

EFC

March 22, 2020

“The Final Word”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Good morning, EFC family. Here we are, once again, meeting through digital broadcast, and I am grateful we can gather together electronically, since we cannot in person. We hope this time is an encouragement to you, as we all adjust to these new realities. I want you to know that we have been praying for you in various ways. One of those ways is a daily online prayer meeting. If you're interested in joining us at times, send an email to englishfellowshipchurch@gmail.com, and we'll send you the invitation.

This morning we are going to get back into Thessalonians. The events of these past weeks have thrown us off our schedule a bit, so it is going to seem like we are jumping around. But we'll do the best we can, and try to faithfully look to God and His Word to speak to us.

Pray.

Final Word

It's always important to hear the final word if we want to know how things really turn out. If we were to stop half way through the story, our conclusions would be wrong. In fact, it is the final word that matters most. And this is not just true in stories – it is most importantly true in our lives. What we are going to see today in Thessalonians is that Jesus has the final, good word in the lives of those who trust in Him.

Of all the things in life, death is one of the most final. It comes to us all, in one way or another. And if that were the end of the story, we would not have much hope. But Jesus has the final word, not death or any lesser threat or enemy, for that matter.

Paul writes to inform the Thessalonians of the truth of their situation, especially in regards to death and the Christian life. Their struggles had to do with the fact that some of the believers had died. Perhaps they believed that no true Christian would die. Maybe they doubted the value of their faith since it did not keep them from death. Or perhaps they thought that those believers who died would be at a disadvantage in their relationship with God. We're not sure. But Paul writes to found their faith on the truth, and help them know that Jesus, and not death, has the final word. Let's read what Paul says to answer their concerns about death and the Christian.

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. 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 alive, 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

At the heart of what Paul says to encourage the Thessalonian believers is that Jesus has the final word. Period. Not even death can overcome Him. In fact, Paul refers to those who are dead in Christ as being “asleep.” I love how accurate this is for Christ’s followers. Because death is nothing more permanent than sleep, when it comes to God’s power. Easier than I wake up my daughters on a school morning, God raises us to life in Christ.

Paul explains it like this. Since we believe Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give life to all who trust in Him, we know that Jesus’ followers who have died will be raised again. In fact, when Jesus returns at the end of this age, He will first raise those Christians who have died. And then all believers who are still alive will be caught up in the air with them, and together we will meet Jesus in the clouds.

There are two sides to this final word for us. We are saved both from something, and for something. First, we are saved from God’s wrath. Paul mentioned this 1 Thessalonians 1:10, where part of his description of Christians is that we “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus **who delivers us from the wrath to come.**” I think Paul alludes to this aspect of our salvation in our passage because the word for “caught up” (as in, we “will be caught up together with them”) is a vivid word. It can be translated “to seize,” or “to take by force.” I think it points us to how Jesus will come and rescue us in mighty power, snatching us from the terrible wrath of God that we deserved to experience for our sin. But Jesus rescues us from that wrath.

But only does Jesus save us from wrath, but He saves us for life-giving relationship with Himself. Every person who trusts in Jesus will be with Him forever. This is our certain future, and the final word for everyone who trusts in Christ as Savior and Lord. We will forever be with Jesus, and not even death can stop it.

When the Thessalonian believers were tempted to lose heart because of the death of their fellow believers, Paul reminds them that Jesus has the final word, and not even death can stand in His way. But we need to remember that this hope we have is found only in Jesus Christ. This is front and center for Paul. He doesn’t want the church to grieve “as others who have no hope”, meaning that some have hope, while others have none. Those who have hope are those who believe that Jesus died and rose again; the sentence is conditional – *because* we believe Jesus died and rose again, *even so* God will bring the dead to life. Finally, Paul highlights this with the phrases “through Jesus” (vs. 14) and “in Christ” (vs. 16). It is in Christ, and in Christ alone, that we have life that overcomes death, and an indestructible hope for the future. Without Him, we have no hope at all.

These are the facts Paul recounts to establish the Thessalonian believers in their hope: Jesus died and rose. He will raise all who trust in Him, even if they die physically. And whether physically dead or alive when Christ returns, the indestructible destiny of every believer is that we will always be with the Lord. These are the facts upon which our hope is built.

But we can't just leave this as facts in our heads, as important as that is. Don't let these verses pass you by without them moving your heart and lifting your soul to God in awe and worship. Picture with me what Jesus is saying to everyone who trusts in Him. One day, with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, He will come. Can you picture it? Jesus doesn't send a messenger, not even a mighty army of angels. *Jesus Himself* will come to bring us to be with Him. Brothers and sisters, that should make our hearts skip a beat! Jesus, God the Son, our Lord, our Savior, Love incarnate, will come to rescue us. What a day that will be! This is not written to simply give us facts to think; this is also for our hearts! Jesus is coming back, and He has the final word!

I don't think I need to work too hard to point out how this connects with our lives. The truth is, pretty much all of us will die physically someday, with the exception of those who are alive when Jesus returns. Whether from a car accident, a heart attack, old age, or a rampant virus, death comes. But it does not have the last word in the lives of Jesus' people. Do you hear what the Lord is saying to you today? Jesus has the last word for you, and His word is of indestructible hope. Your destiny is heaven, rescued from wrath, forever to be with Him. You have nothing to fear. And if we do not need to fear death, the greatest of enemies, then we don't need to fear any lesser enemy, either. For Jesus has the last word over anything else we face – sickness, poverty, fears, injuries, whatever. Jesus has the final word for all who trust in Him. So don't abandon your faith even in the face of death.

It is God's desire that this impact us in two very clear ways. First, God wants us to be encouraged. And second, He wants us to be encouraging.

In the opening verse of this section, Paul explicitly stated how he wanted to impact the believers. "But we do not want you to be uninformed... that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Paul wants the Thessalonian believers to know that they have a hope that not even death can take away! Jesus still has the final word. Brothers and sisters, God wants us to be encouraged this morning as well. Come what may in our lives, face whatever we face, and the realities of death and loss we may experience, Jesus still has the final word. And that makes all the difference.

I have a picture on my office desk of my grandmother and step-grandfather. They are probably the closest people to me that have died. I loved them dearly – in fact, Josiah's middle name is my grandfather's name. Their death was difficult, but it was not without hope. They trusted in Jesus, and I know that death does not have the final say. One day, when Jesus will return, I will join with them in heaven, and forever we will be with Jesus, together. Jesus has the final word.

So be encouraged, brothers and sisters. Come what may in this life, no enemy has the final word over you – Jesus does. You can live free from fear, and risk everything to follow Jesus and share His love, because you know He holds your future, and not even death can stop Him.

But not only does God want to encourage us, He also wants us to be encouraging. This is the final verse of our passage. "Therefore encourage one another with these words." (vs. 18) Therefore – because Jesus has the final, good word in our lives – we should be encouraging

others with this truth. I want to apply this in two ways, one directly from this passage, and one from the broader teaching of Scripture.

From this passage, I want to challenge us as all to literally encourage someone in our church family with a reminder that Jesus has the final word, and it is good. Ask God who you might encourage, and how you might express that encouragement from His Word and the truth of our hope. Perhaps you could write an email to a ministry leader who is working hard to help others know Jesus and navigate the challenges of life; remind them that their labor in Jesus is not in vain. Maybe it's a phone call to a brother or sister in Christ who has had a profound impact on your walk with Jesus. Or maybe God brings a Bible verse to mind that you could share with someone in our church family. I want to challenge us all to literally "encourage one another with these words."

And from the broader teaching of Scripture, I want to challenge each of us as Christ's followers to encourage people around us who do not yet know Jesus, to turn to Him for hope and salvation. The same word for "encourage" that Paul uses in this verse is also found in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God *making his appeal* through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Brothers and sisters, let us join God in His work to bring people from death to life. I'm not trying to be overly dramatic, but if we can't say this now, I don't know when we can: people are facing death all around us, and without Jesus they face a hopeless eternity. But Jesus rescues. He died, rose, and is coming back to save all who repent of their sins and turn to Him in faith. You have a hope that the world desperately needs to find, and God has made you His ambassador. I really want to challenge each of us to purposefully and boldly encourage people around us to turn to Jesus for their hope, entrusting them into His hands as we do. So that He will have the final word of life in their lives, as He does in ours.