

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / Nov 28, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Taking Your Next Step into Faithfulness Series
A Faithful Hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11)

Introduction: A story reminds that we all face hardships

Good morning. Here after Thanksgiving, I'm thankful for our new ministry to a refugee family and that we're worshipping God together this first Sunday of Advent! Let's ask now for God's help in prayer... I'm currently reading *Walking on Water* by Madeleine L'Engle, a Christian author of the previous generation. I'd like to share a story from it that impacted me, a story with a tough beginning...

"How do we survive the unreliability of life in this world? Everything appears to be going along smoothly, and then, without warning, tragedy strikes.

I flew out to Chicago one July, to speak at Wheaton, and was met by a young graduate, a friend of mine. She took me to her home for a cup of tea, and I called my husband... as I always do after a trip, just to check in. And what I learned was that my just-nine-year-old granddaughter Lena had been hit by a truck on her way home from swimming. That was all he knew because to add to the unreliability of all things, our phone was out of order when I first called, and the operator reported it. During the fifteen minutes I waited before calling again, a neighbour had called him frantically information. So it was she who told him what she knew; the little girl had been hit by a truck and was being taken from the local hospital to the bigger hospital in Hartford. We knew that this meant head injury because the local hospital could take care of everything except a neurological problem...

She [*my friend*] drove me to Wheaton, and I called home again. Our daughter having at last been able to reach her father, we now knew the terrifying extent of the damage. Both of Lena's femurs were broken, up near the hips. Her ribs were broken. Her jaw was broken in two places. Her skull was fractured. She had a head wound which laid bare the bone. Her arms and legs were covered with lacerations and contusions... She was unconscious, and the neurosurgeons were pessimistic. Worse than the fear of death was the fear of terrible brain damage.¹

Relevance: we can struggle amid hardships

I've got an 8 year-old daughter, and so this nine-year-old girl suffering like this hit me particularly hard as I first read it, as it may have hit home for some of you. Like L'Engle's

¹ L'Engle, Madeleine, *Walking on Water*, p.145-147.

family, we have to somehow survive the unreliability and hardships of life in this world, a mighty struggle.

Perhaps you've been struggling personally and then your Thanksgiving family gathering made things worse as you left misunderstood and exhausted by the conflict. And maybe you're deeply troubled by hardships that your friends or family carry.

And do you ever just feel burdened by all the bad news? Drug cartels, religious persecution, refugee crises, natural disasters, racism, injustices, an SUV recently plowing through people at a Christmas parade. Steph and I went to a concert recently where our phones were compared to dementors, sucking the life out of us as we despair over the suffering of the whole world through our news feeds.

Orienting to God's Word: Thessalonians struggled amid hardships, needing hope

Like L'Engle, and us, the ancient church in Thessalonica sometimes struggled when facing hardships and death, in need of hope. I could use some hope, so let's find some as we open to the New Testament book of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Things start hopefully in Thessalonica, as the apostle Paul and his team come to town and share the good news of Jesus. And among those who start life changing relationships with Jesus, a church forms in Thessalonica.

But soon after that, Paul and his companions are persecuted for their faith and forced to leave. And soon after that the fledgling church in Thessalonica begins enduring persecution too.

For differing reasons, some of their Jewish and some of their Gentile neighbors are threatened by the subversive message that "Jesus is Lord". So they attacked the church, and accused them of blasphemy and of treason, and then some in the church died, possibly from the persecution, though we don't know for sure.

And now the Thessalonian Christians are struggling with despair as they wonder if those who died will miss out when Jesus returns. As they struggle, perhaps they also think,

“Just when is Jesus returning to end all the persecution and suffering and to finally heal the world?”

So the apostle Paul pastorally addresses the Thessalonians’ struggles and concerns, encouraging them with a faithful hope that can help us in our struggles.

Teaching: A faithful hope for Christians in hardship

We will be with the Lord forever – So let’s hear about this hope starting in verse 13 of 1

Thessalonians chapter four. **(13-14)**

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. 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.

The Thessalonian Christians wrongly concluded that those in the church who died would miss out when Jesus returns. So Paul reassures them in verse 13 that they do not need to grieve without hope, as the rest of the world does. The rest of mankind lack hope in death because they are without God.

But these deceased Thessalonian Christians have fallen asleep in Christ, as verse 14 says, and so they will be resurrected in Jesus. So while it’s good for the Thessalonians to grieve the loss of loved ones from their church family, Christian grieving is unique, because it also includes a note of hope.

When Paul talks about hope here, he doesn’t mean something that he wishes will happen that may or may not actually happen. Rather, Christian hope is instead an encouraging certainty about something that’s definitely happening. The kind of certain hope that is an anchor for one’s soul, firm and secure, as the Bible book of Hebrews describes it.

In verse 14, Paul explains why Christians can grieve with this hope. Belief in Jesus’ resurrection includes belief that God will resurrect all who have fallen asleep in Jesus. This metaphor of “fallen asleep” is appropriate for Christians because death is a temporary thing we will “wake up” from as those who share in Jesus’ resurrection. In verse 15, Paul shares more about our hopeful future in Jesus. **(15-18)**

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.

There's hope in the Thessalonians' grief because those who fall asleep before Jesus returns will not miss out. They may be dead, but they are dead in Christ, as verse 16 says, which makes all the difference.

The city of Thessalonica held special status with their Roman rulers, so it's possible that the fanfare in these verses with the herald, trumpet, and meeting outside the city could allude to the emperor's reception when visiting Thessalonica.

But it seems more likely that Paul is thinking of Exodus chapter 19 as he wrote these verses. In Exodus 19, God's descent to meet with Moses to give the Ten Commandments included a thick cloud and a loud trumpet blast.

Similarly, here in 1 Thessalonians 4, the believers meet Jesus in the clouds after God's trumpet call. And instead of going out of the city on their own to meet Jesus, like the Thessalonians with the emperor, the Christians are instead summoned. In these verses the dead in Christ are commanded to rise and the living are caught up to meet the Lord.

In the Greek that 1 Thessalonians was originally written in, the verb translated "caught up" in verse 17 is *harpazo*, which means "to grab or seize suddenly... to snatch, to take away."² In Latin, the word that describes this idea of being "caught up" is *repturo*, from which we get the English term *rapture*. If you've been in church a while, you may know there's some debate on interpreting what the Bible says about the end, including about this rapture, this catching up of living Christians to be with Jesus.

So if you've got any concerns about my interpretation this morning, send those to Dave@nwchurch.org. Pastor Dave's family is in town, and he's been off this week, but I'm

² *BDAG*, p. 134 on ἀρπάζω.

sure he'll be glad to immediately respond to your concerns. I'm just kidding, I'm glad to engage if you'd like to explore 1 Thessalonians together.

We'll mention the rapture later in the message, but for now, the important point in verse 17, which all Christians can agree on, is that eventually both those "sleeping" and those still alive will one day be with the Lord forever. Paul began in verse 13 by saying that he did not want them to grieve like those with no hope. The Thessalonians can deeply grieve their lost church members but with hope because we will one day all be with the Lord forever.

Paul wants this future hope to impact the Thessalonians' present, to bring encouragement even in the face of persecution and death and also even in the battles we face today. So Paul concludes this section in verse 18 by instructing us to encourage one another with these words of hope, to be a hopeful community together.

Now we left L'Engle's story needing hope, her nine-year-old granddaughter Lena unconscious, the neurosurgeons pessimistic about Lena's chances. She continues:

"Because I was at a Christian college, I was able to ask my friends for prayers, and a network of prayer quickly went out. That evening, after my lecture, Mel Lorentzen stepped up to the lectern and told the audience what had happened and asked for prayers. And I went back to my room to try again to reach Canon Tallis in New York, and the Episcopal Sisters who ran the school where my little granddaughters had gone and from which their mother had graduated. I had not been able to get any calls through, and I could not understand why. Finally the phone at the convent began to ring, and it rang and rang, and I waited until it was answered by Mother Mary Christabel, who told me that she had had to grope to the phone in the darkness because New York had plunged into a blackout. I told her what had happened and asked her for prayers. Then I got ready for bed, and part of my bedtime routine is to read Evening Prayer. I opened the small prayer book I bring with me when I travel, and when I came to the psalms for the evening, there was a picture of nine-year-old Lena, taken just a few weeks before, at the baptism of her baby brother. It was almost more than I could bear. I hold the prayer book loosely, and a card fell out, a card given me years ago by one of the Sisters at Mundelein (how intricately the strands are woven). On it were the words of John of the Cross: 'One act of thanksgiving made when things go wrong is worth a thousand when things go well.' And I knew that I had to make that act of thanksgiving."³

Like L'Engle, we can dare to make an act of thanksgiving even in despairing circumstances because of these words of hope from 1 Thessalonians. Not only is Jesus with

³ L'Engle, Madeleine, *Walking on Water*, p.147.

us today in our suffering, but we share a future where we will all be with our Lord forever, no more accidents or pain or illness or anxiety or abuse or depression or suicide or death.

A future where we get everything we ever wanted, and so much more with the Lord forever: love, joy, peace, community, intimacy, feasting, purity, holiness, vitality, meaning, purpose, glory, beauty and to worship Him, all beyond what we can even begin to imagine.

This hope in our glorious future can bring some encouragement alongside the deep grief of Lena's horrific accident, the Thessalonians' suffering, and in the hardships of our lives and world today. So I need these words of hope, and I bet you do too.

Having told the Thessalonians to encourage one another with these words of hope, Paul next discusses Jesus' response to injustice.

God will act against injustice – Verse 1 of chapter 5: **(1-3)**

5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

As the Thessalonians grieve while enduring persecution, they may wonder, "Just when is Jesus going to return and take action?" Paul doesn't give them a guide on figuring the timing out, saying that no one knows when the day of the Lord will come.

Now "the day" or "the day of the Lord" is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, referring to times when God intervenes on earth in an extraordinary way. In the Old Testament, most often the day of the Lord refers to times when God intervenes to bring judgment on nations abusing people in rebellion against God. Occasionally the day of the Lord is also described as when God comforts and blesses His followers.

In the New Testament, the day of the Lord is associated with Jesus' coming intervention. Before Jesus brings judgment, there will be deceived and deceiving people proclaiming, "peace and safety", that everything is fine, that Jesus won't act.

But as these verses make clear, Jesus will respond to those who rebel against Him as they persecute His church and harm in other ways while refusing the help in relationship that only Jesus can provide. Some Christians describe this period of judgment on earth, this final

day of the Lord, as the great tribulation, based on teaching in Bible books like Daniel, Matthew, and Revelation.

We may not always be comfortable with how the Bible portrays God bringing judgment for sin, like in verses 1-3. I can't resolve that fully for us, but it might help to think back to last month to when we covered the Bible book of Jonah. In Jonah we saw God portrayed as a reluctant judge, delaying judgment while looking for evidence to avoid needing to bring it.

So God is not excited to judge, and God exhibits great patience in delaying His judgment. But if you love someone, your anger is rightly awakened if they're victimized. And because of God's incredible love for people, His righteous anger is rightly awakened as people hurt and destroy over and over what God holds so precious.

So God will eventually act in response, bringing judgment on the day of the Lord. We humans are not going to save ourselves, so at some point God must step in, including judging those who refuse the relationship with Him that is essential to us becoming whole again and living in a world of peace.

As Christian author A.W. Tozer describes this dynamic, "To preserve His creation God must destroy whatever would destroy it. When He arises to put down destruction and save the world from irreparable moral collapse, He is said to be angry. Every wrathful judgment of God in the history of the world has been a holy act of preservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of the creation are inseparably united... God's wrath is His utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates iniquity as a mother hates the diphtheria or polio that would destroy the life of her child."⁴

Those Thessalonians, and we, can look around amid all the sin, suffering, and death and perhaps wonder if God has abandoned the world. So Paul wants us to know that God is still working and is still in control. One day God will take care of the abuse and He will take care of His people.

For the Thessalonian church is not included in the judgement on the day of the Lord. In verse 3 Paul says the destruction will come on "them" and "they" will not escape. So Paul

⁴ A.W. Tozer quote accessed 11/23/21 at <https://www.criout.com/the-wrath-of-god-what-is-it-by-a-w-tozer/>

is not talking about the church. The church will be with Christ in the air when God's judgment comes upon the earth in the great tribulation.

Given that both the rapture and the day of the Lord are both imminent, that they can happen at any time, it makes sense that living Christians will be caught up with the Lord at the very beginning of the period when God brings judgment on the earth for sin. That's how both can be imminent. Further, the church has not been appointed to suffer God's wrath on earth, as Paul will later say in verse 9. Knowing all this can encourage God's followers to keep living with hope in dark times.

We live as people of salvation, not wrath – Knowing that one day God will act, He will make things right, in His own time. And in the meantime, His followers are to keep living for Him, as verse 4 says. **(4-8)**

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But 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.

As Paul turns his attention back to the Thessalonian Christians in these verses, he uses metaphorical language to encourage them to stay aware and wakeful.

Other people are described metaphorically as of the night, asleep and drunk. Paul is not so much speaking literally, but rather describing those who are unaware of what's happening spiritually, living inattentive to God and His good ways, surprised on the day of the Lord.

In contrast, the Thessalonian Christians are children of the light and day. They, and we, are to live as people of salvation, aware and wakeful to what's going on spiritually.

As the Thessalonians endured persecution and grief, they could have become distracted and despairing. So Paul encourages them, and us, to keep paying attention to our spiritual priorities, living differently than the world around us. As people of the day, we are to live in light of the coming day of the Lord.

To have a military-like preparedness each day as we put on faith and love as a breastplate that defends our heart and put on the hope of salvation as a helmet that defends our head. We need spiritual practices that help us to put on faith, love, and the hope of salvation each day, so that we have protection when facing the onslaughts of life. Let's not face those threats, unprotected. We saw a glimpse of some of L'Engle's spiritual practices as she asked others to pray, and with her nightly evening prayers and commitment to make an act of thanksgiving even in dark circumstances.

If the Thessalonians keep putting on faith, love, and the hope of salvation each day, depending on God's armor, this will even free them to love their persecutors. To pray for them, serve them, and continue to pay the price to share the good news of Jesus. For the Thessalonians, and we, have a faithful hope that can give us strength even in hardship, a hope Paul reminds about in verse 9, saying: **(9-11)**

⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Jesus has died for us, taking God's wrath for all our sin, gifting us with relationship and purpose, and preparing for us a magnificent future. Because our salvation is secure, based on what Jesus has done, whether we live wakeful to what is going on spiritually, or whether we fall into sleepy living inattentive to God, either way, we will not suffer God's wrath when He brings judgment on earth. We will live together with Him.

In light of this glorious hope, Paul again exhorts the Thessalonians to keep encouraging one another and building each other up as we conclude in verse 11.

Next Step

Like the Thessalonians, we can struggle amid hardships, the battles in our hearts and minds so fierce. We need ongoing encouragement to hope in Jesus.

I know that I struggle with the challenges in my life and in the lives of those around me and with all the hard things in our world. It can be tempting to take those negatives of today and then project an even more negative future from there.

So as the Thessalonian church were to encourage each other with hope, our next step this morning is to be a hopeful community together. That's our application, let's be a hopeful community together.

By God's grace, let's help each other to stay focused on the hope found in our breathtakingly glorious future with Jesus. We all need help staying focused on this hope. A secure hope, that no one can ever take away from us, where all shall be well, no matter what, forever and ever.

Now we left L'Engle's story with the words of John of the Cross just "happening" to fall out of her prayer book. Those words are "One act of thanksgiving made when things go wrong is worth a thousand when things go well."

And L'Engle knew that even as everything was going wrong with her granddaughter, she needed to make that act of thanksgiving, an expression of gratitude for her hope in Jesus. She says next about the act of thanksgiving:

"I'm sure I was given the grace to make it that night and during the several days that followed, when I jammed many lectures and classes into a short time in order to be able to get home to the family as soon as possible. The largest part of that act of Thanksgiving was gratitude for my children and grandchildren, for the first nine years of Lena's life, and then to say with Lady Julian of Norwich, 'But all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well,' and then to add, 'No matter what.' That was the important part, the 'no matter what.'

It was ten days before Lena regained full consciousness and we knew that she would recover. The gift of that card falling out of my prayer book when it did was one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. It made me affirm to myself that God is in control, no matter what, that ultimately all shall be well, no matter what.

That autumn Mother Mary Christabel told me that at the onset of the blackout their phone had gone dead; they hadn't been able to use the intercom between the convent and the school. They could make no calls out. No calls came in. Except mine, my plea for prayer."

Skipping forward a bit, L'Engle goes on to say:

"I have heard that in time of tragedy, a family either breaks apart or draws together. I will be eternally grateful that ours drew together. My son, who had planned to spend the summer at his university, writing, came home immediately to help out with the driving, the cooking, with whatever was needed. His medical-student bride-to-be spent her one week of vacation with us, in order to make the hour-long daily drive to the hospital to see Lena. How much I learned from all of these people who are so close to me that sometimes I do not

remember what they teach me. But the two deepest lessons were Lena's uncomplaining acceptance and her mother's loving courage.

It was a long summer, and a hard one, but there were many joyful times, and funny ones, too. Most of the children had little television sets, with hearing discs they could put under their pillows in order to not disturb the others, and we got one for Lena. One day one of the nurses who hadn't seen her since she had been in the intensive care unit, came to visit. Lena was watching *All My Children* on television, and the nurse said, 'What are you watching, Lena?' 'I'm watching my grandfather.' At that the nurse hurried to the nurses' station and said in great agitation, 'The child's delirious!' There was much laughter as she was reassured that the little girl was indeed watching her grandfather, who plays the head of the hospital in that TV show.

All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well. No matter what. That, I think, is the affirmation behind all art which can be called Christian. That is what brings cosmos out of chaos."⁵

Let's pray...

Dismissal – You're dismissed, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

⁵ L'Engle, Madeleine, *Walking on Water*, p.147-150.