

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“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.”

There are certain passages in the Bible that are engrained in your memory for one reason or another. I’m sure you can think of instance. Maybe it’s your confirmation verse? Maybe it’s a Psalm, like Psalm 23 or another passage of Scripture. This is good to have God’s word in our mind and hearts. God’s word should dwell in us richly. The Epistle reading is one of those passages for me that always comes to mind and one I think about often. The reason is because this passage from 1 Thessalonians 4 is in the Committal service. That’s the service, or rite, that’s done at the graveside after the funeral and when we are gathered around the grave at the cemetery. I have read this passage at the grave of God’s saints more times than I can remember or count. Remembering this passage, though, and the situation in life I often hear and use it is not something that I consider with sadness rather I rejoice in what God has says in these words and the circumstances in which God speaks. These words of God in the Epistle reading are comforting, and they encourage me as a pastor when I stand over the graves of dear brothers and sisters in Christ. They also encourage me as a Christian who thinks about what it means to go through this life, that is a vale of tears, mourning death yet mourning with hope.

Listen again to the words the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write, “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.” God wants you to be informed, he tells you that today, he doesn’t want you to be uninformed and there’s more than one reason why. Primarily it’s because of what he says at the end of the reading, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Encouragement comes from God’s word and knowing God’s word in faith. Biblical encouragement, too, is not just someone cheering you on, it’s the sure and certain hope of eternal life in Christ given and shared through God’s word. Encouraging one another with the word of God is what we do as Christians.

Let’s look, then at what encouragement you have today by beginning with a bit of background. The Thessalonians thought the return of Jesus was immanent and those who died before his return, “missed out” or were somehow not a part of the church because they died before Jesus returned. This was false, along with some other issues addressed in the letter. God used St. Paul to correct them, to inform them about what it means to die in Christ and what it means when the Lord returns. Today you might not have the same misunderstanding as the Thessalonians, but you are still taught about what it means to die as a Christian and who you as the whole church of God.

And this is an important thing, then, to consider this day and one that’s very clear. When you consider the death of a Christian, it’s different than the death of an unbeliever and, related to that, when an unbeliever considers death. Note first, though, what God doesn’t say. He doesn’t say you won’t grieve. Christians and unbelievers both grieve. Each mourns the loss of those whom they love, and it hurts. Jesus wept in John 11 over the death of Lazarus and Christians mourn the loss of other Christians. What’s different, however, is your grieving is a grieving with hope. The grieving of a Christian for a Christian is vastly different than grief without hope.

Why is that? Maybe first we should ask what does this mean? Let’s go back to that reading from Matthew, the Gospel reading. “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved.”

God's is evoking something in this Gospel reading through the preaching of the law; it's fear. Fear is something that should only be directed, however, toward God. God's wrath is real, and he can, as Jesus says, destroy both body and soul in hell. There's a brief but fierce glimpse of God's anger toward sin in the Gospel reading and what it looks like on earth when Christ is rejected. The abomination of desolation points to several things but we see the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem really come to the forefront. We see this city, the city of peace, which rejected the peace of God who is Christ and instead mocked him and rejected him. They had turned their backs on the Lord of hosts and this event in history teaches us to grieve our sin, to be in terror of God's wrath and judgement when we continue in it and turn to God's mercy found only in Christ. We see this event in history and hear the words of Jesus and repent. Nations, however great they may be, when they turn their back on the Lord reap the consequences. It was not uncommon for accounts of this event in history, from the historian Josephus, to be read and even included in some hymnals as a warning to for God's people.

In some ways in all of this, though, God teaches us about what it means to mourn with hope when we see something like this and then look at our own lives. We look at the world around us. We look at our own lives according to God's word, according to his law and we see that we indeed have sinned. Not only that but we see that as Christians we have been called to view our lives through the lens of God's word and to lead holy lives according to it. We've been called to fear no man or thing except God himself.

All our lives are lived in the final days. The time between when Jesus ascended into heaven and when he returns is where we live and we move ever toward the Last Day. Jesus tells us that there will be wars, rumors of war, and countless other things as we hear about that today and again in a few weeks during Advent. Living in this world is living in the end. It's not about decoding some world events, or anything hidden that some history channel special talks about. A biblical theology of the end times is incredibly simple. The world is fallen. Things happen in this world even our lives as evidence that we live in a fallen world heading toward destruction. It's tempting for us to stumble over these events and lose our gaze on Jesus who has overcome the world. It's also tempting for us to veer off course and look for a false christ who would promise us relief, healing, prosperity, life, and redemption apart from the true Christ who reveals himself in the Scriptures or to write things off as unimportant. Many false gods spring up during times of trial, and the devil is alive and well to tear you away from Jesus and eternal life.

We are called, though to remain faithful and steadfast, to suffer all even death rather than fall away. Those words of the Introit from Psalm 31 are our prayer in this world that God would be gracious to us, let us not be put to shame, and that we find refuge in him. In all those words we are calling upon God for our redemption and hope. The alternative, to capitulate or compromise is out of the question for if the church does that then she rightly should fear God's wrath. We, until Christ comes again, are in a period of grieving, but we don't lose hope when Christ and his word is preached in our midst.

Jesus warned the people, "And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

So, what's this got to do with mourning and mourning with hope? Jesus places before you today something wonderful. Seeing that terrible image of wrath, destruction, and death you see what the Lord has redeemed you from and what you have instead. Baptized into Christ you are informed in this world. There's no fake news in the Holy Scriptures, but they are the true inspired, inerrant Word of God which has made you wise in salvation

and a light which shines in the darkness. These things around you and yes especially death is seen through the one who is the Son of Man, your Redeemer.

To mourn with hope then is to see the world around you and to see the enemies of sin, death, and the devil as the defeated ones. You know that this too will pass for God's word endures forever and just as you sing in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "the Kingdom ours remaineth." Suffering, sin, the devil's work, and death will come to an end because Jesus has taken your sin upon himself and made peace with God by shedding his blood on the cross for you and the whole world. God's wrath and anger are appeased for you in Christ. This is seen vividly when you look at the death as Christians. As Christians, when you look at the death of those who die in Christ or think about your own death you know that it is not the end. I had a professor who once said he wants written on his tombstone, "This is but a momentary setback." The point being yes, your loved ones have died but they are alive in Christ.

When we die our souls go to be with Jesus in heaven and our bodies are laid into the tomb as a person lays down his body at night to sleep. This is often why "sleep" is a euphemism when talking about death for Christians. The soul is with Jesus and then on the Last Day when the Lord returns, we are bodily, physically, raised from our graves just as the Lord says in the reading today. "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." Those who are still alive on the final day join with those who have gone before us and are reunited with their bodies again, but all have put on immortality and incorruption. This isn't some "rapture" in this reading but it's the day of resurrection, notice how he talks about being brought together here as the people of God. This is what will happen as God promises this to you. This is the hope God shows you which is your future.

"Therefore encourage one another with these words" God says and teaches you. Encourage one another as the body of Christ with these words of hope. These are words of resurrection and life. That's what it is to grieve with hope as Christians it's to know as you sang last Sunday when we observed All Saints Day, "But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day: the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of Glory passes on his way. Alleluia! Alleluia!" Rejoice dear saints of God and take courage to face the days right now as ones who have eternal life. Not even death can take life away from you. That's a bold statement to make but that's the truth of who you are in Christ. You are children of God, sons and daughters who are heirs of life. What a wonderful thing and confidence to have, to be informed and know what you have as God's people baptized. It's a confidence to stare death in the face and have hope, to have life. It's a confidence to see your brothers and sisters in Christ lowered into grave only to stand back up again. And you know what dear saints of God? You will too. Unless the Lord returns first you will fall asleep in Christ and go to be with him in heaven and then on the Last Day your bodies will rise from the grave along with all of God's saints and we, together, will always be with the Lord in the new heavens and the new earth. Mourn death as a Christian but mourn as those who have hope. Take courage and be encouraged for Jesus is risen, your sin is forgiven, and you have all of this in your baptism. What a future you have on account of Christ crucified for you. You have a future which is glory, joy, peace, and life eternal.

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