

Encourage One Another with These Words

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Turn to 1 Thessalonians 4 please. Our paragraph today ends like this: *Therefore encourage each other with these words.* This is a sermon about Christian death. I want to do what it says, to encourage you with these words of Scripture.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, “if you really wanted to encourage us, you would not talk about death at all!” But I listened to a fine sermon this summer in Alberta on this text, by Pastor Brent, and I was much encouraged in all kinds of ways, and I want to pass that on to you.

Let’s read the first and last verse of our paragraph, 1 Thess 4:13 and 4:18. *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope....* [verse 18] *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

God does not want us to grieve about death like those without hope. Verse 16 speaks of “the dead in Christ.” When a follower of Christ dies, we should not grieve like the rest, those who have no hope.

Hope “Hope” in the NT always means something God promised which we know for sure will happen. I might say, “I hope it is sunny tomorrow.” That is NOT how the NT uses hope, because I don’t know about tomorrow. “We know it will be sunny tomorrow.” That’s NT hope. It is hope only because it has not happened yet, not because there is any doubt.

Grieving God does not want us to grieve like those who have no solid promise about what happens to the dead in Christ. We WILL grieve. But not like those people grieve.

At the end of Acts 9, Peter raised Tabitha Dorcas to life. When he got to the house where her body was, they were all weeping, crying. That’s what believers do at funerals. They grieve.

I remember being at a sad funeral and thinking to myself, “half the people in this room, including me, are doing their best not to cry; and we are at a funeral! How did we get so silly?”

And now, to make sure nobody grieves, instead of grieving at funerals, we have a “celebration of life.” When Tabitha Dorcas died, they wept, because they loved her and she was gone. That’s what Christ’s people do when a brother or sister dies. We grieve, but NOT like those who don’t have the certainty God gave us about the dead in Christ.

Encouragement Verse 18: *So encourage one another with these words.* God does not want us to grieve like the rest, God is concerned about how we his children feel when a loved one dies.

His heart goes out to us. God wants to encourage us, and he wants us to encourage each other, and he gives us these words to do that.

When Christians die, three things should happen, in vv13 and 18. One, grief, sadness, but not like the rest. Two, teaching, saying simply what's in this paragraph, so we are not uninformed. And three, encouragement. God gives us this teaching to encourage us, because he cares about our grief, and so we can encourage each other. Grief, teaching, encouragement.

When I die, at my funeral, please do not have a celebration of my life. Rather grieve, because you loved me and I'm gone. Celebration at a funeral is a sign of our world's determination not to think about death but always to be happy. Death is an enemy, and takes people we love. Grieve.

But if you must celebrate, celebrate what God has done through Jesus, celebrate this paragraph of Scripture that I will get to pretty soon. Grieve that I'm gone, teach what's in this Scripture or another like it, and encourage each other with these words. That would be my choice.

Now, what are "these words" that God gives us for encouraging each other?

Died, rose, coming back Verse 14 - *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Three things that are basic to what we believe about Jesus: he died, he rose, and he's coming back. Got it? He died, he rose, he's coming back. If he died and rose, then he's coming back. According to Paul here, it can't be any other way. These three things the Thessalonians knew.

What they did NOT realize is that when Jesus comes back, he's bringing with him believers who are in the sleep of death.

Who rises first? V 15: *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

*According to the Lord's own word.* What follows, Jesus himself said to his disciples at some point. It is not in our Gospels, but a few times in the NT, Paul and other writers quote words of Jesus that are not in our Gospels. John says he only wrote down a small fraction of what Jesus said.

*According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

We can get a feel for what worried the Thessalonian believers, or at least some of them. This is a very early church, one of the very first Paul and Barnabas planted. In those early days they thought the Lord would come back quite quickly. They thought the Lord would come back before they got old and died.

I am sure Paul and Barnabas told them about the resurrection of the body, but there were so many new things for those believers, and that one slipped away.

One or more of the Thessalonian believers had died, and these believers knew that Christ was going to come back for them, but they feared that those who had died would be left behind when Christ came back. Yes, Christ would return to take the living to himself. But what about those who died before he returned? Would they be left behind?

*According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

That was a big relief to the Thessalonians. They who were alive and left would NOT go ahead of those who had fallen asleep. "Certainly not." That's the basic thing they needed to hear. Now we get it explained more fully in verses 16-17.

Between death and resurrection A detour on the time between our deaths and Jesus coming back: When believers die, their body decays in the grave, but their soul is with the Lord. In 1 Cor 15 Paul writes about the possibility of being executed. He says, *I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* If he's executed, he'll leave this earth and his body and be with Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5 he says the same thing: *as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. We are confident, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* Again, when we leave these present bodies, we are with the Lord.

Rev 6 describes those who have been killed for their faith, martyrs, near God's throne and praying to him for justice on earth? *How long until you judge the people of earth and avenge our blood?* They were told to wait a little longer.

So that's what happens between our dying and Jesus coming back. But that's not what Paul's talking about in 1 Thessalonians. This detour is over, back to 1 Thess 4.

Basic sequence Paul lists 4 things in order, to show that the dead in Christ are not left behind.

Verses 16-17. One, the Lord himself will come down from heaven in power: *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God.*

This is the first thing. The Lord himself comes down, not quite to earth, but just above it seems, but this is NOT quiet: loud command, voice of the archangel, trumpet call of God. Not quiet.

Two, *the dead in Christ will rise first.* Don't worry about the dead in Christ. They get their resurrection bodies before the rest of us, though not very long before. We will not go ahead of the those who sleep in Christ. The Lord comes down in power, then the dead in Christ rise first.

Three: *After that, after the dead in Christ rise first, then we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

The dead in Christ rise first, then we who are still alive and waiting for Jesus will be snatched up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So Christ comes down from heaven, but not quite to earth, just above it apparently. Second, the dead in Christ rise.

Third, we who live and have been left are snatched up by God with them, with the dead in Christ who rise first, to meet the Lord in the air. Third is we the living are caught up by God with them.

Four: *So we will be with the Lord forever.* Together with the Lord, where? In the air? In heaven? On earth? Doesn't say, because it doesn't matter. We'll be with **the Lord**, FOREVER!! Who cares WHERE!

One, the Lord will come down from heaven, with a shout of command, and the overwhelming voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God. Two, the dead in Christ rise first. Three, believers who live and remain are caught up to meet the risen dead and meet the Lord in the air. Four, we are all with the Lord forever.

The Christian confidence about death is the most audacious and preposterous confidence ever. The world has no answer for this at all. Just research and science and don't eat the bad stuff, so we can all live a bit longer and die healthy.

We like it that Jesus died and rose because then our sins are forgiven. That's good. But every counsellor in North America is trained in how to encourage people who feel guilty. Their answer is not nearly as good as God's answer, but it helps some people.

But the world has no answer for death. God has given us the boldest answer possible, and God has promised it and made it certain. If Jesus died and rose, it cannot be any other way than what's in this paragraph of Scripture. We are far too reluctant to tell the world what God through Jesus has done to death. It may be the most wonderful thing about the gospel.

Let's go over v17 a little more carefully. *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

Reunion with the Lord There is a brief reunion of believers here, three words long: *together with them*. We the living will be caught up "together with them." But the emphasis of this Scripture is entirely on meeting the Lord and being with the Lord forever.

When Christians are young, they picture life with God as the best place on earth they can imagine. But the Lord is usually not a big part of the picture. I'm like this.

When believers get old, because they are not as interested in nice places and because they've lost too many loved ones. For them, the best part of our future is being with the people we've lost. I'm becoming more like this. The Lord is usually not a big part of this picture either.

Both of these are misguided, I'm afraid. In this Scripture, by far the best thing about the Lord coming back for us is that we will meet HIM, and we will be WITH HIM FOREVER. There's a brief mention of our lost ones, "together with them," but the emphasis is on meeting the Lord and being with the Lord.

Meeting those we've lost will be small for us compared to finally meeting the Lord and being with the Lord forever. We don't think so, only because we never met him. And in this paragraph only one thing matters about where we will be: "with the Lord, forever."

Clouds: *caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord*. These are not rain clouds. In the exodus, when the Israelites left Egypt and went through the wilderness, a cloud led them. The cloud settled over the tabernacle. It was the presence of God and the glory of God.

When the cloud lifted, they packed up and moved wherever the cloud went. When the cloud settled, they set up the tabernacle there, and camped around it. At night it was a pillar of fire.

In Daniel 7, Daniel predicts that the son of man will come with the clouds of heaven. Those are not rain clouds, those are the presence and glory of God.

In Matthew 17, Jesus took Peter and James and John to a high mountain, and he was changed into his glory in front of them. And then there was a bright cloud, those are Matthew's words, a bright cloud, which means the glory and presence of God. And a voice came from the cloud, *This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him*. That was not a rain cloud. God was in the cloud of his presence.

In Acts 1, when Jesus ascended, Jesus "*was taken up from the disciples, and a cloud hid him from their eyes*." That's not a rain cloud. That means Jesus was taken up into the presence and glory of God. He was taken up, and a cloud hid him from their eyes.

That is the kind of cloud we are caught up into, the presence and glory of God. *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds [i.e. into the glory and presence of God] to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

*Therefore encourage one another with these words. First*, the Lord will come down from heaven in power. Second, the dead in Christ will rise first. Third, we the living who are left will be caught up with them to meet the Lord in the air. And fourth, we will all be with the Lord forever.

And remember, Paul is quoting Jesus himself on this. *So encourage each other with these words. Amen.*