



“On Death and Hope”

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

Do you remember the first time you experienced grief?

When I was about seven years old, my family lived in an apartment near the University of Kentucky hospital system, in a red brick complex for families with members who were suffering terminal illness. Our next-door neighbor was a younger man and woman, Paul and Diane. I don't remember what specifically he was suffering from, but I was aware that Paul was dying of cancer; he didn't have any hair from the chemotherapy, and his body was thin and frail; his eyes were hollow and his skin was a pale, ghostly white.

Our apartments shared a porch and I remember he would sometimes grill with one of those little green charcoal camping grills. I used to go out with my mom and watch him put a couple of steaks on the grill in the fall, she's a big fan steak and grilling and they used to talk seasonings and marinades. I'd just watch them sizzle on the grates, and watch as he'd cook them really slowly and carefully, a river of smoke rising into the infinite sky.

He never had much to say, and as a kid, I don't really remember his words. But the light in his eyes seemed to be dimmer, as if his spirit and energy were already beginning to flow outward, to depart naturally away from his body.

One cold, dark January morning, after traipsing downstairs for breakfast, I saw my mother and father at the kitchen table. They were whispering. My mother was crying. They told me that Mr. Paul had passed away last night. He was no longer with us. He died.

Where did he go? What did it mean that he died? In the midst of these lingering questions, I first felt the pain of grief. A few weeks later coming home from school, I noticed that Diana had moved out of the apartment, but little green grill was sitting next to our door, a parting gift from their family to ours, and it eerily felt as if Paul was somehow still with us, his presence had not departed our apartment.

Our first encounters with death as children have a deep impact on us, challenging us to consider our own mortality. These questions of what happens when someone dies were also at fresh on the minds of the people to whom the Apostle Paul is writing in the first letter to the Thessalonians, and his exhortations in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 that the congregation refrain from mourning the dead come as a surprise to us; how could they not mourn those who had passed away?

And while this text frequently is cited by individuals cobbling together a theology of Christ's second coming, a favorite of apocalyptic fiction writers, we see that at the time, the advice Paul gives was merely for the people of the church in Thessalonica who were grieving the loss of their siblings in Christ. Those who were "asleep."

This morning our text indeed comes from Paul's letter to the Christian community located in the city of Thessalonica, or Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is the capital of the region of Greek Macedonia, a city that rests on the edge of the Aegean Sea, in the shadow of Mount Olympus, home of the Olympian gods of Greek mythology. It was an important city for commerce and trade during this period, occupied by the Roman Empire.

And Thessaloniki becomes a center for Christianity in the early days. Paul may have visited the synagogue in Thessaloniki on different occasions to preach and teach.

This epistle is believed to be the earliest of Paul's letters, and thus the earliest text written in the New Testament. What you are looking at in your Bibles, scholars believe is earlier than the Gospels, Matthew Mark Luke and John, earlier than Paul's other letters, Romans, 1 Corinthians, these are some of the earliest words on the Gospel message ever placed on paper.

A large chunk of the letter acknowledges the faith of the members of the church, “keep doing what you’re doing” kind of stuff, but in chapter 4 we learn that members of the church were concerned about a huge question that apparently had not been answered yet in Christian theology: What happens to members of the church who die?

Now, we believe that the members of the church in Thessaloniki were Gentile, Paul is talking to a church composed entirely of Gentiles, non Jews. So they have lived Gentile lives without any of the Jewish religious or cultural context. So while Jews believed historically that all people who died were cast away into a dark valley, the Valley of Sheol, Romans had another conception of death. Romans believe that before the remains of a person were placed in a grave or tomb, their shade or spirit had yet not made the harrowing journey across the River Styx (the river that takes one from the World of the Living to the World of the Dead).

But now that they became followers of Christ, Paul urges the believers to turn from their Gentile ways, both practices and religious understandings.

Paul says, “we do not want you to be uninformed” I want you to have all the information on what happens to people when they die. The question of why Paul needed to include this information in the letter is one that has puzzled scholars for a long time.

For a church of Gentiles whose faith was recognized by believers far and wide, did they not know that the dead would rise with the living?

Sometimes we make assumptions about why individuals would have chosen to follow Jesus during the first century, and many times we always assume that people become Christians to escape death and live eternally, but apparently this was not a part of the theology of the time. Paul hadn’t explained to them this. We’re talking about a time before creeds and long theological treatises. At least for the believers at Thessalonica, they became Christians without worrying too much about what might happen if they die; their reasons for following Jesus must have been

rooted in a more rich and rewarding life in the present. Or maybe they didn't think they would die before the Second coming.

From what we understand about many of the early churches to whom Paul was writing in the middle of the first century: they believed in Christ's very soon, imminent return. After he had ascended into heaven, Christ promises to return. And it appears as if Paul and many of the early believers thought Christ would return would within their lifetimes--Paul says, "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."

They were confident that they would remain until the second coming of Christ, the Parousia. So, when several members died in their community, word got back to Paul that they mourned and grieved deeply, for these would not get to enjoy the glory of experiencing Christ's second coming. They cried at the bedside of these members, ostensibly lamenting the fact that these would be exempt from the blessings of life with the risen Christ. And Paul's advice on grieving is rather unorthodox for modern readers: don't grieve.

When I was at Wesley Seminary in DC, I enrolled in a class that all students were required to take on pastoral care and counseling. In the course, we discussed pastoral responses to individuals going through a death in the family. We conducted simulations of conversations one might have, learned the questions you do not ask to be helpful to a grieving person, and how to walk alongside someone in the depth of despair.

In a book, we read at the time, Melissa Kelley's *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry* the author compares the act of grieving to the mosaic art form. Mosaics are some of the oldest art that is still permanent today, an art form of placing and arranging multiple small pieces of material called *tesserae*, frequently made of glass, tile, ceramic, marble, or gemstones.

And the spaces between the tesserae are called *interstices*, small bits of grout that stitch together the whole, serving as the connecting tissue for the tesserae. But what is most unique about mosaics as an art form is that artists may plan for one pattern, but in placing the tiles, another

pattern emerges. One cannot blend the colors of the past into a new design. Once a tile has been placed and dries, other tiles must work around it, forming patterns and shapes based on the positioning of that one tile. Similarly, grief builds upon itself. There is no predictable pattern for how individuals grieve, nor are there stages. Everyone's situation is different, and the tiles placed at the beginning of the grieving process affect how the tiles at the end are placed.

So, I would not necessarily look to all of Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians for advice on what to say to a grieving person. Please don't tell someone they should not grieve. I hope it goes without saying that always encourage a person to experience their emotions naturally, allowing the river of tears to fill the room; allowing the dry silence to hauntingly hang in the room.

But Paul asks these followers to encourage one another with the knowledge that our deaths do not signal an end with our relationship with God.

If it takes trumpets and archangels and billowing clouds to bring the dead into God's fold, to include absolutely everyone in this plan, it will happen. This is the message of hope Paul tries to get across in this message.

Paul says do not grieve that the dead have passed away, but celebrate the life that is embedded in the future coming of the Christ, a life that pulls together past and future into one grand mosaic.

We believe in a future where we are reunited with those that we love but have crossed the river. Death is not a permanent separation from God or from life, but an extension of the beyond, a never-ending mosaic of colors, patterns, shapes, and stories pushing deep into the beyond.

We believe in a God who trod this very earth in life, and later experienced the pain of death. But the story of the cross, haunting our dreams, haunting our past would not be the final fragment of the story, for resurrection would come, sweeping all of humanity into life everlasting.

We believe in a God who is able to reach across the infinite expanse of time and space, into the space where the dead rest and into the places of the living, and bring all of us into one embrace. What a message of inclusivity that even the dead will be welcomed to the party.

Friends, for many of us, hope seems to be in short supply right now. We grieve a world that is narrated from the perspectives of death, hatred, rejection and exclusion, we see these themes on our twitter feeds and newspaper pages. We mourn the institutions that are changing, including organized religion. We grieve the loss of the people we used to be. We grieve our personal and societal complicity in systems of oppression, and death.

And while we should not dam the rivers of grief without consequences, attempting to plug the outward rushing of our emotions, rather in the midst of our sorrow, we should not focus on death, but on life, the coming of the Christ as our future, a promise of life and hope. Not on when the world will end, as a few verses later Paul tells us not to worry about the “thief in the night,” not to worry about time or place. In these times, I ask us to encourage one another, to support each other in the present. And we, the living, members at Royal Lane Baptist Church, friends of the Alliance of Baptists can begin to arrange the pieces of this story for a more justice-centered world, one built on peace and hope.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the Advent of hope, peace, joy, and love in the world. We will expectedly wait the coming of the Christ. So, encourage one another with words of hope.