

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, New Ulm, MN  
Festival of All Saints – November 13-15, 2022  
Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen  
Sermon Theme: With Jesus, We're Headed for Heaven  
1. Earth is not our home 2. Heaven is our home  
Sermon Text: 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

**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. 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 (1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18).**

In the name of our Triune God, my fellow Christian saints,

If you ever need a reminder that this life is only temporary, I have a place for you to go. The next time you think hearts are too hard and tears too rare, let's go to a place where knees of men buckle and tears of women freely flow. Let's go to a typical preschool classroom in September. I'd like you to picture parents leaving their kids at the school for the very first time.

I can tell you from experience, as a father of three, it's traumatic. Of course, St. Paul's parents know that our preschool is great, our teachers top notch (especially Mrs. Meyer and Mrs. Guenther). Best of all, we know we'll see our kids in just a few short hours. But, the bottom line is still this: we don't like to say goodbye to those we love.

Of course, what we experience in a preschool is a picnic compared to what's experienced in a cemetery at death. It's one thing to leave loved ones in familiar surroundings. It's something entirely different to release them into the next world, a world we do not know from personal experience and can't adequately describe. We don't like to say goodbye to those we love.

But, we have to. We try to avoid it, but death is a very real part of life. From God's point of view, death is never an accident. Death is always an appointment. For the Bible says: ... **people are destined to die once and after that to face judgement (Hebrews 9:27)**. God doesn't take anyone from this life one minute too early or one minute too late. But, let's make death more personal. Think of a person who means the world to you. It might be your mom, your spouse, your kid or best friend. Got that person in your head yet? Now, one day, we're all going to have to say goodbye to those people in death. And that's hard, even for Christians. Oh, we try to avoid dealing with death, don't we? Without even thinking, we often disguise death by saying trite phrases when our loved ones die. "They've departed; they've passed on; they've gone ahead. But, imagine a child hearing these words for the first time: "departed? to where; passed on? to what; gone ahead? for how long?" Of course, children aren't the only ones with questions about death. Adults do too. What about those who've

already died? What happens to them? Interest in eternity is nothing new. The times and events leading up to Judgment Day have intrigued people for thousands of years. Unfortunately, false teachings of Judgment Day have been around just as long. Take for example the Christian church at Thessalonica at the time of our sermon reading. There was a false rumor floating around. It said that on Judgment Day, only those who were still alive would be taken to heaven and those Christians who had died would miss out. I think you can understand why Paul wrote as passionately he did. He wrote to tell the truth about Judgment Day: that Jesus is coming back and He's coming soon. He wrote to encourage those whose Christian loved ones had died. And he wrote to remind us what we have to look forward to: an eternity in heaven with the LORD Jesus. He wanted us to know that, that on the basis of 1 Thessalonians, chapter four, **With Jesus, We're Headed for Heaven**. Remember, that this world is not our home. And always keep this Christian focus: Heaven is our home.

The church at Thessalonica had buried her share of loved ones. And Paul encouraged them with God's peace in the words of our sermon reading. Many of you have buried loved ones, maybe even during this past year. We're recognizing the 25 St. Paul's members who have finished their lives in faith and now rest from their labors. And just as God spoke comfort to them, He also speaks to us now. If you celebrated a wedding anniversary alone this year, He especially speaks to you. If you thought your dreams were buried as they lowered the casket of your loved one into the grave, God tenderly talks to you. He speaks to all of us who have or will stand in the soft dirt near an open grave. Through the inspired words of Paul, God says: **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.** Some say that ignorance is bliss. Well if this is true, I know some people that should be deliriously happy. Don't you? Ignorance may work for a while this side of eternity. But, we don't ever want to be ignorant about those who die, wondering where they went. That just hurts too much. That's why Paul tenderly addresses us as **Brothers and sisters**. He addresses us as Christian family and gives us the inside scoop. He doesn't want us to continue to live in ignorance. Nor does he want us to **grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope**. Yes, Christians grieve to when we experience the death of a Christian loved one. We cry because we'll miss them. But, we don't cry like the rest of the unbelieving world who rejects Christ in this life. Deep down they have no hope. But, God turns our hopeless grief into hope-filled grief. "How?" By telling us that wonderful truth we'll see our loved ones again. You see, when the believer dies, **They Head to Heaven**. Listen to why this is true: **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.** With these words, Paul tells us why it's so important that Jesus Christ died and rose again on the third day. People die because people sin. So Jesus died on the cross in our place to take away the guilt of our sins and the fear of death. And now He lives to prove He conquered death. He give us good reason to believe in Him as the reigning Savior and Son of God. Jesus didn't die and rise again to show off, but to save us. That's the Gospel message we need to hear and believe because this world is not our home.

Old Testament Lot forgot that in the wicked city of Sodom. Remember your Sunday School lesson how Lot made quite a home for himself. And where was Lot when God's angels came to rescue him? Was he sharing his faith and praying that his neighbors turn from their evil ways? No. Genesis chapter 19 tells us he was making himself at

home among them. And even though he didn't deserve it, God's angels rescued him and his family, literally dragged them out of the city. The angels warned them: ***"Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" (Genesis 19:17).*** As they escaped, God sent fire and brimstone and destroyed this city. Remember that Lot's wife could not bear to think of her home being destroyed. I'm sure that she thought: "Sodom had its good points too." So she stopped, turned back, and was lost.

Brothers and sisters, this world is not our home. And how we need that reminder. Yes, we live in the world, but as Jesus said: we are not of the world. God wants us to work hard and to play hard here. He wants us to serve Him in our respective roles as parents, kids, employers and employees, even retirees. Just don't get too comfortable here or don't get too attached to this world. As Christians, let's live each day for Jesus with our bags packed for heaven, ready to go at a moment's notice. Because, **with Jesus, We're Headed for Heaven.**

This earth may not be our home. But, heaven is. Listen to the apostle Paul as he fast forwards us to Judgment Day. He says: ***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*** We don't have all the details of Judgment Day. But, we do know three things from Paul's own words. We know that on Judgment Day, there will be a return, a resurrection, and a reunion in heaven. First of all, there will be a return. The King of the World, Jesus, who left this world victorious on Ascension Day will come back in the same way we saw Him go. We don't know when: five hours from now or five million years. But, if Jesus kept all of His other promises sealed in Holy Scripture, will He really forget this one? Think about it. He kept His promise to be born in Bethlehem as human baby and to die at Jerusalem for our benefit. He's kept His promise to rise from the grave and to forgive every one of our sins. Do you REALLY think He'll hold out on this one? Me either. When He returns, there will be a resurrection of all people. The Bible says: ***Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, (Revelations 1:7).*** Cemeteries will be vacated and every person around the world will rise: believers in Jesus to everlasting salvation and unbelievers to everlasting damnation. But, let's focus on the believers who've died. They won't be forgotten. In fact, they'll be in the front line of heaven. Finally, there will be a reunion in heaven. With the Thanksgiving holidays coming, you may be headed to a family reunion. There you'll see people you haven't seen for a while. You'll get to catch up and share what's been going in your life. Well, if you think these reunions are special, you haven't anything yet. On Judgment Day, we'll be caught up together to meet the great heroes of faith: people like Adam & Eve, Abraham & Sarah, Peter, James & John. We'll also get to see your family. Your Christian spouse will greet you and your friends will be there. You'll see your parents, no longer frail like the last time you last saw them but robust and renewed. You hear these words whispered in your ear, "Thanks for not giving up on me. Thanks for inviting me to church." But, then you'll see faces you don't recognize because you've never seen them before. You have to be told: these are your great grand-children, and great-great grand-children. These are future generations of St. Paul's members who thank you for giving your generous church offerings today so they have a place to learn about Christ in the

future. Best of all, we'll be with Jesus, our LORD and Savior in perfection. That's heaven. And it will never, ever end.

We don't like to say good-bye to those we love. Whether in a Preschool or a cemetery, separation is hard. It's right for us to weep, but there is no need to despair, especially at the time of death. They had pain here. They don't have pain there. You and I might wonder why God took them home. But, they don't. They understand, perfectly. Because right now, they are at peace in the presence of the LORD. Yes, Paul was right: ***to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21)***. So when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, remember where you're going and why you're going there: **With Jesus, We're Headed for Heaven**. As His believers, may we always encourage each other with these words. Amen.