

## **Whose We Are**

### **Part Eight. Hope and the Promise of Eternity with God**

I Thessalonians 1.3 2 and selected verses

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Twenty years ago Tom Hanks starred in a quirky and charming movie called *The Terminal*, in which a man from Eastern Europe gets stuck in the JFK Airport terminal for nine months when he is denied entry to the United States but is unable to return to his home country because of a military coup. The whole time he is trying to figure out how to finish his flight and get home. Finally, when he is cleared to go, he says – the last line in the movie: “I am going home.”

*The Terminal* was inspired in part by the true story a man named Mehran Nasserri, who stayed in the departure lounge of Terminal 1 at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris for a bit longer than nine months. For eighteen years, to be exact.

In 1988, Nasserri flew from Brussels to London by way of Paris, but he was sent back to Paris from England because he didn't have his refugee passport. When France denied him entry too, Nasserri lived in the transit area of Terminal 1 at Charles de Gaulle for the next eighteen years.

Each day he hung out at the Paris Bye Bye bar or at McDonalds, eating food bought for him by other passengers, smoking his pipe, reading, journaling, studying economics, ever surrounded by his luggage.

More than once arrangements were made for him to be able to finish his journey and go home, but he refused to cooperate, and his family told authorities that they believed he was living the life he wanted to live.

When he had a heart attack in 2006 he was moved to a shelter near the airport, but eventually he managed to return to live out his days in the terminal. He died just short of a year ago, never having boarded a plane home.

Here's a thought experiment:

What if you mistakenly thought an airport was your home?

What if you mistook your departure gate for your destination?

How would that impact the way you lived? What sort of possessions you had? What sort of relationships you made? And why? Where you fixed your heart?

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In about 50AD, a recently converted Christian man wrote a letter to a church that he helped establish in a port city in northern Greece. He wrote to encourage them and cheer them on in their faith.

The man's name was Paul. The city was called Thessalonica. The letter, called First Thessalonians, was preserved for us in the New Testament. And we've been studying its themes this fall.

The men and women who made up the church family faced a lot of difficulties. So did Paul. So he thought it would be helpful, among other things, to remind them about their hope as followers of Christ.

Three Christian graces, core qualities that are supposed to characterize us as Christians, dominate this letter from Paul. They are faith, love, and hope. Here's how Paul introduces them in this letter

I Thessalonians 1.3

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We've already taken a few Sundays to explore what Paul has to say about faith and love. Today and next Sunday we're exploring what he has to say about hope. And if you have read through the letter a few times, you've already discovered that Paul has quite a lot to say.

This Sunday we'll focus on the nature of our hope and what it means to rest in that hope, and next Sunday we'll focus on how our hope in God's perfect tomorrow gives us endurance and peace in the midst of our struggles and difficulties today.

So what is hope?

Think about the brokenness that we experience all around us in our world.

The appalling events in Israel and Gaza

The unjust war and loss of innocent life in Ukraine

Civil war in Syria, lawlessness in Haiti, crackdown on the church in China, poverty in South Sudan, chaos in Afghanistan

Closer to home, in our own nation

The petty divisions and infighting in the House of Representatives as we struggle to respond effectively to national and international concerns

The incivility and drama related to the upcoming presidential election amid charges against the former president

Tales of deception and exploitation in one dimension of our society after another

Still closer,

The deaths of two sisters at Purdue as their parents waited to take them home  
 The mistreatment and neglect of children right in our own community  
 Even something as simple and evil as a phone scam taking advantage of  
 people's generosity and goodness of heart right in our own church family

And those are just a few of hundreds of examples we could come up with that remind us we are living in a broken world.

There are really just two ways to view this broken world of ours. It either is, or isn't, our ultimate home. This is our departure gate, or this is our ultimate destination.

Anxiety is what comes of thinking this world is our home, and feeling overwhelmed because we believe it's all up to us to fix it and make it all right.

Similarly, despair comes of thinking this world is our home, but giving up because we believe it's all up to us to fix it and we know we can't.

Hope, on the other hand, comes of knowing that this life is not all there is, and this world isn't our ultimate home, and living with peace and purpose because we're confident that God will not only make our journey through this world rich and meaningful but also that he will ultimately bring us home.

Hope is our confidence that God's loving purposes will have the last word in the future, so I can trust the future to God and I can entrust myself to God as I walk into the future. God's got this – whatever it is. And he's got me, and I've got him. And that's all I need.

Hope means that neither the brokenness in me nor the brokenness I find anywhere else in this world will have the last word.

It may not all work out according to my script or my timetable. Or with the outcomes I might have wanted, or asked for. But it will all work out, because it will never be, and I will never be, outside of God's loving and powerful hands.

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Look at these bookend passages from the beginning and end of Paul's letter that really tell us the most important thing we can know about our future hope.

I Thessalonians 1.4

We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people.

I Thessalonians 5.24

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

We are loved. And we are his. He chose us to be his own. And what God has resolved to do, he will see through.

(By the way, do you remember our church's statement of identity and purpose – we are his people, and we exist for his kingdom and his glory – that's comes straight from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 2.12.)

Joining what Paul says here with the teaching of other New Testament writers, I think there are four word or ideas that capture the heart of our hope in Christ.

### **Enjoying God . . . forever . . . together . . . in a new creation**

#### **First, our hope is the promise of enjoying God**

The hope of *heaven* is a bit of a misnomer. Our hope is ultimately in the *God* of heaven.

In 1650, a pastor named Richard Baxter wrote a book called *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. It was one of the most popular books of the entire Puritan era, as popular as Randy Alcorn's books about heaven have been in our day. It was all about the hope we have as followers of Christ. In it, he wrote,

It is the presence of God that makes heaven to be heaven. (66)

Mark Twain thought the essence of heaven was a bunch of people wearing white robes and strumming harps. No wonder he wasn't too thrilled about the idea.

No, the essence of our hope is the assurance that God loves us and has chosen us to be his own people, and the promise that one day, as his beloved people, we will fully enjoy God's presence. "Now we see him as if in a dim reflection, but one day we will see him face to face." (I Corinthians 13.12)

God created us for relationship with himself. It is why we exist, and the essence of our hope is the fulfillment of that purpose for which we were made.

We will see him, be fully present with him, knowing him, being known by him, and enjoying his boundless love for us.

As Baxter says:

We shall see God face to face and stand continually in his presence, and derive our life and comfort [directly] from him. (67)

When we live in our Father's house and presence and God is our all and in all, then we will indeed be at home in rest. (68)

Our hope is the promise of enjoying Him.

#### **Second, our hope is the promise of our enjoying Him forever**

Ours is not a meager, disappointing, this-life, this-world come and go sort of hope.

Teresa of Avila described life as one night in a bad hotel.

Our hope, by contrast, is a forever and never-ending day in God's glorious presence. We will be blessed to enjoy God in Buzz Lightyear fashion – to infinity and beyond.

### **Third, our hope is the promise of our enjoying him forever *together***

The future is not a solo experience for Christians. We are part of a forever family. Look around you for a moment. These are your eternal companions.

Richard Baxter said:

It is the presence of God that makes heaven to be heaven.

But it much sweetens the thoughts of that place to remember that there [will be] such a multitude of my most dear and precious friends in Christ. (66)

O beloved, if it is a happiness to live with the saints in their imperfection [now] . . . what will it be to live with them in their perfection [then]? If we thought [we were] in the suburbs of heaven when we [were reminded by our sisters and brothers of] the beauty of our Lord and [when they pointed us to] the excellencies of his kingdom, what a day will it be when we . . . join with them in praise to our Lord *in* . . . that kingdom! (67)

### **Finally, our hope is the promise of our enjoying him forever together in a new creation**

We can forget this part – that heaven is a temporary arrangement until Jesus returns, and ushers in the new heaven and the new earth, and we will be blessed to enjoy him in a reclaimed and recreated physical existence.

At that moment God will create a new physical realm from which all sin and evil has been eliminated eternally. And in that new physical world we the new humanity will be given new physical bodies.

So that's God's promise related to the future: enjoying God forever together in a new creation. That's our hope.

But that's not what he promises to all of humanity. He *offers* it to all of humanity, but it is a promise as sure and certain as reality itself only for those who have put their trust in Jesus as King and wait for his return from heaven.

As Paul writes in to his brothers and sisters in I Thessalonians 1.9-10

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Later in the letter he says this is one of the things that separates Christian believers from the rest of the world. We have hope. They ultimately don't.

I Thessalonians 4.13

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.

So how will God fulfill his promises concerning the future? Paul has a lot to say about that.

First, Jesus will come for us.

One of the most important elements in any compelling story, whether it be a war story, a western, or a love story, is when the good guy promises to return to put things right and rescue the one in trouble and bring them home

Some of you who are newer to Covenant should probably be aware, before you get any farther in committing yourself to our life together, that one of my favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*.

If you know the story, which I'm sure you do, the beautiful Princess Buttercup is in love with the handsome Farmboy Westley, but she is abducted by the evil Prince Humperdink. But before they are parted, Westley and Buttercup have this conversation.

Westley: Hear this now: I will always come for you.

Buttercup: But how can you be sure?

Westley: This is true love. You think this happens every day?

In the first few verses of John chapter 14, on the last night Jesus spends with his disciples before his death, Jesus says this to his disciples:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms; [and] I am going there to prepare a place for you. And once I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you also will be. (John 14.1-3)

And in this letter to his dear friends in Thessalonica, Paul reminds them of that truth – in every chapter – that Jesus will come for them

I Thessalonians 1.10

you are looking forward to **the coming of God's Son from heaven**—Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

I Thessalonians 2.19

**we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes**

I Thessalonians 3.13

you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father **when our Lord Jesus comes** with all his holy ones.

I Thessalonians 4.15

we who are still alive, who are left **until the coming of the Lord**, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

I Thessalonians 5.23

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless **at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

In God's perfect time, at a time when no one but God himself knows (5.1-10), Jesus will come for us.

And then, at that moment of his appearing, he will complete the work of transformation that God by his Spirit began in us by making us fully like himself.

As Richard Baxter says:

“He prepares the kingdom for us, and then prepares us for the kingdom.” (53)

Listen to what Paul says about how God will complete his sanctifying work at the close of the age.

I Thessalonians 3.13

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

I Thessalonians 5.23-24

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

As Thomas Traherne puts it in his *Centuries of Meditation*, (1636-1674), we will “become glorious personages, and like Him in all our ways” (135) – fit company for eternity.

Finally, Jesus will gather us into his arms and carry us home

This idea is first introduced in 3.13, where Paul speaks of  
 when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

This is elaborated on in 4.13-18

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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.

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

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

The same idea is opened up again in 5.9-10

<sup>9</sup> For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, **we may live together with him.**

Here again is the essence of all our hope: enjoying him forever together

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If that's what's true, if that's the reality that awaits us, our hope will have much to say to us when we find ourselves in the midst of hardship and difficulty. We'll look at that next Sunday.

But Paul also urges us, even apart from any difficulty we may face in a given moment, not to lose sight of the reality that lies before us.

So this is how he urges us to live today.

First, to live *expectantly*.

I Thessalonians 1.9-10

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven.



I Thessalonians 5.2, 8

You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. . . .  
Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

We don't know when Jesus will return, but we know that he will. Paul urges us to live expectantly, knowing he could come at any moment. Live with your bags packed.

Think of how often Jesus taught about being ready for his imminent return.

For example, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus told five different parables to encourage his followers to await his return with expectancy: the wedding banquet (22:1-14), the homeowner and the thief (24:42-44); the faithful and the unfaithful stewards (24:45-51); the vigilant wedding party (25:1-13); and the parable of the talents (25:14-30).

Let me bring us back to the movie *Princess Bride*.

After being shipped off into exile and falling into the clutches of the dread Pirate Roberts, and then being caught and put to death by the evil Prince Humperdink, faithful Farmboy Westley is brought back to life, breaks into the castle and rescues his beloved Princess Buttercup.

Westley: I told you I would always come for you. Why didn't you wait for me?

Buttercup: Well...you were dead.

Westley: Death cannot stop true love. All it can do is delay it for a while.

Buttercup: I will never doubt again.

Westley: There will never be a need.

We don't know when he'll return, but we are called to live with ready hearts, as though it would be at any moment. "Come, Lord Jesus" is the closing prayer in the pages of Scripture.

What would happen if that prayer from Revelation 22.20 became part of your daily prayer? How might that help you live in expectancy? How might it help you not mistake your departure gate for your destination?

That doesn't mean we check out here while we wait. Just the opposite, as Paul makes clear. A strong hope moves us toward others in love. A heart of hope and a life of love are two sides of the same faith. Faith, love, and hope all encourage and deepen each other.

Paul also urges us to live *encouragingly*. It's so easy for us in the gravity and pain of this world to lose sight of the hope that we have for tomorrow. Paul urges us to keep reminding each other that this life is not all there is, and that this world is not our home. We have one more flight to catch before we're home.

I Thessalonians 4.17-18

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. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I Thessalonians 5.10-11

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Almost exactly four years ago my dear friend Lon Allison. In the nine months or so leading up to his death, when he knew his life was coming to an end, we talked often about the hope of heaven. What it meant to me to see his hope so firmly anchored in that promised future!

Think of someone you know who is especially weighed down by the burdens of this life. How could you encourage someone this week with a reminder of the hope that we have in Christ?

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We close our message by coming to the communion table together.

There are different ways we celebrate this meal, and each has a different shade of meaning.

When we celebrate the meal as the Lord's Supper we look back and focus on the last supper and on the sacrificial death of our savior for us in the past

When we celebrate the meal as Communion or as the Eucharist we focus on the spiritual presence of the risen Lord with us in the present

And when we celebrate the meal as a foretaste of the great wedding feast, which we do today, we focus on the joy that awaits us on that day in the future when the bridegroom will come to take us home

In Matthew 22.1-14, and again in Revelation 19.7-9 and 21.2-9, passages that are rooted in the imagery of the great banquet in Isaiah 25.6, we are given the image of a feast that God and the people of God – whom he chose to be his, and whom he dearly loves – will share together in eternity.

Communion is a foretaste of the hope that awaits us as the people of God.

On the last night he spent with his disciples, Jesus said, "I am going to prepare a place for you. And then I am coming again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you also will be."

Then he took bread and he broke it and he said, "This is my body, broken for you. Eat it. This is my blood, poured out for you. Drink it."

And then he said, "I won't eat of this bread or drink of this cup again until the day when we drink it together in the kingdom of God."

If you are a follower of Jesus, I invite you to share in this anticipation of the feast to come.

Jesus says,

Yes, I'm coming soon.

And his bride says

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.