

Forever– Maintaining an Eternal Perspective

Sermon 4: Matters of life and death

Passages: Matthew 24:26–35

1 Thess. 4:13–18

This is the fourth sermon in our series entitled, “Forever– Maintaining an Eternal Perspective”. As we have followed Paul’s theological thoughts through this, his first letter to the Thessalonians, one thing we have noticed: **Paul talks a lot about ‘forever’!** That is, he has his eyes on eternity!

Think back on the three chapters we’ve studied so far.

- **In chapter 1**, Paul speaks highly of the Christians in Thessalonica. Although life wasn’t easy for them, they were waiting for God’s Son from heaven. By having their eyes on ‘eternity’, the fruit of faith, love and hope would keep increasing in their lives. Paul’s focus is on Forever!
- **In chapter 2**, Paul speaks about suffering. He talks about his own suffering and the suffering of these new believers in Thessalonica. In that context, he tells them that the secret of perseverance is found in the knowledge that Jesus will one day come back. Paul’ focus is on Forever!
- **In chapter 3 and the 1st part of chapter 4**, Paul speaks about holiness. What is the way to be holy? It comes by separating ourselves from evil and engaging in good for others, in the knowledge that, one day, evil will one day be destroyed. Paul’s focus is on Forever!

Today we continue with chapter 4. And, guess what? Once again, Paul is going to focus on Forever.

Now, tell me, if you were Paul, what else do you think you would you need to say about Forever? If you wanted to complete the picture of ‘Forever’, what would you still need to talk about?

Clearly, you would need to talk about **death**! As they say, “death is the doorway to forever!”

That’s what we’re going to look at today. But first, **let’s pray**.

All human beings basically hold one of **three views** about death:

1. Some people, who think that this world is all there is, believe that death is simply the end of life. There’s nothing else. And so, for them, death doesn’t really matter. Everyone dies...so get used to the idea!
2. Other people, however, think of death as a stepping stone to something better. For them, death is actually a good thing.
 - a. The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, thought that death was a good thing. That’s why he poisoned himself! He believed that death would liberate him from his body...He would become a perfect soul.
 - b. Buddhists also see death in this way. Because they believe in reincarnation, they see death as an escape from this present and painful life. They believe that, as long as they have done good things in this life, they will come back in a better position... or even advance to Nirvana.
 - c. Most Hindus also have this view about death. They see it as a positive advancement to a better life...unless, of course, they are already high up on the ladder! I remember talking to a wealthy and very well-educated Indian man about reincarnation. Because he was a Brahmin, at the top of the caste system, he was afraid of death. He couldn’t be sure of being good enough to come back in a better form...and it worried him!

3. This leads me to the third view that human beings hold about death—there are some people who see death as something very evil!

Now, think about these three ways of understanding death and tell me—How did Jesus see death?

You might be surprised to learn that **Jesus was in this third category**. He thought that death was evil! That's why He opposed it. That's why He called it 'the enemy'. That's why He stood in direct opposition to the forces of death by raising several people from the dead, like his friend Lazarus.

In fact, it's interesting to note that, when it came time for Jesus to die, He didn't go willingly. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he wept bitterly. His sweat mixed with his blood. He argued with His Father, saying "Please, take this cup from me." He didn't want to die. To give-in to death was to give-in to evil.

Listen to Hebrews 5:7- **"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."**

Now, this verse from Hebrews raises an interesting question. We've established that Jesus hated death and stood against it. He saw it as evil...something to which he would not give-in.

So, then, why did His Father allow Him to die? Why (contrary to what Hebrews 5:7 says) did His Father not reach out to save him? I mean, everyone knows that Jesus died! He who was so opposed to death... and who raised others from the dead...seems to have had no power to stop His own death. And, neither did His Father; or, so it seems!

In the end, I guess it all depends on what actually happened on the day when Jesus died. I mean, perhaps the mystery of the cross is that Jesus actually took this enemy, death, into Himself and, in His own body, He separated it from evil. In other words, in the

‘sting’ of His own death, Jesus forever took the ‘sting’ out of death.

Have you ever been stung by a bee? Did you know that, once you’ve been stung, that bee can no longer sting again. You’ve taken the sting out of the bee. Jesus took the sting out of death... forever!

Keep all that in mind as we turn to **1 Thessalonians 4:13–18**.

In these verses, Paul turns his thoughts to the subject of death. Perhaps it’s because he just received the news that someone in Thessalonica had died. Perhaps several people had died... persecuted and tortured for their faith in Christ. We don’t really know what prompted this shift in his focus onto death. But one thing we do know—Paul tells the people in Thessalonica not to grieve for those who have died.

Verse 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.”**

Why shouldn’t the people grieve? Isn’t it normal to grieve for your loved ones?

If you’ve ever been to the Middle East or in Africa, you’ll know that one of the noisiest moments of life happens when someone dies! Everyone wails! People are falling over each other with grief. So, for Paul to say, **“Do not grieve...”**, he was literally challenging the way society understood death.

But the issue for Paul was not simply about grieving. Paul’s exact words were, **“Do not grieve as people who have no hope”**. Grieving is not really the problem—it’s ‘hopeless grieving’ that Paul doesn’t like. And, why not? Look at the next verse...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.”**

Jesus has totally changed what happens at death. You see, prior to His own death on the cross, death was Jesus' enemy—He opposed it; he hated it! He cursed it! But, because Jesus accepted death...and accepted it for all humanity ... He has taken the sting away. This means that we have nothing to fear! We have nothing to grieve! For there is now, in Jesus, a hope that goes beyond the grave...a hope based in the fact that the great enemy, death, was powerless to hold Jesus down.

In the end, you see, the Father did finally come (three days later) and rescue His Son from death... in much the same way that Jesus did finally come to rescue His friend Lazarus (four days later). The point is not, Why did Jesus die? or Why did Lazarus die? Rather, the point is that, despite the delay, in the end they were both saved from death.

And so shall we all be saved from death.

We just don't know how long it will take between the day we physically die and the day when Jesus comes to rescue us from death and raise us up from the grave. **All we do know is, it will happen!** And it will happen like this– (Read verses 15–17)

“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.”

Do not grieve, says Paul. Why not? Because whether Jesus comes tomorrow or delays His return until the year 3000, He will still come! And on that day, there will be a reunion of heaven and earth; a reunion of the dead and the living; a reunion of the

present with 'forever'! **“And so we will be with the Lord forever!”**

As I said earlier, human beings tend to look at death from one of three perspectives.

1. Some people see death as totally unimportant– it doesn't matter because everyone will die.
2. For others...those seeking to escape this life... death is seen as a good thing.
3. But for us, Christians, we see death in a different light. What used to be our enemy has been neutralised in Christ. In a sense, Jesus has taken death out of the equation. Sure, it does affect us...but not permanently! And, one day soon, any power that it has to 'steal away' the gift of life will be totally eliminated. Soon, death will be completely swallowed up in the life of 'forever'...thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Verse 18– **“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”**

Let's pray.