

SLEEPERS ARISE

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

November 8, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians*, chapter 4, verses 13 through 18. In this epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul reminds his readers of the eternal hope we have in Jesus Christ. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Thessalonians 4, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we're going to talk about ... *the end of the world*. That's what we do this time of year. Counting today, we have three Sundays left in the church year. And since the church calendar is designed to teach the whole story of Christian doctrine, it makes sense that these last few weeks would focus on the last things or the end times.

So ... *the end of the world*. Perhaps that subject piques your interest a bit. It is rather exciting. What's going to happen? When will it happen? What will the signs be so I can be ready for it? Will it hurt?

But it may also be that you find the topic complicated or overwhelming. At times the Church has done a disservice by presenting the doctrine of the last things as a complex matter. And it can be complex ... if you want it to be. As with every branch of theology, you can dig deep enough to make your head spin ... if you want to.

But let's start simple. At its core, the doctrine of the last things is really quite simple. If you know the Apostles' Creed, then you already know the doctrine of the last things.

There are two places in the creed that deal with the last things. The first is in the middle article, concerning Jesus Christ, where we confess that Jesus "is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead." Then in the last article, we confess, "I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." That's it. That's the doctrine of the Last Things. And you will find identical or similar statements in both the Nicene and Athanasian creeds.

If anything, the creedal explanation is so short and sweet that it's over before your brain even has time to start processing. So let's review. Where is Jesus now? *In heaven, at the right hand of the Father*. And what will Jesus do on the Last Day? *He will come again from heaven to earth*.

What will happen on earth when Jesus comes again? *Two things: the dead will be raised, and Jesus will judge all mankind.* And what comes after the judgment? *Eternal life for all who believe in Jesus.* That's the doctrine of the last things. This doctrine is a great comfort to Christians. Scripture calls it "our blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). It will be the end of all sin, and suffering, and death. And it will be the inauguration of perfect peace and justice.

So remember this: Jesus will come again in bodily form. All people will see him. That includes believers and unbelievers. It includes both the living and the dead, for the dead will be raised. That's how Jesus will judge both the living and the dead. He will raise their bodies first. And at the judgment, Jesus will cast the wicked into eternal torment. This won't be pleasant, but it will be just, and, therefore, good. And Jesus will bring all who believe in him into his new creation, where righteousness, and justice, and goodness will prevail for all eternity.

That's the doctrine of the last things. I hope you recognize now how simple it is, because in the last few minutes, we went through it three times. Did you notice that? That's how simple the last things are. But we're still going to dig a little bit deeper. Just because something is simple, doesn't mean we can take it for granted. So we'll take the simple presentation we learned in the creed, and we'll use that as our roadmap to venture a little more in depth.

So here's a question I want you to think about and answer in your head: *Is the return of Christ Law or Gospel?* As Lutherans we use the distinction between Law and Gospel to help us think about doctrine. "The Law is the divine word [that] tells us what we must do" (Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, p. 33). So it mostly consists of God's commandments, but it also includes God's threats of punishment, chiefly, death. "The Gospel," on the other hand, "is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior" (ibid, p. 34). The Gospel is all about the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from death through Jesus Christ. So ... is the return of Christ Law or Gospel? Make your final answer now. If you answered, "Law," you are right. But if you answered, "Gospel," you are also right. If your answer was, "Yes," or, "Both," then you get a gold star and you're running a double A+.

For the unbeliever, the return of Christ is Law, because, for the unbeliever, Jesus' return in judgement will render a guilty verdict, and they will be cast into eternal torment. This, by the way, is the judgment we all deserve. But for the believer, we will be judged based on Christ's righteousness in our place, not on our own works. So for believers Jesus' return is mostly Gospel. It will mean final deliverance from sin, death, and the devil. It will mean the resurrection of our bodies, and our complete transformation in both body and soul, so that we will live in perfect bliss for all eternity in God's new creation. This is most certainly Gospel. There is still some Law in the doctrine for us, though, because it should cause us to ask, "How then should we live?" We should live "lives of holiness and godliness" as we await the coming of our Lord (2 Peter 3:11-12). So the return of Christ is both Law and Gospel.

I found it interesting to notice Law and Gospel at work throughout the Scripture texts for today. All three texts deal with the coming of Christ. In the Old Testament lesson from Amos (5:18-24), it's called, "The Day of the LORD." Amos says,

- 18 Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
 Why would you have the day of the LORD?
 It is darkness, and not light,
19 as if a man fled from a lion,
 and a bear met him,

or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.

²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

Law or Gospel? That's Law. And it's harsh Law. Amos prophesied against religious hypocrites. They kept the feasts God commanded ... sort of. They did enough to make themselves think they had their bases covered with God. But it was merely external. They really had no faith, and this was evidenced by the way they took advantage of the poor and needy among them. So Amos really let them have it. He was a fire and brimstone kind of prophet. And that's what the people needed. *You think you want the Day of the LORD? Really? You want God to come down to earth? How do you think that will go for you? It will be like running from a lion, and thinking you got away, but the lion only stopped chasing you, because he saw what you didn't, and you run straight into the paws of a waiting bear.* Game over.

Amos remains a call for us to examine our own selves, to see if we might be those hypocrites. God does not desire to be a waiting bear for us, but if we refuse to repent, he will be. The first person a hypocrite fools is always himself. I would say God is the last person to be fooled by a hypocrite, except he doesn't get fooled. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Amos is Law, calling us to examine our hearts and repent.

The Gospel lesson is the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). The return of Christ is both Law and Gospel in this parable. There are ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to come. Five were wise and five were foolish. The bridegroom was delayed and night came, so they all fell asleep. Then the bridegroom came in the middle of the night. To the five wise virgins, it was pure Gospel. They had oil for their lamps, so when the bridegroom came at night, they lit them up and went into the wedding feast. For the five foolish virgins, it was Law, and not just the commandment part of the Law, but the punishment part of the Law. They had no oil, and it was too late to buy some, so they were locked out of the wedding feast.

The bridegroom is Christ, the wedding feast is heaven, and the oil is faith. The five wise virgins expected the bridegroom to come, but the five foolish virgins, for whatever reason, did not. They had the appearance of godliness—that's the lamp—they wanted to make it look like they were waiting for the bridegroom, but it was just a show. If they actually expected him to come, they would have brought oil. They had not faith in the bridegroom. So it's a parable that teaches us that we should be ready for the return of Christ at any moment. It could be today. It could be tomorrow. It could be a thousand years from now. Like the ten virgins, we may all fall asleep before Christ returns. That is, we may all die. We must be ready for Christ to come now, but we must also be ready to wait and suffer our entire lives. And if we die before Christ returns, that's okay. He will wake us up. He's good at that.

And then in the epistle lesson, the return of Christ is pure Gospel. Paul was writing to Christians who were grieving, so he offers them sweet comfort. The reason for their grief was that they didn't completely understand the doctrine of Jesus' Second Coming. So Paul teaches doctrine in order to comfort them. We see here just how practical doctrine can and should be.

Paul says, "We do not want you to be uninformed." The "We," by the way, refers to Silvanus and Timothy. They were coauthors of this letter with Paul (1:1).

The Thessalonians were ignorant concerning "those who are asleep." That means they were "dead." The Bible often does this when speaking of the death of Christians. "Sleep" is one of the

sweet names for “death.” We call it this because death is not permanent. When someone falls asleep—and I’m talking about normal sleep here—we expect them to wake up again. So also, when a Christian dies, we expect God to wake them from death. So we call it “sleep.”

Remember this when you go to bury your loved ones in Christ Jesus. Laying them in the ground is like tucking a child in at bedtime. And when you go back to visit their graves, that’s like peeking in the door to watch them sleep. For Christians, death is merely sleep.

But for some reason, the Thessalonians had forgotten this basic piece of doctrine, or they failed to apply it correctly. For some reason they didn’t think those who had died would see the return of Christ. It seems that they had such a strong expectation that Jesus would return very soon, that they all expected to remain alive until then. So they didn’t give any thought to the resurrection of the dead, and when members of the congregation started dying, they feared they were gone for good. So Paul corrects them and reminds them of this doctrine so that they “may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (4:13).

And I want you to notice, he doesn’t forbid them from grieving. But he doesn’t want them to grieve like those who have no hope. It’s natural to grieve when someone we love falls asleep. Jesus grieved when his friend Lazarus fell asleep, and that was just moments before Jesus woke him from sleep (John 11:33-44). We grieve because a part of us has been taken away. And you don’t have to get over it either. Sometimes the grief stays with us our entire lives, and that’s okay. Grief changes over time, but if it doesn’t go away, you don’t have to feel guilty about that. Losing a loved one is kind of like losing a hand or a foot. You adjust to their absence. You learn how to live without them. But the loss is still there. So Paul does not forbid grieving, but he does not want us to grieve as pagans who have no hope. If there is no resurrection of the dead, and if death is permanent, then we would have no hope. But there is a resurrection of the dead. Death is not permanent. So we grieve with hope. God will raise those who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus.

Now this is a really bold claim. Suppose someone knocks on your door and claims they can bring your dead relatives back to life. You probably laugh at them. You might even get mad at them for messing with people who are grieving. It would be cruel to make promises like this if you can’t actually deliver. So what makes us, as Christians, so certain that God will raise the dead?

We might say, “Because God said so.” And that’s not a bad answer. God does promise to raise the dead, and God keeps his promises. But how do we know our God can actually do it? How do we know our God is the true God who actually has the power to raise the dead?

The answer is in the text. Paul says, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (4:14). The proof of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus died and rose again, then we know that God has the power to raise us from the dead as well.

Actually, the first thing we know from Jesus’ resurrection is that our sins are forgiven. It’s not that his resurrection forgives our sins. His death forgives our sins. But the resurrection is proof that it worked. It is proof that God the Father accepted Jesus’ death as the sacrifice for our sins.

Then it is proof that Jesus is who he says he is, that is, the Son of God in human flesh.

And, of course, it is the proof that God can raise the dead. Jesus rose again, so God can do it with you, and he can do it with all the dead.

The proof of all this is the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus is the proof of the entire Christian faith. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and he prophesied that he would be crucified and that he would rise again on the third day. So then, when he made it happen, it proved that he really is who he says he is, that is, the Son of God, and that he knows what he's talking about when he affirms the Scriptures as the Word of God. The resurrection of Jesus is the basis for how we know the Bible is true.

That's why it's important that none of these things happened in a corner (Acts 26:26). That's why it's important that, following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to people on many different occasions and proved his resurrection from the dead. We know the names of many of the eyewitnesses. He even appeared to more than five hundred witnesses at one time (1 Cor. 15:6). The resurrection of Jesus is no myth. It's a historical event with numerous eyewitnesses.

Skeptics of Christianity have, for the most part, stopped trying to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. They can't do it. So most of them simply dismiss it as being in the realm of religion, and therefore not historical. They separate religion and history, as if there's no possible way the two can overlap. They say, "The resurrection of Jesus is a miracle claim, and miracles are probably impossible, so historians have no business talking about the resurrection." But they don't realize how illogical that is. The resurrection of Jesus has more historical evidence for it than any other event from the ancient world. And I mean all of human history from the ancient world. You can't just dismiss it because you think it's too miraculous.

We have a lot of intellectual arrogance these days. And I mean our society as a whole. We think we're smarter than people in previous centuries. We have all this scientific knowledge, so we think we understand the natural world better than the ancients. And maybe we do in terms of just total scientific knowledge, but not on a practical level. We're actually the ones who are far more likely to lose touch with reality on a practical level. And that's because we spend so much of our time looking at screens. Think about this. Graphics in video games are becoming more and more life-like, so you get into a game and you kind of forget that it's not real. The fake things in the game start to blend in with your conception of reality. I notice this sometimes when I'm working on a project, and I have an important and kind of difficult cut to make. If I mess it up, the whole project will be ruined. So I pause and think to myself, *What should I do before I make this cut?* I feel like I should save my game, so I can go back and reload it if I make a mistake. But this is real life. You can't do that. Or you watch a TV show or a movie. The whole thing is scripted and acted out. It's completely fictional, but it looks real. Or they use CGI to create something on a screen that looks completely real, but it's merely the creation of a computer. Without even thinking about it, we perceive these things as reality, because our senses are designed to interpret sights and sounds as reality. We lose touch with reality, because so much of what we consume isn't real, but it feels like it is.

The ancients did not have this problem. They lived 100% of their existence in the real world. They were firmly in touch with reality. So they were far less likely than we are to believe a miracle—like someone rising from the dead—unless they actually saw it with their own two eyes. So when hundreds of ancient eyewitnesses say that something happened, the most reasonable explanation is that it did actually happen, even if it seems impossible.

The resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact. And so it is on the basis of Jesus' resurrection that we have confidence in God's promises, including the promise to raise us from the dead.

So when Paul seeks to comfort the Thessalonians, he reminds them of Jesus' resurrection, because he has already established it as a historical fact. That's already at the core of their faith.

It has to be in order for a person to be a Christian. So Paul makes the simple point that if Jesus rose from the dead, God will also raise those who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus.

Then he teaches them, very simply, what will happen when Jesus returns. Those who remain alive at Christ's coming will not precede those who have fallen asleep (4:15). We will see him together, and we will join him together. The Lord, that is, Jesus, will descend from heaven with a cry of command. There will also be the voice of an archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God. In other words, it's going to be loud. You can think of this as God's cosmic alarm clock that wakes the dead from sleep. "And the dead in Christ will rise first" (4:16).

Some have mistakenly interpreted the word "first" here to mean that there are two bodily resurrections. One here for believers, and one later for unbelievers. But that's not right. There are several other passages of Scripture that teach us that all of the dead, both believers and unbelievers, will rise at the same time. One of those passages was our gospel lesson, the parable of the ten virgins. In that parable both the wise and the foolish virgins wake from sleep at the same time (Matt. 25:6-8). The word "first" here simply means that the dead will be raised before we meet the Lord.

So then, immediately after the resurrection, all believers of all times will be caught up to meet Jesus in the air as he's coming down. Some have also mistakenly taken this to mean that Jesus won't actually come all the way down to earth, as if we'll just meet him in the air and then fly away. But that's not what the text says. Other passages of Scripture clearly teach that Jesus will descend to earth and judge all mankind at the same time (Matt. 25:31-46). So, most likely, the way this will work is that we will meet Jesus in the air and join him for his final descent. This is like what people did in the ancient world when a conquering king came home from battle. The people would go out of the city to meet him, and then accompany him back into the city. You might remember this is what the people of Jerusalem did with Jesus on Palm Sunday (John 12:12-13). They went out to meet him, and then followed him back into the city. So we will meet Jesus in the air and accompany him on his final descent. When he comes in glory, we get to share that glory.

So from that moment that the dead are raised and we meet Jesus in the air, we will always be with the Lord. And when Paul says, "We," he means all Christians of all times and all places. It will include those who remain alive until that day, and it includes those whom Jesus will raise from the dead on that day.

In the next chapter, which we'll read next week, Paul goes on to speak of the destruction and judgment that will come on that day. But in this section he stops at the point where we all meet and see Jesus face-to-face. That's because his purpose is to comfort those who grieve. So he ends by saying, "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (4:18).

Those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ are not gone. We don't even have to say they are dead, because they are not dead in the same way unbelievers are. Nor are they dead the way Jesus died. Jesus tasted the fullness of death and was separated from the Father in a way that we never have to be. He saved us from that. So those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ are not really dead. Their bodies sleep while their souls are alive in Jesus Christ. And at the return of Christ, their bodies will be raised. Body and soul will be reunited. And we will all be transformed after the image of Jesus Christ so that we may live and reign with him in perfection for all eternity.

When those we love fall asleep in Jesus Christ, we do not say, "Goodbye." We say, "Goodnight," because we expect them to wake again. We tuck them in to sleep in their graves. We visit their graves to watch them sleep. And we may even go to sleep as well. We do this

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trusting that when bedtime is over, our Savior will come to wake us from sleep. We believe this firmly and faithfully, because Jesus died and rose again. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” This is our blessed hope. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)