

Understanding Death and Christ's Return

DAVE BAST

It's funny how sometimes people who lived long ago and far away, who could scarcely be more different from us, can still affect our lives today. Because a small group of believers in a place called Thessalonica were asking big questions about life and death two thousand years ago, we have, today, one of the finest expressions of Christian comfort that has ever been written. It is in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4, and we are going to look at it today on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and this is the fourth program in a series of five programs; conveniently five because there are five chapters in the little book of 1 Thessalonians, a letter of Paul written to the church in Thessalonica, a city in northern Greece; and it is, Scott, we think perhaps the earliest part of the New Testament ever written.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul may have written letters before this, but this is the oldest one we've got. You wouldn't know that from the ordering. Thessalonians is a little bit later in the New Testament...after Corinthians and Galatians...but we think this one was written first.

In the last program, Dave, we kind of looked at the heart of the letter, where Paul talked about, as he often did in his letters, some theological teachings, and then the ethics that spin out of that: Here is what we believe, here is how we behave on account of that belief. He talked a lot about sexuality because sexual immorality was rampant in the ancient world...in the Greco-Roman era; so, he warned them about that...warned them to stay away from that, on account of the fact that he said: You know who God is; and when you know who God is, you know how he wants you to live. So, that was in the first part of, actually, Chapter 4; but then, he does a rather...beginning at verse 13, he does a rather abrupt change of subject. Let's listen to that now.

DAVE BAST

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. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵According to the Lord's Word, we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷After 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. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, as you said, Scott, it is a rather abrupt change of subject. I mean, Paul has just been stressing, though, that Christians are different...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because we belong to God; because we know God through faith in Jesus Christ, we are supposed to be transformed; and that includes the way we think about death—the way we approach death—we do it differently from people who do not know God; and yet, it seems as though there must have been an issue behind what Paul is saying here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We saw earlier in this series that Paul was desperate to know how the Thessalonians were doing, if they were standing firm in the faith. So, he sent Timothy...his co-pastor, Timothy to go visit them, and then he came back with a report. It was a very encouraging report, but Timothy must also have said: But Paul, look; there is this topic that they are talking about in Thessalonica. Several members of the church have died, and the people are in a tizzy about it because, well, they thought nobody would die until Jesus came again. So, they've got all kinds of questions. You are going to need to write to them about this.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; so, he is obviously addressing a felt need, or a painful subject, and they were having an issue with death; but it wasn't the issue that we might think it was. It wasn't the same kind of issue we have. I mean, it wasn't that they were afraid of dying. Sometimes, in fact, Scott, as you and I have been pastors for a number of years, we have often called on elderly Christians. Maybe they were sick and they were approaching death, and they longed for it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

They were really looking forward to being with the Lord; but here it was the opposite issue for the Thessalonians. They were so convinced...I mean, remember this was a very early letter...so convinced in the truth of the facts of the Gospel...Jesus died; Jesus rose; Jesus is coming back...that they expected they would all be there to see it; and then, they weren't. Suddenly, you know, Mr. Smith dies in a work accident, and Mrs. Jones dies in childbirth, and little Jimmy gets sick and dies, and old Grandpa passes away; and so, the question was: Is there something wrong with them?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so...and you can imagine, there were a number of questions. One: Well, was Mr. Smith not a true believer then? Or if he had been, he would still be alive; is that the case? Or, whether he was a true believer or not, is he just lost...is he just gone now; away from Jesus, away from us? Are we ever going to see Mr. Smith or little Jimmy who passed away suddenly of an illness...are we ever going to see these people again? So, were they true believers; because they kind of thought true believers wouldn't die until Jesus came back; and whether or not they were true believers, where are they now? So, Paul did a lot of teaching when he planted churches like the one in Thessalonica, but you cannot cover everything; and as we saw earlier in this series, Paul also had to flee Thessalonica a little bit quickly, in the dead of night once, or save his own life. So, he just didn't get around to everything; and so, he is now kind of making up for lost time by saying: Here is how to think about death; here is what is going to happen when Jesus comes back.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and he uses a beautiful analogy in the very opening verse. We don't want you to be ignorant, it could be translated. We don't want you to be uninformed about those who have fallen asleep. Those who have died have fallen asleep in Jesus, he says; and then he adds: So that you don't grieve like other people—people in the world—people without hope—people who have no hope in the face of death; and there, he really touched on a fact that was rampant in the ancient world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In most of the Greek and Roman world, there wasn't much hope; and in fact, in some Greek circles, if you remember, you know, Socrates when he was put to death, he welcomed it. It was the great release from the prison of the body; you know, you get released into a realm of pure spirit. So, they didn't really have hope; they didn't really foresee an afterlife, other than you are just sort of blurring and blending into...

DAVE BAST

Yes, kind of like nirvana, maybe...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A cosmic soup, yes.

DAVE BAST

You just sort of ooze out into nothingness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and in fact, Dave, I know that you had collected a few tombstone inscriptions from the ancient world that just sort of try to shrug death off, or just sort of say: You know, well, it is what it is. There was one tombstone that said: As you are, I was; as I am, you will be.

DAVE BAST

Yes; very cheerful. Imagine going to the cemetery and reading that, you know: Oh, well, I am going to be in the ground, too, someday. Well, it is true, but it is hopeless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; or another one: Do not be overly distressed; no man is immortal. So, in other words: I'm gone; you're going to be gone; that's it; end of story...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No hope; and I think a lot of us find that vaguely depressing. There are still people today who think: Well, when you're dead, you're dead. That is a part of life, and you know, you get a good run here...60, 70, 80 years if you are lucky, and then that is it, you're gone; but a lot of people find that a little unsettling. In fact, there remains this niggling sense that we have got to be able to see our loved ones again someday. Well, the Christian faith, anyway, is a faith that says you will, and here is why. It is because of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the Gospel bursts like a bombshell in the middle of the First Century world with this bleak view, this hopelessness in the face of death, and I think we cannot overestimate the impact that it has had, and still has, in a sense, in our culture; even though, in many senses, we are living in a post-Christian society, there is still this hope that the Gospel planted that most people have an expectation that they will live—that they will survive death. Very few go to the lengths of bleak despair; and that is all because of the Gospel, as you said, Scott; because of what Jesus said and did, and especially because Jesus rose again. So, let's think some more

about that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are talking about a wonderful passage from 1 Thessalonians 4, where Paul tries to straighten out the Thessalonians' thinking about death, and specifically, those fellow believers who died before Christ came back, and the Thessalonians were wondering, well, are they lost then? What is their condition? Will we see them again?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; was their faith not strong enough? Was that why they died? If they had stronger faith, would they still be living?

So, lots of questions. Paul is addressing them; and he did say...as we have seen, Dave...that he said: I don't want you to grieve as those who do not have hope; and I think we need to point out, Dave, that Paul doesn't say don't grieve. Grief is, even for Christians, perfectly natural and right. We grieve differently...we will explore that in a second...but, let's make that point first of all. To cry, to be sad, to rage against the idea that this isn't the way it is supposed to be, even as Jesus did at Lazarus' tomb...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is okay. That is not anti-Christian. We are not supposed to put yellow smiley-face stickers on caskets and on our faces, as though this isn't affecting us. No, it affects Christians very deeply; maybe more deeply than those who don't have faith because we sense how wrong this is in God's creation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; death doesn't belong. Jesus hated death. You mentioned how he wept outside of Lazarus' tomb. He also kind of trembled with rage...with anger. This is the enemy. Paul calls it the last enemy. And besides that, grief is the normal reaction to human loss, any kind of loss, and the ultimate loss is the death of a loved one, a beloved spouse or a parent or a child. So, yes, we grieve; but it is different, Paul says; and the difference is hope. We have hope, and to have hope you have to have a future; and that is where Paul turns next in this passage. He talks about what is going to happen when Jesus returns, and he begins, just to rehash: The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. So, this is what is going to happen; and Paul says: I am telling you this according to the Word of the Lord, or by the Word of the Lord. He has authority for what he says about the future. He is not just casting a vision or uttering some wishful thinking.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think we can sum up what Paul says here, Dave, with a little pneumonic device here of four Rs...four R words: Return, resurrection, rapture, reunion. So, the first R is Return. Christ is going to return at some point. It is going to be a very cosmic, public event. It is not going to be a secret return. Jesus himself said: Don't believe anybody who says to you: Oh, he came back over there; it is very quiet. No, it will be like lightning flashing from one end of the sky to the other. Nobody is going to miss it. He will return, and it will be a very dramatic, public event.

DAVE BAST

And nobody is going to mistake it for something else, either. Everybody is going to know instantly this is what is happening. Nobody is going to have to look around and say: Hmm, well, what is that? Kind of a weird weather phenomenon, you know. So, yes; that is the first event of the end times, Christ's return; and then, the second thing that will happen is, Paul says, resurrection. The dead in Christ will rise first. So, there is the immediate answer to the problem of those who have died...those who have fallen asleep. What is going to happen to them? Christ is going to raise them from the dead. We referred briefly to the story of Lazarus, that classic preview of the end time when Jesus will raise believers from their tomb. It was a kind of prefiguring, I think; a miracle in advance to give us a snapshot; and Jesus approaches the tomb and says: Lazarus, come forth!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I love what one commentator said: If he hadn't prefixed that with "Lazarus", everyone within the sound of his voice would have gotten out of their grave. He had to specify Lazarus. So, he will call your name, believer, and you will rise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and this final resurrection will be not just a resuscitation...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But a new resurrection body, like Jesus himself got, where you will not die again. So, that is what will happen to the people whom you are mourning, oh, dear Thessalonians. You are going to see them again. So, Christ returns; they are resurrected, and then we are raptured. Paul says, once they are all joining the victory parade of Jesus as he comes back...once those who have died are up there, then we are going to go next; and we will get in line and we will join the Lord in the air...in the clouds...in what is often called the rapture. I think some people probably think: Well, only some Christians believe in the rapture. Actually, that is not true. All Christians believe in the rapture; the difference comes in sort of the order of events. Most Christians, and people in the Reformed tradition and the Catholic tradition, believe that the return of Christ and the rapture and then judgment day all happen immediately. The dispensationalist teachings of the last 150 years that some fundamentalist Christians believe say there will be a rapture of people disappearing and then there will be like a thousand years before Christ fully comes again. There will be a gap; and Paul is saying here: No, it is all kind of the same day.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the premise behind this is something that he says in another passage about the return of Christ; at the end of I Corinthians Chapter 15 he says that we who are alive...who are left until that day...and there will be some Christians who are alive on that day, and will not taste death. They will simply be transformed, Paul says, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; and then, here, putting it together with 1 Thessalonians 4, what happens is that all those who have been raised from the dead—the believers—and all those believers who have been transformed in that moment will together be caught up, Paul literally says, to meet the Lord in the air. The word *rapture* actually comes from the Latin translation of this verse, verse 17 in 1 Thessalonians 4, which is *rapturo**, a kind of catching up or seizing. This is the only place in the New Testament where that verb is used, and it refers to a kind of public...I like to think of it, Scott, as a welcoming committee for the coming-back Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and there is a word here...I cannot remember what it is in Greek; it is a hard to pronounce word, so it is just as well I cannot remember it; but there is a word that Paul uses here that is like a victory parade...a welcoming parade, as you say, like with throngs of people at the airport greeting a loved one coming back from maybe serving in the military overseas or something like that. We are talking about a lot of people here now, too. I mean, now we know we may be talking about billions of believers from along the ages, and the Old Testament saints as well will be with the Lord, we would imagine. So, this is quite a crowd. So, there is going to be a definitive return; there is going to be a resurrection of those who have died previously. There will be a rapture of those who are still alive when Christ comes back; and then the last R is one that we will look at in the close of our program, and that is the reunion of believers with the Lord, and we will take a look at that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork* today; *Groundwork* that is digging into 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 13 and following; where Paul explains the future for believers, and why in the face of death, even as we grieve the loss of loved ones, we don't do so without hope because we know we will see them again. We will be reunited with them.

One important thing to notice here is the direction in which the movement is going. For many, many, many Christians, I think as they think about hope, even in the face of death—their own death or the death of a loved one—the desire is to go to heaven, to go up to be with the Lord and with their loved ones. Here in this passage, Paul says ultimately our hope is moving in the other direction. It is Christ coming back to earth and bringing with him, he says, those who have died with faith in him. We kind of meet together in the air, but then, we come back to earth together.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we said a minute ago that the fourth R...return, resurrection, rapture...and then the fourth R is reunion; and you are right. Where is the reunion? Way beyond the cosmic rim in some cloudy, vapory, misty heaven place? No, it is here.

So Paul, in this letter... We mentioned, Dave, in the very first program that considering that this is one of the most ancient pieces of Christian writing that exists in the world, it is remarkable how much doctrine had already developed. So, here Paul doesn't lay out the full vision of the return of Christ that you will get in the book of Revelation, but the movement is the same. John tells us that the dwelling of God will be with people; that heaven comes down; that it is this earth...this cosmos that gets refurbished and becomes our cosmic home; and without getting that elaborate, Paul is indicating the same thing here. We are not following Jesus as he heads to the stars; we are following Jesus as he heads back to the soil of this earth; and that is where the reunion takes place.

DAVE BAST

Right; and that is our final vision of the future...that is the *Bible's* final vision of the future; which is not to deny the truth...the reality...that those who die now before the end are with the Lord. Paul says that. In fact, we have done a *Groundwork* program or two about this, about what is sometimes referred to as the intermediate state...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, what happens...you know, this is not the question exactly maybe that the Thessalonians were asking, or maybe it was, but what happens to them in the meantime, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, to use that beautiful phrase again; and Paul says elsewhere...the Bible says elsewhere...Jesus says: You will be with me. So, that is good; that is okay; but we need to recognize, I think, the basic thrust of the hope of the

Gospel, of the message of the New Testament, which is a very much physical reality in a new heaven and a new earth, where all is made right; where shalom fills everything; where the knowledge of God fills the earth like the waters cover the sea; and we have been raised from death, we have been transformed and given the same kind of bodies that Jesus has; and that is a staggering thought, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is; and small wonder that this part of 1 Thessalonians 4, and into the 5th chapter...you know, the bottom line, Paul says: Therefore, encourage one another with these words; or comfort one another...with these words...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that translation, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because again, Paul is writing all this because he had heard via Timothy that this was vexing them...this was troubling them. So, Paul wants them to understand death, understand our future with Christ, understand that Christ is coming back with all those who have died. So, comfort one another, and not in some namby-pamby way, right? I think we did a series recently from the Heidelberg Catechism, and we talked about our only comfort in life and in death. We noted that the Latin word there is *comfortis*—with strength. Comfort is not just some nice little Hallmark card. An ancient writer, probably maybe from around the time Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who is writing to somebody who had lost a loved one said: I am so sorry, and weep over your dear departed one; but really, in the face of such things, one can do nothing; so, comfort one another. You know? That is kind of weak comfort. You know, help each other stand and muddle through. No, Christian comfort in the knowledge of Jesus Christ has oomph to it; it has strength and staying power to it.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is another word: *Commiserate*; to commiserate with someone is to kind of feel bad alongside them or with them. You know, you don't want to belittle that. That is a very human reaction. We sympathize. That is what that word literally means in Greek: *sumpatheó*—to suffer with—to commiserate is a Latin based word. So, that is a kind of comfort, Scott; but as you say, it is kind of weak comfort because it is all just human; and without downplaying the importance of true humanity and real human feelings, to have real comfort we have to have something more than that. We need a word from the Lord, as Paul says here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

A word that the Lord gave Paul and that Paul has given us; and here is the great thing. Like everything else in the New Testament, literally everything...it is based on a solid fact: the fact that Jesus died and rose again. For, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, Paul says here, so we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we have seen that as sort of the bass note underlying this whole letter; and we will see it again in the final program, when we look at the very end of 1 Thessalonians 5 in the next program, Dave, that that touchstone of the resurrection—that truth—that Christ has overcome death, and nothing can take that away; nothing can erase that; well, in some ways it undergirded even the sexual ethics that Paul was teaching in Chapters 3 and 4. It undergirds everything; so, you really cannot overstress the importance of the resurrection, right? If it happened, it is the key to everything. It *did* happen; so, we do grieve, but not as those without hope. We do cry; that is a perfectly normal reaction; and yet, we can comfort one another with these words, and the words we comfort each other with are: Christ has died; Christ was raised; Christ is coming again. Thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Amen. And thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we close our study of 1 Thessalonians with Paul's final instructions to the believers in Chapter 5.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

* The audio of this program misstates that Latin translation of the word rapture is *rapto*, when in fact *rapturo* is the Latin word we translate as rapture.

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