

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on November 16, 2014 on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Legacy
Today's Focus: Priority

"A Legacy That Lasts For Eternity"

We've been talking the last two weeks about the legacy we want to pass on to others—even for generations. In other words, What's important? What's not? What do we want to hold onto tightly and what are we willing to hold onto loosely and let go? Today we're talking about perhaps what's most important and that's leaving a legacy that outlives death. A legacy that lasts for eternity. Sounds absolutely audacious to say it like that, doesn't it?

Now when you were a kid, didn't it seem like you sometimes had to wait an eternity to experience certain things? I was reminded of this a couple weeks ago when our second grader, Sophia, expressed her frustration that she had to wait until third grade to go out for C team basketball while her older sister in fourth grade gets to play. I tried telling Sophia like a knowing adult, "Well kiddo, third grade will be here before you know it". But she wasn't buying that. "Dad, a year is like forever." She hates the idea of missing out on playing basketball—which I can relate to because I love basketball too. Her sister gets to play, how come she can't? I feel her pain.

And you know that feeling too, don't you? Like there's something that you don't want to miss out on? It's not just a feeling for kids, is it? We adults know that feeling too.

In fact in our sermon text today, that's exactly how the Thessalonians were feeling. You see the Christian church in Thessalonica was one started by the Apostle Paul. He came and told them the truth about Jesus even though he upset a lot of folks in town. He told them about how Jesus came into our world and fulfilled God's ancient prophecies of a Savior—the Savior we all need. About how Jesus obeyed all God's commands as the perfect substitute for all humanity. About how Jesus suffered and died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. About how Jesus rose from the dead and about how he, Paul, and many others, saw Jesus alive. About how Jesus ascended back into heaven and about how every single one of us needs to repent of our sins and receive the victory that Jesus won before he returns on the last day and it's too late. Because Jesus Christ is coming back. We talked about this last week. "The day of the Lord" is coming.

And some people in Thessalonica, by the power of the Holy Spirit, believed all this. They turned away from their sins. They trusted in Jesus as their Savior. They looked forward to his return with eagerness. But then they started to lose hope. And you know why? Because it was like they had just gotten through Bible 101 and hadn't yet finished Bible 301 yet when the Apostle Paul, their pastor, was chased out of town by a mob. So here's this tiny little Christian church that's left there in Thessalonica and to their credit they stood firm in their new faith despite immediate persecution. I mean how many of you after just completing Bible 101 would have been willing to risk your life on what you had just learned especially if your pastor had been forced to leave town? But they remained excited about the victory of their Savior Jesus Christ. They knew it wasn't about who their pastor is but who their Savior is. The Gospel of Jesus was that special and important to them as I hope it is to you.

But then the weeks began to go by. Initially when they were so excited, they thought that Jesus' return was right around corner. Yet as time went by and some of their church friends actually died, they figured this meant that their friends who had died were going to somehow miss out on eternity. They worried that all hope for them was lost. They thought now when Jesus would come back that their family members and friends would be stuck in their graves. They worried that their believing friends' deaths meant the end of their opportunity to live forever with God. That they had somehow missed out. They began to worry if they themselves died before Jesus came back whether they'd miss out too.

That's terribly sad, isn't it? But in a way it's also honest. If you remove eternity from the dying scenario, or if you take away the resurrection unto eternal life, that's kind of where death leaves you. It just winds up being the sad end to a very brief and finite period of consciousness. No cosmic significance. No grand scheme of things. And if that's all death is, well it's kind of hard to live your own life with any sort of hope, isn't it? It doesn't matter what legacy you leave. You might as well as make your life all about you and having as many experiences as you can to make yourself momentarily happy while you're alive so as to cope with the inescapable reality that nothing in your life truly matters and your life really has no ultimate meaning when you die.

That's why the apostle Paul wrote back to the Thessalonians to correct their misunderstanding and to remind them of the ultimate hope we have in Jesus. It is passing on this specific hope in Jesus that makes the legacy we pass on to others a legacy that lasts for eternity.

¹³ *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.* It's not that people don't try and find various versions of "hope". I remember being at the funeral of a relative who died in a motorcycle accident years ago. He was a big rig truck driver. That was his career. But he apparently didn't care too much about Jesus as his Savior. And so to give the people who attended his funeral some "hope", the chaplain leading the service who'd never met this guy, said a bunch of absolutely meaningless stuff even referring to him by the wrong name. And then they piped in a Johnny Cash song about how this guy was now up there somewhere driving along the big open road in the sky that goes on and on but never ends. It was a very hopeless kind of hope.

But I suppose if you don't have the real hope that Jesus Christ gives...then you might as well take the feel good hope of Johnny Cash to help you cope as you grieve. Because have you ever heard truly hopeless grieving? I once got called in to serve as a fill-in for the chaplain for a local police department. So I got called to the scene of a drug overdose where a young man had just been discovered dead. I'll never forget standing there with that man's live-in girlfriend as she wailed and screamed and cursed at everyone and everything because there was no faith in Jesus, there was no peace of conscience, there was not even a glimmer of hope. At that moment, at the scene of that drug infested house, I had absolutely nothing to say. I mostly stood there. I felt like there was a black hole in my heart.

But it was with incredible clarity at a time like that when I also realized what a high priority it must be for us who know Jesus to share Christ's victory while we still can. It made me realize the importance of passing on a legacy of hope to today's people *and* to the next generation. It broke my heart that there are people here in the suburbs, in our community, who are dying without hope because they don't know the victory of Jesus Christ. They don't know our church exists and they don't care. They don't know the hope that lasts for eternity because Jesus conquered death and rose again. And this is what God doesn't want us to lose sight of either as we live in this world where our priorities are constantly being tested as the devil wants us to push God's Word further and further to the edges of our lives.

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. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Friends, what do you want to be said at your funeral? Have you ever thought about that? I realize there are all kinds of expectations for funerals these days. There's actually this show on TLC called Best Funeral Ever. Any of you seen it? I watched two episodes one night because I still couldn't believe it after I saw the first one. They have these elaborately themed funerals. It's very American... Personalized. Customized. Over top funerals. But I couldn't stop watching until it hit me what they were doing. They were replacing hope with its poorer substitute, humor.

Now nothing against humor, but what God wants us to have in the face of death is hope—words of true hope because they are words that point us to eternal life through Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians worried that if they died before Jesus returns on the last day that they would miss out. However these words today from God in the Bible reminded them and us that death for a believer in Jesus Christ isn't a missing out. It's just a momentary falling asleep. And the point of calling death a "falling asleep" is that just as much as you might look forward to a good night's sleep after a long, hard day so we can anticipate death according to God's timetable and not be afraid. Why?

Because if your hope is in Jesus Christ, you will not be disappointed! You will not miss out. Even if you die before Jesus returns, your soul immediately begins to live with Jesus in heaven while your body just waits in hope for the resurrection unto eternal life which will happen at the decisive moment of Christ's return. When Jesus returns he will, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (cf. Philippians 3:21). And then what does Paul say? *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, but forever sounds like a long time, doesn't it? This is why it's important to think this through now. Parents, what legacy are you leaving when you worry that your child's going to miss out on this or that scholarship or miss out on this or that opportunity for success if you don't put them in this or that activity or get them into this or that sport...but you do that at the expense of time spent with God at home in family devotions or time with God at church? What legacy are you leaving when you spent your time complaining about this, that, or the other thing instead of building each other up with kind and encouraging words?

Friends, I'm here because I want to leave a legacy that lasts for eternity. I want my kids and grandkids and my neighbors and their kids and you and all the people in this community who are dying without Jesus to be with me in heaven. Nothing is more important to me. Everything we are doing as church, why we started, where want to go is because we want to pass a legacy that lasts for eternity because of Jesus.

And when you have eternity in mind, see then you're free to enjoy the things of this world without tenaciously clinging to them. Then you're free to love the people of this world without thinking about what you want to get out of them. Then you're free to look at life here on earth as temporary in contrast

to what matters most which is eternity. So you're free then to invest in what's going to last. Free to invest in eternity by using here your time, your talents, and whatever treasures God loans to you to share what matters most—your hope in Christ who won for you and for me eternal victory.

I think that's why our text ends the way it does: *Therefore encourage one another with these words. Encourage. One. Another.* This is the second week in a row where the text ended with the words, *Encourage one another.* Why? Because we want to leave a legacy that lasts for eternity... and I don't think that just happens naturally. It takes making it a priority. Our top priority! And the devil, man he never stops working to tear us apart from each other. To isolate us. He never stops trying to get us to tear each other apart with words that hurt. *Therefore encourage one another with these words.* Friends, this is one of the reasons God brings us together as a church family. To encourage one another with words of hope, words of faith, words of love—words that leave a legacy that lasts for eternity. Amen.

My Next Steps

Tension: Should we be living for this life or the next? Or what should the balance be? Living for this life comes pretty naturally. How do we keep a biblically healthy perspective and balance?

Connect: Through his life and ministry Jesus shows us what living (and dying) for the next life looks like. He did what we cannot. And thank God he did! Without him there would be no life after this life.

Treasure: *"...and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words"* (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Challenge: See the directions for creating a personal/family crest on page 15 of the worship folder. Then create your crest on page 16. This is the last week to submit your completed project to Pastor Ben to be eligible for winning a restaurant gift card!