

Strengthening One Another

"Amplify" Series, February 7 & 8, 2026 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Why does death leave us sleepless and a little dizzy?

Sam Harper was the first person I saw die.

I was fresh out of seminary and in my mid-twenties. When I came to the church, Sam and I became friends quickly. He was five decades older than I was, but just sarcastic enough to make him fun to be around. Sam came down with cancer and fought it through multiple rounds of chemotherapy. Until he couldn't fight any longer. I was with him the morning he died. The gap between his breaths kept growing until he stopped breathing. Then his heart stopped beating. I prayed as he died and felt God present in the room like the air in my own lungs.

As I drove back, I stopped at a traffic light and watched vehicles come and go.

I thought, "How can you go shopping and go to work like nothing happened?" All I could think about was how Sam had just died. And that Sam was with Jesus. Suddenly, heaven and resurrection were everywhere, like a light I couldn't ignore but one that was so bright it made me squint. I don't know that what I said at his funeral made sense. I'm sure it was garbled, but it was full of resurrection and hope. It was all I could see, everywhere I looked. Grief and hope in an odd mixture.

Death normally leaves us reeling.

We cry. We can't sleep. We don't want to eat. We can't sit still, but we don't have energy to do anything. We ask why. Why her? Why now? Why didn't God stop this? What's next? Sometimes we can't breathe.

Death left the Christians in Thessalonica with an unexpected problem.

They heard that Jesus had died, had risen, and was coming again. Soon. They put their faith in Him and lived expecting to see Him any day. Then time passed, and first one, then another, Christian died. Imagine their shock and worry. Were they wrong about Jesus? Would their brothers and sisters who died miss Jesus' return?

The Thessalonians were right about Jesus.

But they were missing important information about death, the afterlife, resurrection, and Jesus' return. Paul filled in the missing pieces. What did he tell them? And how does that help us? We'll get there. But if we want to find our answers, it helps to look in the right place.

When we fixate on the details, we miss the masterpiece.

The Thessalonians were looking in the wrong place.

1 Thessalonians 4:14-15 says:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

They knew that Jesus was going to return. They assumed that those who were alive would be the first to welcome Jesus and be glorified. So, they worried that those who had died would miss out; maybe they would be raised later or not at all. How did they get this so wrong?

A famous Bruegel painting shows how we can focus on details and miss the main event.

This painting comes from the 16th century. What do you notice? A man farming? Ships coming into port, their sails filled with wind? A port city, a shepherd? Down in the bottom right is a pair of legs sticking up out of the water. It's easy to miss. The painting is called, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Icarus is the man who flew too close to the sun on man-made wings. Here he is plunging to his death in the water. We barely notice his death because we're looking everywhere else. The Thessalonians did that and we do it, too.

Paul refocused the Thessalonians on the masterpiece of Jesus' return and our resurrection.

1 Thessalonians 4:16 continues,

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven ...

Jesus is returning. Then Paul reminds them that the dead will be resurrected. This addresses their core worry--even though the Thessalonians' beloved dead are in the grave, they are not beyond God's reach! Then the living will be glorified. Then both will be caught up in the air to meet Jesus. That's the masterpiece.

Today, we ask important questions about the details of Jesus' return and our resurrection.

Does Jesus return before, during, or after seven years of tribulation? Is there a literal millennial kingdom? Does Jesus rule over it personally? What is the place of the nation of Israel in the future? But sometimes in focusing on these questions, we miss the masterpiece of Jesus' return and our resurrection. Let's not do that. That's where our hope lies!

But Jesus' return is the indisputable headline.

Headlines frame news stories.

Details follow in the body of the story, but the headline tells us which details to notice and what they really mean. If we read the headline, "Crime Rate Soars", then we easily see the rising number of burglaries in the story that follows, but we ignore the falling homicide rate.

A famous poet wrote one possible headline.

W.B. Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" in the years right after World War 1. He saw war, death, and suffering as the past, present, and future. He described it as a monster being born that would shatter the world and usher in a violent age of chaos. He wrote:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Sometimes we put that same worried headline over our stories.

Have you watched the news lately or been on social media? You hear name calling—like “king” and “traitor”. You see hand-wringing about alliances, trade, and interest rates. You hear apocalyptic predictions about the economy, personal freedoms, and impending wars. Whether you come from the political left, right, or center, many people agree on one thing: Things are falling apart. At times, we view our lives that way, too. Maybe you have bills you can’t pay. Or your friend group may be torn apart by a conflict. You may be worried about how your children are doing in school. Or you may have lost a job. So, you say, “Things are falling apart!” But “Things are falling apart” is always a headline that tells the wrong story.

Jesus’ return is the true and right headline that frames history.

The right story is that history is moving toward a destination. God knows the end and is moving history toward it. Jesus will return, evil will be destroyed, and glory waits for those who belong to Jesus Christ. “Jesus Wins!” That’s the headline that helps us to see today accurately—no matter what today looks like.

And it’s the headline that frames our stories.

My story is heading toward a day when I will see Jesus face to face. In that day—whenever it is—I will be changed. My old, decaying body will be swallowed up in glory. I will be made new. My gimpy ankle will work the right way again. All the stains of sin finally gone. I will live forever with my Savior! Nothing that happens today can stop that story from getting written! No twists in the plot will ever change the end.

Jesus rose from the dead and we will, too!

Jesus died and rose again.

Everything about Jesus was real. The Son of God really took on human flesh and became one of us. He lived a human life but did it perfectly. Then He died. His death was real. He stopped breathing and His heart stopped beating—just like Sam Harper. They buried Him, just like we get buried. Then three days later, Jesus was given a new and glorified body. His heart started beating again, and breath came back into His lungs. He rose again from the dead. His Resurrection was real.

His past is now our future.

Jesus died and we will die. If Jesus doesn’t return first, we will stop breathing and our hearts will stop beating. But what comes next? If we have faith in Jesus, we are His! He was resurrected in the past, and we will be resurrected in the future. Resurrection is now our future!

We see Jesus’ power and glory on display in verses 16-17:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Jesus Who ascended into heaven after His Resurrection crosses that barrier once again. A loud cry sets in motion the culmination of history that will lead to eternity. An archangel marshals the armies of heaven, ready for the command of their Lord. A trumpet announces the arrival of God on earth. And the One coming on the clouds is God Himself. That's power! That's glory!

It's a glimpse of the power that will triumph fully over sin, evil, and death itself in the end.

Picture what will happen on that day if you have already died. Your body will be transformed, your heart will start beating, and your lungs will begin to breathe. Your eyes will open. You will be caught up in the air with all the saints of history and one of your first sights will be your glorified Savior coming for you for eternity. That's the power we see on display in 1 Thessalonians 4. And it's the kind of power that will one day destroy the armies of evil, cast death into the Lake of Fire, and create the New Heavens and New Earth. The One Who can raise the dead can do all of that!

We don't need to grieve or worry like those who don't have our hope.

Death can be frightening. It's filled with so much uncertainty, so it's no wonder people grieve and worry. But what Paul tells us here fills in the most important pieces that we were missing. Resurrection is our future in Christ, God's power will make it happen, and God's promises are certain. That's something we can trust and hold onto. So, we grieve when people we love die, but not like people who don't know Jesus Christ. We think about the future and sometimes become concerned about the path and the process, but not about the end. And THAT was Paul's goal. He told us so at the beginning, in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**,

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

We have a different kind of confidence in the face of life, death, and the future because of Jesus Christ. But it's easy to forget the truth when we're worried or grieving. When we're faltering, Paul tells us that we need each other.

Let's strengthen one another with these words.

"Strengthen one another," Paul says.

It's another important word in 1 Thessalonians that describes how to be and make disciples. It's found in **1 Thessalonians 4:18**,

Therefore **encourage** one another with these words.

It comes from the Greek root, *parakaleo* which literally means to come alongside and call out. Paul uses it here to mean "strengthen one another". "You have Good News," Paul is saying. And there will be days when your faith is failing and your courage is waning. On those days, find a Christian brother or sister. Tell them what you are facing and how you are struggling. When someone reaches out to you that way, first, listen. Then, acknowledge that what they're facing is real, powerful, and scary. And then remind them that God is powerful! God is in charge, and we are in His hands now and forever. Pray for God's Holy Spirit to come to them and strengthen them. The word Paul uses here is the same word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes alongside of us, calls out to us, exhorts,

comforts, and encourages us. When we do that for each other, we are being God's presence in each other's lives in physical form.

God does bold things through people strengthened by the family of faith.

Carol Ward is a missionary living in Africa's Sahel, a region stretching across the midsection of the continent that is home to Boko Haram, ISIS, and Al Qaeda. Most people would avoid it, but Carol's family has been heading into harm's way to reach unreached people groups with the Gospel for decades; it's a family tradition. She leads prayer movements, introduces people to faith in Christ, and trains missionaries. She has even trained former Boko Haram members and sent them back into rebel-held areas as missionaries. "How can she do that?" you may ask. She's living where the world really seems to be falling apart. Isn't she worried? She says, "You can't live here until you've already died... to yourself." Carol has hope grounded in the Resurrection and in the power of God at work in the world. She is surrounded by her family of faith; she strengthens them, they strengthen her, they strengthen one another, and the Holy Spirit strengthens them all.¹

When we strengthen one another, death seems less scary and the future less worrisome.

When someone reminds us that death is not the end, we can sit by the bedside of a friend who is dying with peace ourselves. When we pray together and confidently proclaim that God is powerful and in control, we can face the toughest days—end of a relationship, bills we can't pay, and even violence—with quiet confidence. When someone sits with us and holds OUR hands and prays over us in the name of the Risen Christ, we can face our own deaths knowing that we will be with Him forever.

Imagine what could happen if we resolved to strengthen each other!

Would we end up as missionaries to the war-torn regions of the world? Perhaps. But when we are worried or grieving, we would remind each other of the power of God and the future God has planned for us. With less worry, we could find ourselves ready to reach our own mission field—wherever that might be. We would build deep relationships instead of keeping people at arm's length. We would serve boldly, even when it's risky. We would share God's Story confidently, knowing it's the story that changes everything. We would live—really live—with less fear of dying.

¹ <https://cbn.com/news/world/coming-jesus-large-numbers-brave-missionaries-see-big-results-deadly-corner-africa>