

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, November 12, 2023

"Hope Everlasting"

"Young at Heart" Message

You may be seated. After church today, I'm throwing a last-minute party. It's going to be the best party you could ever imagine.

Yes, it's going to be even better than the Christmas potluck. Sorry to steal your thunder, Dave.

I'm going to have the best food you could ever imagine, and you don't have to worry about bringing anything, which for some of you already makes it the best party ever!

Everyone who attends will get 1 million dollars.

Oh, and all of your dreams will be fulfilled. If you want a new car – you'll get a new car.

If you want a trip to France, you'll get a trip to France.

If you want the warmest pair of slippers you could ever imagine, you'll get them.

This is not a joke – it will be the best party you could ever imagine. So, who's planning to come to my party after church?

Oh, I forgot to mention – only these two sections of the church are invited. This section over here won't be allowed in at the door.

For those of you who aren't invited, how does that make you feel?

For those of you who were invited, how do you feel about those who weren't invited?

It doesn't feel great on either side, really. If you were not invited to the party, it certainly feels unfair, and you might even feel a little anxious.

After all, those who were invited are promised something amazing.

And for those of you who were invited, it feels pretty unfair that you have access to this amazing party and the opportunity to fulfill your wildest dreams, but those who aren't invited will miss out.

You might even go so far as to beg me to invite those who weren't invited.

Maybe, you would even choose to protest my party unless I make it fair for everyone.

After all, what kind of loving pastor invites only two-thirds of the church to such an amazing party?

In our scripture reading today, this is essentially how the Thessalonians are feeling. They feel like they've been invited to the best party ever, but they have concerns about those who were not invited.

The Message

First of all, it is important to place our scripture passage from the Thessalonians into context.

Scholars widely agree that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament.

Most scholars believe Paul wrote it during his 18-month stay in Corinth, before any of his other letters and even before the Gospels were written.

It is important to understand the context of this text because we must understand what is happening in Thessalonika and where the people's heads are at. They have very different concerns than we do today.

The city of Thessalonika is located in modern day Greece.

For many ancient Greeks, once people died, they were considered to be separated from the living and they were doomed to the underworld.

This separation from the living wasn't believed to be a punishment, though it was permanent. It was just the belief about death and afterlife at the time.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is writing with his companions, Silvanus and Timothy. They are writing letters to address specific issues in the communities they founded, of which this Christian community in Thessalonika is one.

It is important to understand the context in which Paul is writing before we can really analyze the text and work to understand what it is telling us that can be applied to our lives today.

The Thessalonians have been evangelized by Paul and his companions and they look forward to Jesus' triumphant return, which they believed would be happening within their lifetime.

Therefore, many of them were grieving because they believed that death had permanently separated them from their loved ones.

In other words, they were concerned that those who died between the time Paul came to them and whenever Jesus would return would not be saved in the same way they would be saved.

They were afraid that those who have died would miss the best party they had ever been invited to.

So, this letter to the Thessalonians is part of Paul and his companions' work to introduce a new way of thinking about death.

Imagine what that must have been like for the Thessalonians.

They desperately wanted to believe in the promise of Jesus Christ and his return, but they understood death very differently. What Paul and others were claiming sounded foreign to them.

For some of them, it must have felt like a race between death, and Christ's return. They were trying to reconcile their preconceived notions of death with this new promise they so desperately wanted to believe in.

For them, Jesus was very different than any other Greek hero they were familiar with. Jesus was not held down or separated by death.

Death was not permanent for those who died in Christ. And this gave those who were still alive and invited to the party hope that even if they died before Jesus' return, they too would not be separated permanently from their loved ones.

Pop culture today loves to imagine what it would be like to experience the Rapture.

There have been many movies made about those who are left behind.

But this notion of resurrection, life after death, and unending grace even for those who have gone before us is not meant to scare us into believing we may be left behind. Our pop culture movies would like us to believe that's what it is about.

It is not about fear. Rather, it is about hope. Hope everlasting.

This letter to the Thessalonians is meant for those who lost children, siblings, parents, spouses, and other loved ones.

It is meant to reassure them that even if they died before Christ's return, they would not be excluded. They were still invited to the best party they could imagine.

And this passage does not only give hope to the Thessalonians. It gives hope to every future generation that waits for Christ's return.

God has not forgotten those who came before us. God has not abandoned them. Nor has God forgotten or abandoned us.

This passage is meant to reassure us that God will raise the dead up and we will see them again.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy ground their faith in Jesus' death and resurrection because they are fighting for eternal hope.

They are fighting for hope everlasting. Not just for the Thessalonians, but for all future Christians, including us.

They seek to offer hope and encouragement that even if this life isn't fair, even if we struggle on our journeys, that in death, we will be raised to life again.

This passage offers the bold hope that *all* those in Christ – living and dead – will be there on the day when he will come again in glory, and they will dwell with him forever. Amen.

God of hope, thank you for your endless love, grace, and care. Thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ to teach us and save us, and thank you for sending other teachers who have shared their prophetic ministries throughout history – both ancient history and more recent history.

We are grateful for the hope you provide, and we are grateful that we are all invited to your table and no one is excluded. May your hope sustain us throughout our lives and deaths. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.