

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Get Happy

Notes from a sermon preached Christ Church Liverpool

Big idea: Living to please God means grieving with hope that all Christians will be with the Lord forever.

Big application: Understand that death is no loss to Christians who die and grieve for now in a markedly different way to the hopeless world.

The average age of our congregation is about 25. If you're there or thereabouts you will probably live for another 55 or 60 years during which time more than half the people you know will die and then you will die yourself.

For some of us that day is much nearer. Some of us we are already grieving a recent loss. Some of us are still suffering from a bereavement of many months or even years ago.

Wherever and whenever in history you live there is a lot of death in life. What is the best way to deal with all that death?

The advice of the world varies massively. In 21st century British culture we stand uncomfortably, somewhere between very public tears for celebrities we don't know in any meaningful way at all and stoic silence at the graveside of family members we have spent our lives with.

Such conflicting approaches are not new. Back in the 18th century the diarist and dictionary writer Samuel Johnson was definitely of the stiff upper lip school. "Grief," he said "is a species of idleness." By contrast his contemporary, the poet William Cowper (who gave us the phrase "God works in mysterious ways" through one of his many hymns), said that "grief is itself a medicine." And if this contradictory advice is found in different centuries in Britain, other countries have also suffered in the same way.

In first century Greece the cults of death encouraged great and noisy grief. On the other hand, stoics and other philosophers urged rationality and reason so that one writer summarises the typical ancient letter to a grieving relative as usually containing six teachings:

- 1 Death is inevitable.
- 2 Death is the fate of all, king and beggars, rich and poor.
- 3 The person's memory and honour will live on in spite of death.

4 Death releases one from the evils of life.

5 The funeral and tomb are a great honour to the deceased.

6 Either death is nonexistence and does not matter to the dead or it leads to some happier state of existence.

In this confusing maelstrom of varying advice it wasn't surprising that the Thessalonian Christians, introduced to a new way of thinking about the whole of their lives by the apostle Paul with his good news about Jesus Christ, weren't quite sure how to react when Christians died.

And it's not surprising that, with so much bad advice around, many of us here have little idea how we ought to think, feel and behave in the presence of death.

Should we, as W H Auden said, "pack up the moon and dismantle the sun" because everything is worthless now, or take Henry Scott-Holland's view that just a "negligible accident," and act as if our loved one is just in the next room?

Into this whirlpool of emotion and confusion steps the apostle Paul with some wise and timely advice about death and grieving.

If you've been here over the weeks that we've been studying Paul's letter to this infant church in Thessalonica you'll remember that the great theme of the letter is encouragement. Paul is delighted that despite all the difficulties of living as Christians in a pagan world these new believers were continuing in faith, hope and love.

Last week we saw Paul urging them on to greater and greater love for one another, particularly in the realms of sexuality and work, as an expression of their faith to those who do not yet believe in Christ.

In the whole section from 4:13 to 5:11, which we'll be looking at over the next three weeks, Paul turns especially to the subject of **hope** and deals with lots of vitally important questions to do with death, resurrection and judgment.

The great news this morning is not just that the Bible gives us answers that will help us to deal in a godly way with death and the end. Yes, understanding what Paul has to say here will be a great comfort and encouragement to us. But more than that, as we learn to live as people of hope, we will commend the

good news about Jesus to outsiders. Dealing in a Christian way with grief isn't just good for you, it is also a wonderful advertisement that tells people why they should put their faith in Christ.

So let's learn together, this morning, about good grief. We'll see what good grief is, why good grief is possible and what good grief recognises. What it is, why it's possible and what it recognises.

1 What good grief is: grief with hope

I am absolutely certain that, during the short time he had with the Thessalonians, Paul would have explained his understanding of what happens when Christians die.

So what he's doing here isn't teaching them something new. He's just reminding them of things that it's hard to keep in mind when you are going through the mill and feeling pierced by grief.

What does Paul want the Thessalonians, and is, to know? Well it's simple. Here's John Calvin's brilliant summary of this whole passage: "*we must not grieve for the dead beyond certain bounds, for all God's children are going to be raised again.*"

How should we face death? Well when you read v13 it's actually quite oddly constructed. I wonder if you noticed the double negative? We do *not* want you to grieve like men who have *no* hope. You could rearrange that positively. How should we grieve for Christians who have died? We *should* grieve like those with hope.

There are, I think, lots of traditional churches and Christians in them, that give the impression that we shouldn't grieve. Things are better for them now, people say. They might even quote some Bible verses for you – the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Yes, yes, yes, I want to say. Of course God is good. Of course he has the right to take life as he has the right to give it. But that does not mean that I cannot grieve.

It's fine to grieve. It's fine to weep and even to seethe with rage whenever you are confronted by death. That's what Jesus did when confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus. Death should make you angry. It should make you feel the unnaturalness of a world that is not how it was meant to be. A world that, as Paul writes elsewhere, is crying out for liberation from its slavery to decay and destruction. Death, though it is God's just judgment on all sinners, is not how things are meant to be. Death is unnatural.

My gran, a Christian believer I think though in a rather confused way, died peacefully at the age of 95 after just a few short weeks in a nursing home. She had kept her own home for over 60 years, led an active life until she was about 94, had a wide circle of friends and a loving family. She lived till the kind of age of some Old Testament character. Did it feel like a right time for her to die? Not at all. As soon as I stepped through the door of her house on the day of the funeral I was completely overcome with tears. There is no good time to die. Death is unnatural.

It is not wrong to grieve death, however old, sick or senile the person who has died. If you have Christian brothers and sisters in your life who have fallen asleep and you have not shed tears for them because of some fear that would be less than godly let me say to you this morning that it is OK to come and have a coffee and a good cry after our final hymn.

It is OK to feel helpless and powerless and angry in the face of death, which intrudes into our world. Death, which we brought into the world with our sin, robs us of relationships which are precious to us. It is not wrong to grieve. Fortunately very few of us need bereavement counselling. Mostly we just need to know that God says grief is legitimate.

We should grieve ***like those with hope***. We'll come in a minute to the details of the hope Paul proclaims here and why we can be confident in it. But let's just think first about how hope changes our grief.

When another Christian dies they have gone to be with the Lord Jesus and we too, will be with him soon. That does not change the fact that we have lost something. But it does change what we have lost.

When a Christian dies there is no need to grieve for them. Not because, as the cliché puts it, they have gone to a better place, but *because they are with a better person*. Dead Christians are with Christ. They are with the person they love most in all the world. They are happier with him than they would be with you.

It is vital that we remember that. Christian parents: your children brought up to trust God, love Jesus more than they love you. Christian students: your parents, if you have been brought up in a Christian home, love Jesus more than they love you and more than they love each other. Christian couples: your wife or husband does not love you as much as they love Jesus. If they die they will be with someone they love more, someone you will be with too, very soon.

When you grieve, therefore, you are grieving for a world where death reigns. You are grieving for

yourself and your loss of relationship with someone you love. But you are not grieving for them.

There is nothing wrong with grieving for your loss. If someone you love dies your loss is real and your tears are legitimate. But you need to realise that if your loss is unbearable that is a sign of how much you love yourself not how much you loved the one who has died.

2 Why good grief is possible: because Christ is risen

I don't know about your reaction when we had our reading this morning but, for me, looking at v15-17 of this passage always makes me think "man, this is a bit weird." Calvin describes these verses as talking about things that are "incredible to the human mind."

So it's really important that Paul introduces us to these teachings on what will happen to Christians at Christ's return, which we might feel are impossible, by pointing us to something that seems equally impossible but which has definitely already happened:

V14: We believed that Jesus died and rose again and SO we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

The Christian hope for the future of those who have died, and our hope in the face of our imminent death, is based on faith. But faith isn't, as Mark Twain suggested "believing what you know ain't so."

It's having a settled conviction about facts based on evidence. We *believe* that Jesus died and rose again. There is as much reason today as ever there was to believe that Jesus Christ didn't just die; he also rose bodily and physically from the dead.

For twenty centuries some of the brightest minds on earth have put forward alternative theories to explain the empty tomb of Jesus, the radical transformation of the disciples and the spread of the Christian faith across the world despite severe repression by the authorities.

They have suggested that Jesus never really died, that the disciples stole the body, that the Romans stole the body, that the Jews stole the body, that it wasn't Jesus on the cross, that the disciples went to the wrong tomb, that they had some sort of hallucinatory experience or that what the disciples meant wasn't actually that Jesus rose again but that he lived on in their hearts.

Every argument that human ingenuity can devise has been offered to disprove the resurrection. This isn't a

talk on the resurrection so we don't have time to go into the reasons why every one of them is entirely unconvincing. But you can be assured this morning that not one of the alternatives can explain both why the authorities didn't produce a body to dispel the Jesus movement that was causing them so much trouble and why the disciples were prepared to die for their belief in the physically risen Jesus.

If you're here this morning and you are not a Christian and you'd like to know more about this please do come and ask me afterwards about the evidence for the resurrection. It's really good evidence!

If you are a Christian here this morning then, by definition, you already believe in the resurrection of Jesus. You already believe that he is the glorious Son of God who died for our sins and was raised to new life from the tomb before ascending to his position of reigning power in heaven.

You might, like me, find it difficult, almost impossible, to comprehend how, at the end of time, God will give all his people resurrection bodies and house us in a new earth. It's fine not to be able to imagine the process or the scale of that! But you don't need to feel sceptical about it. You don't need to doubt in your mind that God can raise you, raise us, from the dead. Because God is not asking you to believe something for which there is no evidence. He is asking you to believe something that follows entirely naturally from the historical fact that Jesus has already been raised from the dead.

What God is proposing for the human race is not something new. It is not something he has never done before. What God is going to do for his people is what he has already done for his Son. He is going to repeat something that hundreds witnessed. He is going to do again the resurrection miracle, a miracle that those who saw it were so convinced was real that they were willing to put their lives on it.

It is possible for us to grieve with hope, not because Christians have some "faith" gene that enables us to believe three impossible things before breakfast, but because Jesus died and rose again.

3 What good grief recognises: that dead Christians will be honoured.

It seems that the Thessalonians were particularly concerned that those Christians who died before Christ returned would miss out in some way.

Many Jewish teachers in the first century taught that the blessings of the kingdom of God would only be for those who were living at the time it came. That would have been fine when the Thessalonians had

first become Christians because if Christ had returned at that point all those who had believed in him would still be alive to share in the kingdom. But once some of them started to die it raised some difficult questions.

Paul wants to reassure them. Far from missing out on the blessings of the kingdom of God, the remade perfect world that Christ will bring on his return, those Christians who have died before Christ comes will be right at the front of the queue.

At the time when Paul wrote this letter it was common for visiting dignitaries to a city to be greeted some way outside the city gates by important people of the town and escorted back to the city. Ambassadors and others would send riders ahead to let people know they were coming and announce their progress with instruments and heralds so that the appropriate crowd could be gathered.

This kind of honour was even accorded to the apostle Paul on one occasion – you can read about it Acts chapter 28 later if you like. Paul was a prisoner being taken to Rome, and the Christians in that city travelled some 30 miles down the Appian way to greet him at the Forum of Appius and escort him to the world's capital city.

When Jesus returns, Paul says, there will be a much more impressive escort than that. When Jesus returns there will be lot of noise. There will be a loud command from heaven, archangels will shout and the call of God will sound like a trumpet. The volume of the announcement will make the coming of a Caesar seem like some school children blowing a kazoo.

It will be such a noise, he implies, that it will awaken the dead. And those deceased Christians, now clothed in their resurrection bodies, will go, with those who are alive when he comes, to meet the coming Lord Jesus. Where could you go to meet someone who is coming to be the king of the whole earth? Only into the sky to greet and escort the coming ruler of the world to his realm.

Some of you may have heard this passage used to talk about a 'rapture' of Christians into heaven before some sort of time of trial on the earth many years before the final judgment. There are many godly Christian people who believe that, just as there are many godly Christian people who believe in the baptism of infants or the rule of bishops or a second Spirit baptism that happens some time after your conversion. If you are one of those people we love you as a brother or sister. But you need to know that, as a church, we do not believe in the 'rapture' or a time of tribulation or that Jesus will return to earth

before his final judgment and the dawn of the new heavens and the new earth.

The way to make sense of this passage is not that when Christ comes we will go to meet him, led by dead Christians resurrected to new life, just to hang out in the air. No we will go to escort Jesus in glory back to earth where we will live with him.

At the head of that great procession of joy and triumph celebrating Jesus' victory will be brothers and sisters who have died. If he waits a long time before he comes we will be in that group. If he comes tomorrow we will still be there; applauding and cheering the king as he comes as we are caught up and transformed into our eternal form.

When Jesus comes we will all be there. Dead Christians will be alive. Living Christians will be more alive than we have ever been. And we, together, all of us, will be with the Lord forever.

There is, indeed, a lot of death in life. But Christians face death, both our own death and that of our fellow believers, knowing that there is eternal life after death.

I'll draw out some practical implications of that in a minute.

But, although it's not addressed directly by the passage, it would be very remiss of me if I didn't deal with the obvious question this all raises for many of us. After all lots of us have many dear friends and family members who we know will die but who we also know are not trusting Jesus as their saviour. Perhaps this passage has helped you to understand a bit better what the bounds of grief are for those we know we will see again, but what about those we believe face only God's judgment on that day when Christ comes from heaven? How should we grieve for the unbeliever?

As I say that's not the topic Paul is addressing here so I'm just going to offer a few observations that might help you – please do come and chat to any of the elders after the service if this is something that distresses you. We will happily counsel and pray with you.

I should tell you that coming from a family where almost everyone is not a Christian I personally find this pretty difficult; so most of the things I'm going to say are things I've found helpful for myself. None of them solve the problem, none of them will take away the pain of knowing that those we love may face a lost eternity, but I hope they will be of some use to you...

The first thing I need to know is that all my grief, for Christians and non-Christians, is put into better perspective if I love God more than anyone else. The best cure for almost all my struggles is to remember that I am made first for relationship with God and then for relationship with other people.

The second things I need to know is that I know less than I think I do. When you stand by the grave of a dead unbeliever you very rarely know whether they have made their peace with God in their final hours, or even perhaps their final minutes. We cannot *presume* that they have. But many do. Faced with the final undeniable reality of death and the deep, deep knowledge that this is not how things are meant to be, many people have finally stopped running from God and, blessedly, embraced Christ just before they meet him. For that reason it is so, so, important that we tell all those we know and love how to be right with God through Jesus. We never know at what point they may want to throw themselves on his grace. When a person who has not professed Christ but who knows what the gospel is dies you may not have much hope, but you usually have some hope, and that is precious.

The third thing I need to know is that however hard it is to face the death of people who do not trust Christ in a world where God does not save everybody it is much better than all the alternatives. Would it be better to live in a world where everybody faced eternal judgment, as we deserve, and there was no saviour? Would it be better to live in a world where there was no God and, therefore, no hope and no ultimate purpose for anything at all? Would it be better to live in a world where God saved everybody regardless of justice so that those who have no desire for Christ to pay for their sin are forced to glorify God for doing that forever? Even with my very, very limited human insight it seems to me that none of those world are any better!

The final thing I have found helpful is to remember that God loves people, even those whom he will judge, more than I do. He is the one who cries to the sinner "why will you die?" and who gave the treasure of heaven for the sins of the world. My grief at the death of unbelievers is not greater than God's but merely a pale reflection of it, and so in my grief for unbelievers the God I worship is not distant and disapproving but near and understanding.

And for anyone here this morning who not a Christian, I would plead with you in the light of God's coming judgment, not to leave today before doing business with Christ; confess your sin, ask for his forgiveness through the cross and leave this building looking forward to welcoming him in the clouds and escorting him to his throne rather than anticipating

being condemned to depart from him, and all that is good, forever.

As I say the death of non-Christians is not the issue Paul is really addressing here but I hope that's at least a vaguely helpful opening up of that that subject for some.

Let's return though, as we close, to how believers should face the death of other believers. Not all tears are an evil. We should weep as we face the temporary parting of our fellowship with those in our church, those of our family and friends, who depart ahead of us to be with Christ.

Indeed we should weep so that, as people did who saw Jesus by the grave of his friend Lazarus, the watching world says of us "see how he loved him." If our grief for Christians who die is shallow it probably reflects that our love for them is shallow and that should not be.

But our grief must always be infused with hope and with the conviction that the best thing in the universe is to be with Christ whom we love. Will it be tragic if some of us die young? Yes, for those who are left it will. Those funerals will be deeply sorrowful. But for the child, for the student, for the graduate professional, the young parent and the middle aged amongst us, if we die today, we have not lost out; the dead in Christ will rise first. There is nothing any amongst us can look forward to in this life that will not be infinitely surpassed by the perfections of what awaits us.

So when your brother or sister dies, grieve as those who loved them, but with hope. Such grief is good grief. Not just good for you, setting your world in its right perspective, but also good for the gospel; commending the love of Christ and our hope in Christ to a watching world.

When your Christian brother or sister dies, whoever they were to you do not believe the lie that their loss is the end of the world, or even the end of your world. And do not despise those who encourage you with the hope of glory. That does not mean glibly telling every grieving Christian you meet that it'll all be OK. But it does mean that as we weep together, as we seek to share in the pain of loss, we must constantly return, in the church, and in our conversations to the reality of the resurrection of Christ.

He is risen. He will come again. And when he does his people, every one of them, will be caught up with him in the air and form his cheering, joyful escort as he comes to reign our new and perfect world.

Andrew Evans, 13th November 2011.