

**We Grieve With Hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)**  
**Matthew Williams**

Few experiences in this life are more painful than the death of someone you love. There is a crushing sense of finality, a flood of memories whose very sweetness makes the moment all the more bitter. This can't be happening. This is happening. Why did it have to happen this way?

I remember the numbness and pain that wracked my heart when my one-year-old niece died. I remember the confusion and sorrow that filled my mind when my thirty-three-year old pastor friend and classmate from Wales, Dan Gaweda, succumbed to a massive brain aneurysm.

We think we're captain of our fate. We think we're master of our souls. We have tomorrow all planned out. Then death comes in and brings the whole illusion crashing to the ground. Our lives are fragile. Our bodies are mortal. There's a reason the prophet declares, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass" (Isaiah 40:6-7.)

Grief in the face of death isn't just inevitable. It's good. Why? Because it's not the way things were supposed to be. Death is a monstrous intrusion, a ravaging corruption. It is terribly familiar, but it is not normal. It was not part of the exceedingly good world God created. It came into the world because of our sin.

It didn't take long for the first man and woman to turn away from God. In their pride, they thought they could do just fine without Him. So they opened a door they thought would lead to heights of joy and found themselves quivering in the clutches of death. So it goes for all who follow them. Romans 5:12, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..."

God sees. God knows. God grieves. When Mary fell at Jesus' feet in John 11, undone by the death of her brother, Lazarus, Jesus was "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." And when they beckoned Him to come and see Lazarus' tomb, He broke down and wept. Sobs shook his body. The One who spoke the stars into being, the One before whom every knee will bow, broke down and wept. We are not alone in our grief.

The church in Thessalonica to whom the Apostle Paul wrote this letter was also grieving. One or more of their number had died. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy – their spiritual fathers in the faith – learned as much and were concerned. They were concerned not because the Thessalonians were grieving. If Jesus wept, we should weep too. They were concerned because the Thessalonians were grieving (1 Thessalonian 4:13) “as others do who have no hope.”

Not all grief is the same. There is a kind of grief that is void of hope. And there is a kind of grief that is full of hope. Paul wrote these words at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4 to inform the Thessalonians (and in turn you and me) about what happens to Christians who die so that we will grieve with hope. Mere understanding of the end times wasn't his goal. Hope in the midst of sorrow was his goal. Spiritual encouragement remains the divinely intended effect. V. 18, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

Experiencing encouragement in the midst of grief over the death has everything to do with what you believe about Jesus. Simply put, when a believer dies, we should grieve with hope, knowing Jesus' story is our story. Because He rose, we too will rise. Whether we die before He returns or not, His death and resurrection guarantee our bodily resurrection and eternal life in the all-satisfying presence of God.

Such is the blessed hope of every Christian. So let's pay attention as Paul address the foundation, the substance, and the reward of our hope.

### **1) THE WORK OF CHRIST IS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR HOPE (vv. 13-14)**

Look at verse 14. Paul wants to give the Thessalonians hope in the midst of grief, but he doesn't start out by talking about them or their fellow Christians who have died. He starts with Jesus. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again...”

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key to understanding everything God is doing in the world today and everything he will do in the world tomorrow. For it is in Him and Him alone that the redemptive purposes of Almighty God are revealed and come to pass. Hebrews 1:1, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days has spoken to us by His Son...”

So what exactly do we need to understand about Jesus in verse 14? We need to be informed and aware that what God inaugurated in the life of his Son will be consummated in the life of his people. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, His story is your story, which means if you want to know what will happen to you when you die, you need to know what happened to Jesus when He died.

For make no mistake, Jesus really died. It wasn't a mirage. It wasn't a magic trick. If the Romans were good at anything, they were good at killing people. But why did Jesus die? Ultimately, it wasn't the Jews or the Romans who killed Him. It was God who killed Him. God the Son died because God the Father put Him to death. As he hung on the cross, He bore in his body and soul the cumulative guilt of our sin, the very sin that brought death into the world in the first place.

Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Jesus died so that all who cry out to Him for the forgiveness of their sins could discover with tears of joy that His death was sufficient to atone for ALL your guilt, ALL your disobedience, ALL your unrighteousness, ALL the sins you remember to confess, and ALL the sins you don't. How do we know that? Because He didn't remain dead.

Joseph of Arimathea took His body, wrapped Him in a linen shroud, and laid Him in a tomb. The Jews were concerned that His followers would steal the body away and claim He had been "resurrected," so they convinced the Romans to seal the tomb and post a guard of soldiers to keep it secure. Three days later two women, both followers of Jesus, went to see the tomb. Matthew 28:2-7 tells us what happened next.

"And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him...'"

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that Jesus soon appeared not only to Peter and the disciples, but also to "more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive..." In Jewish law, the reliability of a matter could be established

by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Clearly, Jesus wasn't interested in meeting the minimum standard. His resurrection was no more an illusion than his death. It was a reality confirmed by a multitude of eyewitnesses.

So what does the reality of his resurrection prove? It proves, as Richard Sibbes so wonderfully said, that there is more righteousness in Christ than there is sin in us! The payment He made didn't just meet the debt we owed. It exceeded the debt we owed. The same justice that compelled God to crush His son compelled God to raise Him up. Now here's where the good news of the gospel gets absolutely amazing.

If you die trusting Jesus and the work He did on the cross to save you from the condemnation you deserve, then the Lord promises He will raise you up too – not because you are worthy, but because Jesus is worthy, and the Spirit has united you *to* the Son through your faith *in* the Son such that the eternal life that is now *His* will most certainly be *yours*.

Fearful saint, trembling in the shadow of death, shaken by the futility of your life, hear this. Your God will not leave you in the grave. "Through Jesus," as Paul says in verse 14, God will bring you "with Him." He will bring to where Jesus is, into the glory of His presence. He will bring you home to heaven. Your physical death is no longer the final word on your life than it was for Jesus. John 14:19, "Because I live, you also will live."

That's the entire force of the "even so" in the middle of verse 14, which is why Paul describes Christians who have died as those who have "fallen asleep." In the same way that Jesus' death was temporary, and our physical sleep is temporary, so too our physical death is temporary. We need not fear death, as painful as it is, for it will not have the final word. It was not the final word for Jesus, and it will not be the final word for all who cling to Him by faith.

There are people out there whose lives seem to go exactly according to plan. No surprises, no major heartaches. Good marriage. Good kids. Good job. For most of us, however, at some point something will happen that reminds us just how futile life really is. The doctor says you have dementia. Your spouse says, "I'm done." The friend you thought would always be there betrays you. You run smack into the wall of your own helplessness and mortality. It feels like death is reaching out to you from the grave, pulling you further down into a yawning pit of physical or mental darkness. You see no end in sight and wonder if life is still worth living.

There is hope even in that darkness, friend, for if you are in Christ, Jesus' story will be your story. You will be delivered. You will be vindicated. You will make it home to heaven. You may enter the sleep of death with great sorrow, but you will wake up afterward to be with the Lord. Death will not have the final word. Because Jesus died and rose again, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. The work of Christ is the foundation of our hope.

## **2) THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY IS THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR HOPE (vv. 15-16)**

Comparing the physical death of a Christian to "falling asleep" raises all sorts of questions, starting with, "Exactly what happens to us when we die?" Does the Father immediately bring us "with Jesus" or do we have to wait? And what does the timing of Jesus' return have to do with all of this?

Thankfully, God doesn't leave us in the dark. He doesn't answer every question about the future but He does tell us everything we need to know in order to live with the end in view. The church has historically spoken of all the Bible says about what happens after we die and what will happen when Christ returns as the doctrine of eschatology, or the study of the "last things."

In his book, *The Future of Everything* (which I highly recommend), William Boekestein identifies three pitfalls we must avoid when it comes to end-times issues. First, we must avoid "speculative eschatology." We're speculating when we make Scripture answer questions it's not intended to answer simply because we're curious. That's a problem. Second, we should avoid "argumentative eschatology." Faithful, God-fearing Christians have disagreed over the details and will continue to disagree. It's not wrong to hold or defend a particular view. It is wrong to question the integrity of other believers who have a different perspective or adopt an attitude of superiority toward them.

Third, we should avoid "avoiding eschatology." 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 have sparked no lack of controversy among Christians over the centuries, leaving some to say, "Who knows what the Bible actually says. I'm going to leave all of that up to God and focus on the here and now. There are two really big problems with that attitude.

First, what Paul says in verses 15-17 isn't intended to confuse us. It's intended to comfort us. Usually the confusion comes when we try to make Scripture say more

than God intends it to say. Second, understanding what will happen in the future is one of the most important ways God empowers us to trust and obey Him in the present.

The Thessalonians were grieving in the present, worried that Christians who die before Jesus returns will miss out on the blessing of his second coming in the future. Paul quickly correct that notion in verse 15. "For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep."

Translation? Believers who have died before Jesus returns will enjoy the exact same blessings at the exact same time as believers who are alive when Jesus returns. How is that going to happen? Verse 16, "For the Lord himself (speaking of Jesus) will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first..."

When a believer dies, their soul or spirit immediately goes to be with the Lord in heaven. We know as much because of Scriptures like 2 Corinthians 5:8 where Paul says to be "away from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord." Think of Jesus' word of comfort to the thief crucified next to him in Luke 23, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Those who have "fallen asleep" as believers don't enter some sort of spiritual limbo state. They enjoy spiritual fellowship with Jesus in heaven.

They must wait, however, for the second coming of Christ to be reunited with their resurrected body. When Jesus comes back, the same voice that gave life to Adam, thundered on Mt. Sinai, whispered to Elijah, cried in a manger, taught his disciples, calmed the storm, and healed the sick...the same voice that still speaks today through the written Word of God, *that voice, Jesus' voice*, will summon the physical bodies of believers who have died from the dust of death, raising them to life and vindicating the saving power and authority of God.

On that day, the resurrected bodies of those who have died in Christ will be physically recognizable, just like Jesus' body was recognizable, but they will no longer be corrupted by sin and sickness, subject to decay and death. 1 Corinthians 15:42-43, "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power."

The same will be true of the physical bodies of every believer who is “alive” when Jesus returns. Though they have not physically died, they too will receive a body that is imperishable and immortal. 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” Then we all, with imperishable bodies, will be (verse 17) “caught up together...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...”

Notice several things about what Paul is saying here. First, there’s nothing secretive or hidden about the resurrection of those who have died in Christ. It is visible in the sense that it happens after “the Lord Himself” descends from heaven. Matthew 24:27, “As the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” Besides, what do “a cry of command,” “the voice of an archangel,” and “the sound of the trumpet of God” have in common? They’re audibly loud.

Second, Paul’s concern is more relational than geographical. Throughout the Old Testament, “the clouds” are a symbol of the presence and glory of God. Being caught up “in the clouds” with every other believer to meet the Lord isn’t Paul’s way of saying we’re all going to see Jesus, but it’s not going to happen until we reach 20,000 ft. Meeting the Lord “in the air” is a powerfully symbolic way of saying the One whose physical body is in heaven, will be united with those whose physical bodies are on earth.

It doesn’t matter whether you die before Jesus comes back or are alive when He returns. You will receive a resurrected body and in that perfect body you will meet the Lord. Why is that comforting? Because it reminds us that the redeeming power of God isn’t going to stop working until every bodily vestige of sin and death has been erased.

So much of the futility and brokenness we experience in this life is intensely physical. In response, God doesn’t say, “Hey, congrats. Because of Jesus, you’ll eventually get to enjoy spiritual fellowship with me in heaven as a disembodied soul. Aren’t you glad we left all that nasty physical business behind?”

No, when God created our bodies, he created something very good, something He hasn’t abandoned or forgotten. The same redemptive power that is presently at work in our souls, making us more like Jesus in a spiritual sense, will one day accomplish the same work in our bodies, making us like Jesus in a physical sense.



The bodily nature of our resurrection reminds us that our bodies could not be more important to the Lord. They are not disposable. They are not ours to use however we desire. They are a theater for the saving power of God no less than our souls.

My wife, Aliza, loves to remind me that from age 21 onward, everything begins to decay. If I have the slightest ailment or soreness, I will inevitably hear, "Get used to it, babe. You're getting old like everyone else." For now, I prefer willful ignorance. But then I visit an aging church member in the hospital, I sit with a young brother or sister in Christ battling chronic illness, I weep over the news of another miscarriage, I think of all the deaths I mentioned earlier, and I pray...

"Lord, thank you that one day all of this will be made new. Thank you that the grave isn't the end, not just for our souls, but for our bodies. What you created is good. For now, we languish under the physical curse of sin. It hurts, Father. It really hurts. But thank you, Lord, thank you that where the works and effects of sin abound in a physical sin, grace will abound all the more. Thank you for the comfort of knowing that all that is physically wrong within me and around me, will one day be made right." The resurrection of the body is the substance of our hope.

### **3) THE PRESENCE OF GOD IS THE REWARD OF OUR HOPE (vv. 17-18)**

I can't imagine the joy of sharing in the resurrection of the body. I love all of you who work in the medical field, but let me tell you, I can't wait until you're out of a job. But I can also imagine an even greater joy, an even greater reward, and that is the reward of spending all our days in the presence of the Lord.

It is exceedingly good to know the comfort of the indwelling Holy Spirit – God with us. It is exceedingly good to live in community with other Christians, enjoying the presence of God in a uniquely powerful way when we gather to worship and pray. It is exceedingly good to walk through life knowing that no matter what kind of suffering awaits, the Lord is near to the brokenhearted. Jesus hasn't left us on our own, friends. He's with us. All of that, friends, is exceedingly good.

But there is something even better. It's called seeing Jesus face to face. Look back at verse 17. "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." Brothers and sisters, that is one of the strongest encouragements we can ever share with one another as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.





The story of our salvation begins in Genesis 3. The cool of evening is at hand and the setting sun soon gives way to the darkness of sin and death. The story of our redemption ends in Revelation 22 where the Lord walks among us once again. Only this time, we see His face at the beginning of an eternal dawn of life in the new heavens and the new earth. Revelation 22:4-5, "They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

Think about the face we will see. Think about the Lord with whom we will always be. There is no one more beautiful than Him. He is infinitely holy, lovely, glorious, and mighty. So many pleasures in this life come and go. Even our awareness of the Lord's presence ebbs and flows. Not so the pleasure of life with Jesus in heaven. A pleasure greater than anything we will ever experience in this life will go on and on without end – the infinitely glorious one bringing infinite satisfaction to our souls for there is no one more satisfying than Him.

You were made to know Him. You were made to be with Him. In Psalm 17, King David recounts the suffering of this life and the distress in his soul over the seeming prosperity of the wicked. In the final verse, however, He remembers his portion ultimately isn't found in this life. His inheritance is in heaven. Verse 15, "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with Your likeness."

Brothers and sisters, finding encouragement in Paul's words in verse 17 – "So we will always be with the Lord," will only bring hope in the midst of grief to those who have made the Lord their greatest treasure. If you love nothing and no one more than Him, there is nothing better than always being with Him. If you love something or someone more than Him, then always being with him will sound fine, but not particularly satisfying. Test your affections with a simple question, "If you could have eternal life, but not Jesus, would you be satisfied?"

Those who fight the hardest to make Jesus their treasure in this life enjoy the greatest hope in the midst of grief because they have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. They live with a deep and abiding conviction of the truth of Psalm 84:10, even as they wait to experience their joy in full. "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere." The presence of God himself is the ultimate reward of our hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are all too familiar with death. Through Jesus, God is eager to give us hope in the midst of our grief. It's not a pipe dream. It's not a spiritual fantasy. It's not a "wouldn't it be great if that happened" kind of hope. It's a sure hope. It's a certain hope. It's a result of looking to Jesus and focusing on the promises he has made about the future to all who choose to trust and obey him. Should you grieve when a loved one passes away? Yes. But if they are a believer, we grieve with hope, knowing Jesus' story is our story.

Even if your loved one is not a Christian, we still do not grieve as those who have no hope. Why not? Because even amidst the pain of watching them refuse the consolations of Christ, this you know. One day, you will be with the Lord. He will wipe away every tear from your eye. And you will know on that day in a way you have never known before that He does all things well.

The work of Christ is the foundation of our hope. The resurrection of the body is the substance of our hope. The presence of the Lord is the reward of our hope. I urge you, friend, amidst a world of grief, look to Jesus. Turn your eyes to His death and resurrection. Fix your gaze on the future He has promised you. Grieve, but do not grieve as those who have no hope. For God has given us in Christ the greatest hope imaginable.