

How We Grieve

Our second reading is from 1Thessalonians 4:13-18. The theme that runs throughout both of Paul's Thessalonian letters is the hope of the return of the Lord. Each chapter in this first letter ends with a word about this hope, and the text for today is perhaps the best loved passage.

Read:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

There's an old gospel song by Jeremiah Rankin titled *Tell It to Jesus*, with a fourth verse that asks this question that could well have been asked of the church at Thessalonica:

*Are you troubled at the thought of dying?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus;
For Christ's coming Kingdom are you sighing?
Tell it to Jesus alone.*

Church historian Martin Marty says that a strong majority of Americans share a belief in eternal life, and yet they live in terror of death. For many, their belief in everlasting life is founded on wishful thinking rather than on a personal and biblical faith. It is for them a false security. I sensed the irony of the theme of death during the Halloween season, when death becomes a fantasy world reserved for goblins, zombies and ghosts, whose task is to scare us in haunted houses on Trick or Treat Night. We don't really think about the reality of death.

For the believers in Thessalonica, and perhaps for some here today, there's a fear of death because of a misunderstanding of the promises and truths of God's word. Some of you perhaps have a legitimate fear of death because you're unsure of a life-changing, eternal-life giving relationship with Christ. Paul says affectionately yet straightforwardly, "Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be uninformed about these matters."

Perhaps you were a *Peanuts* fan, and in one of Charles Schultz's cartoons, Lucy looks out of a window and wonders, "Boy, look at it rain! What if it floods the whole world?" "It will never do that," answers Linus. "In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of that promise is the rainbow." "You've taken a great load off of my mind," replies Lucy, to which Linus responds, "Sound theology has a way of doing that."

Paul hopes to take a load off the troubled minds of believers, who were burying their Christian family and friends. Evidently there were believers in a bit of turmoil over the fact of death, which was facing them day after day. Would these departed ones miss out on the return of Christ, which they thought was immanent.

The general climate of the ancient world was one of gloom, even though the Greek Gnostics had a quasi hope of the immortality of the soul. Most believed that death was simply the end, as did many of the Jews.

FF Bruce quotes a 2nd century letter of condolence written from one friend to another:

"I sorrowed and wept over your dear departed one, as I wept over Didymas...but really, there is nothing I can do in the face of such things. So please comfort each other."

Paul was writing to remind them of hope, as an important part of the faith-hope-love triad that runs throughout the Thessalonian letters. Just as we are to please God by growing in holiness by faith, and also by growing in love for one another, so are we to grow in hope for life everlasting, for ourselves and for our fellow believers.

In our passage of Scripture, Paul seems to be saying two truths that are vital for our understanding of biblical hope. Paul's statement in verse 13 implies the reality of grief. The Bible notes the sorrow over death as a normal human emotion. Ecclesiastes notes that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men;" (3:11), so it is normal to think of death as unnatural and certainly unwelcome. Death comes as an abrupt intruder to life, a tragedy, which is not a biblical word, but is rather a pagan Greek word, attributed to a culture that didn't know a sovereign God, but was rather subject to the whims and fates of lesser gods and fate.

Following the tragedy of the horrendous mass shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas last Sunday, our nation is faced once again with the uncertainty of life and the possibility of death. These massacres are happening with such frequency one news report said that America is no longer shocked by but are becoming numb to tragedy.

And as a congregation, we're grieving the loss of one of our long-time, faithful members, Ruby Meyer. We grieve her loss, even though we are grateful for her long life and confident of our hope that she's with the Lord. Even Jesus understood and shared the emotion of sadness and sorrow over separation caused by death. He wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (Jn. 11:35).

Leighton Ford, Presbyterian minister and former associate evangelist with Billy Graham, shared his grief experience over the death of his 21-year-old son, Sandy. He noted that our struggle in such a time of grief is in bringing our faith and emotions together. We have common human emotions, but by the grace of God we can bring our faith to bear upon them, but there is a struggle to do so. Death takes our loved one from us into the realm of the unknown, and to a place where we cannot go. It's the separation of a long journey.

You know the sadness of saying good-bye to your spouse and family when you leave for a long visit or move to another state or country. Death for the believer brings the sad emotion of saying "good-bye" to a loved-one. It may be that in the eyes of the world the death is a real tragedy. Leighton Ford said in retrospect, "Yes, I believe God is good and strong and that he brings blessing out of pain. But I would be less than honest if I didn't acknowledge the part of me inside that says, 'It's not right'" (177).

And so, we grieve, but do so with a difference. *The Message* paraphrases verse 13, "First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word." We grieve, says Paul, but with a hope for the life to come. This hope that makes all the difference is based on Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul gives this most foundational confession of faith: "*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died*" (14).

When Paul speaks of the death of a believer, he uses different words and terminology, like "to sleep." Paul doesn't say that Jesus slept, but that he died. He suffered the full experience of death as the consequence of sin. Not his sin, but ours. He suffered death as the curse for our sin, and was separated from the Father during his hours of God-forsaken-ness on the cross.

Because of Christ's death, the grave has been robbed of its victory (1Cor. 15: 55-57). We now can call our experience being asleep in Jesus. But the empty philosophy of our age has a wishful thinking *ersatz* hope called reincarnation. Many who deny Jesus' resurrection look to him as a good moral example and not as a risen Savior. Ed Steimle said that the older he gets, the less he gets out of good moral principles and noble examples. He wants a Savior who can give power to change life, and victory over death. We need a life-over-death deliverer!

In recent years there has been a pseudo-scientific effort to assuage our fears of death, with people like Raymond Moody and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and their

theories of thanatology. These psychologists and physicians try to prove the existence of life after death based on the testimonials of folks who purportedly died and returned to tell us about it. But our hope is not based on such empty theories, but on the word of God. Paul's triad in 1 Thessalonians is faith, hope and love. Without a real hope our faith is meaningless, and love is just sentimentality (1 Cor. 15: 12-19). If there's no resurrection for us, there wasn't any for Jesus, and so this whole Christianity thing is a big hoax.

Death for the believer is so different Scripture uses the analogy of sleep. In our NRSV text, the Greek is not the word "death" but the expression "fallen asleep." Sleep, unlike death, is harmless, healthy and temporary. Jesus spoke of Lazarus, who was dead, as being asleep (Jn. 11:11). Paul spoke of his preference for being absent from the body, which sleeps in death, and being present with the Lord (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8).

The word for cemetery means "place of sleep" (koimterion). Our bodies, though decaying, are in the mind of God as asleep in Jesus. When Jesus returns, and here it's clearly not a secret rapture, He'll come with all who've gone ahead to be with the Lord. Then, the bodies of believers will be raised to meet the Lord, and all who remain with alive bodies, will also be caught up to meet the Lord.

Death doesn't separate us, but rather unites us with the Lord (Rom. 8:38f), and Jesus told the thief on the cross that he would be with him that day in Paradise (Lk. 23:43). This is clearly not what some call soul-sleep, that is, loss of consciousness. This is the temporary sleep of the body during a time of being disembodied, but present with the Lord in a glorious estate in heaven.

Warren Wiersbe tells of a friend whose wife died. He was approached by a friend, who said, "I'm sorry you lost your wife." "I didn't lose her, because you haven't lost anything if you know where it is, and I know where she is."

What glory for those who have gone to be with Jesus! We grieve the separation, but we certainly don't sorrow for them.

CS Lewis, in *A Grief Observed*, said he finally, as he worked through the long grief process of losing his wife Joy, came to the point of realizing that even if he could bring her back to life with him, it wouldn't be fair to her.

There's a partial reunion going on in heaven all the time, as believers are reunited in heaven. But Paul tells of the great reunion when Jesus returns, when he will come triumphantly as the King of kings. This verb translated "to meet" was used to describe the action of dignitaries in a city, going out to the city gate to meet an arriving hero, perhaps a victorious king. And then the king and the accompanying dignitaries would enter the city together.

Leighton Ford said he and his wife, Jeannie, grieved over the death of their beautiful, bright, athletic, and talented son, Sandy, but he says theirs was “a clean grief.” It was not sullied by regrets, and by anger with God. Even though they questioned God, they waited long enough to learn to trust him, and to be reassured of his love. They came to believe in the purposes of God, who was glorified in Sandy’s life, and that his potential is being fulfilled in heaven.

CH Spurgeon said that the Greek word in verse 17 is *sun* and not *meta*. We will not just be alongside the Lord in heaven, but will be *in him* completely. This means we’ll be perfectly righteous and holy and loving, just as he is. This means all our human potential will be fulfilled, and we’ll be more glorious than Adam and Eve before the fall.

Paul gave the church not a lesson in theology just to satisfy their curiosity, but so they would have truth to share with those experiencing grief. How blessed I am by the way this church ministers to one another in times of grief! CH Spurgeon once again said that funeral services ought to include congregational hymns of praise. Funerals ought to be also services of celebrating everlasting life.

We grieve, Paul said, but not like the hopeless. Being in an airport is a reminder of the mixture of tears of sadness with departure and joy upon reunion. You see couples and families embracing with tears of “good-bye,” as a loved one departs for a long journey. But then you see tears of joy as long-departed loved ones are welcomed home.

A piece of doggerel, which was an epitaph, appeared on a tombstone in an old British cemetery:

*Pause, my friend, as you walk by;
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so you will be.
Prepare, my friend, to follow me!*

A visitor scratched this reply,

*To follow you is not my intent,
Until I know which way you went. (Wiersbe)*

We know which way all of departed God’s children went. They went to be with Jesus. One of the last things Nancy said to me before she lost consciousness was, tearfully, “I want to be with Jesus.” I know which way she went.

We need to affirm our faith in the risen Christ, who will overcome our fear of death because he has already given us victory over death. All who want to be with Jesus now will be with him for eternity. Our hope is in being with Jesus and all who have known him and gone before us into his glorious presence.

