

5.24.20 Comforted by the Hope of the Lord's Return 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18
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One of the things that's been difficult over the last couple months is families losing loved ones and not being able to have services to acknowledge and give thanks for their lives in an appropriate way. Today's passage from 1 Thessalonians 4 is relevant for people like us experiencing a health crisis in which many people have died and during which rituals related to grief and death that we'd normally be able to engage in such as having memorial services here at the church are not taking place. In his letter, Paul turns his pastoral concern to the grief people are feeling about those who have died before the return or the second coming of the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18.

*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 & 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."*

Paul wants the church to be **Comforted by the Hope of the Lord's Return**. In the first chapters of 1 Thessalonians Paul repeatedly uses the phrases "You know" and "as you know" to affirm what the church already understands (1.5; 2.1, 2, 5, 9-11; 3.3-4; 4.2). Now Paul introduces a subject that they *don't know* as much about – **what happens to those who have died before the return of the Lord**. Paul writes, "we do not want you to be uninformed," in other words, "we want to be sure you completely understand this," "**so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope**." That's the first important thing to note from this passage. As followers of Christ, we **Don't grieve as those who have no hope**. This statement is a very important one for those of us who trust in Christ. We do not grieve those who have died in the same way

as those who have no hope of seeing their loved ones again or of life beyond what we see and know on this earth.

However, being a Christian doesn't mean we don't grieve at all. Of course, we do. When someone we love dies whether a grandparent or parent, a spouse or a sibling, a child or dear friend – of course there is a real and heartfelt sense of loss. Each person is unique and his or her place, role, and influence in our lives can't be filled in the same way by anyone else. It's important to acknowledge that person and his or her importance to us, our gratitude for how their life touched ours and the tangible and specific things that we will miss now that they're no longer with us. We'll need to be patient with ourselves and with others as we adjust to a new normal, as we feel the pain of the absence of the loved and lost, and as we re-direct the focus and energy of our life in new ways.

Being a Christian doesn't mean we don't grieve at all, of course we do; however, we grieve differently than those who have no hope because we believe our loved ones who put their trust and faith in Christ will be with the Lord. In the perspective of the kingdom of God, physical death is not the end of a person's existence but a temporary cessation analogous to sleeping. In John 11:11, Jesus tells the disciples, "*Our friend Lazarus has **fallen asleep**, but I am going there to awaken him.*" "**Asleep**" is a common New Testament description of death as we see in Matthew 9:24, Mark 5:39, **Acts 7:60**, Stephen as he's being martyred, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them,*" When he had said this, he fell asleep (Greek). **1 Corinthians 15:6**, "*though some have fallen asleep.*"

What enables us not to grieve as those who have no hope?

2. Believe that Jesus died and rose again

This is a part of a core Christian statement of faith. We believe that Jesus who died on the cross and through whom we have the forgiveness of our sins, rose again on the third day. Each of us must decide for ourselves if we believe that or not. Bill Morrow became the Treasurer of BBC in 1998 bringing his keen analytical mind, and thirty plus years of experience in accounting, contracts, numbers, and budgets. Bill was a committed Christian who worked with great faithfulness, wisdom, diligence, and integrity as BBC's Treasurer and then Financial Manager. He was highly respected by all our lay

leaders who often camped outside his office to ask his opinion about a project or an idea, especially our Building and Grounds people. Bill was a beloved staff member and he was instrumental in BBC's success for many years and his good humor, support, and understanding were invaluable as was his dedication to helping us pursue our mission as a church.

He was stricken at home on Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2014 and rushed to Cape Cod Hospital. I was with Bill's wife Marilyn and their daughter Betsy standing by his bed. I had my arm around Marilyn's shoulders and we were telling Bill it was okay to go, to be at peace, to go toward the light, when all of sudden it looked like Bill, who was lying flat in the bed and hadn't moved at all, was going to get up out of the bed. It was like there was someone else standing at the foot of the bed telling him to get up and he tried to rise as if to receive and give a hug. Then he eased back into the bed, visibly relaxed, and took his final breaths. It was amazing to witness. As was noted in his obituary, he "passed into glory on Good Friday." Which is what Jesus did and what Christians believe. I believe with all my heart that Bill, like a good steward of the Master, heard the words we all long to hear, *"Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."*

We don't grieve as those who have no hope because we believe Jesus died and rose again and 3. We Believe that We will be with the Lord forever.

From the opening lines of 1 Thessalonians, the Parousia, or the return or second coming of Jesus Christ permeates the letter. Believers are those who (1:3), *"hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* and who (1:10) *"wait for God's Son from heaven."* God calls believers into (2:12) God's *"own kingdom and glory."* Paul and his team are praying for their blamelessness at (3:13) *"the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* Yet as the church awaits the Lord's return, they are wondering about those who are dying before that happens. Our faith and trust in the Lord make a difference even when we die before the Lord's return.

Harris "Chappy" and Paula Chapman were a delightful couple who lived on Crocker Lane here in Brewster many years ago. During their more than 50 years of married life they attended just three churches. Ruggles Street Baptist Church in Boston,

First Baptist Church in Arlington, & Brewster Baptist Church. It was a difficult step when they sold the house & moved to Thirwood Place. I still recall the day in August of 1999 when Paula called me & told me that Chappy had died in his sleep. I immediately drove to Thirwood & when I came in & saw him in the bed, he had a big peaceful smile on his face. Paula was emotional as any of us would be in that moment and I asked her if I could take her hand and if we could stand by the side of the bed. I asked her to tell me what emotion she saw on Chappy's face. She was quiet for a moment and looked at her dear husband's face and then she said, *"He looks like he's smiling. He looks like he's happy and peaceful."* I replied, *"That's exactly how he looks to me. He looks really happy."* We talked about how he was at peace and would be with the Lord forever and would be waiting for her. My mother who was a nurse for 25 years at New England Baptist Hospital in Boston always said that she could tell the difference between a person who had faith and a person who didn't because people of faith tended to face death with greater peace, calmness, and serenity and you could see it on their faces.

We don't grieve as those who do not have hope because we believe that Jesus died and rose again and that we will be with the Lord forever.

Finally, Paul writes, 4. Encourage one another with these words.

One of the best people I've heard at **encouraging others** with the life transforming message of Jesus' death and resurrection was **Ravi Zacharias**, a Christian apologist whose ministry for the gospel of Jesus Christ impacted millions around the world. Ravi died this past Tuesday from a rare form of cancer at the age of 74. I appreciated his thinker's approach to the Christian faith. His obituary begins, "When Ravi was a cricket-loving boy on the streets of India, his mother called him in to meet the local sari-seller-turned-palm reader. *"Looking at your future, Ravi Baba, you will not travel far or very much in your life,"* he declared. *"That's what the lines on your hand tell me. There is no future for you abroad."*

By the time a 37-year-old Zacharias preached, at the invitation of Billy Graham, to the inaugural International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists in Amsterdam in 1983, he was on his way to becoming one of the foremost defenders of Christianity's intellectual credibility. A year later, he founded Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), with the mission of ***"helping the thinker believe and the believer think."***

In the time between the sari seller's prediction and the founding of RZIM, Zacharias had immigrated to Canada, taken the gospel across North America, prayed with military prisoners in Vietnam and ministered to students in a Cambodia on the brink of collapse. He had also undertaken a global preaching trip as a newly licensed minister with The Christian and Missionary Alliance, along with his wife, Margie, and eldest daughter, Sarah. This trip started in England, worked eastwards through Europe and the Middle East and finished on the Pacific Rim; that year, Zacharias preached nearly 600 times in over a dozen countries. The sari-seller-turned-palm reader probably should have stuck to his first job.

It was the culmination of a remarkable transformation set in motion when Zacharias, recovering in a Delhi hospital from a suicide attempt at age 17, was read the words of Jesus recorded by the apostle John: ***"Because I live, you will also live."*** In response, Zacharias surrendered his life to Christ and offered up a prayer that if he emerged from the hospital, he would leave no stone unturned in his pursuit of truth. Once Zacharias found the truth of the gospel, his passion for sharing it burned bright until the very end. Even as he returned home from the hospital in Texas, where he had been undergoing chemotherapy, Zacharias was sharing the hope of Jesus to the three nurses who tucked him into his transport.

At Billy Graham's Conference for Itinerant Evangelists in 1983, In front of 3,800 evangelists from 133 countries, Ravi shared his fear that, *"in certain strands of evangelicalism, we sometimes think it is necessary to so humiliate someone of a different worldview that we think unless we destroy everything he holds valuable, we cannot preach to him the gospel of Christ...what I am saying is this, **when you are trying to reach someone, please be sensitive to what he holds valuable.**"* I wish more evangelicals lived their faith in that loving and humble way.

Another thing I appreciated about Ravi's ministry is their humanitarian division Wellspring International, shaped by the memory of his mother's heart to work with the destitute. **Founded on the principle that love is the most powerful apologetic**, it exists to come alongside local partners that meet critical needs of vulnerable women and children around the world.

Michael Ramsden, president of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries said in a tribute, "*(Ravi) saw the objections and questions of others not as something to be rebuffed, but **as a cry of the heart that had to be answered,***" said "*People weren't logical problems waiting to be solved; **they were people who needed the person of Christ.** Those who knew him well will remember him first for **his kindness, gentleness, and generosity of spirit. The love and kindness he had come to know in and through Jesus Christ was the same love he wanted to share with all he met.***"

One of the similarities to living in these days of COVID 19 and waiting for the return of the Lord is the they both carry a sense of open-endedness and uncertainty. We don't know what lies ahead with the virus, we don't know what will happen as life re-opens, we hope there will be a vaccine or treatment that proves effective and can be widely shared, but we don't know if or when there will be one available to every person and if everyone will be open to taking it. We need to learn to live in the in-between time wisely, patiently, and compassionately. In a similar way, since the first century, Christians have affirmed that the Lord will return. Clearly many in Thessalonica and even Paul himself, seemed to believe that the Parousia or return of the Lord would be in their lifetime, but it didn't happen. In virtually every generation since, there have been Christians who were certain that the "signs of the times" were indicating the return of the Lord was near and imminent. There are people saying that today. In every case since the first century people have been wrong, but it doesn't stop people from speculating.

Rather than trying to figure out when Jesus will return, it's better to be comforted by the fact that he rose from the dead and that if we put our trust in Christ and live for His glory we will be with the Lord forever whether he returns in our lifetime or we die first and go to God. We're called to live faithfully, humbly, and patiently, remembering always that **love is the most powerful apologetic. Encourage one another with these words.**

Blessing: Almighty God, source of our life & breath, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself that we might have eternal life, help us remember Jesus' own victory over death & his promise that because he lives, we also will live.

Comfort our hearts through his words, strengthen us now with his presence; &

May your grace & peace be ours both now & forever. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What was something you found comforting when someone you loved died? It could have been something you did, or something someone else said or did.
2. Paul says that Christians don't grieve as those who have no hope. How has the hope we have in Christ impacted your grieving? What difference has your faith made in those times in your life?
3. Central to Paul's preaching of the good news is the belief that Jesus died and rose again? If someone asked you, why would you think this is both important and good news?
4. Paul writes that whether a believer died before Christ's return, or if one is alive when that happens, that the core thing to remember is "we will be with the Lord forever." If we're going to be with the Lord forever, how we live in the present to prepare for that?
5. Ravi Zacharias's mission was "helping the thinker believe and the believer think." The great commandments tells us to love God with all our mind (Luke 10:27). What can you do to continue to sharpen and deepen your thinking as a Christian?
6. Do you agree that that love is the most powerful apologetic? If no, what do you think is? If yes, what are the implications for how you live out your faith?
7. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 states, "Therefore encourage one another with these words." What can you do to encourage others with the good news of Jesus Christ as well as with your words and communication in general? Why is encouragement vital to relationships and in the church?