

“Our Comfort in Death”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
(Preached at Trinity, April 9, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Today is Easter Sunday, the day the church traditionally sets aside to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Like many of the wonders of Christianity we tend to take it for granted. This was surely not the case for the early church. They were filled with great joy that they served a risen Lord.
Luke 24:52-53 NAS - "And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple, praising God."
2. The resurrection is of vital importance to the church. It is central to the Gospel message.
1 Corinthians 15:1-4 NAU - "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"
3. The resurrection is the sure expectation of the Christian believer. It is the certainty of our life after death. The resurrection is our great comfort in death.
In Paul's letter to the Church of Thessalonica he told them of the coming return of Christ in power and glory. Some in the church feared that those who had already gone to the grave would miss out on the event. Paul assures them that no believer would be left out. At the end of the passage Paul concludes:
1 Thessalonians 4:18 NAU - "Therefore comfort one another with these words."
4. On this Easter Sunday I want us to look at Paul's comforting words.

- I. First, Paul presumes the reality of death – “about those who are asleep”
 - A. Death is the display of God’s curse upon sin
Genesis 2:16-17 NAU - "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."
 1. When Adam sinned he died – spiritual death came instantly. He also became mortal. He began the process of dying.
Romans 5:12 NAU - "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned--"
 2. Adam witnessed death all around him until he experienced the reality.
Genesis 5:5 NAU - "So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died."
 3. Such has been the lot of all men

- B. Except for those alive when Christ returns, we will all pass through the portal of death.
 - 1. Paul is writing of those who had already died – “about those who are asleep”
 - 2. Death is a certainty for all
The word died, die, death etc. found over 1200 times in Scripture
Genesis 3:19 NAU - "By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."
 - 3. Most live as if there is no end to their life. Death stalks us as a wild beast tracking us with a relentless pursuit. There is no place to hide; death will find us all.
- C. We should note that it is only the body that goes to the grave.
 - 1. Our soul, our consciousness goes immediately to be with Christ.
Those who have died will return with Christ.
1 Thessalonians 4:14 NAU - "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."
 - 2. This passage is speaking about what happens to the bodies of the dead upon the return of Christ. Our souls are already with Him.
2 Corinthians 5:6-8 NAU - "Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord-- ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight-- ⁸ we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."

II. The other thing that Paul makes clear is the grief of death - "so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

- A. Christians are not denied the grief of death
 - 1. Death is a grievous reality. When Jesus arrived at the scene of those mourning the death of Lazarus He knew He was about to raise him to life. But the scene of the grave and of those mourning his death brought genuine sorrow to Jesus. John records, “Jesus wept.”
 - 2. We read of Stephen’s martyrdom:
Acts 8:2 NAU - "Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him."
 - 3. The issue is not whether or not we grieve. Paul is stressing *how* we grieve Death and loss are very much a part of life. It is good for us to have an understanding of the proper expression of our grief.
 - 4. God doesn’t deny us the reality of grief. It is a sharp dagger that pierces our heart. It is a burning fire that rages within our bosom that no earthly potion can quench.
 - 5. Paul’s words here is that our grief is different
1 Thessalonians 4:13 NAU - "so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

- a. It is not wrong to remember our sorrows; in fact, it is a healthy thing to keep in memory those we have lost.

It will always be a source of comfort to remember their lives – their personality, their unique expressions, the ways they demonstrated their love. It is good to remember what they meant in our lives.

- b. In a real sense, our grief never ends. We never forget our departed loved ones. They are forever in our memory, and we never cease feeling the loss.

Dale Ralph Davis describes this reality – “With passage of time the acuteness of sorrow may lessen but its ache remains. I recall a Christian woman in her seventies telling me that her husband had been dead thirteen years and still she felt the loneliness and missed his companionship. She was/is a well-balanced, mature, joyful Christian woman. But she lost the husband she loved and, in one way, had never gotten over it. Nor should she. Great love has the greater pain.”¹

B. But Christian grief is different

- 1. First, we are not grieving for the dead but for ourselves. The fallen believer has simply left their moral body and are standing in the glorious presence of Christ. We have this certain expectation.
- 2. We also have the certainty of the resurrection.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 NAU - "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

- 3. Matthew Henry: "The doctrine of the resurrection and the second coming of Christ is a great antidote against the fear of death and inordinate sorrow for the death of our Christian friends; and this doctrine we have a full assurance of, because we *believe that Jesus died and rose again.*"²
- 3. Paul says the dead in Christ shall rise first. We shall see Him, we shall meet Him. We shall be ever with Him. Paul says there is comfort in this "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

III. The contrast between those who die in faith and those who do not

A. Paul contrasts the believer with the unbeliever

V. 13 - "so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

- 1. "As do the rest" – the rest of humanity who has no hope. For the unbeliever, death offers nothing but hopelessness
- 2. Death strikes fear in their hearts
 - a. Because, for lost humanity, death separates them from their true love – the things which satisfy the flesh. It is a fearful thought to lose all that we have. We fear the end of our feeble plans.
 - b. The lost hide from the wrath of God but they cannot deny it. God has revealed it to them and they tremble.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary, (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002).

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2342.

- c. Death brings the lost man face to face with the demands of Divine justice. Death puts him face to face with an endless hell.
3. For the lost man there is no comfort in death, no ultimate meaning in life. Life and death are emptiness and vanity.
- a. The lost man lives, dies, and then goes to hell. Everything is lost.
Proverbs 11:7 NAU - "When a wicked man dies, *his* expectation will perish, And the hope of strong men perishes."
 - b. All of his plans and preparations are unfulfilled, left behind for others
Luke 12:19-20 NAU - "And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry." ²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'"
4. For the lost, their grief is particularly painful. Like the rest of humanity, they too grieve over the loss. They deeply miss their departed loved one. But their loved one is forever gone. But there is no hope. Without the hope of the resurrection there is nothing left in death. They have no expectation of seeing them again. There is only emptiness, hopelessness.
5. They are held captive by the philosophical outlook of lost humanity: They are from nowhere and going nowhere. This is a hopeless emptiness. The inscription on an ancient Latin tombstone reads:
"I was not; I became; I am not; I care not."³
- B. Death for a believer is different
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13 NAU** - "so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."
- 1. In both life and death we belong to Christ. Both life and death are in His hands. We understand that the time of our death has been appointed by His eternal counsel.
James 4:13-15 NAU - "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."
 - 2. God is sovereign over every aspect of our lives – including death. For the righteous, as their lives have been purposeful, so also their deaths.
 - 3. It is always great gain to trust in God's sovereign dominion and live in submission to it. The Christian truth is we have already died.
Galatians 2:20 NAU - "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

³ Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, eds. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 164.

4. The lost man lives in the constant fear of death.
The moment of death is often a terrible battle to hang onto life as the claws of hell drags him to perdition. The believer always has his sights fixed on eternity.
- C. The word “hope” is key
1. The Christian is sustained by the promises of God’s Word.
 - a. There are differences of opinion regarding the meaning of the words, “word of the Lord” in **Verse 15**. Many declare it must refer to some earlier teaching of Christ, a saying of Christ that is not recorded in the Gospels.
 - b. I believe, instead, that it is an affirmation that the Word of God is the same as “the Word of the Lord.” The expression occurs over 250 time in Scripture.
 - c. We can find great comfort in the promises of God, and we can encourage and comfort one another as we face the sorrows of death. “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”
 2. For the Christian there is the certain hope of what lies ahead. Death has no hold over the life of a believer. Death is only the beginning. We are joyously awaiting the resurrection – **Verses 14-15**
 3. The Christian can live and face death with faith, hope, and confidence. The Christ-centered man lives his life with purpose and is prepared to meet Christ
 4. Jesus assures us, “Let not your heart be troubled”
John 14:1-3 KJV - "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, *there ye may be also.*"

Conclusion:

1. Paul is saying, I don’t want you to have any misunderstanding regarding the future. I don’t want you to grieve as those who do not have the peace and assurance of Christ.
2. The Christian has the glorious hope of the resurrection. Death is our arch enemy, but it cannot defeat us. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,
1 Corinthians 15:54-55 NAU - "But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"
3. The fear of death is God’s just judgement upon our sin, condemnation which Jesus has removed by His death and resurrection. There is no greater hope than to rest in Him.
4. We can face our own death with joy and hope, and we should face the death of our believing loved ones with joy and hope—to grieve, but not as those who have no hope.
5. May this Easter Sunday bring you peace and comfort as you consider the certainty of your resurrection.