

COMFORT AT THE GRAVE

by Ray C. Stedman

No one knows what circumstances he is going to face tomorrow. That is characteristic of the future. But there is something that comes before tomorrow. It is called today, and that is where we must live. We cannot live in tomorrow, but we can live today. This issue was troubling the Thessalonian Christians. They were looking toward tomorrow, but wondering what to do today. The Apostle Paul's advice to them in his first Thessalonian letter is, as usual, very practical. We have it in Chapter 4, beginning with Verse 9:

But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody. {1 Th 4:9-12 RSV}

"Keep loving and keep working" is Paul's excellent advice.

First, keep loving! Keep your attitude toward others warm and gracious. Watch how you speak. If you offend, correct it. When I spoke at our New Year's Eve service I said an ungracious word to a man who was trying to help me get the microphone going. I had to go to him afterward and confess that. That is all we need to do. We must keep loving and forgiving one another. We must refrain from being bitter, resentful, sarcastic or critical toward another.

Christians do not need to be taught how to love one another. Paul's amazing claim is that God, through his Holy Spirit, teaches us that. "God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" {cf, Rom 5:5 RSV}, says the apostle in Romans 5. If we give that love of the Spirit a welcome, we can manifest love to each other. If we choose to be bitter, of course, then that love will not be manifested. But if we reject the caustic word, the sharp attitude, then we can show kindness, mercy, and grace to one another. Thus, the most amazing claim of the Christian faith is that, by means of the Holy Spirit, believers have a new capacity to love which the worldling does not possess.

That does not mean that we will immediately feel loving. Many people make that mistake. Christians feel the same way non-Christians do. We often feel angry, put upon, resentful and repulsed. Here is how one Christian writer described his feelings:

Loving people is about the most difficult thing that some of us do. We can be patient with people and even just and charitable, but how are we supposed to conjure up in our hearts that warm effervescent sentiment of good will which the New Testament calls love? Some people are so miserably unlovable. That odorous person with the nasty cough who sat next to you in the train shoving his newspaper into your face. Those crude louts in the neighborhood with the barking dog. That smooth liar who took you in so completely last week. By what magic are you supposed to feel toward these people anything but revulsion, distrust and resentment, and a justified desire to have nothing to do with them?

That attitude is understandable -- we all feel it at times -- but the wonderful good news is that God has said we do not have to act like that. Though we may feel this way momentarily, we can reject that feeling. We do not have to regard others as rivals or enemies. We can look upon them as victims in need of sympathy and help. Then, by drawing upon the grace that God has given us, we can begin to act lovingly. Love is a decision that we make to draw on Another's strength. That is why the apostle tells the Thessalonians to love each other and to "do so more and more." They should apply it in increasingly wider areas, reaching out to one another.

Secondly, says the apostle, they should keep their hands busy with profitable labor. People who are going through stress need to remain busy. They should not keep dwelling on their own needs and feeling sorry for themselves. Keep busy, think of someone else's problem, that is what the apostle is urging. It is clear from what Paul goes on to say that some of these believers had stopped working because they thought the

end of the age and the coming of the Lord was at hand. Thus they had become a burden to others. As days and weeks went by and the Lord did not come, they ran out of food. They would have starved if some of their Christian friends and neighbors had not come to their aid. So they had become a burden to the rest of the church.

Paul will deal with that more sharply in the second letter, but here he is pointing up the fact that true faith in Christ, even faith in the second coming of Jesus, does not produce fanaticism. It does not encourage people to abandon everything, dress in white robes and go out on a hilltop, waiting for Jesus to come, as some have done. We need to recall that one of the last words of our Lord to his disciples was, "Occupy till I come," {cf, Luke 19:13}. Keep working, keep busy until I come. Even he did not know what day that would be. Mark records that the disciples asked him, "What will be the day of your return and the hour of it?" Not having read *The Late Great Planet Earth*, he had to reply, "I do not know. Only the Father knows that." At this point of time, as a man, he did not know the time of his return. He could have known if he had chosen to, but he did not know because he had left that in the Father's hands. These Christians in Thessalonica were making fools of themselves by stressing the immediacy of the coming of the Lord to such a degree that they had stopped working. That is why the apostle bids them to keep busy.

Here in the United States, in 1846, a group of followers of William Miller abandoned their work, sold their possessions, and went out on a hilltop to wait for the Lord to appear because this prophet had told them that Jesus was coming at a certain day and hour. There was tremendous expectancy on their part, but, of course, Jesus did not come. They became fools in the eyes of people because of their extreme action and turned many against biblical prophecy by what they had done.

The apostle corrects that kind of thinking in these words. "Keep busy" is his advice. "Keep from meddling in other people's affairs. Do not try to get them to follow some foolish idea that you may have about prophetic things. Keep busy, providing your own needs (that is a wonderful word) so you do not become a burden to others and you will win the respect of the outside world." These are very important words.

I have a short list of names I want to mail this sermon to when it is in print!

Paul now takes up the third problem, the problem of tomorrow.

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. {1 Th 4:13-14 RSV}

Twice in this passage the apostle uses a term for death that likens it to sleep.

That term, by the way, is never used in the New Testament of anyone but believers. It never says of a non-believer when he died that he "fell asleep." There is a wonderful lesson in that. It shows that death, for the believer, is nothing more than sleep. When your loved ones fall asleep you do not run to the phone and dial 911 for emergency service for them. You know that they are quietly resting, that they will awaken again, and that you will have contact with them again soon. That is why the New Testament regards the death of believers as nothing but sleep.

Jesus declared of the daughter of Jairus who had died, "She is sleeping," {Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52}. It is a wonderfully encouraging word for those who are facing the death of dear ones.

The question which the Thessalonian believers were asking was, would they see their loved ones again? They were expecting the Lord to return any day. They felt their loved ones who had died would not be resurrected until the final resurrection at the end of time. They would not see them again until that far-off event.

In this they were like the sister of Lazarus in the New Testament. Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will live again," {cf, John 11:23}. Martha replied, "Oh, I know he will live again at the last day," {cf, John 11:24}. She imagined that Jesus was referring to what she had learned from the Old Testament, that there is a resurrection of all the dead, believers and unbelievers alike, in the last day. But Jesus meant he was going

to do something right then and there. As we know from the account, he did raise Lazarus from the dead at that very time.

The Thessalonians also did not understand that. They thought it would be a long time before they saw their loved ones again.

We can best understand this account if we remember five simple things:

First, the Thessalonians had clearly been expecting the return of Jesus before any of them died. This was a moment-by-moment expectancy in the early church. 1st century Christians never entertained the thought that death would occur for them. They believed the Lord was coming within days, or weeks at the most. In the first chapter of this letter Paul commends the Thessalonians for "waiting for God's Son from heaven," {cf, 1 Th 1:10}. That is what they were looking for.

Jesus' own words suggest that this would be the case. All his statements about his return were addressed to people who were still alive, and he speaks of them as though they would still be alive when he returned. To his disciples he said, "Watch, for you do not know the hour. Be ready," {Matt 24:42, 25:13}. He used terms like "be not deceived," and "the Son of Man will come at an hour that you think not," {cf, Matt 24:44, Luke 12:40}. There is no mention of the impact of his coming upon those who had already died.

The second thing we should recall is that the Thessalonians, like us today, were projecting the sequences of time into eternity. We all struggle with the concept of eternity. We tend to think of it as time going on endlessly; that, as is the case here on earth, we must wait for certain events which are yet future. That is how it will be in heaven, we feel, despite the fact that the Word of God seeks to demonstrate that time and eternity are two different things. Time has sequences: past, present, and future. But eternity has only one dimension: it is present, now. We struggle with that, as the Thessalonians also did.

In time, we are all here in one building this morning. We are all locked into a segment of time together; we are all feeling the same temperature, etc. But that is true only of our bodies.

That says nothing about where our minds have been. Some of you have not been here for the last half hour! It would be interesting to know where everybody had been during the service this morning. Minds are not limited to space, or time, or sequence. They can go anywhere and experience anything at any time.

Eternity is much more like that. That is why we have great difficulty understanding these prophetic passages in terms of time when they are really eternal events.

Although I believe that Paul knew the differences between time and eternity, he reassures the Thessalonians without becoming abstruse or pedantic, explaining that the living and the dead will be together when our Lord returns. That is the point at issue. He says, in effect, "Yes, you will see your loved ones immediately when the Lord returns. Whether you join that event when you die, or whether the Lord comes while you are yet alive, your loved ones will be with him." That is the point he is making.

He then goes on to give them a new revelation.

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, {1 Th 4:15a RSV}

I take those words to mean that this is something he had not taught them when he was in Thessalonica. He had taught them about Jesus' death and resurrection and how that would affect them, but he did not give them details of time and circumstance of his coming again. Now the apostle is revealing further truth.

... that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. {1 Th 4:15b RSV}

That sheds further light on the subject. "We will all be together," says Paul, "do not worry about that. You will find your loved ones again when the Lord returns."

Then fourth he gives them the details of how it will happen

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. {1 Th 4:16-17 RSV}

Paul calls this "the coming of the Lord." Many people, including certain notable Bible scholars, are confused on this because they tend to regard the coming of the Lord as though it were a single event, an immediate and once-for-all appearing. But if we carefully study the Scriptures (and we will see evidence for this in a moment), the coming of the Lord is a series of events. This series has a dramatic beginning, as Paul describes here, with Jesus appearing to take his living and dead saints to be with him. And it has an even more dramatic ending when, as the Lord himself said, he would manifest himself to the entire world: "They shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of glory with all his heavenly hosts," {cf, Matt 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27}. That is a different event from the one here described. You cannot make those fit together. In between them is a period of time during which Jesus is present on the earth though not always visibly so.

That is what Scripture calls the "presence," which is the Greek word *parousia*. That is a better translation of this word "coming." When Scripture talks about the coming of the Lord, it sometimes looks at the beginning of that series, sometimes it looks at the end of it, and sometimes, as in the book of Revelation, it is looking at what is going on between the two ends. We must train ourselves to think in those terms. The *parousia* of Jesus is a series of events.

Daniel, the Old Testament prophet, says that it is a week of years long, i.e. seven years in duration. One event is at the beginning; another event is at the end; and in between the Lord will be present on the earth behind the scenes, as it were, very much as he was in the days after his resurrection. For forty days Jesus was here on earth. He appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem and in Galilee. People heard reports that he was around, but nobody could find him except when he chose to be seen. That is the same condition that will prevail on earth during this time of the coming of the Lord, the "presence" of Jesus. If we understand that, it will help us greatly to comprehend what is described here.

This is all suggested by the three sounds which the apostle connects with this initial appearing of Jesus. It is the Lord himself who will come. That always warms my heart. He is not going to send Michael, the archangel, or Gabriel, or Moroni, or anyone else. He is coming himself. "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a cry of command." Who is that cry addressed to? These three sounds affect different groups. Scripture gives the answer to this. Jesus himself had said in John 5, "The hour is coming and now is ..." (Observe the blending of time and eternity there. It is coming in time; it now is in eternity.) "The hour is coming and now is when all those that are in the grave shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth," {cf, John 5:25}. Jesus had stood before the tomb of Lazarus and cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth" {John 11:43}, and to the amazement of the crowd the dead man appeared in the doorway of the tomb, still wrapped in his grave clothes. He heard the voice of the Son of God, and he came forth. As many of the commentators have pointed out, if Jesus had not said "Lazarus," he would have emptied the graveyard! But the hour is coming when all the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth! That is what Paul is talking about here. The cry of command is addressed to the dead, to those in the tombs who had fallen asleep in Jesus.

The second sound is the archangel's call. The only angel in the Bible called an archangel is Michael. Though Gabriel is a great angel he is not called an archangel in the Scripture. In the first two verses of Daniel 12 we read that an angel said to Daniel, "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people," {Dan 12:1 RSV}. "Your people" means Israel; Michael is always connected with Israel. Michael shall stand up, and then there shall be a resurrection. Those who are in the tombs will come forth, Daniel was told. Also, the living nation of Israel will be summoned to a new relationship with God. Details of this event concern the 144,000 Israelites, twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, who are described in the seventh and fourteenth chapters of Revelation. These will be called into a new relationship with Jesus, to follow him wherever he goes on earth during the time of his presence. He is invisible to the world, but visible to them. That all begins when Jesus returns for his church and the archangel calls Israel into a new relationship with the Lord.

The third sound is the great trumpet call such as was heard at Mt. Sinai when the Law was given. Then the trumpet sounded so loudly that the people cried out to Moses, "Stop it! We cannot stand it." I do not think the world will hear this call; only those to whom it is addressed will hear it. Paul identifies those in First Corinthians 15, the great resurrection chapter. There, he says, "Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep (i.e. not all believers will go to heaven by death) but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump," {1 Cor 15:51-52a RSV}. Some church nurseries, referring to babies, post that verse on the door: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed!" But this verse is especially addressed to living saints. "We shall not all sleep." We are not all going to die. Paul includes himself in that. He felt he would be part of it. "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." That is the important thing. "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump." When that trumpet sound reaches the ears of living believers, although it will be inaudible to the world, they will be changed and caught up to be with the Lord.

The fifth thing to note, then, is the comfort that this is intended to bring.

Therefore comfort one another with these words. {1 Th 4:18 RSV}

The comforting hope is that we shall all be together as the great family of God and forever be with the Lord. That covers everything the church does from then on. Whatever it is, it is done with the Lord. As I have suggested, the Lord will actually remain on earth, behind the scenes, directing the events described in the dramatic portrayal of the book of Revelation. The church will be with him, invisibly participating in directing the course of the Great Tribulation, but not going through it because they are no longer living on earth but are transformed saints affecting the events on earth. The critical point which the apostle stresses is that we shall see Jesus face to face. That has always been a source of great comfort to believers through the centuries.

At Christmas I received a beautiful painting of a mountain and lake scene in Glacier Park, Montana. I have stood by that lake and looked at that mountain and the painting brought back to me the majesty and beauty of that scene. I remember thinking to myself, "I wish I could live here and look at this every morning." Last year I stood on the edge of a cliff in Mendocino County, looking out over the great breakers of the Pacific that were dashing up one hundred feet or more into the air. It was a scene of awesome power. I thought, how great it would be to live here all the time. But if creation makes us turn on with anticipation, what will it be like to behold the Creator face to face? If we tingle at the shadow, what will it be to see the Substance himself? If we revel in nature's masterpieces, what will it mean to be face to face with the Artist himself?

Samuel Rutherford was one of the Scottish Covenanters of the seventeenth century who served the Lord during times of persecution in Scotland. A poet took some phrases from Rutherford's beautiful letters and put them together in one of the most popular hymns of the nineteenth century. It was D. L. Moody's favorite hymn, and it has always been a great favorite of mine.

The sands of time are sinking;
the dawn of heaven breaks.
The summer morn I've sighed for,
the fair sweet morn awakes.
Dark, dark has been the midnight,
but the Dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory, dwelleth
in Immanuel's land.

O, Christ, he is the fountain,
the deep sweet well of love,
The streams on earth I've tasted,
more deep I'll drink above,
There to an ocean fullness,
his mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
in Immanuel's land.

The bride eyes not her garment,
but her dear bridegroom's face,

I will not gaze at glory,
but on my King of Grace,
Not at the crown he giveth,
but on his pierced hand,
The Lamb is all the glory
of Immanuel's land.

What a marvelous hope we have! When we face the thought of our own death, or when we stand at the grave of a loved one, we are comforted indeed by this tremendous vision of the tomorrow that awaits God's own. That is the apostle's purpose in giving this revelation.

Let us revel in the comfort it brings in the hour of death -- our own, or that of a loved one.

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