

Date: November 8, 2020

Scripture: I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Title: GRIEF AROUND DEATH

The apostle Paul wrote today's passage from 1st Thessalonians, to a very young congregation of believers. Not young in age. Young in the faith. Many of them had only become Jesus-followers in the past few months. Some of them were Jews; many of them were Gentiles, from a variety of religious backgrounds.

Paul needed to teach them the basics of the faith. And what could be more basic, or more important, than the way a Christian views death? It's not a pleasant subject, but it's an important subject. It's really important that we figure this out, for others and for ourselves. Because everyone will grieve at some time in their lives. The way we view death, affects how we live our lives. Paul wrote these words of encouragement in verse 13: ". . . we do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died, so that you may not grieve, as others do, who have no hope."

Notice that Paul doesn't say, Christians are not to grieve. But that, Christians have a different perspective on death, than non-Christians. Paul is simply counseling these new Christians, that they are not to grieve, as "those who have no hope."

Everyone grieves at the loss of someone, or something we love; it's unhealthy to deny these feelings, or to judge ourselves because of them. We grieve because we love. We grieve because we've lost a part of ourselves. We grieve, because we've lost all the expectations and dreams, we had for our future. Grief is a raw and terrible thing. If we try to act like it's not, if we push others to "get over" their grief, if we try to hide our tears or our desperation, we're going to move further away from healing and hope. We need to live our grief, and to share it with others. We need to find some hope, in our grief. It's the only way to keep it, from overwhelming us.

A few years back, a newspaper reporter in Chicago received a telephone call from a man named James Lee. Lee said he was sending the newspaper, a story about his suicide. The reporter tried to trace the call, but he was too late. Lee killed himself, after hanging up the phone.

In Lee's pocket was a drawing, obviously made by a child. Lee had written on the back of it, "Please leave this in my pocket. I want to have it buried with me." The picture was drawn by Lee's little daughter, Shirley, who had died a few months earlier in a fire. Lee's wife had died when Shirley was a toddler. He had no one else. He was so alone with his grief, that he had begged strangers to attend little Shirley's funeral. James Lee had no one to share his grief with. And eventually, the pain became too much for him to bear.

If only Lee had heard these words from the apostle Paul. If only he knew that there's hope, beyond the grave. That's why we've got to talk about it. That's why we've got to figure this out. Because at some point in your life, you will be grieving a loss so painful, that it will change the course of your life, and you need to be able to view it from God's perspective. There are people around you, who have no idea that God has promised us, eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ. Promised us! Guaranteed it, by

the sacrificial death of himself on the cross. Death, no matter how painful it is, is not the end. And that's the foundation of our hope. That's what Paul is trying to teach these new believers.

Because Jesus lives, we can grieve, but with the hope of eternal life, with God. And it's the life God made us for. Life as it was meant to be, without crying or tears, or mourning, or pain.

Comedian Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, gave a touching tribute to his mother, Lorna, when she passed away. He said that in the days before her death, his mother became confused about many things. Colbert and his siblings tried to get her to talk about her favorite things, like her favorite color or her favorite song. And sometimes she couldn't answer their questions. But then they asked her about her favorite prayer. And his ailing mother immediately began reciting the Child's Prayer, a traditional German prayer about trusting in God.

Lorna Colbert trusted God while she was living, and she trusted she would live with God forever. And that gave her consolation. God is eternal. And God made us in God's image. Before the creation of the world, God planned and promised us eternal life. And God gave up His own life, through His Son, Jesus Christ, to defeat death and ensure that we could live forever with Him. This is the hope that overcomes our grief.

Let me tell you about a young man who knew about that hope. Mattie Stepanek was born with a rare, disabling and painful disease. Instead of focusing on his pain and fear of the future, Mattie focused on writing poetry and advocating for peace and justice. He wrote seven best-selling poetry books. He became a public speaker. Sadly, Mattie died at age thirteen. But his writings and his work live on in a foundation created to honor his legacy and advocate for peace.

One of his poems is especially beautiful. It is titled *Heavenly Greeting*. In it he asks how God will greet us when we enter God's final kingdom. He feels certain that God will reach out a hand to us. But, will it be God's right hand or His left one? Finally he asked his mother. He said she told him God would reach out both hands and give him "a great big giant hug. He ends the poem by saying, "Wow! I can't wait for my hug, God."

Mattie Stepanek got his hug. And he's living the life God made him for, with no more weakness or sickness or sorrow or pain. Because Jesus lives, Mattie looked forward to eternal life with God. And his family and all those who loved him can find hope in their grief.

And that means because Jesus lives, we can grieve, but with the hope of being reunited with those we love. Nan Pinkston tells of serving as a nurse on the chemotherapy ward at a hospital. One of her patients was a young mother named Rebekah. As Pinkston slipped an IV line into Rebekah's arm, the young woman whispered a prayer under her breath. She asked Nan for her favorite Bible verse. Nan replied, "Jesus wept." She explained that it made her feel closer to Jesus knowing that he understood our sorrows.

Over the next few months, Nan and Rebekah grew close as Rebekah endured round after round of chemotherapy. But the chemo wasn't enough to fight the cancer, and one day the doctor told Rebekah that her case was terminal.

Instead of giving in to the pain and sadness, Rebekah began recording messages for her daughters on cassette tapes. She made a list of all the important milestones in her daughters' lives, like their first day of school or their high school graduation. And she recorded messages of family stories, motherly advice and encouragement for her daughters to face each of these important events with faith and hope. And finally, one day, she had completed her list. She gave all the tapes to her husband with instructions to give them to their daughters at the appropriate times in their lives when they would need their mother's guidance.

One afternoon, Nan got an urgent call from the hospital. Come immediately, and bring a blank cassette tape. Rebekah's breathing was labored when Nan got to her room. Nan set up the cassette recorder and held the microphone close to Rebekah's lips. Rebekah began her last tape to her daughters with the words, "Ruthie, Hannah, Molly, this is the most important tape. Someday your daddy will bring home a new mommy. Please make her feel special. Show her how to take care of you." She shared a few more words of advice. Then Rebekah ended the tape with these words: "It's okay to be sad, sweeties. Jesus cried too. He knows about sadness and will help you to be happy again. Remember, I'll always love you."

Rebekah could face her death with hope, because she knew she would see her precious children again. And she was preparing her daughters to grieve her, with the hope, that they would be reunited with her someday in eternal life.

We don't know how to grieve in our culture. We're afraid of the power of death, and grief, and loss. But what if, we really understood the power and nature and promises of God? God is the Creator of life. That's power. God is the Great I AM, eternal. That's God's nature. And before the creation of the world, God created us for eternal life, through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ. That's God's promise. What do we have to be afraid of? Yes, we will grieve, and we shouldn't have to hide it, or be judged for it, or set a timeline on it. We will grieve. But we don't have to grieve as those who have no hope.

Death, from God's perspective, is the doorway to eternal life. Life with God. Life without sorrow or pain. And life reunited with those we love. Paul ends these few verses with the words: "And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words." The pain of grief, cannot compare to the hope of eternal life. Decide today, to trust God with your life, *and* with your death. Decide today, to trust God with your grief. Remember God's promise that, through faith in Jesus Christ, you will be with the Lord forever. And remember to encourage one another with these words of hope and assurance: we and our loved ones will be with the Lord forever. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God. Amen.