

2023 1 Thess. 4:13-18

If you can't read that peanuts comic strip. The rain is coming down and Lucy says, "Boy look at it rain... what if it floods the whole world?" To which her brother Linus responds, "It will never do that... in the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.." Lucy turns back to the window and her frown has turned to a bit of a smile, "You've taken a great load off my mind..." Linus turns to her and responds, "Sound theology has a way of doing that!"

Here's to you Linus, and Charles Schulz in this strip. I think in our epistle lesson we see some confirmation of this. "But we do not want you to be uninformed" – uninformed! He wants you to have information, knowledge, in the Greek, about what? "About those who are asleep" – the dead. For what reason? "That you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

And if we take out the negations of the sentence I think it is fair to deduce that he is saying: If you are informed about the dead, you will have hope. Some sound theology to take a load off of your mind.

Now, I think it is perhaps helpful at this juncture, before we look at the specific information that gives us hope for the dead, we should probably point out that faith, belief in Jesus that leads unto salvation, is not simply an information game.

The demons know about God, but shudder, for they have no faith in him or his promises. Faith is a gift of God given to the disabled, to the littlest of children, and therefore is not reliant on mental faculties. Which is a bit of theology that I hope takes a great load off our minds when we consider those with dementia, or our miscarried children.

Faith is a gift of God, given by the Holy Spirit with great efficacy through the Word, through baptism, and strengthened in communion. And that faith is efficacious, it saves, because the OBJECT it has faith *in* is strong.

If you've heard me use this analogy before, forgive me, but consider a bridge. A bridge will carry a certain amount of weight and how much faith you have in it, doesn't change that in the slightest. Or, even if you consider it at all! So the child might cross the bridge care-free, distracted by the clouds in the sky, if the bridge will hold their weight, it holds! Likewise the faith given children, faith in Jesus, saves them, because Jesus is strong – that bridge will hold regardless of their mental faculties or awareness.

But then we “smart” grown ups come along. And I see a bit of rust on the metal beams. And I see a few bolts missing. And maybe a rotting plank. And I have no clue how much weight that bridge will hold. And so I walk across the bridge on tiptoe, sweating the whole time and kiss the ground when I get to the other side.

Does my ignorance of how much weight it would hold change how much it will hold? No, it either holds or it breaks.

But then one of you smart engineers come by. And you know the tensile strength of the specific metal and wood, and you have factored in the amount of rust and mold and you can pinpoint how much weight it can hold, you determine it is much more than your mass and so you walk across the bridge without a care in the world.

Notice then, the child, me – the one with little faith, and the engineer with strong faith all got across the bridge. And what ultimately mattered when it came to them getting to the other side? The amount of faith they had? Or the bridge? The bridge, the object of their faith and its ability to carry them. The tragedy then, would not to go across the bridge at all. Which would mean there was no faith at all.

And so we claim to know One who can bring us across the chasm of death to life eternal, Jesus. The primary, primary question is therefore, does that bridge exist and is it strong enough to carry us across? And the answer the scriptures put forward time and time again is yes, yes, and yes. And it is an answer echoed by the apostles and martyrs who gladly went into death rather than deny their faith. Why would they do such a crazy thing? Because they had seen Jesus rise and knew that the bridge was strong.

The secondary question then, is, how scared (or not) are you, when you think about having to cross it?

And that returns us to our text. Paul asserts that information can be of assistance to you in giving you hope. So, are you scared of death? Maybe you aren't losing sleep over it, but when the doctor's scare comes along, well, it's still a "scare" isn't it?

And maybe I'm telling on myself, and maybe you are brave and bolder than I and don't have any fear of death for yourself, good! You shouldn't, Jesus is a strong bridge!

But, don't miss the fact that in our text today Paul isn't actually talking about your death – he's talking about those around you "those who have fallen asleep," those "that you grieve." Are you scared for your spouse? Your parent? Your child?

What if something were to happen to them? What if the Lord who gives, takes away? What do we do? I think we would be liars to say we wouldn't grieve. We certainly grieve, the text doesn't say we don't grieve – we miss those we love – it says we don't *grieve without hope*. Hope in the information he offers us: that Jesus died, so we and our loved ones don't go through anything he hasn't. And Jesus rose again! So the bridge is strong enough to see you and your loved ones to the other side. So have some hope, Christian who grieves!

Paul then continues to say that the Risen Lord will come again in victory. Which may be cause for more skepticism. It's been so long, but a day is like a thousand years and thousand years like a day to him as he, this is the important part, works to save more and more that they might join us in the new heavens and new earth.

But still, all that end times stuff seems a bit weird and scary, I can admit that.

Amos, indeed, today purposely tells how terrifying it will be for the unjust, the corrupt, the violent, the idolaters, the hypocrites. And now we are scared, or at least you should be, because you are unjust, corrupt, and all the rest at times!

So what basis for hope is there? Well, I might go back once more to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Why did he do that? To wash you clean of your sin, to make you his own, to open for you everlasting life.

Which is why Paul can say, "yes, we have hope on the last day- we will be just fine, just as the people who are asleep will be as well." How, why? Well consider the information he gives us. That the Lord will come, and it will not be a secret, and the dead, those asleep will wake up! Hooray, your loved one lives again! Why were you so scared for them? And then you, should you still be walking around, will be caught up to the Lord and his people.

The reason for hope here is this: You will always be with the Lord. You are now, and on the last day, he isn't going to leave you hanging. He isn't going to make you

sweat it out, “so you will really appreciate what he could have done to you.” No, he will bring his children to himself. And so the Father runs to his prodigal son. So Jesus immediately reaches out to save doubting Peter who is falling under the waters. And so he will rush to bring you to his side in safety. That sounds quite hopeful, I think.

The chasm of death is scary. But folks, what’s the alternative? You’re going into it either way. Whether you trust Jesus or not. You are forced to the chasm, what bridge will you take? People try all the coping mechanisms. Some try to explain it away – it’s just going into “nothingness” – is that a comfort? Game Over? Never to meet again? Then you should be scared for your loved ones. These days of cognition are all you have, before you fade back to darkness and nothing, which I suppose is better than suffering, which is why we put our pets “to sleep” but are we just like them? Or as we ponder things eternal, things good or evil, are we not something, different, maybe because we have something of the eternal and the good in us? Or at least a reflection of it, or Him, and His image? And how can we even consider such things or think on them if the thoughts in our head are just chemicals randomly bouncing around?

But those are philosophical questions, good ones, I think, that may or may not lead to definitive conclusions and may or may not lead to some hope. So perhaps we should return to the text today. We know there is a God. We have evidence that

someone beat death. He has promised you will too. That your death will be nothing more than sleep – sleep that, like a Sunday nap, isn't anything to fear, is restful, and certainly something you will wake up from.

Can we trust that promise? Will that bridge hold for us, and for all the saints? Can the nail scarred hands guide us to himself?

I think that bridge will hold. And that that takes a bit of a load off my mind. Sound theology has a way of doing that. Amen.