

## How We Cope

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

A man often cut through a dark cemetery on his way home. Unaware that a new grave had been dug in his path, he fell in. His efforts to climb out of the seven-foot-deep grave proved futile, so he finally gave up and settled in for the night. An hour later, a farmer out possum-hunting came along and fell into the grave too. He also desperately tried to get out. It was pitch black. He could not see the man sitting at the other end. Finally, the first man reached over in the pitch darkness and laid a hand on the farmer's shoulder. "You can't get out of here," he said ... but he did.

No grave is inescapable. The Thessalonian believers had some serious misunderstandings about the kingdom of God. They had the idea Jesus could come any moment, which was great, but they feared that their loved ones who had died in the meantime were going to be left out of something. This familiar text was written by Paul to alleviate the grief that attended the death of these loved ones, but it also gives us a glimpse of what the return of Jesus will be like. And, especially, it provides an exciting picture of why we never have to be victims of despair in the face of anything. We have promises not of this realm to look forward to, promises that take our hearts and minds captive.

### I. The Calming of the Lamenters (13-15)

<sup>13</sup>Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

#### A. Ignorance as the Basis for Inconsolable Grief

After Jesus died and rose again, He ascended into the clouds as His Apostles stood and watched. Suddenly, two men in white, presumably angels, appeared alongside these dumbfounded men:

<sup>11</sup>"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." - Acts 1:11

Among the last things Jesus told His Apostles was that it was not their place to know the times and the dates that the Father had appointed for the final establishment of His kingdom. They needed simply to be witnesses for Him, announcing a salvation secured by His death and Resurrection. Still, much had happened in such a short time. The early church came to expect that Jesus would return at any moment. This imminent expectation of the Second Coming electrified the early church as it expanded from its origins in Jerusalem across the known world.

Most Christian communities figured out that Jesus' words that we are not to know "times and dates" meant just that. They accepted that there could be a wait involved. But, Thessalonica was a community of uniquely novice believers. Paul had not been with them for very long before he had been driven out of the city by persecution. Apparently, the church there also had to face the wrath of the harassers, and Paul commended them for their solid stand. Still, in matters of doctrine, they were awfully green, and I don't mean environmentally sensitive.

As death began to touch the church in Thessalonica, some began to worry that somehow their loved ones would miss out on something. They may have thought that the dead would miss out on life in the kingdom altogether. Did Paul have to remind them of the promise of resurrection? More likely, they expected a resurrection at some point, but they feared that their loved ones would simply miss out on the glorious moment of Christ's return. Paul speaks only of a fear that those living would only "precede" the dead in some matter. They were asking questions not so different from questions we ask about the End Time. "How is this all going to fit together?"

In response to their grief, Paul describes the physical death of a believer as "sleep". Death is never a permanent state for any child of God. Jesus spoke of Lazarus as asleep and in need of being awakened when that man had been in a tomb for three days. He inquired of the professional mourners at the home of Jairus, where that man's daughter lay dead: "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep" (Mark 5:35). When Paul spoke of death as "sleep" he was referring only to the body that is awaiting resurrection. When we are "away from the body" we are "at home with the Lord" Paul tells us this in Philippians. He calls that state "better by far," so we take him to mean that we are consciously at home with the Lord.

## **B. Faith as the Basis for Indomitable Hope**

Paul does not want his readers "to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." It would smack of phoniness were we to tell one another not to grieve at all when loved ones die, but our hope in Christ's return and in the resurrection of the dead in Christ tempers our grief. We do not sink into despair because God's promises calm our sorrows. But, the ancient Greek word view was pessimistic about death. A typical epitaph on a typical gravestone might say something like:

*"I was not; I became; I am not; I care not."*

That's the guy I want at my party, a real cut-up! Our hope springs from our faith. It comes from the things that we believe. Paul adds: "...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." Apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus, we may as well grieve like everyone else for we would have no basis in history for knowing that death and all the horrors that attend death have been confronted and defeated.

Paul does not say, "We sleep because Jesus slept first." He says, "We sleep because Jesus died!" The difference is significant. When Jesus died, He faced the full fury of God's wrath and Hell's terror so that you and I would not have to. He bore guilt for sins He never committed and He bore that guilt in the place of you and me. He experienced estrangement from His Father one day when a strange mid-day darkness hovered above the cross on which He hanged. He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46), so that you and I will never have to. And, anytime we might so cry out, it is only because we are being a bit whiney that day.

In short, Jesus died, so that you and I can think of death as "sleep". We have this hope because we believe that Jesus died, we believe that He conquered death when He rose again and we believe that His new life secures our new life. Elsewhere, Paul calls Christ's Resurrection the first fruits of all of our resurrections. Death had been defeated. If God raised the dead once, with all the sin He heaped on Jesus, we know that He can wake us up when the time comes.

## **C. Revelation as the Basis for Invincible Faith**

This faith is “according to the Lord’s own word ...” We cannot link Paul’s teaching here to any direct quote of Jesus recorded elsewhere. Jesus spoke on the topic, but with different emphases and different details. Many times in the early church, truth was made known by direct revelation to duly appointed, “apostles and prophets” among whom Paul was numbered. The Lord’s Supper needed fixing in Corinth. Paul wrote: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you ...” (1 Corinthians 11:23). Through Paul, Jesus spoke to an issue in Corinth. There is no reason to think that He would not do the same to correct debilitating thinking in Thessalonica.

Whatever Jesus spoke to His Apostles carries the same weight as anything Jesus Himself is recorded as having said in the Gospel narratives. Regardless, when Jesus speaks, truth is established, and truth is the foundation of our faith. Paul knew that knowing what is really true would come in awfully handy for the Thessalonians as they struggled to sort out their questions and fears. You know what? Knowing what is true still comes in handy in our struggles today. Too easily, we let our emotions dictate to us; our impulses drive us, our moods paralyze us and our passions steer us. How lame is trusting such shifting sand when we know God has spoken?

<sup>35</sup>Direct me in the path of your commands,  
for there I find delight. – Psalm 119:35

## **II. The Coming of the Lord (16, 17)**

### **A. The Splendor of the Return of Christ verse 16a**

... <sup>16</sup>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 ...

The very same Jesus Who ascended to the clouds will return whence He came, just as those two men dressed in white told the Apostles. The days of envoys, preachers, missionaries, even angels announcing Jesus will have passed. Jesus Himself, Who suffered and died for us, will come to establish His kingdom with us. And there will be glory. He will return as a conquering King. His “loud command” will establish Who is in charge at this incredible event. Where there is “the voice of the archangel” or chief angel, it only follows that the many angels under that angel’s command will likewise be present. The “trumpet call of God” will be reminiscent of the giving of the Law at Sinai. This will be a signal of God’s presence and of the judgment of His presence.

That’s quite different than the humble and obscure first entry of Jesus into this world. Angels announced His birth, but to only a few shepherds. A remarkable star signaled the birth of a king, but we only know of a few Persian star-gazers who found that signal adequately provocative that they would journey to greet this new-born royal. How different it will be the next time around.

### **B. The Sequence of the Resurrection of the Dead verses 16b – 17a**

... and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>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.

The dead in Christ will rise first. This was Paul's remedy for those who feared that their deceased loved ones were certain to miss out on something. "They will not miss out on a thing!" he insists. The difference in time may be infinitesimally small, but the dead in Christ will actually receive their glorified bodies before the rest of us, who may or may not still be alive. That's all Paul meant when he numbered himself with those "who are still alive and remain."

Only after the dead have been raised will the rest of us be lifted up to meet Jesus and receive our immortal bodies. Elsewhere, Paul says, "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51). Even though that's a popular verse, suitable for framing and hanging in the church nursery, it actually addresses the fact that there will be believers alive when Jesus comes. They will bypass natural death and receive their immortal, glorified bodies. However, they will not experience anything that those who are asleep in the Lord will not experience first.

### **C. The Sweetness of the Reward of All the Saints verse 17b**

... And so we will be with the Lord forever.

A cartoon in my files depicts a frantic man on the phone to his pastor: "My wife just left me, I lost my job, I need surgery, and my spirits have hit bottom! Pastor, you've gotta help me. What's the difference between pre-, post-, and amillennialism?" - Doug Hall

Okay, so the dead will rise first. Everyone else will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Now what? Paul leaves his readers almost literally hanging, or at least, "suspended" in the air somewhere between heaven and earth. Where does everybody go? Ah, this is where it gets dicey.

Some believers think that everyone heads to planet earth. As the citizenry of Jerusalem swarmed out to greet King Jesus as He was entering their city on the first *Palm Sunday* only to escort Him into town, they see a glorified assembly of saints rising to meet Jesus, only to accompany Him as He continues His descent earthward, where judgment is meted out, the bad guys are discarded and Christ's kingdom is established. Others picture this entourage in the air being whisked away back into heaven while other events on God's End Time agenda are worked out. Some in this group suggest that only the redeemed hear that loud command, the archangel's voice and the trumpet, while those "left behind" scratch their heads trying to figure out where everybody went.

Feel free to thrash that out over Sunday dinner. Arm wrestle for it. Whatever you come up with, I'll still be your friend. What I see in this text is so much more important than any of that for the Thessalonians, for Paul and for us. Remember, these Thessalonians knew nuthin', and their ignorance was causing them distress. These were novice Gentile saints. They did not have access to Jesus' apocalyptic discourses to place alongside ancient prophets like Daniel as they put this puzzle together. What they needed to know is what Jesus told Paul to tell them; Christ's people, the ones that sleep and the ones that are alive when He comes, are *ALL* going to be with Him *FOREVER*. And, that is the part, I am convinced, about which we too need the greatest clarity.

### **III. The Comforting of the Lingerers (18)**

... <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage each other with these words.

## **A. Where Else Can Such Powerful Encouragement be Found?**

William Barclay cites what he calls one of the most pathetic papyrus letters that has come down to us from that age, a letter of consolation on the occasion of the death of a mutual loved one. It concludes with the following words: "But nevertheless against such things one can do nothing. Therefore, comfort ye one another." The question that springs into my mind is, "Comfort how?"

When someone's loved one dies, we often find ourselves wishing that we knew what to say, fearing that if we say anything, it might be the wrong thing. We have been assured that just being there is helpful and that even if we are utterly silent, our presence means a great deal, and that is good advice. But finally, when silence just gets too awkward, someone resorts to reading something from the Bible. Paul's counsel is that this should be the first place we turn. In the face of grief, he said, "Therefore encourage each other with these words."

This was the very text I read into the ear of a cancer patient some years back. Nellie had declined so far that none of us were sure that she could even hear me. She was gasping for every breath, but almost simultaneously as the words were read, "And so, we will be with the Lord forever," the gasping simply ceased, and, as the nurse announced, Nellie had expired. She went to sleep, and for a change, I knew that it was almost certainly *NOT* me that had put someone to sleep.

When you encounter grief of any kind, do you really think that if you think long enough you will come up with anything better or brighter to utter than God's promises? God speaks of life in the face of death. Surely, Jesus attended many funerals in his day – perhaps Joseph's, his earthly father or Cousin Zechariah's or Cousin Elizabeth's. But, the Gospel writers did not have the space to record such ordinary events. Whenever they spoke of Jesus' presence at a funeral, they told how He was there to break it up with life. When we lead with the promises of God, we don't have the power to break up a funeral with a resurrection, but we do have words of life that encourage the sorrowful.

## **B. Into What Kinds of Trials of Life Can Such Words Bring Courage?**

Grief was the trial of the moment, and Paul spoke directly to it. "Don't grieve like hopeless unbelievers. Jesus is coming for all of us. Your loved ones won't miss a thing. Just relax."

But, there are so many other trials in this life where the best solution would still be to simply believe the promises of God rather than to just claim that you hold the Bible in high regard. One of my greatest frustrations in ministry is believers who just will not allow themselves to be either consoled or exhorted by truth. They'd fight me if I questioned whether they believe the Bible, but they just will not trust the Bible whenever they are convinced that their unique fear is uniquely too dark, their unique sorrow is uniquely too deep, their unique anxiety is uniquely too nerve-racking or their unique passion is uniquely too strong. Even words of life cannot help if they are dismissed.

It is trust in and obedience to the words of God that can restore your joy when all other options fail. His words can protect you from trouble and guard you from sin when the force of your will has proven futile. They can restore direction to your life when your own resources, impulses and wits leave you shipwrecked. Therefore, in the face of grief, but also in the face of just doing life, encourage each other with God's words. They will always be the brightest thing you can say.