

## Gospel Shaped Church (14) – Why Christian’s Grieve Differently

*Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:-13-18*

Have you ever missed the best meeting ever? You miss church one week & everyone you meet that week tells you how great it was. Or Christian brothers & sisters head off to a special event or conference & come back buzzing, telling you why you should have been there & what you missed... Over the next few weeks these verses will assure us none of us have missed the best meeting ever because the best Christian meeting ever is still to come & the best Christian meeting ever is one no true Christian will miss.

This is part of Paul’s concern in this section. Although it’s not so much that these young Christians themselves were concerned about missing the best Christian meeting ever, since they fully expected to be there, they were concerned about their Christian brothers & sisters who had died before it missing it. Would they miss out? This leads me to the first thing I want us to think about.

### Why These Verses Are in the Bible (V13)

The reason these verses were written to these young Christian’s & are therefore in our Bible is made clear in verse 13; **“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers & sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”** Most of what Paul has written about in this letter is stuff these believers have received previous instruction about. This is the only part of the letter which does not contain a reminder of some kind. Paul returns to the language of reminding at the beginning of chapter 5 but the phrase **“we do not want you to be uninformed”** here helps highlights that this particular section contains teaching they have not previously received.

The reason for Paul bringing this up is that these young believers had questions about those who had died before Christ’s return. This is the whole point of these verses. Remember they were living in anticipation of the return of the Jesus. They fully expected to be alive at his return. However during these first few months of their Christian walk death had obviously visited their fellowship. They are now wondering; *“What about our brother or sister who have died? Will they miss out because they have died before the return of the Lord? Where are they now? What will happen to them?”* Since this is the oldest NT book what we very likely have here is the oldest inspired answer to a question asked by Christians! And it is about those who have died... The reason for these verses then is to encourage these young Christians that their Christian brothers & sisters who are asleep will not be disadvantaged in any way when the Lord comes again. Their believing loved ones will not miss out on the best Christian meeting ever.

As Paul begins to speak to their concern note how he describes those who have died; **“those who are asleep.”** He also refers to them this way in verses 14 & 4:10. This way of describing death is common in the Bible, & it does nothing to support the idea of soul sleep. Jesus used the metaphor of Jarius’ daughter

before raising her. What Paul is doing is using such language to reinforce that for the Christian death is not final & it is not something to fear. Death is not terminal; death is not life-threatening to the Christian. Death is only a temporary thing like sleep. As Colin Smith puts it; *“Death is like a dark valley that we all have to pass through... but for the Christian it is a safe place. Christ has cleared out the enemies who lurked there.”* It’s also worth noting that Paul doesn’t use the word dead in reference to them until he talks about them rising in verse 16.

Note also that in verse 15 Paul again highlights that his teaching is by the authority of the Lord; **“For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord...”** So the gospel came from God, the instructions came from the Lord Jesus & now we are told this teaching about future hope also comes from the Lord. The Lord does not want us to be uninformed or ignorant about those who are asleep in him & he wants us to see why Christian’s grieve differently – we grieve on the foundation of hope. It’s not that we don’t grieve but we grieve differently – & the difference is the presence of hope. As Leon Morris points out; *“His contrast is not between one degree of sorrow & another, but between Christian hope & pagan despair.”* An ancient Greek poet captured the mood of the time when he wrote; *“Hopes are for the living; the dead have no hope.”* Paul is assuring these young believers the Christian’s perspective couldn’t be more different & hopeful.

Grief is something all of us face in this present world. None of us escape the emotion & pain of grief. We rightly miss relationship with loved ones & struggle to adjust to them not being around. Life is not the same without them. But while death separates us from loved ones in the Lord we need to understand we have not lost them. It is not so much sorry for your loss (for the Christian) but sorry for your temporary separation. They are not lost they are with the Lord – we know where they are; **“to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord”** – & these verses assure us that one day we will be reunited. Every time we bury the body of a brother or sister in Christ we do so looking forward to the reunion party of all reunion parties... Even in our moments of greatest grieve we can still look forward to sharing the most spectacular moment in world history with them. Such is the encouraging vision of Christian hope.

The reality now is we miss them & feel the pain of separation & that grief is very real. Sometimes we hear those words in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 quoted which are taken from a sister passage to this one; **“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”** What gets missed however is that these verses are talking about the future not the present! They are not talking about how things presently are now. If we ask in the present; **“O death, where is your sting”** we could point to real examples. We could all go to the graveside of a loved one & point & say *“there, there is the sting of death.”* When someone we know dies we feel the sting of death. When we stand at the graveside during a funeral we see & feel the sting of death. But as Paul says just before these words; **“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:**

**Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"** For this reason we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

Presently we feel the sting but there is coming a day when the sting will be removed forever & the pain will be gone & that is the hope every Christian carries in their heart. On that day; **"He will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away"** (Rev 21:4). Death does not have the last say, the Lord with his cry of command will have the last say & this leads us perfectly to the second thing I want us to think about – the reason for Christian hope.

### **The Reason for Christian Hope (V14-15)**

Paul writes in verses 14-15; **"For since we believe that Jesus died & rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep."** Paul assures these young believers that their sleeping brothers & sisters in Christ will in no way miss out. His basis is simply; **"Jesus died & rose again."** This is the basis & content of their shared belief & therefore the foundation of their hope. To truly believe those five words is Christianity – everything else flows from here including our hope. What Paul is going to teach them is based on this confession **"Jesus died & rose again."** Do you believe Jesus died & rose again? Believing this brings us out of the uncertainty of pagan despair & into the certainty of Christian hope. As Romans 10:8-10 says; **"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."**

The first reason these young believers can have hope for their fellow believers who have died is grounded in Jesus' resurrection, which in Paul's theology guarantees the resurrection of believers. In 1 Cor. 6:14 he writes; **"And God raised the Lord & will also raise us up by his power."** 2 Cor. 4:14; **"knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus & bring us with you into his presence."** Or we could turn to **1 Corinthians 15 & read verses 12-24.** This is our reason for hope – because Christ has been raised those who are asleep in him will be raised when he comes again. The reason for hope is Christ's resurrection – all Christian hopes rests on his resurrection. To take away his resurrection is to remove all reason for Christian hope. There is no point in Christianity without the resurrection. This is why true Christianity must declare; **"he is risen!"** When we understand what those words mean for us & our loved ones in Christ according to the NT they have the power to enable us to face death knowing the best is still to come & to face grieve as those who have great hope.

The second reason we can have such hope, which I've already touched on, is grounded in Jesus' words. Paul is not merely giving his opinion here but an authoritative teaching of the risen Lord Jesus himself. He is assuring them as one study bible puts it; that *"all believers – the deceased-but-now-resurrected-ones & the living-but-now-transformed ones will share equally in the glorious coming of the Lord."*

The Lord Jesus taught his disciples in John 6:38-40; **"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."** Paul's words here echo & expand on this under the direction of the same Lord who spoke them. Jesus preached three funeral messages when he came the first time. The first was called, **"Young man, I say to you arise."** The second, **"Little girl, I say to you arise."** The third, **"Lazarus, come forth."** When he comes again his cry of command will have graves bursting open all over the world. One might ask how? They've been in the grave 10 years, 100 years, a 1000 years. Remember what Martha said to Jesus when he said take away the stone; **"Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days."** Jesus said to her, **"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God."** He says the same to us in regarding what will happen at his coming.

D. L. Moody said; *"I hunted all through the gospels trying to find one of Christ's funeral sermons, but I couldn't find any. I found he broke up every funeral he ever attended! Death couldn't exit where he was."* What Jesus calls the last day here Paul calls the coming of the Lord – the parousia. Parousia carries the idea of presence. When he returns to this world, when he presences himself here again death will not be able to co-exist with the author of life. What a day that will be. This is the event these verses are pointing to.

At the end of chapter 1 we are told to **"wait for his Son from heaven."** At the end of chapter 2 Paul asks; **"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting? Is it not you? For you are our glory & joy."** At the end of chapter three Paul prays; **"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."** And now at the end of chapter four & into chapter 5 Paul goes into most detail about what the coming of the Lord will be like & we will look at these next verses over the next couple of weeks under the titles *The Best Christian Meeting Ever & On The Right Side of History.*

.....

Note that when you preach carefully through a book the preacher doesn't so much pick the series as the series picks the preacher. A walk through a book of the Bible is not so much a series but lots of mini series'. We have covered a lot of ground & this is only one small letter in the NT.