

We Will Be With The Lord Forever

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1) Introduction

- a) Great to be here with you this morning
- b) Thank you for your words of encouragement over this past month
 - i) Many of you have been overwhelmingly supportive of my appointment as the Community Chaplain here at St Andrew's
 - ii) And also my appointment as the Interim Pastor for this congregation whilst we seek God's leading for the right person
 - iii) Just on that note, if there is anything I can do for you at a pastoral level, please let me know
 - (1) If I can pray for you, or encourage you in any way, or
 - (2) You just want to debrief about something, please let's chat

2) Friends, in case you'd missed it in the busyness of life, Christmas is now less than a month away

- a) I think retailers are reminding us earlier and earlier every year that Christmas is just around the corner
- b) Well today we begin our Advent series
 - i) In the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas we ask ourselves the big question; "Are We Ready?"
 - (1) Not just ready for Christmas
 - (a) And remembering the birth of a saviour, Jesus Christ
 - (2) But "Are we ready for Christ's return?"
 - (a) Are we living in joyful anticipation that one day, Jesus will return and take us to be with him for eternity?
 - (b) If you're anything like me, reflecting daily on the second coming of Jesus isn't high on your priority list
 - (c) For some of us, simply getting to the end of the year has been an achievement in itself
 - (3) As I've reflected back on this year, my family and I have had some amazing highs
 - (a) Living on the Sunshine Coast
 - (b) Being part of a wonderful community of believers here at Peregian Springs
 - (c) Meeting so many beautiful people that we now consider our friends
 - (d) Employment for both Bek and myself

- (e) Great schools for the kids
 - (f) My studies have gone exceptionally well
 - (g) And I thank God for those things
- (4) But at the same time, I've also had some incredible lows
- (a) There were times I wondered if I had done the right thing moving my whole family from Melbourne so that I could study the Grad Dip in Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast
 - (i) In 2016, both Bek and I sensed in a very powerful way that this was God's plan for us
 - (b) Yet, I recall at the beginning of the year looking down the barrel of 13 university assignments for Semester 1 and thinking to myself;
 - (i) "I've made the biggest mistake of my life!"
 - (ii) "I'm not sure I can do this."
 - (iii) "And if I do finish the course, I don't even know what we'll be doing in a year's time"
 - (c) But at the end of the day, when I doubted myself / and sometimes when I even doubted God's plan, what I valued more than anything in this past 12 months, was the encouragement of others
 - (i) Family / fellow students / lecturers / old friends and new friends we've made from this congregation
 - (ii) People who gave me some perspective, hope, words of wisdom to keep trusting in God's plan
- 3) Followers of Jesus in the 1st Century needed that same perspective, hope and encouragement to keep trusting in God's plan
- a) You see, after Jesus' death and resurrection, there was a lot of confusion about His promised return:
 - i) Some believers thought it was fine to just kick back and wait, and live how they pleased
 - (1) They'd become idle, letting others do all the work
 - (2) Some of them had even given up their jobs
 - (3) And they'd been tempted return to living like the pagans around them
 - (4) Paul addressed their situation in the earlier chapters of 1 Thessalonians

- (a) Telling them they needed to get their act together and live the way they'd been called as followers of Jesus
- ii) And then there were other believers, who still wanted to live God's way and stay firm in their faith, but they were becoming disheartened that Jesus hadn't returned
 - (1) And to make matters worse, while they waited for Jesus' return, fellow believers were dying
 - (2) This raised the question for those still alive:
 - (3) "What would happen to Christians who died before Jesus' return?"
 - (4) "Would they share in the promises of eternal life?"
 - (5) "Or had they missed out?"

4) Today's passage

- a) So in today's passage Paul set out to address some of these questions
- b) He knew that their bereavement was very real
- c) It's part of being human
 - i) It's a natural response to losing a loved one
 - ii) Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus
- d) It doesn't matter how firm your faith is, the loss of a close friend or relative causes profound shock
- e) I've even been known to shed tears when leading funeral services for people I've never met
- f) Here in this passage, it seems that some of the Thessalonians weren't prepared for the experience of losing a loved one
- g) And so as he began his answer, Paul wanted to ensure they were neither
 - i) Ignorant about the Christian dead, or
 - ii) Grieved in hopelessness, like the pagans (verse 13)
 - iii) Instead, Paul wanted the believers to have a profound hope
 - (1) Not a "cross your fingers and hope for the best" type hope, but
 - (a) Joyful and confident expectation of eternal life
 - (b) That's how Christians are to interpret the word hope
- iv) It's interesting to note in these verses that Paul refers 3x to those who've died as falling asleep (verses 13, 14, 15)

- (1) Even Jesus mentioned when Lazarus died that he'd fallen asleep (Jn 11:11)
- (2) Sleep has been a euphemism for death in many cultures
- (3) But here, I think it is used in a more profound sense
 - (a) Just as sleep is followed by an awakening, death is followed by resurrection
 - (b) And so for those who have fallen asleep, there is a great hope
 - (c) WHY? Verse 14 "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."
 - (d) Christian hope is based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that one day he will return
 - (e) And when he does, he will bring with him "those who have fallen asleep in him."
 - (f) And so Verse 15 assures us that there is no favouritism for either the living, or those who have fallen asleep
 - (g) All will be raised with Christ

5) Christ's return

- a) Paul then continues in verses 16-17 to paint them a picture of Christ's return
- b) "16 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. 17 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."
- c) To say these verses have been debated at length by theologians would be an understatement
- d) Let me briefly point out a few things from these verses, and as I do, I want to restate that Paul is trying to paint a picture
 - i) The picture is not the reality
 - ii) It would be as absurd as me taking a \$1 coin from my pocket and saying;
 - (1) "I've met the queen" or
 - (2) "I've met a Kangaroo"
 - iii) The reality is far more grand isn't it...

- (1) Similarly, Jesus' return will be far grander than the picture Paul paints here in 1 Thessalonians
- (2) In many ways it will be indescribable and incomprehensible for our little brains...
- (3) There is no way that a few verses can do justice to Jesus return

6) But there are some things we do know:

i) Firstly

ii) It is Jesus who will return, not a representative, nor a delegation, but Jesus himself

iii) And with his return, there will be great fanfare

iv) The passage speaks of a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and trumpets (verse 16)

v) Whatever this looks like, it will be exceedingly grand

b) Next

i) The dead will rise with Christ and those still living will be caught up with him (verses 16 & 17)

ii) The Christian dead and the Christian living will be reunited

iii) As believers, we can be certain that we will share

(1) Life with Christ, and

(2) Life with our fellow believers

c) Thirdly

i) We will be in the presence of God

(1) Verse 17 speaks of believers being "caught up together... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

(2) The return of Jesus will go beyond our understanding of time and space

(3) That image of clouds is one used numerous times throughout the Bible as a symbol to represent the presence of God

(4) We see clouds during the Exodus, on Mt Sinai, at Jesus' transfiguration, and at his ascension into heaven

(5) The clouds and the air are symbolic of God's presence, so believers will be in the presence of God

d) Finally

i) Verse 17, the believer's new life will be forever

- ii) All who trust in Jesus (either living or dead) will share everlasting fellowship with God

7) For Us

- a) So what difference will all this make to you during this season of Advent?

- i) I think Paul has one clear take-home for us today

- ii) It's right there in verse 18

- (1) "Therefore, encourage one another with these words"

- (2) We have a sure and certain hope that Jesus' return will unite us with both him, and believers who have died before us

- (3) This is something we can look forward to

- (a) And encourage others to look forward to

- iii) We should never underestimate the power of encouragement to spur others on

- iv) The name **Siri/vanh Keta/vong** probably means nothing to you

- (1) She is an athlete from Laos

- (2) One of the poorest countries in the world

- (3) Finished stone cold last in the women's Marathon at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, crossing the line in a time of 3:34:27

- (a) This was 1 hour and 11 minutes behind first place

- (4) As she stumbled her way into the stadium, she met a standing ovation from the crowd

- (5) Other athletes stopped their events and cheered Siri/van Ketavong on her final lap

- (6) She kept going... completely exhausted, but she ran ever more determined because of the encouragement and support of those who were cheering her on

- v) Encourage one another in the faith during this season of Advent

- (1) Study God's word together

- (2) Pray with one another

- (3) Support one another through both the good and tough times

- (4) Share verses of Scripture that have encouraged you

- (5) And finally, as a community of believers, let's prepare well for the second coming of Christ

8) Pray