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**“HOPE OF RESURRECTION”
First Thessalonians 4:13-18**

☑ This week I came across a piece that I wrote shortly after my grandmother Helen Nelson died. I can remember previous deaths in the family, but her passing was the first that struck close to my heart.

It was 11:25 p.m. on Friday, December 18th, 1992. I stood beside Grandma’s hospital bed and stroked her head and watched her die. I heard her last shallow breath. I saw her heart’s last flutter. I felt her body cool when her soul and spirit left it.

The following days were unreal. There was so much to do: call the rest of the family, order flowers, plan the funeral, clean out the apartment, sift through her things, and deal with all the well-wishers.

Somehow, we [my family] found the time to begin grieving. We talked about our loss. We shared our memories. Remembering was so important.

Emotions came unpredictably, in waves....

Anything might trigger tears, or laughter: a song, a verse, an object, a face.

Nothing mattered more than Grandma’s death, but the world didn’t notice our loss. It felt odd

to choose a casket, knowing that down the street someone else might be putting as much thought into choosing laundry detergent.

I couldn’t help wondering how the other drivers felt when our funeral procession passed. Were they curious about who died? Impatient at the interruption to their routine?

Those events are chiseled into my memory like words carved on a headstone.

☠ Scripture speaks of death as our most stubborn adversary. First Corinthians 15:26: **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”**

To be sure, the *moment* of expiration often comes as a blessing. That is why we rightly pray for God to release loved ones from incurable physical agony or mental anguish.

Still, even then death is not our friend. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I believe that when we cry, “Lord, take her!” we are not pleading for death; we are pleading for a conclusion to the process of dying.

As a group, North Americans do not know where to find hope in regard to death. Some *glamorize* death (idolizing Romeo and Juliet), some *deny* it (by steering clear of the subject and even the “D” word), some attempt to *delay* it (through endless workouts or extreme medical measures), some do their best to *escape* it (by sanitizing every surface or undergoing

cryogenic preservation) and some, like Jack Kevorkian, even attempt to *control* it (by beating it to the punch).

But there is no substantial hope in these efforts. At best, they put off the moment but prolong the process. Worse, they lull many people into ignoring the basic issues of life, death, sin, salvation, and eternity.

Death is an ugly, stubborn, bitter enemy. Thank God, it is not the last word!

□ Please turn to 1st Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. [Notice, the text does *not* say “do not grieve” when a Christ follower dies; it says, “do not grieve like [those] 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. [Those who were Christians when their bodies expired.]

According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the arch-angel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are 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 one another with these words.

→ Paul’s readers are worried by the deaths of fellow Christians: “What will happen to them? What difference does discipleship make if death still claims us?” Indeed, {1 Corinthians 15:19} **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others,”** for in that case death is the victor. The grave is our future. Sin wins.

→ Praise God, Jesus **“has...been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 15:19)! **“The firstfruits”** is the portion of a crop that ripens earliest and is harvested first. Hence, the resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste and a guarantee of the full harvest yet to come.

→ Our **“hope in Christ”** is not **“only for this life”!** We who obey Messiah’s call to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him {Romans 6:5} **“have been united with him in a death like his.”** Likewise, **“we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”** For the disciple of Jesus, physical mortality is just a prelude to the promised glory of bodily resurrection.

So what happens to Christ Followers who die before the Second Coming?

● {23:40-43} Jesus was crucified with two other men. One insulted him, but the other rebuked him, saying:

“Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

For now, when Christians die their bodies decay, but their spirits are transported into Christ’s glorious presence in heaven. It is an amazing place of spiritual rest and refreshment. Its magnificence far exceeds our imagination. Yet it is not our final destination; it is a temporary home. Consequently, living forever as disembodied spirits in heaven is not the ultimate Christian hope.

■ In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul uses the Greek word παρουσία [parousia]. Most English-language Bibles render it **“coming,”** but **“presence”** is the more literal definition.

{Wright, *Surprised by Hope*} First-century people used this word in two very significant ways:

⊕ 1st, they used παρουσία for **“the... presence of a god”** particularly as it was revealed in miraculous ways. **“People would suddenly be aware of a supernatural... presence, and the...word for this was παρουσία.”** Greek-speaking Jews (like the historian Josephus) also used it when they talked **“about YHWH coming to... rescue... Israel.”**

⊕ 2nd, they used παρουσία to describe an in-person visit by **“a person of high rank...to a state”** or city under their authority, especially **“when a king or emperor [visited] a colony or province.”**

■ Next, in verses 16-17 Paul says, **“the Lord will descend... with a loud command, 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 will be caught together with them in the clouds to meet”** (**“to απαντησεις”** [apanteeseis]) **the Lord.”**

Most translations change this word into a verb here, for ease of reading; in fact, it is a noun that literally means, **“a meeting.”** When a King made a παρουσία [parousia] to a city, the leading citizens would go out to greet him. Some would blow trumpets and others would shout his praises. This event was called **“the meeting,”** the απαντησεις [apanteesies].

What happened after that? Would the king lead his people to the distant capital so they could live in his far away palace? No! The people would escort the king into their city. In effect, he brought the palace to them.

Παρουσια [parousia] speaks of the revelation of God’s presence, and the coming of the king. Απαντησεις [apanteeseis] speaks to the king’s meeting with his people.

● This resonates beautifully with **Revelation 21:2-3: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud**

voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

This integration of heaven and earth will be the total fulfillment of our prayer: {Mt 6:10} **“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”**

I am convinced that our most profound hope is not to die, go to paradise, and spend eternity as spiritual beings. It is to dwell in God’s presence, for a while as spirits in heaven if we die before Christ returns; but then forever as whole beings (with purified spirits, perfected souls and, yes, perfect physical bodies), and in this way live with the Lord on a renewed, material earth after his Second Coming.

This has all sorts of implications, but I will limit myself to this: by the ministry of Jesus, God has sealed the fate of our ugliest, most stubborn enemy. The world does not know this, yet; but it will, when **“the Lord himself [comes] ...from heaven.”**

Do you live in Christ? If not, consider what you are missing: hope in the present and eternal life in a glorified body later. Don’t settle for glamorizing death, or denying it, delaying it, escaping it, or controlling it. Face it with the true hope of resurrection!

The gift is there for you to receive. All that you must do is to receive it in faith. Please seek me out. I would be glad to pray with you after the service.

If you are already alive in Christ, thank God! Remember what he has done, and live in hope. First Thessalonians 4:13-18 was written for our benefit.

**“Therefore,” (First Thessalonians 4:18)
“encourage one another with these words.”**