

GOOD NEWS ABOUT DEATH: Grieving with Hope

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/grieving-with-hope/>

I.

It was on November 13, 1789 that Founding Father Benjamin Franklin wrote what was probably his last great quote, a saying about the Constitution and life. A publisher, entrepreneur, and diplomat, Franklin became known for sayings or “proverbs” that appeared in Poor Richard’s Almanack and his newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette. One of his last great quotes came as Franklin knew his life was near its end.

On that day 234 years tomorrow, Franklin wrote French scientist Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, concerned that he hadn’t heard from Le Roy since the start of the French Revolution.

After asking about Le Roy’s health and events in Paris for the past year, Franklin gives a quick update about the major event in the United States: the Constitution’s ratification a year before and the start of a new government under it.

Franklin wrote, “Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.” He concluded with a note about his own mortality to his friend: “My health continues much as it has been for some time, except that I grow thinner and weaker so that I cannot expect to hold out much longer.”

Franklin would succumb to a combination of illnesses at the age of 84 in Philadelphia five months later, confirming his words on the certainty of death.

While the concept of a “death and taxes” quote existed before Franklin, the publication of his papers in 1817 made the proverb a staple in American popular culture.ⁱ

II.

Let me cut to the chase. We’re all going to die. As one pastor is fond of saying, the mortality rate for human beings is hovering at around 100 percent. As Ben wrote, death and taxes are certain. Everything else is up for grabs.

Last Sunday, on All Saints Day we read the names of those in our congregation who had died since November 1, 2022. It is important to remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us. It also invites us to think about our own mortality. Perhaps a few of you had thoughts similar to mine last week – whose names will we read next year on All Saints Day? When will my name be read on the list of remembered saints who have died?

Death raises all kinds of serious questions – questions about what awaits us, questions about those who have passed away.

Losing a loved one is probably one of life's most difficult experiences. Unless we die young ourselves, we eventually experience what it is like to lose someone to death. One person put it this way: "We understand death only after it has laid its hands on someone we love."ⁱⁱ Death is an abstract theory for us until it touches someone we love. That's when we first begin to understand the pain of separation, the dreadful finality of it all, the terrible fact that this person whom we loved, whom we still love, is never coming back. That is the horror and the tragedy of death.

In the aftermath of death, we wonder what has happened to them. Are they okay? Will I ever see them again?

These are the same questions which confronted the Thessalonians as they faced the death of their loved ones. What about those who have died before Jesus comes back? Why does death seem still to have such a sting, if Christ won the victory?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, a section from the oldest book in the New Testament, Paul, one of the writers, addresses a community of believers struggling with the loss of loved ones and provides profound insight into how we can navigate the waters of grief with hope.

III.

Paul and many in the early church seemed to believe that Jesus's return was coming soon, most likely in their lifetime. But as the years went on, and some of the believers began to die, those early Christians became concerned and began to panic. Funerals were being held after all. Painful questions arose: were these people not Christians after all? Was their faith lacking? If so, how can any of us be sure we are good and faithful enough? Or, far more concerning, was Paul just wrong? Is the Gospel a hoax? Is there no true victory of life over death? We can easily envision how terrifying and gut-wrenching these fears would be.

So, they sent word to Paul, and he includes in this letter as much reassurance as he can muster. Paul wrote with a pastoral heart to address these fears, to bring hope, and to encourage them with the truth that they nor the saints who have died before them are forgotten. Paul writes in verse 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." (v. 13)

Nancy's son Tripp suffered from cystic fibrosis. As Tripp lay in the hospital in his final days, Nancy asked him if she could read Scripture to him to comfort him. She wasn't sure what to read him, and he could sense that, so he told her to turn to page 1649. The numbers 16 and 49 were two of his favorites, since Joe Montana was number 16 and he played for the 49ers.

She flipped open her Bible, but it ended on page 1334. There was no page 1649, because the New Testament started over with page 1. She was about to tell Tripp to try again, when she did

the math in her head and realized that page 315 in the New Testament would have been page 1649, so she turned there.

There she found these words, from the apostle Paul to the Thessalonian church: “But we do not want you to be uniformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (v. 13)

Tripp turned to his mother, his CO2 level rising and his lungs failing, and he said, “Mommy, those are the sweetest verses.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I’ve heard people criticize Christians who grieve when a believer dies. Their logic is that we know where they have gone and who they are with, so why would we grieve? But their logic is one more example of the weakness of dichotomies or opposites. It doesn’t have to be hope or grief. It can be both. It should be both. Paul did not believe we should not grieve. Faith does not exempt us from the need to grieve. Instead, Paul tells us that we should not grieve as those with no hope. We will grieve. That is evidence of love. We hold the reality of human loss and the hope of eternal life together in both hands. Grieving with hope will always mean acknowledging our loss (and taking seriously the sadness of others around us), while trusting that a larger story is unfolding. We grieve, but we grieve with hope.

IV.

But how is that possible? Look at v. 14, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” (v.14)

Our hope is built around the resurrection of Christ, upon the promise of Jesus himself who said on the night of his betrayal, knowing his death was nearing and seeking to comfort his disciples with this promise: “Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:19) This is our bedrock belief. There is an ancient confession of the church that we need to revive: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Paul comforts the believers saying that those who die before Christ’s return will not be left out or pushed aside by those still living, but the dead in Christ will rise first. “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. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” If we are in Christ, whether on earth or with the Lord, we are still in Christ.

Paul wants the believers to remember that Christ is King and Lord over all, both now and in his return. So, when Paul describes Christ’s arrival, or what some translations call the “Second Coming,” Paul employs words and images first century Christians are familiar with when a ruler or king arrives to visit his subjects in a certain city. Trumpets would blow and there would be a military shout to muster the troops at hand to come to attention. Paul says believers will be caught up in the air (v.17), a symbolic way of saying Jesus is Lord of all beneath him.

These were words of comfort. Paul's intent was to soothe anxieties, clarify some confusion, and give the believers hope. Over time, Paul's words in these verses have taken on a life of their own – fueling speculation and theories as well as division and arguments among believers about end times. These arguments seem unlikely to be resolved until ... well, until Jesus returns. Perhaps these theories should simply be left behind. The truth is God is the only one who knows when the world will end as we know it and what exactly that will look like.

In one of his classes, seminary professor Andrew Bandstra, had just completed a rigorous and thorough defense of the Reformed position of amillennialism, the denial of most timelines for end-time events. The class finished and as the students were stuffing their books and notes back into our backpacks, Professor Bandstra said, "Then again, if the Lord Jesus returns and you meet him in the air and he starts talking about setting up a 1,000-year kingdom headquartered in Jerusalem, well . . . go along with it!"^{iv}

In truth, none of us can fully envision what the end will be. But if it's Jesus and if we are with him, neither do we or will we have a blessed thing to worry about.

Paul didn't write these words to create speculation and arguing among us about the end times. Instead, Paul wrote these words and John wrote the revelation given to him to comfort and encourage believers. Where is the safest place in the universe? In Christ. In God's loving embrace. Who wins in the end? God wins.

V.

"Encourage one another with these words" Paul writes in the end. Do not be people of fear or confusion. Encouragement in the face of death is what we all need. And the Gospel gives it. Once we are in Christ, we will never die. Our bodies may give out. Eventually those who remember us are also gone. But we will never cease to be. We can't. We are in Christ. He remembers us. And he has a future for us. Paul says, encourage one another with these words. And do it often.

Death is not the end for those in Christ. We grieve, but we do not grieve without hope. Why? Because Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/benjamin-franklins-last-great-quote-and-the-constitution>

ⁱⁱ <https://funeralguide.co.za/powerful-grief-quotes/>

ⁱⁱⁱ A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, 77.

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-32/commentary-on-1-thessalonians-413-18-6>