

1Thessalonians 12-05-04a

This is Friday the 4th of May 2012. We're in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and we pick up tonight in verse 13. We'll pray and then begin.

Father, what a blessing it is to gather, to spend time together in fellowship in the study of your Word, especially as we look tonight at this wonderful subject of the return of the Lord Jesus to gather us to himself and ultimately to bring us into your presence. We thank you for this passage. We thank you for the provision that you have made that enables us to be here and to seek to improve our understanding and our application of the truth of your Word.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will superintend. We pray that the ministry function of each person who is here will be in evidence and that all of us will receive a blessing and be able to provide a blessing to others. We pray that in all things the Lord Jesus will be glorified.

We pray it in his name. Amen. Well, we have come to this very fascinating section.

There's nothing more exciting than the rapture of the church. Hence the word rapture, although it has come to mean something else than what it did in the Latin. And of course the New Testament was not written in Latin, the Catholics notwithstanding.

But this is where we get our word rapture from and this is our central passage in the New Testament on the gathering of the church to the Lord Jesus Christ. There has been vast amount of discussion and some controversy regarding the timing, regarding whether or not the rapture of the church is the same thing as the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The schools of thought on this have what they believe to be strong arguments on various points.

We're going to briefly review those. We're not going to dwell extensively on it because I think most of us already have our minds made up and I am going to be somewhat preaching to the choir on that. But I think it is good to review why we believe what we believe about the pre-wrath, pre-tribulation rapture of the church and why we see it as distinct and separate from the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

So we'll do something of an excursus on that, but not much. We want to move right on through our passage and hear the letter the way Paul wrote it. Paul and Barnabas actually.

So let's take for granted that you remember what has come before. Paul says there are some things I don't need to remind you about and I don't need to remind you about what Paul didn't have to remind them about. So this is the part that he does want them not to be lacking knowledge of.

So if you pick up in verse 13, But I do not want you to be ignorant brethren concerning those who have fallen asleep lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died

and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus. We've done most of the exegesis on this last week, so I'll give it a quick once-over when we get to that phase.

But look at verse 15. For this we say to you by the Word of the Lord that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words. What I would like to first point out this evening is the inclusio here.

Just look at the first and the last things that Paul says because this defines the purpose for which he gives it. And that's very important because there are many things that you can say about any given subject depending on your purpose. What is your purpose? What is your goal? If I am asked by my toddler child who has only recently learned to speak and ask such questions, why does the sun come up every morning? Well, what is my purpose in answering that question? Do I just want to explain the interval of day and night? Do I want to get into a discussion of the solar system and stars and galaxies? What is my purpose? That's going to define the way I answer that question.

Same thing here. So what is Paul's purpose? He says in verse 13, I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. So the concern, the reason this topic comes up isn't, let me tell you about the timing of the end of the Church Age, the Tribulation Period, the coming of Antichrist, Armageddon, the Second Advent, the inception of the Millennial Kingdom.

That's not his purpose, is it? What is his purpose? I want to tell you, I want to comfort you so that you don't have sorrow about those who have fallen asleep. This is the goal. Don't be unhelpful.

Don't be grief-stricken as others about those who have fallen asleep. So we can deduce from this that there has been enough time go by since the Gospel came to Thessalonica that some people who accepted it have passed away, family members. Maybe there were some elderly relatives.

Maybe there was someone who met with accident or execution by Roman authorities or whatever it may be, but somebody in this congregation, one or more people, heard the Gospel, accepted the Gospel, came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and have since passed away. And so as people contemplate the teaching of Paul about the Lord Jesus Christ and that they should live in hope, we've already had that earlier in this letter, that remember back in chapter 2 verse 19, what is our hope or joy or crown of rejoicing? It is not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming. You all to whom I am speaking, not the dead ones, just the living ones, you to whom I'm speaking, you are going to be my joy and glory and crown at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And they're thinking, well, but what about Uncle Bob? He's checked out. He has fallen off his perch. He's upside down in the bottom of the cage.

He's no longer with us. What's going to happen when the Lord Jesus returns? How? And Paul says, I don't want you to lack information so that you would have a kind of grief that matches people who have no concept, no hope, and no expectation of the things that he is about to say. This is the purpose.

Believe me when I tell you, it is extremely important to keep the purpose in mind, because it is not only what Paul says here, but what he does not say that is important. How do you know what he's not saying? Well, you have to know what he's talking about and why he is talking about it. So, we see this in the first and last comments.

I do not want you to be ignorant concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow. Therefore, now that I've told you, comfort one another. And that, by the way, in verse 18 is a present tense.

Keep on comforting one another. Keep on reminding one another. Keep on being assured.

Keep this truth in your thinking when you think about those who have passed away. Be comforted. Be comforting one another with these words.

The purpose is comfort on an occasion for grief, passing away of believers. So, having said that, this that we've already looked at in verse 13, I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow. And, lest is not the way I would translate this.

It's a legitimate translation, but it is hena me, plus the verb. Hena means so that, and me is the milder negative. So that you not, and it's kind of a really, even though there's a negative in there, it's a more positive construction.

I don't think Paul's idea is, I don't want you to be ignorant, lest you sorrow. His purpose is, in order that you not sorrow. So, there's a subtle difference there.

I can't really explain it, but I like it better saying, in order that you not sorrow. As others, and others here is really a word that means the remainder or the rest. And these are those who are outside.

These are the unbelievers. These are those who do not have the faith of Christ, but the loipoi are the remainder, the leftovers, ones who you get this stuff over here, and you get the rest over there. Like the rest, the ones having no hope.

Hope is an important element of our faith. It defines us. Be ready always to give an answer to

every man that asketh you a reason for the love among your brethren.

Is that what it says? Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason for the faith that characterizes your life. What is it that draws people? What is it that marks us out to unbelievers? Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you. Hope, not just hope in the face of those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

This is hope in the face of adversity. This is hope in the face of grinding circumstances, things that don't have any prospect of let-up, or amelioration, or resolution. There are things that happen, and it's going to be a permanent temptation to grief, and to sorrow, and to giving up, and to being depressed.

We have an antidote for this. It doesn't mean that we're slap-happy. It doesn't mean that we are silly or ecstatic all the time, but we have a kind of comfort, and this is Paul's purpose.

Comfort one another. Hope provides comfort. Not only does it serve as expectation, not only does it help us to find our goals, and our priorities, and our values, but it provides a comfort.

So what is a point of application here, before we even get into the details of this passage? If we find ourselves in sorrow, if we find ourselves battling grief, grief that is crippling, grief that is unnerving, grief that is disabling, bereavement, disappointment, catastrophic circumstances of a personal nature, or of an economic nature, or whatever it may be, all of us know that black valley of the shadow that we sometimes find ourselves in. Maybe our own fault, might be somebody else's fault, might be nobody's fault. It might just be the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but whatever it is, we have that black pit of despair, and we can't shake it.

We say, well, let me say a few verses to myself, and it doesn't seem to work, and we pray, and it doesn't seem to provide comfort, and we talk to others, and sometimes when they look at us, and we see the look of pity and commiseration in their eyes, that depresses us. Where is the comfort? Where is the genuine salve on this deep and sometimes abiding wound? It is hope. So when we go to the scriptures, it's not just any old memory verse, not just any old study.

We specifically look to the truth of God that is in our souls, that constitutes our hope. God has a plan and purpose. It is working every hour closer to its ultimate resolution and fulfillment and forward movement.

The Lord Jesus Christ is one day, one hour, one moment closer to his return, closer to gathering us to himself, closer to enabling us to put off this mortal body with its frailties, and its sorrows, and the curse that lies upon this earth, and to move into that realm of blessing, and light, and opportunity, the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, the presence of God the Father, those dwelling places that partake of the righteousness, and the peace, and the happiness of God. And how real those things are to us depends on how much of the truth of God has been inculcated, has been built by faith into the structure of our souls. And in times of adversity, that becomes our

bastion, that is the rock of our hope.

This is one of those passages. It is a central passage, as I said, probably the central passage on the rapture of the church. This is the passage where the name rapture obtains.

This is where it comes from. When Jerome and the rest of the old Catholic greybeards put the Greek text into Latin, they took the verb that you find here in verse 17, where it says caught up. This is harpazo in Greek.

Well, it is rapere in Latin, R-A-P-E-R-E. Rapere, and through a process you get rapture out of that. But it's harpazo, which means to grab, to snatch away, to to sort of draw rapidly, even violently.

But we're not quite at that point yet. But this is our central passage. I do not want you to be ignorant.

Brethren, brethren. Second thing we see here at the beginning, the first one is that the purpose of this passage is hope. The second thing we see is this is addressed to Christians.

This is addressed to brethren. It's not Jewish. These are largely Gentiles and Thessalonica.

Mix, people that came from the synagogue, they're brethren. So this is a church truth, a church doctrine. It pertains to the brethren.

Paul is addressing brethren. And when he says concerning those who have fallen asleep, there is a message there. Why doesn't he say those who have died? Well, keep in mind the purpose of this passage is comfort and hope concerning those who have died.

Well, if you have ever been in the presence of someone who has been or is in the process of being bereaved, they're losing their loved one, you know that there are ways to speak of the condition of this loved one. You don't walk into the hospital room and say, well, see your dad's dying. It's insensitive.

What do you say? Pastors, preachers from immemorial times talk about the dearly departed. They don't say, well, we're here to eulogize this dead guy. It's not sensitive.

It's not tactful. Even though it's a fact, it's a harsh fact. In speaking of that, what do we do? We speak euphemistically.

We speak tenderly. We speak gently. And this is a third point.

If you're keeping track of my points, the first one is what? The purpose here is hope and comfort. Second is it applies to the church. The third point is there is a tenderness.

If you are going to speak hope and comfort, you draw on tact and tenderness. There is a strand

of conservative Christianity that almost delights in harsh truth and sort of in-your-face conservative truth. There is a time to be bold.

There's a time to be blunt. There's a time for that kind of confrontational truth-speaking. Bereavement is not that time.

Bereavement is not that time. You look at the treatment that the Lord Jesus gives to ladies. If their brother has died, you look at Mary and Martha in the case of Lazarus.

You look at his speaking to these parents who come to him because their child is either at the point of death. There is always a tenderness and a respect. It's not the time for rebuke.

So when he says those who have fallen asleep, we recognize that there's also maybe a second channel of communication here in terms of the status of these people. But I would say primarily at first blush when he says those who have fallen asleep, he's talking about these people's loved ones, their relatives, those who have been near at hand and are probably very recently departed. And so he is gentle.

He doesn't have to employ that term when he talks about the Lord Jesus. If we believe that Jesus died, he doesn't say if we believe that Jesus fell asleep. We don't have that same need for tenderness.

So, Paul, even as he speaks hope and comfort, is careful to be gentle. Nobody can be more confrontational and brutally frank than Paul, but not here. And it's a reminder.

If we love one another, we know when to be gentle. And that goes beyond just times of bereavement. Even sometimes in correction, instead of being brutal, we should be gentle.

Those who have fallen asleep, in order that you not sorrow as the rest, those who are not brethren, who have no hope. The Greeks, the Roman world, had no concept of resurrection. They had no expectation that they would see their loved ones again.

But Paul said these truths you should not fail to know. You should not be ignorant of them. For if we believe, and this is a *El* plus the indicative, this is a first-class condition, if and it's true, since we believe.

First class, you know, your four conditions. If and it's true, number one. If and it's not true is number two.

If, maybe yes, maybe no is a third class. And the fourth class, if I wish it were true, but it's not. And there's even a fifth class, but I've only seen one instance of that.

This is if and it's true. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, God will bring, not with him. This is not meta.

This is not soon. Meta or soon, either one could be translated with. This is dia.

What does dia mean? What's the dia meter of a circle? What's the diameter of a circle? It's a line that goes through the center, right? Dia means through. God will bring through him. Notice also in verse 14 that you have the name of Jesus without Lord and without Christ twice.

Can you think why that might be? Yeshua, Jesus in Greek, is Jesus' human name. That's the name given to him at his birth in his humanity. Lord and Christ are certainly parts of his appellation, his titles, his status, his identity.

But what are we talking about here? What happened to his humanity? And in his human flesh, Jesus died and in his human flesh, Jesus rose again. It's important. If it says Jesus Christ died or the Lord died, now you're getting into some theological wrestling.

Can the Lord die? Jesus can die. And without getting too far into the hypostatic union, suffice it to say that Paul is focusing on Jesus' community with us, his likeness with us. He came and partook of our flesh and in that flesh he died.

He died just like we die in the sense that in the body he was in the grave. So we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring through him those who sleep in Jesus. And once again, Paul uses this tender euphemism for those who have died.

I do argue, and you know from long past experience, that sleep is is not an accident here. He doesn't just say the departed. He says they sleep.

What is the case when you sleep? You are unaware of the passing of time. You lose consciousness, you don't cease to exist, but you are not cognizant of what is going on while you sleep. There is a doctrine of soul sleep that some have embraced based on passages like this, that your soul is actually on a cot somewhere, waiting it out until the end of whatever age you belong to.

This is just our human serialized thinking. It's not necessary. God can erupt in and out of human history.

Angels can come and go in human history without being bound by time. And you know my thoughts on this. I think at the point of death, we exit the time tube.

During the time we're here, we're like a marble rolling down a vacuum cleaner hose. We start at one end and we go sequentially through whatever time has been allotted to us. Human history can be thought of as a great long tube.

And if you could live from beginning to end, you would just roll like a marble all the way from Adam and the exit from the garden all the way down through the ages, through the centuries, through the millennia, and we'd come out of the other side at the close of the millennial kingdom

and the melting of the elements with a fervent heat. Well, there is the idea that once you're born, you've got to roll through that tube no matter what. And if you die, well, now you're just rolling on a higher plane.

But you've still got to watch the clock and watch the calendar all the way through. Don't think it's necessary. Don't think it's practical.

And this passage very much militates against that. Sleep would imply that you fall asleep in this life and for you, the rest of time is not pertinent. It is not applicable.

It does not apply, does not pertain. You close your eyes and immediately open them to be tens, hundreds, a couple thousand years in the future. These Thessalonian believers that had died, they died in circa 60-something Anno Domini.

They... Where are they right now? My argument is it's not the right question to ask. When are they? When are they? Well, they lived from however long they lived. If they lived 60 years, they were born around the time of the Lord Jesus, and they died before the Apostle Paul did.

And that span of time, they were rolling like a marble through the tube. Just like they weren't in the tube before they were born, they're not in the tube after they die. But they do reappear without a break in existence.

This is why Jesus can say on the occasion of Lazarus in John 9, The one who lives and believes in me will never die. Body can die, but it's just like taking that tube and letting it loop way down, whatever the rest of human history is. Take that spot where the Lord Jesus is going to come back and just push the two together and just pop right across.

60 AD you die and 2000 plus AD, here's the Lord Jesus absent from the body, face-to-face with the Lord. Every single passage related to death and resurrection, being with the Lord face-to-face, meeting him in the air, everything is in perfect harmony with that construction. The only leap you have to make is to shake our earthly conception that once something comes into existence, it must exist on the clock ever after.

God's not limited by space, nor is he limited by time, and when we are in Christ, neither are we. We are as free of time as the Lord Jesus Christ is and according to the Word of the Lord and the will of the Lord, we can be in history, we can be out of history. Samuel can die in the Old Testament and be buried, and when Saul goes to the witch of Endor and God needs Samuel to speak a word to him, Samuel is suddenly around and conscious, back in the tube again, and he's all disappointed because he was expecting to see the kingdom.

He was expecting to see the Messiah and the resolution and fulfillment of all the covenants, and instead he's looking at this nasty, ratty old witch and Saul all falling to pieces. He says, why have you brought me up? Why have you brought me back? This isn't where I wanted to be. I was

expecting the peaceable kingdom.

I was expecting the Lion and the Lamb and all of the things that Samuel probably knew even before the prophets knew them. So I'm sure he was cranky. You think about Moses and Elijah showing up on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Now, if you have to have an intermediate experience, that's the one to have. Moses died. God hid his body someplace where nobody could find it.

Moses' next conscious thought is he's in the land that he didn't get to see from, but from afar. He looked over, gazing over at Mount Nebo. God says, well, you can't go in the land in the flesh, but here he is standing on the mountain with the Lord Jesus.

Ah, made it. This is great. I'm in the land.

And here's Elijah. Same thing. Went up in the chariot.

Moses and Elijah standing on the Mount of Transfiguration, talking with the Lord Jesus. Peter, James, and John getting a chance to witness it. And they get that intermediate view instead of looking at it in prospect and then coming back for the kingdom and looking back at it in retrospect.

They get to see the Lord Jesus Christ. What a privilege for Moses and Elijah to see the incarnate Lord standing in the land on that mountain. Well, everything in Scripture comports with this notion.

And being asleep, those who have fallen asleep, makes sense. Now, we're going to pause and take our break. But when we come back, keep in mind two things.

What did we start with? This passage is to comfort and allay grief in the face of the death of believers. Ask yourself the question, if that is my purpose, and if when believers in Christ in this age die, they fly up to heaven to float around in the presence of Jesus, why wouldn't you tell people that so that they wouldn't sorrow as those who have no hope? If you are trying to provide words that will offer comfort, and if that is the truth, why isn't that in here? Brethren, I would not have you be ignorant as the rest who have no hope, because those who have fallen asleep are in the presence of the Lord Jesus. They're in a far better place.

They're free from pain. They're free from... He doesn't say any of that. Why? Good question.

Well, let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to pick up in verse 15.