

“Good Grief”

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

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I was six years old and yet time has not erased the memories of my great-grandmother's death. Looking back upon it, I realize that it was quite peaceful and normal, but that was not how I felt about it at the time. This was my first encounter with death. No one that I knew, at least a close family member, had died. My world was filled with life and living with absolutely no thought of death and dying. All that changed on a hot Sunday night in August.

My family and I were at church that evening. I was in Training Union when my father came to get me. I knew something serious was happening for my brothers and me to leave church early. That never happened!

We drove to my grandmother's house where almost all my family was gathered, including several cousins. I recall sitting in the room adjacent to the bedroom where my great-grandmother was and watching people go in and out. Most were crying and all were somber and quiet. I had never experienced anything like this. It was the first time I saw my mother cry and that shook me.

I was told that my great-grandmother was very ill, but I knew this was different from any kind of sickness that I had been exposed to at that young age. Everybody else in my life that got sick also got well. This was the first time someone did not. My great-grandmother died that night but with her passing a new concept was born in my life, mortality. I came face to face with the fact that the people I knew and loved would not live forever. That was not a pleasant thought. It pricked a hole in my bubble of innocence that slowly deflated as the years went by.

The Christians at Thessalonica were also struggling with life and death issues when Paul wrote them. They were wondering if their friends and family members that had died would be granted eternal life since they departed before Jesus returned. Inherent in this concern was the fact that they felt the return of Jesus was imminent and those who died prior to his coming would miss it. Most of the early Christians, including Paul, never dreamed they would die before Jesus' Second Coming.

To dispel their anxiety, Paul wrote this beautiful passage in I Thessalonians 4:13-18, a portion of which reads, “We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like men who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. Encourage each other with these words.”

These words certainly encourage me because they help me understand life and death better. Let me share with you what this passage teaches me.

It teaches me, first of all, that even Christians die. I read with great interest the details of Billy Graham's latest crusade in San Diego, May 8-11, 2003. I am amazed that he is still able to conduct a crusade in light of his deteriorating health. However, more than a quarter of a million people came to hear Dr. Graham. Citing his own fragile health, including Parkinson's disease, and the fact that his wife is now completely bedridden, Graham spoke of mortality. “All of us here are going to die,” he said. “In the next sixty to seventy years, almost everyone in this stadium will be gone.” Of course, he then challenged everyone to be prepared to go into eternity.

I have no doubt that most in that stadium were Christians, including Dr. Graham. However, being a believer is not going to keep these people from dying. As a matter of fact, I would not be surprised to hear of Billy or Ruth Graham's passing at anytime. Both of them are very fragile.

One reason I find this passage in Thessalonians so comforting and reassuring is because of Paul's candor concerning death. Even Christians die. Paul never denied or ignored this fact. He knew that death was a natural part of life in a sinful world. "The wages of sin is death," he wrote in Romans 3:23, and since all of us are sinners, we will die.

Secondly, this passage teaches me that the death of family and friends will bring great sorrow and grief. Paul did not tell the early Christians that they should not grieve upon losing a loved one. Instead, he told them not to grieve as those that have no hope.

Grief is the normal result of losing someone that you love. We are emotional creatures and sorrow is a strong emotion. Paul never scolded the Thessalonian Christians for grieving. That would have been cruel and insensitive.

I have shed many tears at the funerals of my parents, grandparents, Jackie's parents and other dear friends. To this day, their memory can cause my heart to ache. I miss them deeply and long to be with them again. That's normal. This is what it means to be human and Paul knew it.

Thirdly, this passage teaches me that as Christians, our grief should be noticeably different from that of unbelievers. The dominant theme of this passage is hope, not despair. It saturates it. Some people get so preoccupied with trying to determine the details of the Second Coming or reconciling this view of the parousia with other scripture that they miss the main point of this passage, which is the certainty of life after death with Christ and other believers. As much as anything, what Paul was telling these anxious Christians in Thessalonica was that nothing could break the union and relationship that their loved ones had with Jesus, not even death! That was good news not only for them, but also for us.

You cannot read this passage without sensing Paul's confidence. So certain was he that the deceased believers would live again that he even stated that they would be the first to participate in the Second Coming.

"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that **God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.** According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, **will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God and **the dead in Christ will rise first.** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words" II Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Billy Graham said one more thing to his audience in San Diego on that last night of that crusade. After reminding them of their mortality, he said, "I'll probably never be back in San Diego and preach another sermon. Because of my health, I'll not be with you again, but I'll see you in heaven." I think Paul would applaud his confidence.

I'll never forget the August night my great-grandmother died and I confronted my own mortality. Neither will I forget Paul's words of assurance that can calm the disturbed heart of a child or an adult. I appreciate his confidence and his candor and thank the Lord for a faith that promotes both.