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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“AS THOSE WHO HAVE HOPE”
First Thessalonians 4:13-18**

At 11:25 p.m. on Friday, December 19, 1992 I heard my Grandma Nelson’s last shallow breath. I saw her heart’s final flutter. I felt her body cool.

The following days were unreal. We called the rest of the family, planned the funeral, ordered flowers, cleaned out her apartment, and dealt with the well-wishers.

Somehow, we found the time to begin grieving together. We talked about our loss. We shared our memories. It felt very important to remember.

Emotions came unpredictably, in waves... Anything might trigger tears, or laughter: a song, a verse, an object, a facial expression.

Nothing mattered more than grandma’s death, but the world barely noticed our loss. It felt odd to choose a casket, knowing that down the street someone might be putting as much thought into choosing laundry detergent.

I wondered how the other drivers felt as our funeral procession passed. Were they curious? Irritated? Reminded of their losses?

My grandmother’s passing was the first that struck close to my heart. Parts of the experience are chiseled into my memory, like words carved on a headstone.

☠ Death is our most unrelenting adversary. First Corinthians 15:26: **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”**

Granted, the *moment* of expiration often comes as a blessing. We do pray for loved ones to be released from physical agony and mental anguish.

But even then death is not our friend. ‘Lord, take her!’ is not a plea for death; it is a plea for an end to the process of dying.

Death is the quintessential human dilemma. It is literally the bane of our existence.

People are desperate for hope, but many do not know where to find it. In response,

- Some undertake to *deny* mortality by avoiding the topic, perhaps even refusing to speak the “D” word.
- Some try to *minimize* it with gallows humor, portraying it as one big joke.
- Some attempt to *conceal* aging and mortality (the one follows the other, right?) behind youthful fashions, cosmetics, Botox, and eye lifts.
- Some endeavor to *delay* it by means of fitness and extreme medical measures.
- Some strive to *outmaneuver* death, achieving pseudo-immortality by getting famous or having lots of children to carry on the family name.
- Some make every effort to *cheat* it, by sanitizing every surface or undergoing cryogenic preservation.
- Some try to *glamorize* death by idolizing Romeo and Juliet or obsessing over death cults.
- Some even attempt to *control* it, by deciding the when, where, and how of their passing.

A few of these approaches are to be shunned altogether. For example, it is inherently unwholesome to glamorize death.

Most of them can be beneficial, practiced to the right degree and at the right time, but they are not the answer. At best, they give a little comfort. At worst, they lull us into ignoring the fundamental issues of salvation and eternity.

Still, people need hope. They are desperate for it!

? What hope is true? What hope stands the test of time? What hope endures as we age, as we suffer chronic disease or disability, as our bodies crumble? What hope do we have to shine into the world, hope that is true and substantial?

■ Please turn with me to First Thessalonians 4:13: **“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.”**

{Jn 10:10; 14:5; 8:51} The Christians in Thessalónika are anxious. They have heard the Gospel that the Son of God came **“that they may have life.”** They have confessed that Jesus is **“the way... the truth and the life.”** They have believed the Savior’s claim that **“Whoever obeys my word will never see death.”**

Even so, some of the **“brothers and sisters”** have passed away. They have seen death. They do not have physical life any longer.

? What difference do discipleship, faith, and obedience make if death still claims us?

{1 Co 15:19} As Paul admits, **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others.”** **“If only for this life we have hope”** Mortality is the Victor with a capital “V.” **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ”** the Grave is our future, period. **“If only**

for this life we have hope in Christ” Death wins, and it wins big!

Paul tackles the issue head on. His goal is to equip his readers with authentic, durable hope.

■ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle grounds our hope in two decisive events: Messiah’s historic Resurrection and future Return. Verse 14: **“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.”**

The Savior **“died and rose again, and so,”** as a result, accordingly, for that reason **“we [know] that God will bring with Jesus those who have [died] in him.”** Christ’s Resurrection does not merely facilitate his Second Coming, it obliges it.

First Corinthians 15:20 explains that Christ who has **“been raised from the dead”** is **“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** **“Firstfruits”** is the part of crop that ripens earliest and is harvested first. As a metaphor, it indicates that the resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste and a guarantee of the full harvest yet to come.

{Ro 6:5} Because he has risen others will rise. All who heed his call to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow him are **“united with him in a death like his”** and **“will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his”** when he comes again.

■ Verse 15: **“According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming”** (the παρουσία [parousía]) **“of the Lord,**

will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” {Wright } First-century Greek speakers used

παρουσια spiritually to describe the presence of a deity. When they became aware a supernatural being had drawn near, they were overcome with awe. The total experience of divine presence, followed by human awareness and reverent terror, was called παρουσια.

{Wright, Surprised by Hope} Παρουσια was also used in a political sense, to signify a regal visit by a Greco-Roman king to his colonies.

■ Paul depicts Christ’s παρουσια as a stately visit. Verse 16a: **“The Lord will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...”**

When a ruler journeyed to one of his cities, he and his entourage would draw near but stop short of entering it. The king’s heralds would announce his presence with shouts and trumpets.

Watchmen posted in guard towers would see the company dressed in splendid regalia, see the royal banners, hear the shouts and the trumpets, and immediately give the signal: “The king is coming!”

■ Verses 16b-17a: **“the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air....”**

The city’s leading citizens would form a delegation and go meet the king where he waited. Some blew horns, others shouted praises. This was “the Meeting,” the απαντησιν [apántēsín], and that is Paul’s terminology

here: **“we will be caught together with them”** for the απαντησιν.

Paul’s choice of words is intentional and significant. He could use συναγωγη [synagōgē]. This is familiar to us as the name of a Jewish house of worship; however, it was commonly used for any **“meeting”** or **“gathering.”**

He could use εκκλησια [ekklēsia]. The specifically Christian definition of this word is **“the Church,”** the gathered people of God; but εκκλησια is used more generally of any **“assembly.”**

Instead, the apostle writes απαντησιν. He frames the παρουσια as a first century majestic visit.

What do you suppose happened when “the Meeting” phase of the παρουσια was completed?

Did the people to abandon the city and set up camp with the king, outside the walls? Ridiculous!

Did he turn around and lead his people to the capital so they could live in his palace? No.

The people escorted their king into the city, and he stayed with them. In effect, he brought the palace to them.

Likewise, we will **“meet the Lord”** outside the city **“in the air,”** but we won’t stay there. Nor will we abandon the physical plane and permanently relocate to Heaven.

■ {Rev 21:2-3} Instead, **“The Holy City [will come] down out of heaven”** and it will be integrated with the new Earth. **“God’s dwelling place [will be] among**

the people, and he will dwell with them.” “And so”
 verse 17b, **“we will be with the Lord forever.”**

{Mt 6:10} Our petition, **“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”** will finally be entirely fulfilled. **“Then [will] the saying...come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”**

Our hope is not to deny, minimize, conceal, delay, outmaneuver, cheat, glamorize, or control death. It is not even to go to Heaven when we die.

Our true hope, substantial hope, lasting hope, the hope God has given us to shine into the world, is that he will resurrect us with purified spirits, completed souls, and perfected physical bodies, to dwell forever with Messiah Jesus in New Jerusalem on the New Earth after his Second Coming.

If we are in Christ, mortality is NOT Victor with a capital “V”! The Grave is not our ultimate future! Death will not win!

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

First Thessalonians 4:13-18 is the Word of the Lord.