
Finding Comfort After the Death of a Loved One

DAVE BAST

Because of the confusion and fear in the face of death that a small community of Christian believers was experiencing two thousand years ago, we have one of the greatest expressions of Christian comfort ever written. It is found in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4, and it is all about the risen Lord Jesus Christ and the hope of his return. We dig into this passage today as we look for Bible words of comfort on the loss of a loved one. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast.

RUTH BOVEN

And I am Ruth Boven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is good to welcome Ruth once again to this program as part of this series of what passages do we read to each other, for ourselves, do we quote to each other during difficult times; today we can think about – if we want a mental image – the funeral home; going to the funeral home for someone in our church, someone in our family; we are going there where there is a casket, opened or closed; there is an urn; maybe there are pictures. What do we say about death? And it is a question that has been coming up from the very beginning.

DAVE BAST

It came up with me last week. I was standing in line and the line was a long one, inching forward. I think I was there for an hour, and much of the time I was thinking, “Okay, what am I going to say?”

RUTH BOVEN

I think that is common for everybody, don't you? I think that is what most people are thinking, standing in line. What am I going to say? What can bring comfort?

DAVE BAST

There are a lot of things, probably, you should not say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I hope I have never said it, but I know I have been tempted, but we have certainly heard a few of them, right? You have, too, Ruth, I am sure.

RUTH BOVEN

Right; yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is in a better place.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes; this is God's will.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I know exactly what you are going through.

DAVE BAST

My, doesn't she look good? No, she looks dead. Not so good, actually.

Ruth Boven: Or bringing up: You know, my aunt died of the same thing. Things that you bring it back to yourself.

DAVE BAST

You are trying desperately to somehow connect and say I am like you, or I have been through this. The truth is, no, you have not. I have not. Everyone goes through this for themselves and their experience – we cannot necessarily try to connect that way or try to project what we may have felt. I think it is always safe to say I feel for you. Or I feel with you – maybe not so much.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or, I am just so sorry. Or I cannot imagine what you are going through, just to be honest about it.

DAVE BAST

I want to say, too, that I think in that context, in that situation, we all feel a little bit of nervousness, a little discomfort, and we would like to get past that if we could. We would like to move on, so we tend to say things about: Well, you know, soon you will be this, that, or the other thing – really unhelpful things to try to deal with our own discomfort.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Why is it that as soon as you hear that somebody died – somebody's mother died, and your first question is: How old was she? The idea being, well if she was old enough, I do not have to feel so bad. I am trying to comfort myself here, right? Well, that is not terribly helpful. I have talked to people whose parents died at 93; my father-in-law just died at 88; a ripe old age, but it feels just terrible to us and to my wife. We are trying to comfort ourselves sometimes.

DAVE BAST

Right; exactly. We are more concerned about how we feel and our discomfort than trying to be a comfort to the grieving person.

RUTH BOVEN

Probably a good examination of what your motive is for what you are going to say is a good thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Premised on all of this, behind our conversation so far, Ruth and Dave, is the fact that has been true all along, that we do deal with death in the church community. Way back when, in the first generation of believers in Thessalonica, which we think may have been one of the first churches Paul ever planted, they seemed to have come to this idea, and I guess you can understand maybe how they got to it, that maybe once they became Christians, that nobody would die anymore; or nobody would die until Jesus came back, which should be any minute now. Then all of a sudden, people started to die in the natural course of things and they had these funerals. So, they thought to themselves: Maybe it is all a lie.

DAVE BAST

Yes, what is wrong here? Or is that a punishment for that person, or were they not a true believer, so God is singling them out. Or will they miss out on the eschaton on the kingdom of God in the last day?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thessalonica might be the first instance of something we have dealt with all along, and Paul writes to them in 1 Thessalonians 4; this is what he says:

¹³We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep; that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this 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. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with the cry of command and with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

DAVE BAST

Yes, scholars – most scholars suggest that this is probably the oldest writing in the New Testament. It was the very first thing to be written.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Before the Gospels, even.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. But yet, there were certainly sayings from the Gospels that were circulating by word of mouth, and some of those may very well have come to Thessalonica as well, including Jesus' teaching about this generation not passing away before the things that he was predicting happened. Now, he was mostly talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, and that is a notoriously difficult passage, so we are not going to get into that one. We will dig into Matthew 24 on another program, but the point is somehow the Thessalonians – some of them at least – had come to the conclusion that Jesus would come in their lifetime and the kingdom would come in its fullness. As you pointed out, I think, Scott, for all of us this is a problem when we become Christians or when we grow into our faith and become aware and become more mature, suddenly we realize that a lot of things happen that are inconsistent with our vision of the future and we have to make sense of it somehow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes the reason we struggle with what to say in the funeral home is that we are not prepared for it. Have you seen that, Ruth? People are just not prepared to deal with death?

RUTH BOVEN

Oh, absolutely. Yes, it just comes too quickly. I think even those who know that their loved one is going to be dying, when it actually happens it is as if it is a surprise.

DAVE BAST

Well, ours is also a death-denying culture. So, we have removed it as much as possible from our lives and we have done everything we can to paper over this brutal fact that someone whom we loved is no longer living. And that is just wrong and it is hard and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So we get taken aback. The Thessalonians were taken aback because they had some theological idea that nobody would die before Jesus came again; but we get taken aback, and yet that is why this passage is here. That is why it ends with Paul saying comfort each other with these words. When we come back, let's look at

what some of those words are.

Segment 2

RUTH BOVEN

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Ruth Boven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are going to look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; a passage that Paul says is explicitly written to address grieving Christians. Christians who have lost loved ones and are struggling now with the problem of death and what to make of it, and he says comfort one another with these words, and he begins this way: I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, about those who have died; who have fallen asleep is the metaphor he uses; so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. Let's start right off the bat by pointing that as Christians we do grieve. We are not supposed to pretend like, "Oh, everything is fine. They are in heaven. I am happy."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of everything Paul writes here, the one thing he does not write to the Thessalonians is: Oh, do not grieve. No, he says go ahead and grieve.

Ruth, I think you were saying earlier too that by hook or by crook, whether we mean to or not, sometimes what we say to each other in the church is the equivalent of do not grieve. Please do not cry in front of me. Do not be sad. Paul says that it is okay.

RUTH BOVEN

I think another thing that we do sometimes is put timeframes on people's grief. We think that we know how long a person should grieve. Acknowledge that all Christians grieve and that they all grieve in their own way.

DAVE BAST

I remember when I was just a boy, being in church one Sunday morning and it was communion, and there was an elderly lady – she looked old to me – I don't know, maybe she was 50...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Like 32...

DAVE BAST

And she was weeping as the sacraments were distributed. I did not know enough then, but I thought: Wow, that is weird. She was grieving. She was missing someone who had sat next to her in church probably for 30 or 40 years.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it does not go away, but we make room for that. The difference being that Paul says: Okay, go ahead and grieve, but there are people around you who grieve without any hope, and that cannot be what your grief is like.

So, what does hope-filled grief look like as opposed to hopeless grief?

RUTH BOVEN

Well, I think that hopeless grief God would not be in the picture. We have hope, of course, because God is in our picture. What hopeless grief actually looks like...

DAVE BAST

Despair...

RUTH BOVEN

Despair, yes.

DAVE BAST

I think the word for hopeless grief is despair. There is no future. To me, hope is predicated on a future, and if those whom we love are experiencing that future somehow in some way in the presence of the Lord, as we do believe, even though we wait for his return – we are going to look at that – this passage is all about that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, about Jesus coming back.

DAVE BAST

I love this story. I think this is a great picture of grief with hope. It is Martin Luther's experience, and this is an account of what Luther said the night his daughter Magdalena died. She was 13 years old and it was in 1542, and Luther said this: I love her very much, but Lord, if it is your will to take her, Dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with you. And then when she died, Luther said: I am joyful in spirit, but I am sad according to the flesh.

That is that tearing between grieving and hoping, and then he said: The flesh does not take kindly to this. The separation caused by death troubles me above all measure. It is strange to know that she is surely at peace and that she is well off there, very well off; and yet, to grieve so much; I am angry with myself that I am unable to rejoice from my heart and be thankful to God, (and then I love this) although I do at times sing a little song and thank God; whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

You get so much, I think – after all of these centuries – you get this sense of a real Christian struggling with his sorrow – his real sorrow – but also his hope that she is with the Lord and we belong to the Lord, whether we live or die.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ruth was saying earlier about what hopeless grief is – it is Godless grief, right? God out of the picture grief; and then, Dave, you said it was despair.

It is interesting that we did a series on *Groundwork* some while ago on the seven deadly sins, but interestingly, in history there have been a number of people who have suggested we should add an eighth deadly sin, and if we did, a number of scholars have said the eighth deadly sin would be despair. Just to have no bottom to your grief; to have no endpoint; to have nothing on which to stand or lean. To me, it is almost fathomless as a lifelong believer, but that is what it would be. It would just be well, nothing matters and there is no hope and there is no future and that is despair; and Paul says: Cry your eyes out, but do not get like that because we have Jesus and he is coming back.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is just hard for me to wrap my head around the experience of a person who has nothing to look forward to beyond this life. I remember years ago I was watching a television program; the person being interviewed was Stewart Alsop, who was a journalist, well known at the time. He had terminal cancer, and the interviewer looked at him and said: What do you expect will happen to you when you die? And Alsop looked at the camera and he said: Nothing. The worms get you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, boy.

DAVE BAST

Oh, man; talk about bleak. That has stayed with me ever since seeing that, and just thinking, “Wow,” but for a lot of people, that is it.

RUTH BOVEN

I think for some people who are grieving, too, the reality that we do have hope is hard to experience. It is very dark. I lost a niece at 13 and my sister-in-law, her mother, really struggled to get out of bed for quite a long time; and so, knowing that hope, experiencing that hope was very, very difficult, as people who have lost close loved ones know. I guess one of the things I would like to bring up and keep remembering is that we as fellow Christians then can hold onto that hope for them, can help them in that. That is a beautiful thing for us to do in terms of how we reach out to grieving people is to be able to say to them, “I know you cannot hope right now. I know that everything seems dark, but I am holding onto that hope for you; and we all will do that together until you can hope again.”

DAVE BAST

I believe in the resurrection of the dead; as we confess together in our faith...

RUTH BOVEN

Absolutely, yes.

DAVE BAST

And we will look at what that is going to lead to in terms of Christ’s return in this passage in just a moment.
Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast and Ruth Boven, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and our ongoing series of passages we look at for comfort in times of need as the church. In this particular program we are thinking about the funeral home; what do we say to each other; how do we help each other when we are grieving? We have seen so far that sometimes you can have two extremes. Sometimes there are people who can get lost in their grief, and Paul does not want that to happen; do not go to despair. It is okay to grieve, but we still have hope. Of course, I suppose the opposite extreme would be people who refuse to grieve at all. “Well, no; because I am a believer, I am not supposed to cry, so I am not going to,” and sometimes we need to give people permission: It is okay to cry.

Have you ever had that, Ruth? That extreme where – we read that story from Martin Luther earlier and I thought, “Martin, you are being a little hard on yourself, here, Buddy. It is okay. Do not be so upset with yourself that you are sad,” but have you ever had it where you had to say to somebody, “Go ahead, cry.”

RUTH BOVEN

Oh, absolutely, yes; and I sometimes think it is a generational thing. I think there some people who, for some reason, have been handed down the message that it is about faith. If you cry and if you show your grief, then you have not had enough faith; you do not trust God enough to comfort you. It seems to me that it could be somewhat a generational thing.

DAVE BAST

Maybe we are not mature enough to handle it well, either. Just to be personal for a moment, when I was 21 my older brother was killed in the Vietnam War, and he was 8 years older than me, so he was always my big brother; I looked up to him and just totally admirable, and I still think about him often, but I do not remember going through a lot of grief at that time because I think I was too young and too immature. I was just writing someone about him the other day and reflecting; realizing that it is rather silly to grieve for him having

missed out on so much of his life, because if what we believe is true, he is experiencing the reality of which all of the joys here are only shadows; but what I do miss is not having been able to share his life. I grieve for myself in that way, and not having him be able to share my life, as we have grown now into maturity and now late middle age or early old age. So, I do not know what that says about anything about what we are talking about, but maybe there are different levels of grief and different forms that it takes. But, surely, do not grieve for the believer who has died, because they are not missing anything.

RUTH BOVEN

Right; right.

DAVE BAST

Again, a common thing: Oh, it is so sad he will not get to see his daughter's wedding. No, grieve for the daughter who will not be able to have her father walk her down the aisle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In our passage that we have looked at today from 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul does try to bring it all together. The Thessalonians were upset that some people had died and they wondered if they were eternally lost because they thought before Jesus comes again nobody is supposed to die. Then Paul says: No, no, no, no; that is not quite the right time line. People will die before Jesus comes again, but when he comes back, they will come with him. They will be at the head of the parade and then you will join them. So, these are some key lines from the Apostles' Creed; that he will come again to judge the living and the dead; we believe in the resurrection of the body – the second to the last line of the Apostles' Creed, and of course, when we say we believe in the resurrection of the body, we do not mean Jesus; we already confessed that earlier in the Creed; we mean our bodies; and so, when we say that at the site of an open grave, that is a very bold statement of faith for Christians to say this body will rise again and will come back with Jesus when he comes back. Paul talks a lot about what are sometimes called the Four R's: The Return, the Resurrection, the Rapture, the Reunion; it is all in this passage, and maybe we can just briefly look at what Paul is saying there, and maybe what he is not saying, since it is a controversial passage.

DAVE BAST

Well, you start with just the fact that Christ will come again, and he will do so physically, visibly, with glory; there is a lot of noise in this passage. Paul talks about the sound of a trumpet and the cry of the archangel and the voice of command. We do not know what this is literally going to look and sound like. Some of this is undoubtedly figurative, but surely it does not point to some sort of secret coming, as many groups have talked about or taught. When this thing happens, it is a done deal. It is a once and for all.

RUTH BOVEN

Everybody is going to know it.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are not going to miss this one; and Jesus said that often at the end of the Gospels; it will be like a really, really bright lightning bolt. You do not miss that; that does not happen off in a corner somewhere. That is the first idea: Christ will return. But then the second one is resurrection.

DAVE BAST

And that is the promise that – actually two things – those who have died, their bodies will be raised; again, literally, physically. How can that work? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: Someone will ask, how are the dead raised? It does not happen the way you think; you are not going to understand this if you try to make sense out of it on a molecular level. What is sown is a physical body; what is raised is a spiritual body; whatever that is. There is a deep mystery here; but the promise is physical resurrection for those who have died and a

spiritual, sort of physical transformation for those who are living. We shall not all sleep, but we will be changed in the twinkling of an eye, he says in 1 Corinthians 15.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Do you get questions, Ruth, as a pastor – I'll bet you do – by people saying: Will I see him again? Will we recognize each other?

RUTH BOVEN

Oh, yes. This past week, in fact, a widow was asking me, "Where is my husband right now?" She said, "I wonder that; especially because sometimes I see him. I have heard him speak to me. He comes," and I have had other widows or widowers express that same idea.

DAVE BAST

So, what did you say? How did you answer?

RUTH BOVEN

I said, "You know, the Bible does not say a lot about heaven and where our loved ones are at this moment. We know that they are in the face of Christ, or before Christ, and that I believe that God gives those sightings, those experiences, those... whatever it is, as a gift; as a gift of assurance. Because in every case that I have been told, it has been a beautiful thing; it has been a comforting thing; it has been..."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not spooky.

RUTH BOVEN

Not spooky... not scary... no.

DAVE BAST

Not a ghost.

RUTH BOVEN

No, not a ghost. In fact, I had one faithful, faithful, beautiful Christian woman who talked about a dream that she had; it was very, very real; and she was being welcomed into heaven, and it was – the gates of heaven were filled with yellow roses, which was exactly what her husband had given her their entire marriage for special occasions; and she was a little bit concerned; thought it was a little strange; and I reassured her that that was, I believe, a gift of God for her comfort; for her reassurance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whatever we make of those kinds of things, one thing that you say that is utterly consistent with our faith is that those who have died are with the Lord – we do believe they are alive with Jesus in some very true sense, and it is just a matter of time before they get their bodies back as well, and will meet him in the air, and that is our hope.

DAVE BAST

And this last thing that Paul says: We will be caught up together with them to meet him in the air. It is a reunion and a rejoining with Christ. And yes, Christ will be the central thing for all of us. That will be the face that we most long to see; but we will see our other loved ones, too; and that is not wrong to want that or to think about that because he says: And so we will be together with the Lord. There is still that community. I think it is going to extend outward. This is just my thought, but that the kind of intimacy that we had with maybe only one or two people here on earth will be perfected and it will be for everyone in the kingdom of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is Paul's great message and the tagline of our passage for this program: Comfort one another with these words; and what a great comfort it is.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along today with Ruth Boven and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com; tell us topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs.

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