Tomorrowland – Part One

# Our Hope

# (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Thank you for joining us today for the very first message in a brand-new series called “Tomorrowland”. What we’re going to do in the next few weeks is talk about facing an uncertain future without fear. In a world filled with death, war, and evil, how are we to face what feels like an unknowable future? And certainly, it’s not a new question, but it’s one that’s been asked many times and in various ways. You know, people are always questioning what’s going to happen, is there going to be an end of the world, what’s it going to be like, and are we living in the end times now?

Now that I’ve given you a hint of what the topic is, some of you are probably already guessing what the biblical text is going to be. If I were to say, “I’m going to be talking about speaking in tongues” then you might begin flipping to Acts chapter 2 or first Corinthians chapter 14. If I’m going to be preaching on baptism, you know that there are three or four verses that I’ll probably zero in on. But if I were to say that I’m going to preach on love, even though you may have a couple favorite verses, you may not even know where to begin because the idea of love isn’t limited to merely a few random passages. In fact, every book of the New Testament makes a reference to the word “love” except one book. The book of Acts doesn’t mention the word “love” but it’s certainly demonstrated time and time again throughout its pages by the actions of those first believers.

In the same way, as we consider the end times and how to face a future without fear, some of you may be flipping to the back of your Bible already, you’re anticipating getting into a study of the book of Revelation. And though we’re going to get there, we’re not going to begin there, because this topic is all through the pages of the Bible. And so, what we’re going to do today is we’re going to begin by building a foundation for this series. If you have your Bible and you’d like to follow along, turn to first Thessalonians chapter 4, as we look at our hope for tomorrow.

Now this was a great concern for those first century Christians, because they didn’t have a complete Bible like we have today. As a matter of fact, they didn’t even have any of the New Testament, and so the details of the end and what happens to Christians after they die was left to a whole lot of speculation. Now, the apostle Paul had been teaching them that Jesus was going to return and that it could happen anytime, but then he left and went to preach the gospel in another area. Meanwhile, these first believers in Thessalonica were processing what they’d been taught; and they began to become greatly troubled. Questions, doubts, and fears began to crowd their minds, so they sent messengers to ask for more details, taking their concerns to the apostle.

Some of the things they asked were like where do Christians go after they die? What happens to their souls? And in particular what happens to their bodies? As a matter of fact, they were so convinced that Jesus was returning at any moment that they became obsessed with fear that their loved ones who’d passed away would miss out on the coming of the Lord. They were so burdened by this, they were freaking out, because some of their loved ones who were believers had already died, but Jesus hadn’t come back yet. And so, they’re wondering if their loved ones were going to miss out on what was promised. The apostle Paul answers their questions in first Thessalonians chapter 4 to try to help explain what was going to happen. And so, beginning in verse 13 he says,

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 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. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

And that’s exactly what I want to do today. I want to encourage you with these words, because our God is faithful. As a matter of fact, God gave the apostle John a vision of things to come while he was exiled on the island of Patmos. John recorded his vision in the book of Revelation and one of the things that he saw was, “heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11).

And so, here we find that Jesus Christ is called “Faithful and True” meaning that he never does anything that is inconsistent with his character. The Bible tells us in Psalm chapter 89,

“O Lord God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O Lord, and your faithfulness surrounds you” (Psalms 89:8).

And so, Jesus is faithful to us, he’s faithful to his Word, and that means that he keeps his promises as Psalm 145 tells us,

“The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made” (Psalms 145:13).

And so, God is faithful to his people, faithful to take care of them, faithful to watch over them, and you see this again and again throughout Scripture. For that matter, the Bible tells us very specifically in 1 Corinthians chapter 1,

“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9).

Our God is faithful. He’s faithful when we face temptation, he’s faithful when we fall, he’s faithful when we’re under attack, and I could go on and on because his faithfulness is demonstrated to us over and over and over again. The Bible tells us,

“The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning” (Lamentations 3:22-23, NLT).

And so, just as you can count on the sun to rise each day, you can count on the faithfulness of God, his steadfast love, and his mercies too. You see, he’s the one who’s faithful and true. This is consistent with his character to keep his promises and he’s the one who, number one, promised that he was coming again.

## 1. He’s Coming Again

Now, for sure this was his Arnold Schwarzenegger moment, when Jesus said, “I’ll be back.” “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3). And so, the first believers, the early church, was pumped up, they were excited, because Jesus said he was coming back. But not only that, for 40 days Jesus just showed up, all of a sudden, he was just there standing with them, walking with them, and many people had experienced this. They’d seen him and so there was this deep sense of anticipation that it could happen at any moment. But there was also a great sense of anxiety, because after he’d been gone for a week, and then a month, and then a year, there was so much that was unknown, and so the apostle Paul comforted the church saying,

“We don’t want you to be ignorant (or in other words we don’t want you to be without knowledge) about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

And so, Paul encourages them to face the future without fear, to be prepared, to cling to the truth that they’ve been taught, and to live responsibly in light of their future hope. Now, you’ve got to understand, some of these people had seen Jesus, others knew someone who had and so they believed, they had faith, they expected the coming of Christ. But the question that really concerned them was that when Jesus comes back, when this happens, what’s going to happen to the Christians who fell asleep before his return? In other words, those who have passed away. You know, not sleeping like that guy in the back row, but it’s a way that Jesus referred to those who’ve died believing in Christ. That’s the question that Paul is answering here.

So, number one, Paul reminds them of the promise that Jesus is coming again, because he doesn’t want them to grieve like the rest of the world, meaning those who have no faith, who have no hope in seeing Christ or expectation of a great reunion with those who’ve gone on before them. And so, here Paul answers their confusion with a clear description of this one great event that will be the next occurrence on the prophetic calendar. He says,

“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” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Now, it’s important to note that this isn’t the second coming of Christ, this isn’t when he comes back to earth, this isn’t that great event when he stands on the Mount of Olives, destroying the nations and establishing his thousand-year reign. This isn’t that, this isn’t Christ coming to earth, because it says very clearly in verse 17 that he’s coming in the clouds and we will meet the Lord in the air. And so, there’s no judgment in this event and we’re to encourage each other with these words. This is simply Jesus coming back to take us to be with him as he promised, because he’s the one who’s faithful and true. And then number two, we’ll be caught up together with him in the clouds.

## 2. Caught Up Together

We’ll be caught up. This Greek word means to snatch up, to seize, or carry off by force. It’s a combination of Steven Spielberg and Jason Bourne. It’s rescued, it’s taken, it’s snatched away, you’re there and then you’re gone. It’s a sudden event and you may have heard the term rapture, but it’s simply a word to describe our being caught up. You see, this will be a time when believers are caught up by a sudden, divine, supernatural force. This concept isn’t founded upon philosophical speculation, human opinion, or some ancient church council, but the rapture, this event when we’re caught up together is founded on the truth of the Word of God. Verse 15 says it this way,

“According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:15).

Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, his death fulfills all the necessary conditions to turn the believer’s death into sleep. It’s like when you’re tired, sleep is welcomed, and in the same way for the believer death is welcomed. There’s no longer any fear in death. The Bible says it this way,

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55, NIV).

And so, death is only sleep for the believer because Jesus bore our sins in his body. He became sin for us, he died in our place, he died our death, his perfect sacrifice paid the penalty for our sins and by his death we’re saved. The Son of God entered into all that was involved in death, he took all the judgment of the cross, and so we who trust in him will never see death. It’s only our bodies that will sleep because death has been abolished by the work of Christ. Jesus said it very clearly,

“Whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:26).

Because we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we also believe that God will bring with Jesus those who’ve fallen asleep in him. The resurrection itself proves that God was satisfied with the sacrifice of his Son. Jesus’ resurrection proved that he had indeed destroyed death, that he’d paid our sin debt in full, and it was his resurrection that was God’s stamp of approval on what he’d accomplished on that cross. But even more than that, his resurrection is our resurrection as well, because God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

And so, Christ snatches us away, he rescues us, we’re caught up and taken away. And this is interesting language, particularly for those who have a different belief about the timing of the rapture in relation to the time of tribulation. Now if you’re not familiar with that terminology, the tribulation is a seven-year period when the Bible tells us God begins to pour out his wrath on an unbelieving world that has rejected him. Now, some people, believe the rapture is going to happen before the time of tribulation, before things get really bad. Others believe it’s halfway through, three and a half years into it. And then there are others who believe it’s after the tribulation, that we have to go through hell on earth before we’re saved. But my personal belief and that of the Assemblies of God is that God saves us, he rescues us, snatching us away before the tribulation, before God’s wrath in judgment is poured out upon the unbelieving world.

It’s this passage of Scripture among many others that lead me to take that position, knowing that we’re going to be called up, rescued, taken away, snatched out of harm’s way. And that’s why I call him my Savior, because he saves me from the wrath to come. As a matter of fact, Jesus used the illustration of Noah and the great flood to describe it in Matthew chapter 24. He said,

“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away…” (Matthew 24:37-39).

Verse 40, “That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. "Therefore, keep watch… you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:39-44).

This is so important, because no one knows the day or hour, so we must be ready. The Gospels remind us that it could be a long time. Jesus said in one parable, “My master is staying away a long time…” (Matthew 24:48). In the parable of the virgins, he said, “The bridegroom was a long time in coming…” (Matthew 25:5). And so, the apostle Paul knew it could be a long time, but that it would happen suddenly, it would happen quickly, and so there’s this warning that we need to be prepared at all times. Jesus said he’s coming at an hour when you’re not expecting him, but I assure you that when that day comes it’s going to be amazing, it’s going to be glorious, because number three, we’ll be with God forever.

## 3. With God Forever

That’s what the Bible teaches us. It’s going to be a great reunion. We’ll be with God forever and that’s why we should be living as if Christ could come at any moment. That’s why Paul encouraged us, “to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13). It’s going to be a glorious appearing. And so, let’s look at first Thessalonians chapter 4 again, verse 16 says,

“For 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” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The Lord himself will come down. It’s the Lord Jesus, it’s not an angel, it’s the Lord himself. He’s not coming in judgment, he’s not coming and offering himself as a sacrifice for sins time and time again, but as the Bible tells us in Hebrews chapter 9,

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28).

He’s coming to save us. It’s going to be sudden, we’ll be caught up, we’ll be snatched up, and we’re all going to be with him forever. It’s going to be a great reunion, no one’s going to be left out, no floating spirits looking for a glorified body, because we’ll all be in our new bodies. Therefore, we can comfort one another with these words. The apostle Paul drive this point home saying to the Corinthians:

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

We’ll be with the Lord forever. We should encourage each other with these words. He’s coming back to take us away. And so, we should be living with this consciousness, this awareness, understanding the present time, because the hour has come, our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over and the day is almost here. And so, we should have an urgency to share this good news, because if the people of this world knew how great heaven was, they wouldn’t love this world so much and they too would be waiting for him.

The apostle John saw a vision of this time when we’re with the Lord. He recorded this in Revelation chapter 21, he said,

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).

In other words, when Jesus returns in the clouds and we’re caught up, our physical bodies are going to be transformed into new glorified eternal bodies. The perishable will clothe itself with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality, and all things will be made new. Let us comfort one another with these words.

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