

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Hope in Grief
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8-30-15

This morning, we continue in our study of 1 Thessalonians, a letter that Paul wrote to a group of people in Thessalonica. His aim for this letter was to help them grow together as a community, to deepen their faith, expand their capacity for love, and also have hope. And to this point in our series, we have looked together at faith, the powerful and active faith that draws people from different backgrounds and experiences together and unites them in a common community—recipients of God’s amazing grace. We’ve talked about love, the love that Paul has for this community, and also about how God intends our experience of his love among one another.

Today, we are going to look at hope, particularly hope in the face of death. All of you know what this is like, some of you more acutely than others. Death is something we all face in our loved ones and in ourselves. All of us will at one point or another face those unwelcome feelings of grief and sadness. But I want to make very clear that today’s message is not about sadness, but hope. My goal for us, as a community and as people who trust in Jesus, is that our lives become increasingly filled with a very powerful virtue, maybe the most powerful—hope. Specifically, hope in the midst of circumstances that are difficult. That is a powerful witness; it is a gift that brings peace during calm waters, that when the waves begin to roll, our lives will be guided and steadied by the powerful and steady rudder of hope.

As we begin, I want to ask you to pray with me. *Merciful Savior, what we have to hear from you today is immediately relatable to all of us. There is so much around for which we might be given to despair and hopelessness. I pray that in these following moments, your word to us would reinforce our faith and deepen our ability to have hope in the face of struggles. Continue to shape and mature us we pray, not in our own power, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord, amen.*

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.

Right away in the first verse, Paul is giving us his theme for this section, and it’s that word grieve. In Paul’s day, grief was something that his contemporaries, the poets and philosophers, the writers and the sages were well acquainted. And as I studied this week, what I discovered was that when the grey beards talked about grief, alongside it they also used the word *hiedona*, which is the word for pleasure. The conviction was that grief and pleasure are joined together as two sides of the same whole.

Even if this is a little unclear, you know what this means. When a person loves someone, they receive the greatest joy or pleasure imaginable, but when you love someone you also accept the reality that losing that person one day will cause immense grief. The greater the love, the more acute the pain when they’re gone.

So does this mean we should avoid the immeasurable joy of loving another person, in order to avoid the pain one day losing them will cause? I would imagine all of you would say no. But, in fact, this is how the ancient writers viewed grief. It was something that every person should do whatever they can to avoid. One writer named Plutarch said that it is improper for a diligent person to experience grief. And the way that the ancients suggested you go about avoiding grief was to avoid pleasure altogether. Because grief was such a powerful emotion to avoid, the best way, they thought, to avoid it was to never give yourself to another in love—because then you will never have to experience the heartache of losing someone.

Is the answer to grief to avoid the things in this world that have the potential to cause it? Of course not. We all know that loving someone or something that loves you back is far better. Of course, we know that even in living, the people we love can cause us to feel grief.

But there is another philosopher, a modern writer you might have heard of, his name is CS Lewis, who says this: *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal.”*

The people Paul came to in Thessalonica might have thought that Paul’s advice to them would be to hold one another at arm’s length, protect your heart from grief. But Paul says just the opposite. He says, “Love one another.” In another of his letters, Paul says, “Outdo one another in showing love to each other.” Don’t just love one another, but go over and above in giving yourselves to one another, let your hearts be vulnerable—and in this setting, it would have been the same as saying, “Get ready for grief.” Because when you love and when you lose, it hurts really badly!

Does anybody know what this is like?

Paul does not say that it is wrong for Christians to experience grief and sadness. Even worse, when a person stands up at a funeral and says that you’re not supposed to feel sad for the departure, that is bad teaching. Jesus wept.

What Paul is saying here is that he doesn’t want us to grieve like others do, like those who have no hope.

At the heart of the Christian message is something that is supremely hopeful. It is a message that is even more hope-filled than our deepest, darkest grief. And what Paul is trying to do with these people is help them to see hope – to not keep it at arm’s length, but take it into their heart and believe the good news, even when it hurts.

You see, among the Greeks at the time, there were many hypotheses about what would happen to a person when they died, but they all agreed on one thing: that that journey was a one-way road and its destination was full of misery and sadness. This is why in so much of the Greek writings, there was grief without hope.

But if you look once again at verse 13, you see that the reason Paul believed there was so much hopelessness surrounding death was, and look at verse 13, because they were *uninformed*. Paul had a message for them and for us that would help them, so that they wouldn't have to go on suffering needlessly. Paul desperately wanted them to know the truth.

Look with me at verses 14 and 15: **For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 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.**

What Paul and other New Testament Christians believed that gave them hope was this: Jesus really died. It was not a symbolic departure. It didn't mean that Jesus was never really real. Rather that this real man, Jesus of Nazareth, really and bodily died. Secondly, what they believed that gave them reason for hope was that Jesus actually rose again. Jesus did not come back to them symbolically, or in the memory of his good deeds. He didn't appear to them as a mirage or like Yoda and Obi Wan Kenobi in Star Wars. No, Jesus rose again to a physical existence, and this is the third piece of this hope. How do we know that Jesus had a physical body? Well, the New Testament makes some very concrete references to Jesus' encounters with his followers. When Mary was confused on Easter Morning and sees Jesus in the garden, who does she mistake him for? The gardener. When Doubting Thomas wants proof that Jesus is real, what does he do? He touches his side. When Peter sees Jesus on shore cooking breakfast and the disciples come in, what do they do? They eat breakfast together. And when the disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus, who does Jesus come to them as? A man traveling on the road.

When Jesus rose, it was to a new and physical body. But not only was it to a new body; Paul wants them to know that it was to a perfect and incorruptible body—as he says in 1 Corinthians 15—and this body is no longer subject to breakdown and decay. Is there anyone here who is lamenting the fact that these bodies are corruptible? Jesus not only rose physically, but rose in such a way that his resurrected self was perfect and incorruptible, and no longer subject to the rules of breakdown and decay.

And if we continue in verse 14, we see a subject that gets discussed in many different ways in the church. Paul says, **since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, (or, “in just the same way”) through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.**

What he's saying here is that at the end of things, what God will do is not remove your soul and float up into the clouds with harps and disembodied living. No, what Paul believes and what the Bible teaches is that there will come a day at the end of things in which Jesus will return, gather to himself the dead as well as the living, and they will be given new and incorruptible bodies, and we will be with God in that moment.

Imagine how encouraging that is for the person who loses their spouse or their child unexpectedly. Imagine how encouraging that is for the person who has to watch a loved one succumb to the ravaging of their bodies to cancer or dementia. There will be a day when the dead will rise, and the living at that time also, and they will be given a new body, one that is perfect and completely free from all the ills and scourges of this life. We believe that is true because Jesus returned, and rolled back the curtain ever so much to give us hope to believe.

Does this extend to everyone?

Now if you're like me, or if you are one of the Thessalonians, you are probably curious and thinking to yourself: "When is this going to happen?" Has anyone here ever heard of the *Left Behind* series of books and movies? There is a lot of speculation about when it will happen and what it will look like, but if you read on into chapter 5, you'll see that Paul makes very clear it is not for us to know the date and time. But if we look at chapter 4, verses 16-18, we'll see what the text says about those who face death with the hope of Jesus.

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. 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul authored these words first and foremost, not for speculation, but for encouragement. That there will come a day when those who grieve will be comforted by the resurrection of the dead, and those who are in Christ will be reunited with one another and will see God in glory and splendor. And for those who grieve, this is profoundly hopeful.

But still, in these verses, there is so much curious material, right? What will the trumpet sound be like? What will the archangel look like? Where are the clouds and the air where we'll meet the Lord? You can see why there is so much prediction and speculation. It is so mysterious and fascinating, right?

One of the things that you need to be aware of as you read texts like this one and Revelation is that Paul is not just making these images up, but he is drawing upon his deep understanding of the history and tradition of Israel and the Prophets. These images are the images of what it is like to be in the presence of the King, to be in the presence of God. This trumpet blast is not a melodic sound, but the startling pronouncement of the presence of the King coming into his court. The clouds depict the presence of God coming into the presence of the people; it's theophany (revealing of God's presence). The archangel was the person who was always in the presence of God. When the clouds come, it is because God has come near.

What Paul is saying to this grief-stricken people is that there will be a day when God will come and his presence will be as real as a trumpet blast, or thunder-clouds rolling

overhead. This is something that Christians believed, that Jesus would come again, and when he came a second time it would take place with extraordinary events.

And here's where I think Paul offers the most profound comfort to us, to people who are going through experiences of great grief: Paul says that we who are alive will be caught up in the clouds. The Greek word that is used here is the word *harpazein*. It's the Greek verb that means to grasp at or to tear violently away. Jesus used this same verb when he was telling the story of the bad shepherd who, when the wolf comes, flees, and what does the wolf do? He *harpazein*, he snatches away violently.

At this time, the mind of the people who thought about death was that death was a cruel, unpredictable terror that would come along and, without warning and without reason, snatch away the living. There was a widespread fear that death would come along and drag them down into the depths of Hades, never to return, and the Greek verb was the word *harpazein*. And do you know what the Latin translation of this word is? Rapture.

So if you were to ask someone in Thessalonica if they believed in rapture, they would say, "Of course, I do. I hate rapture. It's when death comes and steals the living and drags them down into the depths."

And what Paul says here is, don't grieve as those who have no hope. Because there will be a day when God comes back, a day when Jesus returns, and it will be powerful and profound and unmistakable, and HE will snatch the dead back and he will snatch the living back up with him. You believe that rapture is that death steals people who are living and takes them into the ground; I believe in a God who takes people who are dead and those who are living and takes them not down into Hades, but up into his very presence forever and ever.

Amen, and that is cause for hope in the midst of grief.