

Sermon 1617

1 Thessalonians 4.13-19

November 19, 2017

They were lounging at the street corner, killing time. They had quit their jobs yesterday, because they believed Jesus was coming back soon, two weeks, tops. Since they had nothing better to do, they talked about things they knew nothing about.

“Poor Joe. He passed away last week. He will miss out on the Judgment Day and won’t go to heaven.”

“Yep, it’s too bad about Joe. Hope I make it to when Jesus comes back. You say it’s going to be this week, right?”

“Yup. Next week tops.”

That’s the conversation some eager beaver believers in the church at Thessalonika were having. They were so eager they totally messed up Jesus’ return and what it meant. They thought that the dead believers would miss out on it all. They thought only the believers who were alive when the world ended would go to heaven.

How would that affect our hope of salvation if it were a “you have to be present to win” deal? Paul’s words corrected their erroneous thinking, and gives great certainty and comfort to all believers, whether we will be walking the face of the earth or whether we will be in our graves when the Last Day comes.

#### We Will Meet the Lord

1. Jesus lives.
2. Believers, first the dead, then the living, in the clouds.
3. Forever in heaven.

The problem with the Thessalonians was they thought believers who had died were going to lose out on eternal life. If that were the case, then we would be like every unbeliever on earth, left without any hope at the funeral of a loved one.

“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. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again (13-14).”

That’s where our certainty as Christians starts, with Christ. How do I know there is life after death? How do I know there is a heaven?

If we follow our sinful human nature, we will come to the conclusion that there is no life after death, that there is no heaven. It’s a one way street. Everybody dies. We see funeral after funeral. Contrary to what my dad wants people to say at his funeral, “Hey, I think he just moved!” we have never attended a funeral that flopped because the deceased came back to life. There are no return policies for burial sites at Palm mortuary and don’t go looking for a deal on craigslist, “Burial plot for sale, reduced price, slightly used, previous occupant rose from the dead.” It doesn’t happen. That’s what our sinful human nature says, our sinful human nature that believes nothing God says, hopes for nothing God promises and pays attention to nothing God commands.

It would serve us right if God gave us exactly what our sinful human nature expected. No life after death. Only eternal death. No forever in heaven. Only forever in hell.

Jesus changed all that. He kept his trust in a loving and life-giving God. On the cross he confessed his faith in the life to come when he told the repentant thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” When his life was ebbing away, he said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” He believed. He did not doubt. He kept the First Commandment even to the point of death. That’s our Jesus. That’s our righteousness.

By that death he paid the price for all the doubt and skepticism our “show me and I still won’t believe what my eyes are telling me” sinful human nature can dredge up. Our doubts no longer stand in the way of our going to heaven because Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus lives. He is my certainty. His resurrection is your hope. And we know we will meet him because he is alive, not dead.

We will meet the Lord. Believers, first the dead, then the living, in the clouds.

Remember, the Thessalonians were only concerned about believers, not all people. They thought dead believers would not be in heaven because they wouldn’t be around when Jesus returned on the Last Day.

“So we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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, and the dead in Christ will rise first (14-16).”

Instead of being left behind or left out, the believers who have died before the end of the world will have the best view. Their souls will return with Jesus when he appears. “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” And it is going to be the loudest, noisiest day in the history of this world. “A loud command, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call of God.” You can sleep through the alarm clock, but you won’t miss this. You could even be late for your own funeral—that’s another story for another day—but you cannot be late for the Last Day. When the Lord commands in his unveiled majesty, heaven and earth jump to it. When the Lord commands in his manifest glory, all flesh keeps quiet and obeys. The souls of believers who had passed away will come with Jesus and be united to their bodies when Jesus raises the dead from their graves and takes them up to the clouds for judgment, as we heard in the Gospel reading and the sermon on it last Sunday. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the nations will be gathered before him (Matthew 25.31, 32).”

First. The dead believers will be the first to be up in the clouds to meet Jesus.

“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 (17).”

I will say it again. Remember, the Thessalonians were only concerned about believers, not all people. They thought dead believers would not be in heaven because they wouldn't be around when Jesus returned on the Last Day. So Paul is only talking about believers. He's not talking about what will happen to unbelievers on the Last Day. Their souls will also be united with their bodies in the resurrection of all flesh. The unbelievers who are still alive will also be caught up into the clouds for judgment.

Just as the eager beaver Thessalonian believers were mistaken that the dead believers would miss out on the judgment, so some modern misinterpretations among Christians are mistaken that talk about only believers being taken from this world and the unbelievers being left behind. The Rapture, they call this false teaching. No matter how many pastors skip the last session of our pastors' conferences, I never get this feeling that the end of the world has come and Jesus has taken his true believers to be with him in heaven, leaving me to vote on where the conference will meet the next time. When Jesus comes back, everybody will know about it. There will be no secrets. How can you keep the voice of an archangel and the trumpet call of God a secret? When Jesus comes, you know the end of the world is here and all people will be caught up in the clouds while this world is being destroyed. When Jesus comes you know the Last Day is here and all believers will be caught up in the clouds as a launching pad for their entry into heaven. When Jesus comes you now the Judgment Day is here and all unbelievers will be sentenced to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

“And so we will be the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words (17-18).”

We will meet the Lord forever in heaven.

Nothing on this earth lasts. In visiting our members in their homes I notice pictures on shelves, display cases, end tables. There are some very important people in those pictures, I mean, besides family and friends and the members themselves! I see pictures of President Reagan or Carter shaking their hands. I see pictures of, oh my, is that Elvis chatting you up at a table at the old Continental? Governor Guinn with his arm around your shoulder. Andre Agassi and you standing on the same tennis court. I could go on and on. You were very proud of that day. You remember that day. But that day has passed. All that remain are memories.

When we meet the Lord in the clouds, that's not going to be a one day photo opportunity. We will be with the Lord forever. That's part of what makes heaven heaven.

Let's look at forever first of all. It will never end. Everything in this world ends. That cute, cuddly little angel you held in your arms, so sweet, so tender, even

blowing baby's breath at you, well, that doesn't last. You get a terrible two with an attitude. Then it's time to send them to school and you wonder how they like the lunch you packed them. God forbid you pack them anything for lunch in high school. And, by the way, could you drop them off a few blocks from school so people don't see them with you? Back from college a quick Thanksgiving Day meal is all you get out of them before they're off to see their high school friends.

Nothing lasts. Every woman believes the man she marries is immortal. He can age, but by golly, he promised to stay by her side (forget about that "till death us do part" stuff). Then she gets hints that he's not immortal. High blood pressure. A mini-stroke that makes him limp. Checking insulin levels. One of them will be left alone and she's pretty sure it's going to be her. Why didn't she fall in love with a man ten years younger than she?

Nothing is forever in this world. The holidays go too fast. The years zip by. When you are 80 it seems like you eat breakfast every five minutes. That's what makes this world so hard. The tough times, I understand that. We go through them. This, too, shall pass. But the good times? Why can't they stay a little longer?

Forever means they will stay. Forever means they will never go away. Forever means the man you married on earth and are so happy he is there in heaven, is immortal now and he's a much better friend in heaven than he ever was a husband on earth! Forever means without end. Never to leave. Never to be left.

Now let's look at Lord. The Lord is the most of every good and perfect thing. Every positive quality you can think of, loving, gracious, compassionate, knowing, caring. God is omni- every one of them. Beauty, he is beauty itself. If a Graecian vase or an Italian painting, are a joy forever, how much more pleasure is the Lord going to give us just by being in our line of sight in heaven? We could gaze at his beauty forever. We could lose ourselves in our contemplation of him. Unlike a self-conscious husband or wife who finally will ask, with a note of irritation, "What are you looking at?" the Lord will never mind.

Finally, let's look at we. You will be there. I will be there. Every believer will be there. Abel, the first believer to die on earth will be there. The last believer to come into the world before Judgment Day, who is alive when he sees the stars begin to fall from the sky, he will be there. Not a one of them will go missing. No doubt about it. "According to the Lord's own word" it will be given unto you and unto me.

#### We Will Meet the Lord

1. Jesus lives.
2. Believers, first the dead, then the living, in the clouds.
3. Forever in heaven.

So do not worry. Let your hearts not be troubled. Believe in God. Believe in Jesus. Believe him when he promises we will meet the Lord.