

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: *The Time in Between*

Service Theme: *A Time to Yearn for the End*

Sermon Theme: *The End Is Near...So Have Hope!*

November 26, 2023—1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

If you walk around downtown in most big cities, or around the stadium at a professional sporting event, it's pretty likely you'll find one. Someone standing on a stool, shouting into a bullhorn at the passersby, and holding up a sign, which reads, "The End is Near!" What are street-corner preachers like that trying to accomplish? Despite the large number of people who walk by rolling or averting their eyes, these doomsday proclaimers have one purpose. They want people to see the end of the world as flames, destruction, and wrath; to rouse people from spiritual apathy, sin, or unbelief with the terrifying truth that God is coming back as a just, wrathful Judge. They want, "The end is near!" to strike fear in people's hearts.

And sometimes that's needed. A few Sundays ago, we heard Jesus' warning that we need to be properly prepared for Judgment Day so we won't be locked out of the eternal wedding banquet. Sometimes, we need the fear of God's law to rouse us from spiritual slumber and mis-prioritized living. "The end is near!" should give us a sense of urgency to prepare our hearts for Jesus' return. But unlike those fiery street-corner preachers' intention, "The end is near!" doesn't need to fill the believer's heart with horror, but with hope!

That was one of the primary reasons the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Christians living in the Greek city of Thessalonica. They needed hope! Not longer after Paul started spreading the Gospel of Jesus and establishing a group of Christians in Thessalonica, intense persecution from the Jews forced him to flee. But the persecution didn't leave with Paul. These new Christians continued facing persecution for their faith. So, Paul writes this letter to encourage them to stand firm in their faith, despite the persecution. Since Paul's time

with the Thessalonian Christians was relatively brief, these spiritually immature new Christians also misunderstood some of the teachings of God's truth, particularly about Judgment Day. They mistakenly thought that all believers in Christ would remain alive until the Last Day. So they were worried about what would happen to their Christian loved ones who had passed away. Would they miss out on Jesus' glorious return? Would they see them again?

To correct these misunderstandings, Paul writes this letter with a heavy emphasis on "eschatology," that is, teachings about the end of the world and Judgment Day. Paul ends every chapter of this letter with a reference to Christ's coming again, writing about and explaining the end not to fill their hearts with fear, but so they could have hope!

Still today, there's lots of fear, confusion, and misunderstandings about Judgment Day and the End Times. But through Paul's letter, God also informs and encourages us to have hope, because the end is near!

Now, to truly have the hope that Judgment Day provides, we need to understand the way the Bible uses that word, hope. In English, "hope" is synonymous with a wish or desire. "I hope I get that for Christmas." "I hope my team wins." Wishes, but not certainties. If we think of the hope of Judgment Day in those same terms, "I hope Jesus will come back again." "I hope he'll take me to Heaven," but we can't be entirely sure, then we'll probably feel more fearful than hopeful about the Last Day!

But the Bible uses the word "hope," not for uncertain wishes or desires, but for absolute certainties; just certainties that haven't yet been fully received. So the "hope" of Judgment Day means we know with absolute certainty that Jesus will come again to take us to be with him for eternity. He will glorify and perfect us. We just haven't received that in full yet.

That's why "the end is near" gives us hope! But it's also the reason we need "the end is near" to give us hope. Because right now, we're living in the Time in Between Jesus' two comings. Jesus has already come and won forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life for all people.

Everyone who has faith in Jesus as their Savior already possesses those gifts, and has them credited to their account, if you will. But because Jesus hasn't come back yet, we haven't received them to their fullest realization. Meaning, until Jesus comes again, we'll still be living in a world broken by sin.

In this time in between, we'll still battle a sinful nature that wants us to serve ourselves instead of God, and is so often successful. We'll still feel the aches, pains, weakness, suffering, and deterioration of our physical bodies and minds. We, and those we love, will still die. We'll still experience natural disasters, accidents, and tragedies. We'll still be terrorized by war, violence, hatred, and injustice. We'll still feel the pain of broken hearts, broken trust, and broken relationships. All those pains, losses, struggles, and frustrations we deal with in the time in between leave us yearning for the end! As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, ***"We ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."*** We groan as we live in the Time in Between. And as we groan, it makes us yearn for the end. Because in the end, there is hope!

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages them with some of the hope that will be ours when Jesus comes again. First, he gives these Christians hope as he corrects their misunderstandings about their deceased Christian loved ones. Paul writes, ***"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. 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. 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."***

Unlike the rest of the world who think death is the ultimate, terrifying end that we should avoid at all costs, Christians can grieve (and we do grieve) with hope! Because when Jesus comes again, he will raise back

to life all those believers who have "fallen asleep" in death! As Paul declares, ***"The dead in Christ will rise first."***

And along with hope for the dead believers, Paul shows the hope that those who are still alive when Jesus returns can have! ***"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."*** When Jesus comes again, those who are still alive will be gathered together with all the dead who Jesus raises to life, so we are with the Lord eternally!

To summarize this reading, and today's other two readings: Jesus himself will come again with a loud voice, a trumpet blast, and the angels. No one will miss it! God will raise the bodies of the dead back to life, and they will reunited with their souls, which have been in heaven or hell. All those still alive will also be gathered together to stand Judgment before Jesus. He will judge all people based on whether they had faith in him as Savior or not. Those who don't have faith will be eternally separated from God, both body and soul, in Hell. Those who do have faith in Jesus as Savior will receive perfect and glorified bodies, and will spend eternity, both body and soul, in the perfect, glorious presence of Jesus! As Paul writes in Philippians, ***"[God] will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."***

What hope that gives us as we yearn for the end! For Christians, Judgment Day won't be a day of terror, but a day of triumph and victory! It will be the culmination of God's perfect plan of salvation for this world broken by sin. It's already been accomplished by Jesus, but at the Last Day when he returns, all who believe in him will receive the complete and fullest realization of that salvation!

And as we yearn for that glorious day to be realized, that hope in Christ sustains us, even through the troubling, painful circumstances of life in the time in between. That's what hope does! Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that in his experience in two concentration camps, once someone lost hope, they would always give up and succumb to the

horrors of the camp. But when people had something to cling to that gave them hope, they were able to persevere and overcome even the most horrific kinds of fear and suffering. Likewise, the hope that “the end is near” gives us also helps us to persevere and overcome even the most difficult and painful kinds of suffering and sadness in this life.

When your grief over your loved one who passed away feels overwhelming, have hope, because the end is near when you’ll be perfectly, eternally reunited with them in the Lord’s presence! When the ugliness of death rears its ugly head in your life, have hope, because the end is near when death will be forever swallowed up in victory! When you feel wearied by war, violence, and bloodshed in the world, have hope, because the end is near when there will finally be perfect peace. When the pain in your body is overwhelming from disease or deterioration, have hope, because the end is near when God will give you a perfect and glorious body! When you’re being persecuted or mocked for your faith in Christ, have hope, because the end is near when the mockers and persecutors will be silenced as they stand before the Lord they mocked and persecuted. When you’re treated unjustly, have hope, because the end is near when the Judge will carry out perfect justice. When you’re feeling weighed down by the guilt and burden of your sins, have hope, because the end is near when our sinful nature will be gone, and we will live in perfect eternal holiness, judged not based on our works, but on Christ’s work of salvation for us!

Ultimately, that’s the reason that “the end is near” gives us hope. Because as Paul simply confesses, ***“We believe that Jesus died and rose again.”*** That’s our eternal hope of salvation—our crucified and risen Savior! He is coming back to take us to be with him. And ***“We will be with the Lord forever.”*** As Paul says, ***“Encourage one another with these words,”*** dear brothers and sisters. No matter what’s going on in your lives. No matter how much sadness, suffering, pain, or loss, encourage one another with these words! Because **The End Is Near...So Have Hope!**