

Jesus Is Coming
1Thessalonians 4:13-18

If you leaf through a hymn book one of the names that you will find more often than others is Isaac Watts.

He wrote hundreds of hymns many of which are still sung today even though they were written nearly three hundred years ago.

How many of you know “When I survey the Wondrous Cross”, or how about “Our God, our help in ages past”.

Those are great hymns but likely his most famous song of all time is a Christmas song that is not a Christmas song.

What I mean by that is we sing it at Christmas time but it is not about Jesus being born in Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago it is about Jesus coming back to earth in the future.

Who knows the Hymn I’m talking about?

It is Joy to the World.

Listen to the lyrics of Joy To the World,

Verse 1

Joy to the world the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room
And heav'n and nature sing
And heav'n and nature sing
And heav'n and heav'n and nature sing

Verse 2

Joy to the earth the Savior reigns
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods
Rocks hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat repeat the sounding joy

Verse 3

No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found
Far as the curse is found
Far as far as the curse is found

Verse 4

He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love
And wonders of His love
And wonders wonders of His love

[It is a great song. It is a song that reminds us of why we can hope as we live in this broken world. We can have hope because Jesus is coming! While it is not technically a Christmas song it is very good to sing it at Christmas because the only reason the coming of Christ that we are looking forward to can be a joyful occasion for us is because Jesus was born in Bethlehem to be our Saviour. Because He came His coming again is our hope. That is the subject of our text this morning **1Thessalonians 4:13-18**. Turn there in your bibles if you would and let’s

look together at what the LORD has for us in these verses. I want to call our attention to two glorious truths God has for us in this text. Firstly, we see here that...]

Point #1 – Trusting in Jesus provides real hope. (Verses 13-14)

The Christian faith is built on the historical reality of the person and work of Christ and therefore is an absolute certainty.

The apostle Paul shares something of his heart for the Thessalonian believers in verse 13.

We are reminded here that Paul thinks of fellow believers like they are family.

These people and all believers on account of faith in Christ are sons and daughters of God.

We are bound to one another by the Holy Spirit making our hearts alive and giving us a love for the LORD and for one another.

That is the kind of affection that Paul feels for his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and it is out of that affection that he has this desire for them to know what God wants them to know.

In this passage he wants believers to know about ‘those who are asleep’.

It quickly becomes clear in this passage that what he means by sleep is death.

It is almost certain that when Paul had first travelled to Thessalonica he taught them about the hope of Jesus’ resurrection and His return.

They likely knew the big picture of the hope of the gospel, but as this new church was living life in this broken world some questions were being raised.

It is highly likely that between the time Paul was torn away from this church and the time he is writing this letter some people in the church had died.

As these new Christians began to deal with their brothers and sisters in Christ passing away the question comes, “*What happens to them since they have died before Jesus has returned?*”

That is the question that is answered in this text.

Paul wants to show them and us that the Christian faith offers something that no other worldview, religion, or philosophy can give, and that is genuine hope in the face of death.

Notice here that Christians will still experience grief as we deal with death.

Jesus’ shed tears at the death of His friend because death is a terrible thing.

When a person dies his soul is separated from his body and he is no longer present on the earth and that happens because of human rebellion against God (what we call sin).

Because that is true, death is always bad and it is something to be grieved, but for the Christian the sorrow of death is felt in the light of hope.

Why do we have hope? Verse 14

We can look to a future beyond the grave with an unshakable expectation because we are trusting in the death of Christ.

Why is that important? Because Jesus died in our place. He took the punishment that our sins deserve.

His sacrifice does not automatically get applied to everyone. In order for Jesus' work to mean something for you and me we need to admit that we have broken God's laws and put our faith in Christ's work on the cross on our behalf.

When we do that His work gets applied to us. Our sins are dealt with at the cross and His perfect God pleasing life gets credited to us and we are declared right with God.

That can happen because Jesus died.

Now, if all Jesus did was die following Him would be just as hopeless as any other religion.

It also says here that He 'rose again'.

That brothers and sisters changed everything.

If Jesus really did conquer the grave then our hope is built on an unchangeable historical reality concerning a person who can actually do something about the problem of death.

That is real hope.

There are two parts to this hope.

The first part is what happens to brothers and sisters in Christ the moment they die?

Notice it says here in the second part of verse 14 that, "God will bring with Him [that is Jesus] those who have fallen asleep".

If God is going to bring them with Jesus the implication is that they are with Jesus now.

Philippians 1:21-23 clearly shows that when the body of a believer ceases to live, the soul of the believer is present with Christ.

That is good news. It is certainly an important part to our hope as Christians but the hope of the church is something more than that.

The hope that he is pointing them to concerning the brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep is something greater than their souls being with Jesus in heaven.

The hope here is that those brothers and sisters are going to be brought with Jesus when He comes.

How do we know Jesus is coming back? We know He is coming back because He rose from the dead.

There are many arguments that can be made for the truth of Christianity and they are all helpful and good, but we don't need to know anything else

beyond the fact that Jesus really died and really rose from the dead to know that He is the way the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him.

[How many of you are familiar with the ‘Water Gate’ scandal under president Richard Nixon? One of Nixon’s advisors was a man named Chuck Colson who was convicted and served a short time in prison for his role in the attempted cover up. That whole experience led to his conversion to Christianity. Here is what he said about the resurrection of Jesus, he said, “*I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world- and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.*”]

He is exactly right the way he frames the question. The witness of the New Testament leaves us only two possibilities, either the apostles are liars or Jesus really did conquer death and ascend into heaven.

Would the apostle Paul really trade all the wealth, power, and privilege to suffer and die for Jesus’ sake if he was lying about having met the Risen Christ?

To my mind there is only one reasonable conclusion and that is Jesus really died and he really conquered the grave which means those in Christ have real hope in the face of death.

[Part of that hope is being with Jesus when death separates our souls from our bodies, but this passage takes us further than that. We must fight against the temptation of thinking that escape from this world is our hope as Christians. That mentality, I believe, focuses our attention on us and will therefore lead us to think wrongly about what the bible teaches us on this subject. The hope that Paul is focused on here is focused on Christ and His coming back to earth to visibly reign over a renewed creation forever. What the next few verses of the passage show us is that...]

Point #2 – Jesus’ return in glory and power is the hope of the church. (Verses 15-18)

Christ will come for all to see and will put every enemy under His feet to the eternal glory of God in which all His people will delight forever.

When we come to the Bible it is really important that we come as hearers.

What I mean by that is we must come trying to hear what the Bible has to say rather than trying to get the Bible to fit what we already think.

Let’s just try to set aside what we think we know about these verses and do our best to listen to them.

As Paul continues to talk about what will happen to believers who die before Jesus returns, he says this in **verse 15**.

“A word from the LORD” probably means something directly spoken by the Jesus.

Some scholars think this is a reference to Matthew 24 and others think this is something Jesus spoke to one or more of the apostles about that is not recorded in the gospels.

Whatever the case this is what Jesus wants the church to know about His coming.

He wants the church to know that those living at the time of His return will not (that is emphatic in the Greek) go before those who have died.

That strongly suggests that one of their concerns for those who have died is that they would miss out on Jesus' return is some way.

The Word from Jesus is that those who are still living will not be placed ahead of those who have died.

Verses 16-17 explain why.

That Jesus descends is no surprise to anyone familiar with Jesus' ascending into heaven.

Luke records that scene for us in Acts chapter 1.

When Jesus had finished speaking to His disciples, it says, “He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight.”

The disciples are left their staring up at the sky and two men in white robes (presumably angels) said to them, “*Men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.*”

He will return as He left and when He comes, it says, He will come with a “cry of command”.

Does that sound like something quiet or something loud?

How many kids have been playing outside with a bunch of friends and a parent or teacher wants to get your attention?

Do they whisper or shout? They shout right?

That is what this word ‘cry’ means. It means to shout really loudly so everyone can hear.

This shout happens, it says, “with the voice of an archangel”

An archangel is an angel that is in charge of other angels.

There is only one angel named in the bible who is called an ‘archangel’ anybody know who that is?

He is named in Jude 1:9, his name is Michael.

Think of an angel giving commands to thousands upon thousands of angels, do you think he would have a quiet voice or a loud booming voice?

Lastly there is the sound of the trumpet of God.

Trumpets have been used for thousands of years to get people's attention.

You can read about the trumpet of God in Exodus 19 where the LORD descends upon Mount Sinai to speak to the people of Israel.

Guess what? It is a very loud trumpet.

[When I was a teenager in youth group we used to play a game called capture the flag. Have any kids here ever played that game? It is exactly like it sounds. Each team had a flag and the idea was to capture the other team's flag and return it to your own home base without getting caught. The best way to win that game was to sneak up on the other team and grab the flag without them noticing. There was no shouting, loud voices, or trumpets in that game. Now how many kids have been to a parade? At a parade there is all kinds of shouting and music and noise because the people in the parade want everyone to know that the parade is happening.]

Now kids, when you hear about Jesus coming with 'a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God does it sound more like capture the flag or a parade?

This is the coming of the King of kings for all to hear and see.

Commentator Gene Green lays out the historical context for these verses which clearly shows that is exactly how the Thessalonians or anyone else living in the Roman world at the time would have heard this.

The word used in verse 16 which we translate as 'coming' was used to describe a high ranking official or even the emperor himself coming to a city.

His arrival would be marked by a loud announcement to the city, a trumpet blast, and a delegation going out from the city to meet him and he proceeds into the city.

In fact the word translated 'to meet' in verse 17 is always associated with this kind of delegation joining the official entering the city.

They would not have heard this as a secret coming and a mysterious disappearance of a whole bunch of people from the earth.

They would have heard this as Jesus calling the bodies of those who have died in Him to Himself so that their souls which are coming with Him would be joined with their resurrected and restored bodies and then living believers would join the LORD in the air having their bodies transformed as described in 1 Corinthians 15 so that all of God's people could join in the triumphant arrival of King Jesus to visibly rule over all of creation forever.

That brothers and sisters is the hope of the church in the face of death.

Not that the church is taken out of the world, but that every believer will join in the coming of Christ to earth where He will conquer every enemy even death itself.

Verse 18.

This is the encouragement believers need as we live in a broken world and have to deal with the grief of death.

This is the encouragement that is needed for believers in a hospital room and a funeral home.

This is the encouragement that is needed in Nigeria, Iran, North Korea, China, and many other places around the world where Christians are being severely persecuted.

We need to know that God by His grace and power will keep every believer in Christ through every trial.

We need to know that all that die in Christ have their souls brought to be with Jesus in heaven until He comes.

And when He comes He will bring those souls, raise the dead, transform the living and reign victoriously forever and all of His people will enjoy living in the light of His glory body and soul for all eternity.

This is a glorious hope.

Be encouraged brothers and sisters, Jesus is coming.