

A Sermon from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

introduction

Here in seminary, we study a lot of great theologians. Barth. Luther. Augustine. And I like all of those guys just fine. They had some really good things to say. But to be honest, those theologians have a pretty narrow appeal. People like us will read them and hopefully find ways to share their thoughts with laypeople in ways they can understand. But in order to get deep Christian thought to the masses, we really need theologians who can speak to the people. And I don't know of any theologian with broader appeal than the great Charles Schulz.

You know Charles. He's the creator and author of *Peanuts*, arguably the world's greatest comic strip. And between the panels of Snoopy's great adventures and Charlie Brown's failed attempts to kick that ever-evasive football, Schulz inserted some theological musings that were actually quite insightful. You really should check his comics out sometime when you need a break from Brunner's *Dogmatics*.

On April 13, 1965, Charles Schulz published a *Peanuts* comic strip that goes a little something like this. Lucy and Linus are standing at a window watching rain pour down from the sky. In her characteristic faux-casual way, Lucy says, "Boy, look at it rain." And then she says, maybe a little more nervously, "What if it floods the whole world?" Without missing a beat, Linus responds, "It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow."

This seems to assure Lucy. She says to Linus, "You've taken a great load off my mind." And then Linus delivers one of his famous one-liners. He turns to his sister and says, "Sound theology has a way of doing that!"

I don't think anyone knew the assuring power of sound theology better than the apostle Paul. He spent a great deal of his time and ministry going around to different cities and teaching them sound theology, whether it was in house churches or in the synagogue if the city didn't have a church yet. And after he finished teaching sound theology in a place, he would move on to another place and inevitably end up writing a letter back to the previous place correcting something that had been misunderstood or adding something that he had forgotten to mention while he was there. Yes, Paul was very concerned with sound theology because he knew of its power to assure believers.

In our text for today (which, by the way, comes from what scholars believe to be the oldest

preserved Christian writing) we see Paul dealing out some pretty heavy sound theology to the Thessalonians. In fact, the entire letter is chock full of deep theological reflections on various issues. And it's easy to understand why Paul had to put so much theology into this letter to the church. You see, Paul had recently founded the church in Thessalonica, but he didn't get to stay there long. For one reason or another, Paul was forced to flee the city, leaving the young church behind. And despite his best efforts to get back to the church and continue his work there, Paul had been unable to return. And so he did the next best thing. He got out a pen, wrote a letter to his beloved young church start, and sent his right-hand man Timothy to deliver the letter and to check on them. And in 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18, Paul had this to say to the young church at Thessalonica:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Based on what Paul is writing here, it seems like the Thessalonians had some pretty serious problems. Some of their members were dying off, and they didn't really know what to make of it. They kept waiting on Jesus to return like Paul said he would, but he wasn't showing up. Seems like Jesus has a thing for being fashionably late. The Thessalonians were confused by the reality of their loss and the fact that it didn't line up with their expectations.

We can get all of that from the text. But what the text doesn't tell us is that there was another source of confusion in the lives of the Thessalonians, and this one may have been even harder to deal with. You see, the Thessalonians were dealing with the challenge of resocialization. They had grown up in a city that offered them every religious alternative you can think of. Emperor worship. The Greek pantheon. You name it, Thessalonica had it.

And these Thessalonian Christians were still baby Christians. Remember, Paul had had to leave pretty quickly after preaching the gospel to these people and forming the church there. And so they were still learning this new way of life. Their newfound faith called them to completely re-think their approach to life in light of their relationship with Jesus. But this isn't

an easy process, and the Thessalonians had lost Paul, their primary source of guidance. They couldn't help but be confused by the disparity between their newfound faith and the culture that they had always been surrounded by.

And so all of this confusion, about theological issues, the loss of members within their community, and trying to live out their newfound faith in a pagan context, had a drastic result: The Thessalonian Christians lost their hope.

Does any of this sound familiar? Because it should. We have a lot in common with those Thessalonians. Like them, we live in a secular culture that is constantly in conflict with the faith that we're seeking to live out. And we face loss in our own lives and communities, don't we? Death is a reality in all times and places.

There is one major difference between us and the Thessalonian Christians that's worth pointing out, though. The return of Christ was a constant reality in the lives of these early Christians. We almost get the sense that they woke up every morning thinking, "Today could be the day that Jesus comes back!" They were constantly aware that Jesus could return at any moment.

We, on the other hand, tend to ignore the fact of Jesus' impending return. Jesus' promise to come back one day doesn't seem to have much of an effect on our lives today. Sure, every once in a while some Christian leader will pop up in the news claiming to have figured out the date of Jesus' return, but for the most part, we don't talk about Jesus' return much. To be fair, we have been waiting a long time. About two thousand years, in fact. And maybe this has changed the way Christians think about the impending return of Christ.

But there are a lot more parallels between us and the Thessalonians than there are differences, and one thing is for sure: Like the Thessalonians, we face the temptation to lose our hope in the face of the reality around us. And so today, I'd like to dig into this passage a bit and look at three different sources of hope that Paul shared with the Thessalonians and that we can observe in the text today.

source one: the coming of Christ

The first source of hope is one that the Thessalonians were all too aware of and we all too often ignore, but one that is far too often misunderstood in either case. That is the return of Christ. It is clear from our text today and from the New Testament witness as a whole that the return of Jesus is a basic tenant of the Christian faith.

This belief in Jesus' return is rooted in the words of Jesus himself. In John 14.3, Jesus tells his disciples, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." This statement was meant not only for those present but for all who would follow Jesus after them. Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus promised to come back for his followers.

And Christians have claimed that promise ever since. We see here in the first New Testament book written that Christians from the very beginning awaited Jesus' return. And the book of Revelation, the last book in our biblical canon, imagines the return of Christ with the image of a rider on a white horse. Paul uses a different image here, the image of a trumpet call and Jesus descending. We have a lot of different metaphors that we use to describe what the return of Christ will be like, and they all fall short of the true glory that we'll see that day. But regardless of which metaphor we prefer, we can say without a shadow of a doubt that the return of Christ is coming.

And how could this not give us hope? Jesus, the God who chose to take on the form of man and live among us, the God who died an innocent death and then overcame death by rising back up from it, the God who ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father, is coming back to earth one day, and he's coming back for us. When he returns, he will make all things new and set everything right. No persecution, no disappointment, no pain, no loss, no grief, nothing we could experience in this life can overshadow the fact that we are awaiting the greatest homecoming of all time, and friends, that is something that's worth hoping in.

For two thousand years, followers of Jesus have been saying that Jesus is coming soon. And of course, this has required us to sort of redefine what we mean when we say "soon." By "soon," we don't mean that Jesus is definitely coming within the next year. We don't mean that we can pinpoint on a calendar when exactly he's coming. We don't even necessarily mean that he's coming within our lifetimes. What we mean is that Jesus could come at any moment, and the fact that he is one day returning has a deep impact on our lives, and so we live with Jesus' return as a reality in our lives even though we know it hasn't quite happened yet.

And isn't that what hope is, really? It's choosing to live into the reality of something that hasn't happened yet because you believe that it will. Theologians call this living in a place of "already and not yet." It's choosing to believe that your loved one will be healed even before the doctor confirms the treatment has had its effect. It's choosing to believe that you'll be able to make ends meet while the bills are piling up and the paychecks just aren't coming. It's choosing to believe that things can and will one day be better than they are now, not because

of anything that we do, but because God is working in and through history, and one day, he is going to show up and make everything right. That's the hope that the return of Christ offers us, and we can each live into that hope today.

source two: the resurrection of the saints

But Paul didn't stop there. He had more hope to offer the Thessalonians, and his letter has more hope to offer us today. You see, the Thessalonians were really worried about the fact that some of their church members had passed away after becoming Christians. There's reason to believe that these deaths may have resulted from persecution from the surrounding community. But regardless, these deaths shook the church to its core. The Thessalonians were waiting for Jesus to return, and they had been taught that he was coming soon, and they were afraid that their fellow believers who had passed away would somehow miss out on Jesus' return because they had already died.

And so Paul offers them a second source of hope: the resurrection of the saints. The Bible teaches us that every person who puts their faith in Christ will one day be bodily resurrected in order to meet with him. That may sound kind of bizarre and counter to what many in our churches believe today, but Paul says it right there. And this is a theme that he harps on a lot throughout his writings. Paul was adamant that those he taught know that their resurrection was coming because he knew how important it was for living the Christian life, especially when it comes to maintaining Christian hope.

If we want to know what our resurrection will be like, we need only look to Jesus. He's our example and precursor. 1 Corinthians 15 goes so far as to call him "the first fruits of those who have died." And in the final chapters of the book of John, we get some really interesting details about what Jesus' resurrection body was like. It's clearly different from his pre-resurrection body in some ways, as we know from the fact that Mary Magdalene, one of his most devoted followers, doesn't recognize him at first. But there's also some continuation between Jesus' bodies because he shows Thomas his pierced hands and side. And we know that Jesus' body was physical because John tells us that he ate food and even cooked a little bit. You see, we aren't trying to escape these physical bodies that we're in; we're simply waiting for God to transform them!

Now these are just tidbits of insight, and they're really not the primary concern of John or Paul, and they shouldn't be our main concern, either. Ultimately, we can't know how it's all going to work. When I was younger and I learned about the resurrection, I had real problems with the concept. I knew from my science classes the sort of cycle of life, and it's amazing that God set it up this way. Bodies decompose and turn to dust, and eventually those nutrients are

used to nurture plants that are eventually be eaten by animals that are eventually be eaten by me, digested, and incorporated into my body. So having these two pieces of information, I became worried that I was going to have to share my resurrection body, or at least parts of it, with someone else. Kids aren't the most abstract thinkers.

But we can't get bogged down in the details. They're not important to us. We can simply let the mysteries of God be that: mysteries. And we can just trust in the fact that the resurrection is promised, and one day, God will fulfill his promise of bringing back to life every person who has followed him and then died.

This had to be reassuring to the Thessalonians, who no longer had to worry about their loved ones missing out on Christ's return, and it should be reassuring to us as well. We don't have to worry about our loved ones who have gone on before us. God's got them taken care of. And we don't have to worry about what happens to our bodies, whether they're threatened by disease or some external power or just the natural wear and tear that comes with time. The resurrection makes all of that irrelevant, and it gives us hope for the new life that we'll experience after the resurrection.

source three: our eternal end

And that brings us to the final source of hope we see in this section of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: our eternal end. It's pretty great that Jesus is going to come back and resurrect all of his followers into new life, but it's even better to know that he won't be done with us even then. Jesus won't return and resurrect his followers for no reason. No, there's a purpose behind it. Jesus is coming back and bringing his followers back to life so that we can share eternal life with him.

I've found that Christians like to spend a lot of time thinking about what heaven will be like. The Bible even offers us some metaphors, some attempts by our feeble human minds to describe this amazing place that's so far beyond our comprehension. We like to talk about the streets of gold and the pearly gates and the layers of precious stones. We like to think about the rows and rows of mansions that we're promised. I once even had a friend who liked to sit around and talk about the kind of food they thought might be served in heaven. And I was like, "Really? The food? That's what your concerned about?"

To be honest, I don't know what our eternal home is going to be like. I don't think we have any way of knowing the details. Really, I don't think they're all that important. Because I know *who's* going to be there, and to me that's what matters.

I know that Jesus is going to be there. Paul tells us as much right here in 1 Thessalonians 4: "And so we will be with the Lord forever." I'll get an opportunity to meet Jesus, the one who gave his life for me, the one who died and rose again, the one who saved me from my life of sin and the eternal punishment I so deserve. I'll get to sit with him. I'll get to thank him for all that he's done for me, not just for salvation, but for my calling, for my family, for this amazing life that he's given me. I'll have time to list it all. Yeah, I know who'll be there.

And the Father and the Holy Spirit, too. They'll be there. Maybe I'll be able to get them together with Jesus and we can finally hash out this whole trinity thing. But then again, once I get into their presence, I doubt those sorts of questions will really matter all that much. Yeah, I know who'll be there.

And Paul. He'll be there. And all the other great minds of the Christian faith. Augustine and Luther and Brunner and others. And Charles Schulz and C. S. Lewis. I'd love to get a few minutes with those guys at some point if I can get a chance. Yeah, I know who'll be there.

And my great-grandmother, who died last month at the age of 93. She'll be there. You know, she lived long enough to meet her great-great-grandchildren. Amazing. Well, some of them, at least. My sister had a baby yesterday, and my great-grandmother didn't live long enough to meet little Trenton. But I know that one day, I'll have the honor of introducing Trenton to his great-great-grandmother, and he can hear all the stories that I got to hear from her growing up, and we can share in that together. Yeah, I know who'll be there.

And I think that's our greatest source of hope. As followers of Jesus, we get to spend eternity in the most amazing company that there ever was or ever will be. We'll get to spend eternity with our savior. That would be enough, but there's more. We'll get to spend eternity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And we'll get to spend eternity with our loved ones who have gone on before us. What more could those Thessalonians have wanted to hear from Paul? What more could we possibly ask for?

I don't know a lot of things. I don't know what this life has in store for me or for you. I don't know when Jesus is coming back or how he's going to get me out of the ground when he does. But I know he's coming back. I know he'll resurrect the saints when he does. And I know what my eternal end is. And that gives me hope. I pray that today, you'll allow it to give you hope as well, and that we'll follow Paul's command to the Thessalonians at the end of our passage for today: Let us encourage one another with these words. Amen.