

**Sunday, November 13, 2022 | Upon This Rock**

**Week 6 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 | "Church Onward"**

*Upon This Rock* is a study designed to help the believer answer one question: "what is the church." How a person answers that question will significantly impact their life. And we began to answer that questions by looking at the church's origins in Matthew 16. **There we learned that Peter, like all true believers, is the substance of the church. The church is not a building but a people who confess that Jesus Christ is the Messiah.** But we also discovered that even though when we are at our best, we can be the foundation of the church, we become a stumbling block when we're at our worst. This is precisely what happened to Peter. He misunderstood Jesus' mission and tried to stand in the Messiah's way. Therefore, to avoid making the same mistakes that Peter made, we must understand that to follow Jesus—i.e., to be the church—we must deny what we want and devote ourselves to Jesus' suffering.

In the second week, we unpacked the church's objective from Mathew 28. **Often called "the great commission," our prerogative is to be disciples making disciples of all nations.** Our mission in life is global, not just local. And that purpose not only stands on the principle that Jesus has all authority; it also has a few methods which assist us in our endeavors. And those methods are baptizing in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching new disciples to obey all the commands of Jesus. And while all who profess the name of Jesus can rest assured that the Lord, at that moment of salvation, takes up residence in their heart, the great commission, nevertheless, ends with a promise that those who obey and make disciples will have the presence of Jesus all the days of their life. Only the believer actively trying to make disciples will genuinely understand what Jesus' never-ending presence actually means.

In the third week, we started unpacking the church's ordinances. And the first of the two ordinances we discussed was communion, also referred to as the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist. And communion is a beautiful way that we, as believers, remember what Jesus did for us on Calvary. While not the literal representation of Jesus' body, the bread is a symbolic object that recalls how Jesus was broken for us. Likewise, while not the literal representation of Jesus' blood, the wine is still symbolic of how Jesus' life force was poured out for us. Furthermore, communion is not only designed to help us recall some past event, but it is also a way that we anticipate the Lord's return, where he'll gather all believers from every age to attend a feast where there'll be no chair left empty. However, it is essential that when we take communion, it is not some simple ritualistic exercise that has no real-world impact; far from it.

The Lord's Supper helps us **remember** Jesus, for sure, but it ought to **remind** us to serve one another as well.

Two weeks ago, we studied the other ordinance of the church, baptism. To review, baptism has no salvific properties. Only a belief in Jesus can save. However, while it may not redeem a person, baptism still helps the believer in several ways. First, it demonstrates to others what has already transpired inside the heart. This is why only a believer must get baptized. Otherwise, the symbolism of the actions loses all meaning. Secondly, it is the first step in obedience for a new believer, as Jesus himself insisted that a disciple must be baptized. Thirdly, baptism helps the believer internalize Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. It is a vivid illustration that reminds us that we are no longer enslaved to sin, that we are free to serve God, and that, one day, we'll be resurrected and given a new body just like Christ. And lastly, baptism enrolls the fledgling disciple in the local church. In this way, baptism is like the door which leads a believer into close fellowship with other believers. Simply put, baptism **is the conclusion** of the old life and the **commencement** of the new life.

Last week, we studied how the church is organized. At first glance, a study that might bore some. However, we must understand the way that God has structured the church as this knowledge will save us from a dysfunctional church and will reveal where, exactly, we fit together in the local church. Ultimately, when this is accomplished, **proper organization of the church organizes believers into their proper place so that the church is functioning properly.**

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Today, we'll close out our series by looking at the "church onward." Or in other words, we'll take a peek into the future to see what will become of Christ's church. And looking to what's to come for us will be a fitting end to our study since we've already covered the church's *past* when we spoke about its' *origin*, and we've already unpacked the church's *present* when we examined its' *objective*, *ordinances*, and *organization*. Now, to be clear, while we cannot know everything planned, the good Lord has seen fit to reveal some essential parts of the end times. And knowing the bits and pieces of what's to come will encourage us in our walk with Jesus, even though we do not yet know how they all perfectly fit together.

Now, not unlike our study last week, there is no shortage of Bible passages that deal with what's to come. For instance, the last book in the Bible, Revelation, is about the end times. And in fact, an entire field in theology is devoted to studying the future called "eschatology." But since we do not have the time this morning to fully unpack everything that is to come, I want to focus on just one aspect: Jesus' return. After Jesus gave the great commission, Luke

tells us he was taken into the clouds. And while his disciples stood there gazing up into the clouds, angels appeared and gave them a peek into what was to come:

**READ: Acts 1:10-11 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Now, while not disclosed in Acts, Paul, in writing to the church in Thessalonica, gives believers a glimpse into what will happen when Jesus returns.

**READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul explains three things about the resurrection:

**i. The resurrection of believers is secured by the resurrection of Christ (vs. 13-14).**

Paul begins this passage by making a comparison. There are those in the world who live "with hope" and those who live "without hope." And the apostle explains to the Thessalonian church—a community built and maintained by hope—that he does not want them to mourn the death of believers like those with "no hope." Why? Because since they "believe" that Jesus died and rose again, they believe that any believers who've died will also rise from the dead just as Christ did.

In defending the doctrine of the resurrection, Paul said that without Jesus' resurrection, our faith is empty, and we are yet in our sins. But since Jesus rose from the dead, he secured us the same resurrection he experienced. In the same way that the first ears of corn are indicative of the entire crop, so too is Jesus' resurrection an indication of what the whole church will

experience. This makes Jesus, as Paul put it, the "first fruits" from the dead. Meaning, as he went, so goes the church.

**READ:** 1 Corinthians 15:20-22 (ESV)

<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Essentially, Paul was calling the church in Thessalonica, just as he did with the church in Corinth, to remember the core belief: since Christ rose from the dead, so, too, will all believers rise from the dead.

**ii. At the return of Jesus, deceased believers will rise first (vs. 15-16).**

Paul did not need to inform the Thessalonians that they would be resurrected. We know that the doctrine of the resurrection was well-established by the way that the apostle speaks here and in other passages in Thessalonians (cf. 1:10; 3:13). As he's just said, they already believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so they also believe that they too will be resurrected (cf. 4:14). The problem that Paul wanted to address--and the reason for his comforting words--is that the Thessalonians were concerned that their deceased brothers and sisters would, in some way, miss out on the return of Jesus. The question is, in what way were believers who were alive in a more advantageous state than those who were dead?

**READ:** 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 (ESV)

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.

The Thessalonians feared they would "precede" those believers who had died and would be among the first to welcome the Lord on his return. Meaning the thing that was causing this church such grief was that they were afraid their loved one would miss out on welcoming the Lord upon his return. Paul assures them that this will not be the case.

**EXAMPLE:** Since my mom passed away on Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, she missed out on meeting Piper and Rowan.

**iii. All believers—past and present—will welcome the Lord when he returns (vs. 17).**

The extraordinary comfort in Paul's words was that Thessalonians and those who had passed away would meet the Lord in the air together.

**READ:** 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18 (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The second coming of Jesus is a ***shared*** experience that all believers from ***every*** age will enjoy. No one will be left out when the Lord returns. Even if they've been dead for generations, death is not strong enough to keep its prey from seeing Jesus' return with their own eyes.

Not only will all believers from every age see the Lord's return, but every Christian will also be transformed at that moment.

**READ:** 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (ESV)

<sup>50</sup> I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup> Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>58</sup> Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise, and all who are in Christ will be changed.

**So, what's the takeaway?**

**Hope in this life is secured by a hope in the life to come.** When the church looks past its present circumstance and onward to what's to come, the hearts of believers cannot help but be encouraged. When believers are parted by death, they may mourn the passing, but they do not grieve without hope. They grieve with hope, knowing that this death is only temporary. They will see their loved ones again. And that reunion will be a glorious one marked by the return of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Hard days may yet still be ahead for the church. As Jesus himself promised in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." We are not guaranteed ease and prosperity in this life. And while that has the potential to discourage us from the task at hand, I would remind you that though Jesus assured us that we'd have trouble in this world, he also said, in that very same breath, "But take heart; I have overcome the world." This life we now live is not an easy one. And if your hope is in this life, you will be disappointed. But your joy will be full if your hope is in the life yet to come.

It's hard to overemphasize how a firm grasp of the second coming of Christ makes even the worst days bearable (cf. Rom. 8:18-25). Think about this for a moment. Sooner or later, ailments like headaches, cancer, and growing old will be things of the past (cf. 1 Cor. 15:50-58). Eventually, there will be a person who will shed the last tear (cf. Rev. 21:4). One day, there will be a day when night will fall for the last time (cf. Rev. 22:5). And someday somewhere, there will be the last funeral (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

When that is our future, is there anything that can genuinely discourage us today?

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## Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: