

December 4, 2011

### ***Sermon Overview:***

---

Sunday’s sermon addressed a taboo topic: Death. No matter who we are, death touches all of our lives. And this was no less true of the Christians in Thessalonica. These Christians believed with all their heart that Jesus would return and rescue them from death. So what were they to think when their friends started dying? How were they to continue believing in light of the reality of death? This is not just a question for 1st century Christians. Sooner or later we all face this issue: How do we deal with death?

**Common Responses to Death in Our Society:** We looked at two common approaches that our society has for dealing with death. The Secular Approach assumes death is natural and ultimate. For some, this evokes paralyzing fear. Most, however, try stoically to accept death as a natural part of life. The Religious Approach views death as a natural transition to a better state—be it reincarnation, unity with all that is, or heaven. While this approach does not assume that death is ultimate, it nevertheless treats death rather stoically. We need not grieve for those who have died because death has brought about their progress. But the question we need to ask is: How does the Bible tell us to respond to death?

**The Biblical Response to Death:** In verse 13 Paul writes: *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* What is important is that Paul does not discourage grief with pious platitudes. The Bible does not give us a stoic approach to death. Rather than downplaying death as natural or right, the Bible tells us death and suffering are intruders into God’s good world; they don’t belong. Our grief is a testimony to the biblical truth that death is not right. Death is not natural; it is not even a natural step. Death is awful, demonic; it is that great enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Thus, Paul recognizes the appropriateness of Christian grief, but distinguishes Christian grief from that of others who have no hope in Jesus’ return. Paul then reframes grief not by downplaying death, but by pointing Christians to the day in which death is defeated.

Death cannot be tamed; it can only be conquered and one day death shall be no more (Revelation 21:4). This is the hope that Paul lays out in 1Thessalonians 4:14–17. These verses paint a familiar picture about a triumphant King coming back to his capitol after a victory, only here, that king is God in Christ: *the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God* (v16; cf. Psalm 47:5). As the ancient people would travel outside the city to greet their King and usher him in, so too Christians *will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air* (v17) that they might welcome Jesus’ eternal presence on earth (v17). Paul is describing the day when Jesus will destroy that last great enemy—death; the day when we will not be grieving death, but taunting it: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

As for those who have died before this great day, well, they won’t miss out on the celebration: *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep* (v15), *the dead in Christ will rise first* (v16), *and then we will all go out together to meet him* (v17). Death is an implacable enemy. But here is the hope that Paul says we must remember: death is not only our enemy; it is God’s. And one day he will be victorious. We can encourage one another with these words.

**Questions for Preparation and Discussion** *Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D). Study based on the English Standard Version*

**Getting to Know Each Other:**

1. When speaking of someone’s death, do you usually use a euphemism? What is it and why do you think you use it? [D]

**Looking at the Bible:**

2. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 Paul acknowledges that it is proper for Christians to grieve, but not as those who have no hope.
  - a. Read Phil 2:25–29. If Epaphroditus *had* died, and Paul *had* responded this way, would Paul have been grieving as one without hope? Why do you think that? [D]
  - b. John 11:17–44 tells us about a time when Jesus was faced with the death of a loved one.
    - i. How does Jesus display hope in this passage? What is Jesus’ hope? [P/D]
    - ii. How do Jesus’ actions and attitudes manifest deep grief at the same time? [P/D]
    - iii. How can we reconcile Jesus’ firm hope with his deep grief? [D]
3. In 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17, Paul sets out the hope Christians have while they presently grieve.
  - a. In 1 Corinthians 15:23–27, 51–54 Paul also speaks of this hope (both speak of trumpets and the resurrection of the dead). How does this passage shed further light on the Christian’s hope (see also Philippians 3:20–21)? [P]
  - b. When important dignitaries would arrive in town, others would greet them some distance from the town (see Acts 28:15). In light of this custom, how do you think the Thessalonians would have understood the events described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17? [D]
  - c. It appears that the Rapture was not mentioned in Christian writings until 1830. Do you think 1Thessalonians 4:14–17 describes a “Rapture”? Was the Church wrong to neglect the Rapture? [D]

**Looking at Our Hearts**

4. How are you prone to think about death and grieving? Do you avoid it altogether? Are you stoic about it? Do you grieve inconsolably, without hope? Why do you think you respond this way?
5. In verse 18 Paul exhorts us to encourage one another. In *Lament for a Son*, N. Wolterstorff writes:  
*What do you say to someone who is suffering? Some people are gifted with words of wisdom. For such, one is profoundly grateful. ...But not all are gifted in that way. ...And if you can't think of anything at all to say, just say, "I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know that we are with you in your grief." Or even, just embrace. ... Express your love. ...But please: Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off at a distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. I know: People do sometimes think things are more awful than they really are. Such people need to be corrected—gently, eventually. But no one thinks death is more awful than it is. It's those who think it's not so bad that need correcting. Some people say nothing because they find the topic too painful for themselves. They fear they will break down. So they put on a brave face and lid their*

December 4, 2011

*feelings—never reflecting, I suppose, that this adds new pain to the sorrow of their suffering friends. Your tears are salve on our wound, your silence is salt.*

- a. What do you say to those who are suffering? What stances do you find yourself taking towards those in grief? What do you think about Wolterstorff’s advice? [D]
- b. What are appropriate and inappropriate ways to apply Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17 to those who are grieving? [D]

**Praying for Each Other:** Pray for those who are grieving and for those who need to grieve. Pray that we all might be mindful to encourage one another properly in our grief.