

A New Hope

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[0 : 0 0] I want to begin tonight with a question that might sound strange. What are you looking forward to most on the day you die?

What are you looking forward to most on the day you die? Okay, and a second question that is even stranger, perhaps, what will you be looking forward to most on the day the person sitting next to you dies?

Those are not questions that we're used to thinking about, are they? Maybe we don't want to think too hard about either of those days tonight. But those are the questions that the young church in Thessalonica wasn't asking, and therefore couldn't answer.

What is there to look forward to when Christians die? Paul brings us tonight to the third great implication of this letter that we've been in the last few months, faith, love, and now hope.

You already have those things. He said in chapter 4, verse 1, you are living to please God. This is not new to you. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

[1 : 3 4] So as Paul wants the faith, love, and hope of this young church to be stretched and to grow, he's taught them what growing faith looks like, is learning to live out our holy, set-apart identity in Christ.

He's taught us that growing love looks like living for others at our own expense. And so tonight he teaches them and us what growing hope looks like.

And it looks like, he says, what you do and what you tell each other when a Christian dies. 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.

And the way that he fills out our hope is by giving us a great, big, brilliant vision for the future. Some of you were here for the vision day yesterday.

It was a great day together. Or when the elders put together that vision, one of the questions we asked ourselves was, if we could look back in five years' time, what would we love to say had happened here at Bon Accord?

[2 : 5 3] Because that's what a vision is, isn't it? It's imagining ourselves where we want to be in the future and living then in the light of that future. Whether we know it or not, we're always living in the light of our destiny or what we tell ourselves our future holds.

So what is our destiny then as Christians? What does the future hold for us in Christ? What does God tell us? What does he give us when we fall asleep in Christ?

And when we look back from that day at our lives now, this church family sitting here, well, what will we do differently knowing that that is the future that is promised for us?

Well, Paul firstly gives us a way to measure that. He wants us to measure our growing hope. He gives us the barometer, if you like, of our hope.

It's there in verse 13. Where does he want to see growth in these Christians? Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, not just so that you'll intellectually have a bit more information about the Christian faith, but so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

[4 : 14] How can you tell if you're growing in hope? How can you tell how tightly you are holding on to that promise? It's easy.

It's easy to hope in Jesus, isn't it, when someone you love isn't dying. Or hasn't died. But the real test of that hope, says Paul, is when someone does die.

How you respond in the face of death tells you everything about who or what it is you hope in, and how clear is that God-given vision to you.

Now, let me be really clear. That doesn't mean that we don't cry. That doesn't mean that we don't deeply grieve the loss of loved ones.

Paul doesn't say, so that you do not grieve, full stop. Does he? How could he? One of the most precious and profound scenes in the Gospels is where the very Lord that he is going to go on to speak to us about stands by the grave of his friend and weeps.

[5 : 24] Jesus cried in the face of death. Friends, it is okay for us to cry at the grave of our friends, at the memory of those we have lost.

Death is an uninvited guest in God's world. Death is a vandal who vandalizes God's image bearers. Death has only come to steal, kill, and destroy.

And think just how harshly the church in Thessalonica would have felt that. You know, I think it's fair to assume that the people that Paul is speaking to and speaking about who have fallen asleep in Christ, I think it's fair to assume that they died in very violent and untimely ways.

Because remember, in the weeks and months since any of them became Christians, what has been going on in their city? You became imitators of us and the Lord, he said, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

You remember right back to the start of our series, the story began with the newborn Christians being dragged out of their homes to face the violent consequences of them having turned from the idols of their day to serve the living and true gods.

[6 : 41] In Acts 17, we saw the people who did that to them were so angry that they chased Paul and the others to the next town to stop the gospel from going there.

That's how much they hated having the church in their region and in their community. And so it's likely that the people in the church who Paul says have fallen asleep in Christ fell asleep in much the same way as Stephen.

That's why we read that passage from Acts. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

When he had said this, he fell asleep. He fell asleep. Friends, that is a beautiful way to speak about the death of Christians.

It speaks about the peace and rest and security and safety that Christians enter into immediately at the point of death in the presence of Jesus.

[7 : 55] It reminds us, too, that a new day is coming when the dead will rise again. But it is not describing the way that a Christian dies.

Stephen fell asleep through blunt force trauma. We don't know how the Christians in Thessalonica fell asleep, but the context suggests probably not from prolonged illness or old age.

Death is painful every time. But just imagine, imagine if next Sunday, this coming week, one of us was attacked and killed for the faith.

What would next Sunday feel like if that had happened? It is into that open wound of grief that Paul says, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death.

There's something you've got to know, he says, because what you know will determine how you face death and how you face death says everything about the new hope that you have as Christians.

[9 : 04] So he is not saying, don't grieve. We would, wouldn't we? There would be tears on a Sunday like that. But he is saying, you have a hope that should cause you to grieve differently from a world that has no hope.

hope. A Christian funeral should look and feel a world away from the empty and trivial funerals that the world holds. And the sad thing is that nobody's ever decided have they to have a comfortless funeral.

funeral. But it's just the way it works. It's just what the world does. It doesn't know how to do it any differently because the world has no hope. There's a gaping black hole where that person once was and to make it bearable it has to be filled with funny stories and a posthumous CV and drink.

Someone said recently, nothing has done more for the gospel in Scotland than the rise of humanist funerals because for most people that is where the absence of the gospel is felt most sharply in a hopeless funeral.

Brothers and sisters, unless verse 16 happens first, you are going to have a funeral one day. What do you want people to hear at it?

[10 : 30] Who do you want people to be focused on during it? How do you want them to grieve? Surely not like the rest of humanity who have no hope.

Some of you have lost people very close to you. Moms and dads, husbands, partners, children. children.

Every single one is a painful, painful loss. Paul says the way we measure the strength of our hope is not in whether or not we grieve that loss, but in how we grieve.

So what then do we need to know to grieve with hope? Well, in our next two points, Paul tells us, next, the basis of our hope, then the beauty of our hope. Firstly, then, what is our hope based on?

Well, verse 14 is about as clear as it gets in the New Testament, Luke. We can grieve with hope for 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.

[11 : 40] So Paul bases our hope in two beliefs, one a historical fact and the other a spiritual reality. The historical fact is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again. And if you're here tonight and you're new to church or you're new to the Bible, you need to know everything that we believe and everything we do as Christians hangs on that claim.

You know, I wonder what you would say is the biggest difference between Christianity and any other worldview or world religion. maybe you point to kind of Christian virtues and ethics.

Lots of people say there is no difference at all. But the biggest difference is this, that our faith as Christians is based not on speculation or mystical ideas and not on the authority of an individual or an institution.

Our faith is based on a claim that something has happened in history that has changed everything forever. Either Jesus died and rose again or he didn't.

[12 : 55] And the evidence to that can be tested in the same way you would test the reliability and the credibility of any historical event. There are real historical sources. Some of them are in your hands.

If you are holding a Bible, the four Gospels. You know, strange as it sounds, Jesus' resurrection is actually one of the best attested events in history. There's better evidence, believe it or not, for the resurrection than there is for the existence of Alexander the Great.

So if you like the idea of the Christian faith or the sound of Christianity but think someone coming back from the dead is a step too far will take time to check your sources.

You people like Paul and the other apostles, Peter and John and James didn't go through the awful things that they suffered for a lie, especially not one that they invented. You know, the very existence of the church today and the hope that Christians have should at least make you curious enough to check whether or not it's real before you write off the resurrection.

You know, I or others here are happy to help you and point you in the right direction if that's you because Paul is so confident that the resurrection happened, he's willing to say in 1 Corinthians 15, listen, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

[14 : 25] Then also, those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. If Jesus didn't die and rise again, he says, we are pathetic, deluded people following a pointless and deceptive religion.

If that's what you think Christians are or you know people who think that's what Christians are, it's great to know, isn't it, that the very first leaders of the church got there a long time before you.

If it's all a lie, says Paul, better that we all go home and stop pretending and that this place has turned into flats or a nightclub. And brothers and sisters, if you don't believe that, if you think that Christianity has something to offer you, whether or not Jesus died and rose again, you're wrong.

Our faith only has valid content if Jesus walked out of the tomb on the third day, risen from the dead.

And even if you do sort of know that in the back of your head, well, Paul says, don't be uninformed about it. Okay, don't let that doctrine, that truth, grow hazy or blurry in your mind.

[15 : 46] Read it again, go back over it. Don't let it be something you haven't really thought about since you became a Christian. Because if we're weak on the resurrection, we're going to be weak and shaky on everything else too because the resurrection is the basis of our hope.

well, great, you say, Jesus rose again. Okay, I tick, get it, okay, but what does that have to do with me?

Well, says Paul, verse 14, we believe Jesus died and rose again, there's the historical fact, and so we believe God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Here's the spiritual reality, and it's this, says Paul, when you put your trust in Jesus to save you, it's as if God hitched your life to his, like a trailer being towed by a car so that where Jesus goes, you go too.

The life that he lived becomes the life that you begin to live. His love, his holiness, his suffering come to life in our lives. The death he died becomes your death, a death to sin, and his resurrection becomes your resurrection.

[16 : 58] Right now, in a new life, a new heart, a new hope, a new birth. But when he comes, your body too will rise again, immortal and imperishable, so that in the truest sense, we, if we trust in Jesus Christ tonight, are inseparable from him.

He tows us through life and death and resurrection into our destiny, into his kingdom. and all of that is captured in those two little words at the end of verse 14, in him.

In him, Paul is speaking about our union with Christ. He says, because we are united to a resurrected Savior, we know that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

And remember, it's not just our souls that go where he goes, but in the end, our bodies too. We confessed right at the start, didn't we? If we are Christians, we are united, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Put those two beliefs together, says Paul, the historical fact and the spiritual reality, and you get a solid basis for hope in Christ for those who have fallen asleep in him.

[18 : 21] and if that's a lot for us to think about, and it is, okay, we're not going to take it all in tonight, are we? We'll come back, invest some time looking at this, thinking on it, dwelling on it, praying about it, because your hope and confidence in the gospel can only grow and flourish if we are not uninformed about the resurrection of Christ and our union with him.

that's what Paul wants, that our hope, our confidence will grow and flourish, and so now he turns to the beauty of our hope.

On that basis, what do we hope in for the future? Now, Paul doesn't say everything that there is to say here about our future, that needs to be said. He's speaking about a very specific concern, but he is answering that question that we started with, what are you most looking forward to on the day the person sitting next to you dies?

Now, the worry that the young Christians in Thessalonica seem to have had is that their dear brothers and sisters who died for the faith might be at a disadvantage when Jesus comes again.

That's why Paul is so definite in verse 15, we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. Those who have gone before are definitely not at the back of the queue, he says.

[19 : 53] Perhaps the church was wondering, maybe they asked on a Sunday night, how will those who gave their lives to Christ see him when he comes? How will they know that he's come?

Will they meet him? Will they be there when he arrives? Now, in the event, we know that their concern was irrelevant because, of course, everyone in the church in Thessalonica has now been asleep for a very long time.

But even though we don't need to share their worry about those who have gone before, it is instructive, isn't it? They had clearly grasped, whatever they hadn't grasped, they had clearly grasped the imminence of Christ's return.

They at least thought there was a real possibility, something, an expectation that Christ would return in their lifetime. And so, while we shouldn't share their worry, we could share, couldn't we, more of their anticipation and less of our own cynicism about the timing of Jesus' return.

Maybe if we lived expecting his arrival any minute, we would take his promises about the future to heart. your verses 16 and 17 could happen tonight.

[21 : 14] They could happen tomorrow. You know, I think that shifts our whole perspective on life. Whatever you need to do this week, whatever is most pressing, well, you will do unless Jesus returns first.

And if he does, you won't be worried anymore about what it was you needed to do this week. Now, these verses give us one of the more vivid descriptions of Jesus' return in the Bible.

He includes some pretty great details. And we know he's telling us the truth because Paul says he's only passing it on according to the Lord's word, Luke. Now, that could be Jesus' recorded words in Matthew 24 verses 30 and 31.

Jesus himself says he will come with the clouds of heaven in great power and glory and he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of the heavens to the other.

And for what it's worth, I'm convinced that that is where Paul's getting it. Others believe that it was more of a kind of direct revelation of Jesus to him. But however it came, he's clear it's from the Lord himself and not just what Paul reckons is going to take place.

[22 : 30] So we can take what he says here on Jesus' authority that 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.

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 and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Now, I don't know about you, for me that raises loads of questions. What's an archangel? What is this trumpet call?

What does it mean to be caught up together in the clouds? In what sense will we meet the Lord in the air? I can't promise to answer all those questions. But just press pause a minute, put the questions to one side and just take in the beauty and glory of the vision that Paul is giving us for the end of time.

The Lord himself will come down from heaven. Jesus says that will be as unmissable as a lightning storm or we could picture a blazing sunset where the colors catch the clouds and sort of set the whole sky alight on fire.

[23 : 53] It will be an unspeakably glorious moment when the risen King Jesus comes down from heaven in his power and glory. And he will come with a loud command.

Commentators think this is Jesus speaking to the bodies of those who've died with their trust in him. Just like he once spoke to his friend Lazarus come out.

Well so now with one final and earth-shattering command he will speak the word come out arise and the bodies of the dead will rise.

And with him the voice of an archangel Jesus spoke about the angels gathering the church from north south east and west that could be tied in couldn't it to this angelic voice and the trumpet call of God.

Now that's an image of victory. You could imagine a fanfare for a sort of returning and triumphant king and victor to celebrate and to announce his victory.

[25 : 01] And I will come back to that idea of victory in just a minute but if we're not still quite sure what it is we're reading here it helps to know what Paul's drawing on comes from apocalyptic writing which mainly gives us things in pictures and in imagery.

So will it all happen exactly like this? Or are these images grasping at something that's bigger and more glorious and more beautiful than words can really say?

You know I think we should hold on to these words very dearly that's what they're here for. I think we wouldn't have been given these words if we wouldn't recognize them on the last day as a thumbnail sketch of what will really take place.

But we've got to recognize too that it will be on such another level that it will blow all human words and language out of the water in its grandeur and beauty and glory.

Now keep that in mind okay as we take in this next bit because it gets even more spectacular doesn't it? End of verse 16 the dead in Christ will rise first as the resurrection that Paul promised in verse 14 and after that verse 17 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.

[26 : 24] Now that's pretty unusual even for the New Testament. Why will we meet the Lord in the air? Are we sort of going to meet him halfway suspended between heaven and earth?

Is this what in some Christian circles is known as the rapture? Well no is the short answer. It has to do again with this picture of victory because the word for meet there in the original is specifically the word that was used in the ancient world for when the people of a city would see their triumphant king returning from victory and would run out to meet him on his way back into the city to form a sort of great procession and parade to celebrate what he had done for them as he returned home with them.

Now if it seems like a lot to hang all of that significance on a single word wouldn't that picture of a great victorious homecoming have meant the world to a small persecuted church in a great big hostile city like Thessalonica.

We know from chapter 1 that they were indeed waiting for God's son from heaven. They were watching for his coming. So when Paul says we will all be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord well it's as if we just can't wait to be with him.

So at the very first sight of his coming we must rush up to meet him to celebrate what he has done on his final victorious journey down to earth.

[28 : 13] John says the very same thing in a slightly different way at the end of Revelation chapter 21 he says I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

It's a picture again of the whole gathered church from every time and place pictured as a radiant city descending from the clouds of heaven with King Jesus to be at home with him at last in a new heavens and a new earth.

So let's be clear in the air is not where we will stay but somehow we will be with the Lord as he comes with clouds descending to take his throne on earth and beyond that what can we say and so says Paul from then on we will be with the Lord forever.

Now he doesn't give anything else away does he and we're still left with loads of questions but isn't that the most beautiful thing you've never seen?

Isn't that the most stunning ending to the story you've ever heard? It's easy to talk past it isn't it? Or to want to speculate on what we're not told or to try and piece it together with other passages of scripture but just breathe it in.

[29 : 48] Just stare at it. Just take it all in. Whatever you're picturing in your mind well the reality will be infinitely bigger and eternally better than anything we can possibly imagine.

But what Paul does want to crystallize in our heads from this vision is the sure and certain hope that those who have fallen asleep in Christ even as martyrs will be just as much with the Lord on that day as those who are left alive at his coming.

And the short, short time in between will pale into insignificance in the ages upon ages upon ages that will unfold when we are all forever with the Lord.

That is our beautiful hope as Christians. So now what do we do with it? Well in the very last verse here Paul says use this vision as the baseline of your courage.

What does he leave us with in verse 18? Therefore encourage one another with these words. Yesterday we thought a bit about what it means to speak the truth in love to one another.

[31 : 08] Well here's as clear an invitation as we get in the Bible to do exactly that. Paul wants us to remind each other of the beautiful hope that we have as Christians in Jesus.

Because when we do he says it will give us the courage to keep living tomorrow for Jesus to keep going until then. It's as if he's saying it's enough simply to know that this is our future, that's our destiny to completely transform our lives.

Hope gets us up in the morning, hope gives us courage to carry on. So if we are breathing this hope into one another's lives, well it is like breathing air into an ember, to keep it burning, to fan it into flame, keep the hope alive in each other he says.

Don't let it die, don't forget it, don't let it burn out. Encourage one another with these words. If you've listened tonight and you're not yet a Christian, I'm sure you've got loads of questions, which I'm really happy to try and speak to you about afterwards, but my question for you is the one that we started with.

What are you looking forward to most on the day you die? Because if your personal hope and trust is not yet in this Lord Jesus Christ, then the future that Paul has described is not your future.

[32 : 44] there is nothing left in the hope that Paul has given us without personal trust in the death, resurrection and return of Jesus.

We cannot have this future without him. Without Jesus, there is no happily ever after. And think, if you want this great future, well, why do you want it?

Unless you have put your trust in what he's done to save us, why would you want to rise to celebrate it when he comes? If you have not yet come personally to him, why would you want to be with him forever on that day, if this is what you want?

Well, there is something you need to do. So let me encourage you with these words to come to him now, before he comes to you, to put your hope in him, to save you, and to raise you from the dead on the last day, and to bring you with all his people into his presence, into the new heavens and new earth, that he has promised for those who love him.

Let's come to him together now as we pray. Let's pray.