.

Paul wrote to his brothers in Thessalonica about these things knowing full well that some of them may not truly believe. The Church is invisible. Paul could not see into other’s hearts, and neither can we. There are those who will never believe, but there will also be those who believe for a time and fall away. Jesus taught about them in His parable of the seeds—that those without root would die. God has also taught us through Saint John that “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us (1 John 2).”

This is not to say that repentance no longer works—it is to say that there must be repentance. Peter, who denied Jesus at His trials, was brought back into the fold. Others can be as well. But sadly, some will leave and

never return. These are ones who will grieve without hope and die without hope. Again, if they do not repent and believe.

Paul continues “(f)or since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

Verse 2

“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. Then we, 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.”

Paul declares, like any good pastor, “Thus says the Lord” when he writes that he and the other apostles had been declaring “a word from the Lord.” Everything he has been writing to the Thessalonians he had received from the Lord—both that some would not be “left until the coming of the Lord” but also that some would.

Yet we can do nothing to either get or retain faith. It is all passive, it is all received. Our works do not either gain us faith or keep us in the faith. Only Jesus’ work can do those things. His life, suffering, and death were in our place to pay for our sins, all of our offenses against God our Father who is in heaven. His resurrection was the assurance that we will rise again, too, as we are kept in the faith by the Spirit of God.

Jesus has done this by becoming man. Back in Genesis, God created man in His own likeness. That man, Adam, lived in perfect relationship with God and his wife from the sixth day until they ate and died. So, too, Jesus lived until He died on the sixth day, taking the eternal death that you and I rightly deserved upon Himself. On the seventh day of creation, God rested; and on the seventh day, Jesus rested in the tomb.

Now we celebrate the eighth day, Sunday, when our Lord was brought back from the dead, bursting from the tomb to show that all of humanity would follow in His resurrection. If we are still alive when Jesus returns, we will not enter the new life alone. We will be joined by all the saints, those asleep in the Lord we considered last weekend. “(A)nd so we will always be with the Lord.” By the faith He has given to us, Jesus words to the Sadducees rings so true: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” Whether we are before Him alive here on earth, or if we are before Him in the throne room with those who have washed their robes having come out of the Great Tribulation, we will enter the new heavens and new earth together with all the saints. That’s why the Sadducees were so sadly mistaken—they did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. That’s why, as others have said, they’re “sad, you see?” Because to God, all are alive, whether they are alive on earth or before Him in heaven.

Verse 3

Paul concludes, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

A few weeks ago, we learned again how God has everything under His control. With that being the case, we have no reason to worry or be apprehensive. Instead, we were encouraged to consider “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8b).” What could be more true or encouraging than the fact that God has our future in His loving hands? What could give us more hope?

Remember? “Hope” is that “confident trust in what is not seen...(g)rounded in Christ’s resurrection, with patient expectation,...in the promise of His return in glory (ESV Study Bible, p.1903).” We have received all three, faith, hope, and love; and while love is the greatest of these—that love we have received in God sending His Son to die and live for us—we now have faith and even hope through that same death and resurrection. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.