

**Christian Hope:
What is it? Part 1**
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

It was **Romans 5:1-5** that sparked in my mind the idea for this sermon series on Christian character and hope. Listen to what it says.

We are living through a period of minor trial at the moment and I fully expect that as time goes on the trials of those who love Jesus will become greater in our culture.

This is already true for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world.

As I think about places in the world where it is costly to be a Christian and as I think about our current situation and the trends that are gaining ground in our own country, I have asked myself, “What do we need to hear in days like these?”

Romans 5 tells us! These few verses announce to us the glorious truth of the Christian being ‘justified through faith’ that is being made right with God.

It speaks about rejoicing in hope and it also talks about rejoicing in ‘our sufferings’.

That may sound strange to us because we are so conditioned to lament in suffering, but the Bible tells us to rejoice in them.

Why rejoice? Because it says that suffering produces ‘perseverance’.

That is one of the things the Holy Spirit does in the life of a genuine believer.

He causes us to press on in our walk with Jesus, He causes us to endure to the end.

The Scriptures sometimes liken the Christian life to running a race. It’s not a sprinting race, but a marathon type of race.

Anyone can run the first 100m of a marathon, but when your body is suffering under the strains of the distance it takes perseverance to make it to the finish line.

In that persisting something else comes. It says that perseverance produces ‘character’.

That is as the Spirit causes us to endure through trial, He uses that trial to make us more like Jesus.

Over the last number of weeks we have looked at the Christian character traits of humility, forgiveness, wisdom, love, and faith.

This is a mere taste of the qualities of Christian character.

Even the small taste of character that we have looked at is enough to see where it leads.

Character, it says, produces “hope. And hope does not disappoint.”

So having briefly looked at character over the last few weeks this morning we are moving to the subject of Christian hope.

Over the course of the next four Sundays we are going to ask three questions regarding hope.

This morning and next week we are going to ask, “What is it?”

After that we will ask “How will it happen?” and lastly we will ask, “When will it take place?”

[Let’s begin with the question, “What is it? What is the hope of the Christian?” For part 1 of the answer to that question we are going to spend our time this morning in **1Thessalonians 4:13-18**. In this text the Apostle Paul gives us the reason for our hope, he tells us what it is, and he tells us why it is the only genuine hope available to people. First, let us ask about the reason for our hope. The answer is this...]

Point #1 – Jesus being alive is the reason for our hope.

Despair and/or hopelessness is a state of being in which a person cannot escape a negative outcome. Since death looms over everyone, staring into its face would be hopeless except for the fact that our LORD has overcome death itself.

The subject of death is in view here is **verse 13**.

When it speaks here of “those who fall asleep” it means those who have died. That becomes clear in verses 15-16.

The goal of what is written here is that believers would not be ‘ignorant’ about those who have died.

From what we know of Paul’s preaching it is certain that he has already taught these believers about what happens to those who die in Christ.

What is written here is a reminder of what has already been taught and he is adding some further details to clear up some confusion that had arisen in the church.

He is doing this because he does not want believers to “grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”

Some commentators argue that his goal is to eliminate grief altogether that the Christian should not mourn over death.

That takes what is written here too far. Even Jesus experiences grief at the death of his friend Lazarus despite the fact that He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that He would call his friend from the grave just moments after weeping over his grave.

Death happens because the world is under the curse of sin and it is right to mourn over this terrible state of things.

Both Christians and non-Christians grieve. The great difference between the two is that the Christian sheds tears with hope.

When we look into the face of death we do not see utter despair.
Why? (**Verse 14a**).

We believe that Jesus died! Jesus died for those who believe in Him, to take the punishment of our rebellion, and, therefore, make us right with God.

There is more though. Jesus did more than just die it says here that He “rose again.”

There is no hope in Jesus’ death if all He did was die! He would simply be like everyone else.

It is His conquering of the grave that gives us the reason to have hope.

In His resurrection, Jesus shows Himself to have the ability to undo the curse of death.

[It is like being in an inescapable desert where your supply of water is going to run out. You can walk in any direction you choose but a drink is nowhere to be found. That is an utterly hopeless situation because you will surely die without water. Then in the middle of the desert a man shows up who can turn sand into water! All of the sudden there is hope!]

That is just what Jesus does! He turns death into life.

The bible tells us that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Everyone who disobeys God (and everyone does disobey God) must die.

Jesus, though, lived in perfection by obeying the Father in everything.

By willfully laying down His perfect life in death, He won the right to turn His death into life which is proved on the third day when His physically dead body was restored to life forever.

[That is our reason for hope, but why? What does Jesus leaving the grave behind mean for us? That is what the next part of this text. These verses show us our hope as believers. It’s not in a change of government, it is not in escaping trials, it is not avoiding illness, it is not found in anything in this world, but rather...]

Point #2 – Jesus’ return is the hope of every believer.

A correct view of salvation is one that is Christ centered. That is the joy of our salvation is the exaltation of our glorious saviour in all of creation forever. That will only be complete when He comes to the earth and undoes the curse of humanity’s rebellion against Him.

Many believers think of our final hope as Christians as dying and going to heaven.

It is absolutely true, when a believer dies their soul is immediately with Christ in heaven.

The second half of **verse 14** here makes that point.

When Jesus comes He will bring with Him “those who have fallen asleep (that is died) in Him.”

Clearly, dead believers are with Him already and in that we can greatly rejoice, but we need to know that is not the end of the matter. Our hope is greater than that. Our hope is in the supremacy of Christ's rule over all of creation.

Because of His supremacy He will not allow this world to remain under the curse of death forever (**Verse 15-17a**).

From the language that is used here, some commentators think Paul is likening Jesus' return to the earth with the arrival of a ruler in the ancient world to a city.

When a person of high position would arrive, the people of that city would send out a delegation from the city to join in the procession of the one who is arriving.

That is what in view here. Jesus is coming in His glorious procession from heaven to establish His triumphant reign upon the earth.

Some commentators think that the reason Paul is writing these particular details to the Thessalonians is because somehow they had come under the impression that believers who died before the coming of Christ would miss out on this glorious moment.

They believed that the believers would be raised from the dead at some point after Jesus' arrival, but they would miss out on the actual event itself.

This is what Paul does not want them to remain ignorant about.

He says don't think that those who are still alive when Jesus comes will "precede those who have fallen asleep".

In other words, they won't miss out at all! Their souls are already coming with Him according to verse 14, but before this procession is over they will no longer be disembodied souls.

According to verse 16 Christ will come with "a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God."

A forceful, unmistakable, and irresistible command that is given for all to hear.

Just as Christ cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus come out!" and the dead man came out of the grave, so too the body of everyone who has died in Christ will leave the grave behind to join in the glorious procession of the King of Kings and Lord of lords as He returns.

Once that happens those who are still alive at Christ's coming will be "caught up together with them" to meet the Lord.

Do you see? No one misses out! This is the hope of every believer.

[Several years ago Michelle and I took a trip to the east coast. We went to a place called the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia. We went there because we had heard about how impressive it is to watch the tide come in. The place was inland a little bit and what happens every day as the tide comes in is a small river forms in that spot. My expectations were built up too much I suppose because from the way people described it I was expecting a torrent of water to come around the corner. It wasn't much more than a ditch filling up water. It would have been really easy to miss and it was very easy to be disappointed.]

Not so with the return of Christ. It is impossible to miss and it will not disappoint those that belong to Him.

Every believer will get to enjoy this moment of revealing Jesus' Supremacy over all of creation. This moment where He undoes the curse of sin, this is the hope of the church.

Rebellion against God will NOT carry the day despite what the present situation may look like.

Jesus will come and "every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:11).

[That is our hope, but what makes this hope better than all the other things people put their hope in. Why is Christ's coming true hope and everything else not really hope at all? We are told here in the second half of verse 17. We learn there that...]

Point #3 – Christian hope is the only genuine hope because it is eternal.

Hope that only lasts for a moment is no hope at all, because it means the situation of despair will return.

Look with me at what it says in the second half of verse 17 and 18.

Another way to translate this is that we will always be with the LORD.

There are at least two parts of great importance in that phrase.

One is the constant state of presence. We will always be with Christ.

We know that Jesus said He will be with His people in this present age right up until the end.

I am so thankful that because Jesus shares in the full attributes of God the Father that He can say that He is always with us.

Jesus never leaves or forsakes those who belong to Him.

He is with us in the present, but in these days His presence is for the most part unseen.

On that day He will be present in a way that everyone sees, on that day our faith will become sight and it will be so forever.

Another important aspect of "being with the LORD forever" is our constant state of being.

When the dead in Christ are raised, when those that remain are caught up with the LORD in the air, what remains of our mortal bodies will be transformed into what 1Corinthians 15 calls incorruptible bodies.

Which means in year 10,000,000 of being with Jesus our state of being which will enable us to worship Him as full human persons both body and soul (which results in our maximum possible joy) will not have diminished in the least from the first moment of His coming.

Maximum joy forever. That is true hope!

[I've mentioned before that as a teenager I played a fair bit of golf. Over those years I once or twice fell victim to the mindset of needing a new club(s). Not because mine were broken but because a new set would make me much better at the game. I remember a putter in particular. It was a ping putter and I thought it would cure all that ailed my putting. Do you know what happened after I got it and took it out on the course? The same thing that happened with my old putter, in fact I may have been worse off than before. To say the least I was disappointed.]

That is what will happen to everyone who hopes in anything but Jesus.

Those things will lead to disappointment because those things don't last.

In the end that is no hope at all and the whole point of what is written here is so that we will not be like that.

God does not want us "to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope."

The things that unbelievers put their hope in are all like the grass of the field that withers and fades or like a mist in the air that does not last.

Whatever temporary relief or joy they may have it will only last a moment and in the end will give way to misery under the judgment of Almighty God.

Oh how much better it is to belong to Christ.

We have the greatest reason of all to have hope, Jesus is alive.

We have the greatest hope of all, Jesus is coming.

We have the truest hope of all, we will be with Him forever.