**Encourage One Another, How?**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

3rd Last Sunday of Church Year

11.07.2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said, “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains… and He continues…For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, and never will be.

Yes, it is the 3rd Last Sunday of the Church Year. Yes, we need to look at the things dealing with the end times. I know, some people do not like to do that. But why? What is the problem?

Why don't people like to think about the end times? There are probably a number of reasons. Unfortunately, it goes hand in hand with the fact that most people do not like to think about death.

We are all enamored with making our flesh happy. Some take it to extremes, even going so far as to deny that their body is God’s gift, and that we are only stewards of the very flesh we inhabit. Their cry is, "it's my body! I'll do with it what I want."

How does square with the fact that we are creatures, created in God's image? From ‘the beginning’ every single person was created by God, in His image, to have a purpose as ordained by Him?

This also raises the question, “what is life?” Does our life have anything to do with being created in God's image? Is there anything important about the fact that His breath has given us life? What exactly does all that mean? Remember talking about rhetorical questions a few weeks ago, questions that have obvious answers? So asking these questions brings to mind the very implications you need to consider.

What are we to do, and how are we to consider our bodies and this life? God had that figured out from the very beginning. Your body is in God’s image. His breath, His Spirit gives you life. That means your body is God’s temple. How do you treat that which is God’s temple?

As believers in God, knowing our place in His kingdom because of the work of Christ, we know even more. Your body was bought with a price, the cost being paid by God’s own Son. He gave His life unto death to pay the penalty due for our willful desecration of His temple – our bodies.

Knowing all these things, how do we look at the end of this mortal life.

Knowing all this, our Epistle becomes an even more beautiful text, giving great comfort and expectant hope. Listen to it again:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, 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 fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Those who are asleep, are those who we would say have died. Some people like to say that they have “passed on” or “passed away.” Our text, God’s Word, declares that they are those who have fallen asleep, that is, they have died in Christ!

In other contexts, how do you treat those who have “fallen asleep?” You may cover them with a blanket to keep them warm. Maybe you will carry them off to bed. With those who have “fallen asleep,” there is always the expectation that they will wake up.

With what we already know about the creation of our bodies, and the use God has for them, we add this Word of God as we consider the cessation of bodily functions in this mortal frame. They have fallen asleep.

Many today, out of their fear of death and uncertainty of any kind of future after this life is over, try to bring joy at the death of a loved one by simply focusing on their memories – holding on to the past. While many call these a celebration of life, they are in actuality a denial of life. Today's text is God's word on that subject.

How are we to grieve? As those who have hope! We know something better! We know what has already happened, and what is going to take place!

Jesus declared to the repentant thief on the cross next to Him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Those who die with faith in Christ join Him in paradise at the point of death – as they fall asleep in Jesus.

What is going to take place, is that those who have died in the faith will be raised on the last day, their bodies perfected and glorified. AND…if we have not died by that day when Christ returns, we will be perfected to join them in the air to meet the Lord.

Some of you are squirming in your seats as you are thinking, “Why is pastor talking about death now? I really would rather not think about it now? I have too much living to do! I’ll worry about that later.”

Tell me a better time to “worry” about such things?

Who is your God? He is Jesus Christ, the One who gave His life unto death, only to be raised again on the third day. Should we think about what is coming to us later? How about now? How about thinking about what lies ahead of us now? Thinking about our future prepares us to live today – in hope and confidence.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Those who die in the Lord will ALWAYS be with the Lord. Is this a bad thing? Or, is this something to look forward to?

If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would you live today? You’d live as if there were no tomorrow! Of course, for most of us, because of the sinfulness in us, that would be rather selfishly. We would do all the things that we want to do, the things that would make us happy. We’d go out with a bang!

What if you knew that you were never going to die? What if you had wealth beyond imagining? What if you knew that your neighbor would probably die and be eternally in torment? What if you knew that you had something to give them that might save their life? What if that something could bring them an eternity of joy?

How would you live your life then?

Oh yeah, you better know all that is true. That is exactly what our text says. Sure, Jesus seems a bit gloomy in our Gospel lesson, but He is speaking to warn those who are not following Him. He is speaking words of doom for those who refuse to come and follow Him.

I know the pain of looking at death. In the last month, I have buried a number of friends. I am even now praying for a beloved uncle and the family, knowing what is going to come much sooner than we would all like. Yes, we grieve in this life because loved ones abandon us, leaving us to carry on without them. It hurts! We are robbed of the joy and happiness they bring into our lives here in this mortal coil, the valley of the shadow of death.

But dear friends, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. We also believe that through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. Those who have fallen asleep are those who die in Christ.

By the way, this also means that those who die without faith in Christ are lost for eternity. They will not enjoy life with God for eternity.

You remember the words of Jesus to the repentant thief on the cross? “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Those who die in Christ are with Christ in paradise. What does this mean? We are not completely sure what that life is presently like. We know a few things, that there is no more sorrow for them. We also know, from our text, that they are also awaiting the last day so that they might enjoy the rest of eternity in their raised and perfected bodies. We also know that even if we do not die before that last day, we will also join them for eternity in perfected bodies.

I am not sure about you, but being with the Lord for eternity sounds like a really great thing. Christ will bring with Him all those who believe in Him.

This passage from 1st Thessalonians declares that we are to “encourage one another.” How are we to do that? “With these words!” They are the words of promise given to us by God in Christ Jesus. It is our joy, dearly beloved of God in Christ Jesus, to proclaim the Word of Christ to others that they might have the same hope that we have – of life eternal with God through Christ Jesus.

It is my joy to encourage you – that we might encourage one another – with these words – to life everlasting. In the name of Jesus. Amen.