

Hope in Death and Life

Jonathan K. Dodson | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 | October 7, 2018

This passage wants to provoke radical change in the way we live, the way we hope, and the way we interact with one another. It says: grieve with hope, live with clarity, encourage like crazy.

Grieve with Hope

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" (11). Death is coming for all of us. Not a single person in this room will escape it. For some, you're experiencing it more as parents age; others can look back on more years than ahead. We don't know when; we don't know how, but we do know it's coming. How will you face death? Will you be *triumphalistic* about death? Don't shed a tear; they've gone to be with Jesus? Paul says *grieve*, just *not as others do*. How do others grieve? If you've been to a non-Christian funeral, you might know what he's talking about. My best friend in high school died in a tragic motorcycle wreck. Neither he nor his parents were Christian. The funeral was utter sadness. Not a hint of hope in the room. His parents were crushed and never recovered. Don't be triumphalist, yes, but don't be crushed, *terrified*. Nijay Gupta, [Grief with hope is lament without despair](#). You are saddened but not crushed, you weep but you hope because your hope transcends what you can see. I think of my grandmother's funeral, a godly woman and a force to reckon with. Hundreds upon hundreds came to her funeral. Tears were shed. But to this day, when I go home I bump into people who say how much she meant to them. We sang—sang—at the funeral, praises to God. Afterward, people came over to the house to celebrate. We ate, enjoyed one another's company, and relished my grandmother, *as though she was still alive*. It was bewildering but joyful. It lacked the despair of my high school friend's funeral. What was the difference? Not that one was Christian and the other wasn't, *but that one had hope and the other didn't*. Christians can face death with hope, *as though they will still live*. Why? Because you will! [For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep](#) (14). He's saying those who have died, those asleep, will be brought back with Christ when he returns. Look in 16, [For 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. And the dead in Christ will rise first](#). Christ secures our hope, now notice the sleepers are called "the dead in Christ." Why? Because they're *not dead*. Sure, they're bodies have been drained of life, but not their souls. How? Because they are "in Christ," *in the life-giving, soul-sustaining presence of the Lord of life*. How is that possible? Because, verse 13, he died and rose again! Jesus swallowed death with resurrection life. How's that? He predates death! Where do I get that? Look where Jesus comes from. He "descends from heaven." Where's that? It's not visible to the naked eye, not yet. Jesus is appearing from somewhere. And here's where we've got to allow Scripture to challenge our imagination, our preconceived ideas. Heaven is not a cloudy existence with harps and angels. Why the clouds. Clouds are consistently associated with an appearance of God. In the Exodus a *pillar* of cloud and fire. In the Psalms and Prophets, God comes *riding on the clouds* as a warrior. In Mark, the Son of Man comes in clouds *with great power and glory* (Mk 13:26). See, it not about the clouds; it's about who rides the clouds. These aren't cottonball accoutrements; they're vehicles of glory! In fact, the *coming*

of the Lord in v. 15 is a technical word also translated “presence.” 2 Thess 2:8, “the appearance of his *coming*/presence.” The sudden appearance of the presence of Christ. A breach in space and time, Vmmmp! He peels back what we cannot see, to show us where we hope. The Lord of life appears to resurrect and rescue those who hope in him. He can defeat death because he predates death. He predates life. He is from beyond the perceptible realm, ruling over all, and he is coming back! *That’s why*, to him, the dead in Christ are *merely asleep*. When Jesus walked into a room to heal a young girl who had died, he told the mourners that she was asleep. They laughed. Then he cleared the room, touched her *hand*, and life came rushing back into her. A touch of the hand and total vitality to organs, breath to the lungs. For Jesus, death is as innocuous as sleep. He predates death and is triumphant in life. This is why we hope. For the Christian, death does not have the final say. The sting is removed, the poison drained, and resurrection is coming. So grieve, but not without hope.

Live with Clarity

This naturally raises the question, when? When will Jesus return? Paul says, “[Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you](#) (5:1). In other words, you don’t need to know the precise timing. What you do need to know is that it will be sudden, like a thief in the night, like labor pains upon a woman. It can happen at any time. And because his arrival will be sudden, Jesus says *be ready*, “[You must also be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect](#)” (Matt 24:44). Are you ready? Are you not only grieving with hope, *but living with hope*? Too often Christians live as unaware of the presence of God, indifferent to return of Christ. They get lulled by those around them who say, “Peace and safety.” This may have been a watchword of the Roman empire, appearing on currency and buildings. Are you looking to politicians for security? Your investment strategies, your career, your friendships, your family? If so, *you are not ready*. Your hope is misplaced. You say, O yes, I’m ready. You have no idea how hard my life is, how agonizing my trials are. But that’s not what he’s talking about. Hope isn’t an eject button (though he will wipe every tear); it looks for Christ. The *primary* emphasis when Christ returns is not relief from hardship but rejoicing in his presence. Verse 17: we [will meet the Lord in the air; we always be with the Lord.](#) 5:10, [so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.](#) Christ is our hope! Readiness is cherishing Christ through the trials, not just deliverance from the trials. So cry out in grief, cry out in agony, but cry out more *for Christ*. In the words of St. Patrick, “*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down.*” Oh that we would be ready, rejoicing, trusting, leaning on *Christ*. For he will come like a thief in the night. If you’ve had a thief break into your home, you know disconcerting it can be. What’s the appropriate response? Get a shotgun and stay by the window all night? Blow it off as though it doesn’t matter? Somewhere in between—get an extra lock, an alarm, report to the police. Not terrified and not triumphalist. But you act. Church, are you *acting* in light of his return? What should that look like? Verse 5-8, to walk in the light, be children of the day, not creatures of darkness, abiding in the night. Those who belong to the night, he says, get drunk at night. Those who belong to the day, are sober. When you’re drunk, your faculties are dulled. You can’t speak well, walk well, or even see well. You’re easily taken advantage of. A thief can steal a lot when you’re not alert. *Live with clarity.* Be sober-minded. NT scholar Beale, “[To be drunk is to imbibe to much of the world’s way of looking at things and](#)

not enough of the way God views reality.” Get God’s view of reality. Put on the helmet of hope. This means testing ideas you put in your mind *against Scripture*. It means filtering the darkness through the light. Reading the Bible, theology, taking classes, protecting your skull from being crushed with half-truths and lies. But don’t put your helmet on and run away. Don’t retreat. Stay engaged and love. Put on the breastplate of faith and love. *Love radically, but put your faith in Christ*. I’ve known people to get hurt, and react by trying to isolate themselves from disappointment. They become hard and bitter. Its like they just put on the helmet. Knowing every last disciple would abandon him, he came to earth, served them, and then died in their place. He loved radically but he did not put his faith in them. He entrusted himself to the Father. Others put the breastplate on but not the helmet, love radically, but get swept up into movements, ideas, religions that are very damaging. They put relationship over worship. As a result, they become deceived. Breastplate but no helmet. The great conflict between the light and the dark, Satan and the Church, requires the full armor of God. Faith, hope, and love—that’s how we act, that’s how we fight, in light of his return.

Encourage Like Crazy

Finally, encourage one another like crazy. Says it in 4:18 and 5:11, “**Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.**” Encourage one another to find peace and security *in Christ*. To *live with him*. Start a FC or stir up a FC whose main aim is *to seek Christ*. Speak up in your City Group, challenge your friend who’s taking off the helmet, test your ideas against Scripture, stir up radical love, and point one another to Christ, over and over again. Incessantly encourage one another. Point out where they are. Celebrate it. He’s coming soon. May he find us walking in the light *already in his appearance*.