

### **How to Find Comfort When You Are Grieving**

This morning I want to continue in a series I started a few weeks ago on things pertaining to our future. I have called the series *Recovering Our Christian Hope*. The reason that I started to do this series is because I have become increasingly convinced that the post-modern world—this culture that we live in that basically views life as absurdity, as an absurd thing without rules; without direction—this post-modern world that we live in has taken away people's hope for the future. And more and more people, even within the Christian community, find Biblical teachings like the return of Christ, or heaven, or our future resurrection and living with Jesus in heaven to be unreal. The thoughts of the future have very little impact on people's lives today. So that as an individual is going through present difficulty, what you really don't hear, even within the Christian community is the kind of statements that you would often hear in the scriptures like: This life is very difficult, but there is a better life waiting for you. Or, some kind of counter balancing of heaven and our future with Christ, balanced over-against the present trials and tribulations that we may face in our day to day existence. There is such a pervasive loss of the future that we find ourselves feeling lonely and depressed and empty, but we don't know why. What has been cut out of our souls is hope.

Now today as I continue talking about issues regarding the future, I am going to touch on that one subject that is both very personal and, for some of us, intensely relevant because of what we have experienced in the last few months, or year or two years and that is the subject of death. I find as I talk with people, even within the Christian community, a great deal of misunderstanding regarding death. I also find that many of the books written from a supposedly Christian perspective are almost entirely unhelpful in bringing any real measure of comfort or assistance to those who are grieving regarding the loss of a loved one.

I picked up a book, not too long ago, written by a well-known Christian author and it was his attempt to bring some measure of comfort, I guess, to people who were struggling with the issue of the death of a loved one. As I read this book, I thought to myself, here is a book that under no circumstance should be given to someone who is genuinely suffering. This man had virtually no ability to communicate understanding to a person who is grieving. Not only did he fail to communicate any sense of understanding or empathy, but actually seemed to ridicule those who were grieving. He increased the pain of the grieving by making fun of people who were genuinely hurt because of the loss of a loved one. One of his arguments was in attempting to deal with this whole issue of God's goodness in the midst of our tremendous suffering in this world—one of the arguments he raised was that we deserve more suffering and that it is an amazing thing that we don't suffer more than we do. I thought that by all means, keep this book away from a genuine sufferer. His arguments were so coldly intellectual that they had the air of "Mr. Spock" about them.

So many of the books in the marketplace that attempt to deal with the issue of suffering and death and grief, frankly, seem to be written by people who are unacquainted with grief—that is, have not themselves grieved, or are afraid to come to grips with the genuine human emotion of grief over the loss of a loved one. It appears to be written by people who are afraid to cry and afraid to grapple with the very depth of a problem of trying to reconcile God's ability to stop somebody from suffering and God's ability to prevent an accident and his obvious allowance of a loved one to die. So many of the books just refuse to go to the depth of the matter. That no matter how you slice it, it just doesn't seem to fit together. And it hurts. Death hurts.

So, as I speak out of the scriptures this morning about the subject of death, I hope to speak as one who is a fellow sufferer along with you. Who is not coming as some would expect pastors to come as the answer man with every string completely tied up and every problem completely resolved in a nice neat package. Death confronts us with issues and difficulties that can not be entirely wrapped up and put in a nice bow. So, I want to walk together with you and speak to you in the way that the scriptures speak to us as we consider the loss of a loved one. Perhaps for you, it is the loss of one of your children or the loss of a parent—a mother, a father, a brother or sister. Perhaps it is the loss of a beloved friend, or a grandparent, or a pastor, or teacher, or co-worker. I would like to offer the kind of realistic and gentle comfort that the scripture offers us. I have called today's talk *How To Find Comfort When You Are Grieving*.

Let's pray.

Let's take a look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The Thessalonian believers were very much like us. They suffered the death of people in their community and the death of loved ones. And, in losing a loved one, they asked the same kind of questions that we ask. What has become of this person that I loved? Will I ever see them again? Where are they? Are they happy now? Are they in torment now? Are they in pain now because they died? Is this the end? It is all over? Moreover--- How should I respond to the death of a loved one? Is it OK for me to grieve and the cry? How long should grief go on?

You know, part of our understanding of appropriate reactions to death turns on what our view of death is to begin with. I want to begin by talking about death from a biblical point of view because there is a great deal of misunderstanding about how death is perceived in the Bible. As a result of this misperception, there is a great deal of misunderstanding regarding how we should feel or react to the death of a loved one. In contemporary society, there are some major alternative views to the biblical view of death and these alternative views have so much air time and are so popular and so much pervade our space that they impact the way some of us think about death. The most popular view of death currently in society is that death is just a natural ending to life. There is what you might call the evolutionary view of death—the view that death is just part of the cycle of life. So that a person or a plant or an animal dies, but they return to the earth; their nitrogen and their minerals creates more life in a different form. The nitrogen adds life to plants and there is just kind of a recycling of the evolutionary wheel of life. But there is something in this major view that is quite natural about

death. Death is just part of the system. It is part of the way the whole natural system is set up. Death just feeds into life and is one great continuum.

This is not the biblical view. The biblical view of death is that death is profoundly and distinctively unnatural and incredibly unfitting, if you will, in the created order. Death is seen as a foreign invasion. In an otherwise peaceful, wonderful village setting suddenly an invasion comes in wreaking havoc and destroying our peace and our enjoyment of each other. Death is viewed in the Bible as a horrible enemy, a foreign invader. You are living securely, you are living peacefully, you are feeling good and then you find this invader in your body, a cancer, a virus, an infection—something that shouldn't be there. You wake up and find that it is there and when you look at the way that people in the Bible refer to death, it is always referred to as an unnatural kind of thing, something wrong.

The book of Job is filled with descriptions calling death a journey of no-return, a land of gloom and deep shadow—that is what Job says in Job 10. He says that he is going down to the place of no-return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow. The Psalmist calls death the place of darkness, the land of oblivion. Job goes on in Job 18 and calls death the king of terrors. He speaks of being torn from the security of his tent and marched off to the "king of terrors." Death is spoken of as destruction and separation, going down to the silence, to the grave. We are told that this body that we are living in is a earthly tent which is going to be destroyed. Death is referred to as a broken wheel, a shattering of a pitcher, the snapping of a cord.

There is something terribly wrong about death. You need to understand that death, from a biblical perspective, is not natural. Because if you get this understanding, you will understand the appropriateness of struggling with death and grieving over death. You see, many Christians feel like there is something wrong with grieving and reacting with great pain and with great difficulty and with great struggle to the death of a loved one. Perhaps you have watched someone grieve or question God, or struggle greatly because someone they loved died. Perhaps you have wondered in your mind, have they gone to far? Is their grief appropriate? Is this the kind of reaction that a Christian should have to grief? Shouldn't Christians always have the victory always. Unless you understand the horrible-ness of death from a biblical perspective—the fact that death is seen as a foreign invasion, you won't understand someone else's grief. You will think that they should be reacting in a better way to the discovery of death. That they ought to be able to embrace this with more faith. Maybe you, yourself, have grieved and felt guilty because you weren't a stronger person because you didn't have more faith.

Again, I want to underline for you, as a front-end matter, the unnaturalness of death from a biblical perspective. Death is seen as a foreign invader, as an enemy intrusion. In Romans 5, verse 12, Paul writes: "As sin entered the world through one man and death, through sin, and in this way death came to all men because all sinned." What he is saying is that sin entered, it was crouching—it wasn't part of the creation that God set up, but it entered crouching at the door and invaded this world. As a result of the invasion of sin in the world, death

entered, came in following sin. It broke into the house the way a rapist would break into the house, or the way a murderer would break into the house. Then death spread this contagion, this plague spread. That is the biblical view of death. It is viewed a great enemy, a foreign invasion.

Let's turn back, then, to 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul writes: "Brothers [and I add Sisters], we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, that means those who have died, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope."

Now, many people have misread this text and they have viewed Paul as condemning or somehow being disapproving of grief. I do not believe that Paul disapproved of grief in the face of the death of a loved one. What I think he is disapproving of is grief of the kind that has no tinge of hope mixed in. It is entirely appropriate and fitting for a Christian to grieve profoundly as a result of the death of someone they loved. To grieve because of the death of a child, or the death of a parent, or grandparent, or spouse, or friend is entirely in accord with what we read of death in the Bible—the unnaturalness of it, the wrongness of it. Indeed, as we look at the people that we are called to imitate, one of the things that we are called to imitate is the fact that they grieved when faced with the death of someone they loved.

I think of Abraham in the Old Testament grieving and mourning over the death of his wife, Sarah. And then there is tremendous grief over the death of Joseph. One of the most powerful scenes in the Old Testament is that of King David and, in one case, throwing himself down on the ground and weeping because his little baby boy was dying. He refused to be comforted. He refused to eat as he watched his child die. And, then in another instance, perhaps in the most poignant scene in the Old Testament, David loses his son, Absalom, and he goes back up to his room. He is all alone. After he hears the news of Absalom's death—here was a young man who had hurt David tremendously and been a rebel and brought great disappointment into David's life—but despite all of that, he was still David's son and David loved him dearly as only a father can love a son. He hears of his son, Absalom's, death, David returns to his room and he is all alone and it says: "He began to weep." He cries out: Oh, my son, Absalom. My son, my son, Absalom. If only I had died instead of you. Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. There is probably no parent who has ever had a child die that didn't say: If only I had of died instead of you.

Finally, in another scene, David weeps over the loss of his friend, Jonathan and his enemy Saul. Listen to David's lament from 2 Sam. 1 vv.23-27, Saul and Jonathan in life were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold. How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights. I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women. How the mighty have fallen! Just a profound description of the ability of one man to grieve because of the death of a friend. I so much appreciate that because in our culture strong men are not suppose to cry, or not suppose to grieve, and certainly not grieve over the death of a friend. We have a very

different model in the bible. Indeed, I wonder if David's tenderness to the loss of loved ones--his ability to feel and to emotionally respond was a part of why God said, "David is a man after my own heart." David really seems to understand and feel many of the same things that we feel when we lose someone. He lost two sons. He lost his dearest friend. He understood the awfulness of death.

And if we ever wondered if it was appropriate to grieve because of the death of a loved one, we only need to look at Jesus weeping by the tomb of Lazarus. As a close friend, someone whose company Jesus had obviously enjoyed and appreciated and he suddenly dies. Jesus is standing by the tomb and the wrongness of death, the horror of death, the tremendous outpouring of anger of God over death wells up in Jesus and Jesus begins to cry.

Why do we grieve? What is it that we feel in the face of the death of a loved one? I want to be honest with you and tell you that I haven't lost someone who is in my immediate family yet. I have not lost a child or my spouse. Both of my parents are still alive. So what I am saying, I am saying only by way of having observed other people; having talked with people and interacted with them—what I have heard from them and observed. Many of you are much closer because of your personal experience to grief than I am. Unfortunately, I, like the rest of you, am very likely to, in the next several years, experience the death of someone near me. But, by way of an observer, I would like to share with you some of the ways that I think people feel as they face the pain of the death of a loved one.

Perhaps as I go through these things, it will also assist those of us who find ourselves in the role of comforter to a friend who is grieving the death of a loved one. Frequently, it is very difficult to understand why this person is saying the things they are saying, or feeling the way they are feeling. And often people's initial response to the death of a loved one is different than their eventual response. Someone loses a parent or a spouse and people are amazed by how they are handling it. By two months later they are back on their feet--doing great. But then a year later, two years later that at the grocery store and bam--they break down. It is like this wave hits and overwhelms them. So comforters -- don't be fooled by delayed responses. People respond at different paces and take different amounts of time to process their grief.

One of the things that I have noted in others as they have gone through the death of a loved one is that the death of a loved one is a profoundly isolating event in a person's life. By isolating, I mean that no one else can really understand the grieving person's feelings. So, when somebody comes up to a grieving person and says: I understand how you feel. Even if the comforter has gone through a similar experience; if the comforter has, likewise, lost a parent or a spouse, or a child, there is a part of the understanding that simply can not be there. Yes, you understand, but only in part, because it is the nature of the death of someone to isolate the griever. You see, every death is unique because every life is unique. Every relationship we have with another person is a unique relationship. No one relates to my spouse the way that I do. No one has that relationship. And the kind of relationship that you have with your spouse is going to be different than what I have with Marlene, or with one of my children, or with

my parents. So the hole that is created in my life, or the hole that has been created in your life through the death of a loved one, is a unique hole. And in that, no one else quite understands. And, in large measure, we are alone in our grief.

That sense of isolation is all the more painful as the griever moves out into the larger community. Maybe some of you have had the experience where after suffering the death of a loved one, you go into a store or shopping mall and it is almost like you have walked into another dimension like the *Twilight Zone*. You suddenly recognize no one here feels what you feel. And people are laughing all around you, shopping and saying things to you like, "Have a nice day" and "Can I help you?" Internally you have all of this grief and anger and you just want to explode or run out of there because you recognize how different you are in your grief from everyone else. What I am saying is that it is the nature of grief to be a profoundly isolating experience. As a person feels these things deeply, they often just want to be alone. That doesn't mean that you should always leave the griever alone, or that as a comforter you don't reach out and put your arm around someone, just sitting with them. But, what I am saying is that it is a natural reaction to want to withdraw because you feel what is real, no one does understand your grief.

There is a second part of the pain of grief and perhaps I could explain the second part by a line from John Donne's famous poem, *No Man Is An Island, No Man Stands Alone*. The last line of John Donne's poem goes this way, he says: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, because it tolls for thee." John Donne is saying don't ask why or for whom the funeral bell is ringing, because the funeral bell is ringing for you. You are wrapped up in the death of this other person, if you are the griever. And in a very real sense, a part of you is buried when someone dies that you love. Let me explain what I mean:

Several years ago my wife, Marlene, lost her grandmother. She was very close to her grandmother. She lived very near her and spent a good portion of her childhood in a very close relationship with her grandmother. In any case, we went home the funeral and we were lying in bed that evening and I was holding Marlene as she was crying. As I was holding her, I had an image of my wife as a small child playing in her grandmother's driveway. It occurred to me that part of the pain of the loss was that Marlene, in a very real sense, was closing the book on her own childhood. She would never be a child again with her grandmother.

See, when someone you love is buried, you, or at least a part of you, dies with them. And when that dirt is thrown into the grave, it falls on you if you love the person. And when you drive away from the cemetery and you leave that person there, or at least their body there, in a very real sense, you feel like part of you is left there as well. In comforting someone who is grieving, we need to understand that a part of that person has died and are mourning loss of themselves along with the loss of the person. "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

Here is a third thing and I take this from the book of Job. I have been reading from the book of Job and there is a great deal of reflection in Job on the whole issue of death and suffering, as many of you know. There are some verses in

Job 7 that I found very helpful. In Job 7, Job says this: "Remember that my life is but breath, my eye will not again see good...The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more. Your eyes will be on me, but I will not be. When a cloud vanishes, it is gone. So, he who goes down to the grave does not come up again. He will not return again to his house. Nor will his place know him anymore." My NIV translation reads: "He will never come to his house again. His place will know him no more. He will never again come to his house."

One of the really painful things about someone dying is this little phrase "never again." See, what is so rotten about death is the finality of it. Never again. Never again will I hold her. Never again will I play catch with my dad. Never again will I sit around the table over a cup of coffee and just talk to Mom. Never will I see him laugh again. Never will he come through that doorway again. Never will I see her smile or cry. We will never kiss again. Or have Christmas dinner. Never will we take walks. It's over! Totally over!

I think it is that closing of the book that is so hard for the griever. Could it be that in the midst of our grief, there is mixed in the pain of regret? We take each other so much for granted, don't we? I mean even with people in this church that are doing a good job and that you like, that you appreciate—we take each other so much for granted and we so rarely say the things that we need to; that we want to each other; that we should say. How much more so our immediate family and our parents? How rare it is that when somebody has died that you said everything you needed to and do everything you needed to do with them. And that you have been able to take back in a real way all the things that you should not have said or should not have done. Isn't it typical of us, as human beings, to feel like we have all the time in the world and then discover that we don't and that time is so much shorter than we realized.

Look back on the death of a loved one and you hate yourself for arguing about trivial matters and fussing about with the person things that in light of death are so inconsequential. If only we could reflect beforehand and say to ourselves: Would I keep doing this if I knew this person wasn't going to be here that much longer? Of course our behavior would change, but we don't think that way as human beings. We always feel that we have more time than we really do. I think that is why the Psalmist says in Psalm 90: "Oh, Lord, teach us to number our days so that we can gain a heart of wisdom." But there is in grief the pain of regret.

So we grieve. We rightly grieve. Our emotions need to be relaxed when someone we love dies. You know the great St. Augustine talked about his own experience of the death of his mother and he said: "The tears stream down and I let them flow as freely as they would making of them a pillow for my heart and on them it rested." Sometimes our tears, as they flow—if we let them flow, can actually bring rest to our hearts.

Potential comforters, let me give you a word of caution. If you wish to offer biblical comfort, do not come as one who is self-assured. Do not address a griever as a person who has all the answers, as someone who can figure it all out. Potential comforters, when you go into a funeral home or to a friend and you want to be of genuine assistance, the worst thing you can do and the thing that

you want to avoid is being an answer-man or an answer-woman. Let me put the matter plainly. The horror of death is ultimately unanswerable this side of heaven. There are no answers—no ultimate answers this side of heaven. You can not, as a Christian, completely plumb the mystery of death no matter how you formulate it. And, I have read the books and I find them terribly unsatisfying. No matter how you formulate it, it is impossible this side of the grave to fit the pieces together. The truth is that with every death, God could have prevented that death. God could have prevented the car accident and didn't. God could have healed the child of cancer and didn't. God could have prevented the miscarriage or the heart murmur or the stroke, but he didn't. And as you try to fit that piece together with the goodness of God that you know, and the love of God that you know what you end up with is saying: I can not fit this puzzle together. That is why in any approach we take to death, we have to hold onto 1 Corinthians, chapter 13: "I know, in part, but I do not this side of heaven know fully." I know some things, but I don't know everything. Where Job's comforters stepped over the line is pretending that they had total knowledge and pretending that they knew the ways of God beyond what God has revealed. God has not fully disclosed the mystery of death for us, he has not fully disclosed the whys and wherefores, and we may not do this for each other. We know only in part.

But you know, partial knowledge is better than no knowledge at all. And it is this partial knowledge that Paul brings to us by way of assisting us in grieving. It is this partial knowledge that gives us some handholds to keep us from completely sinking like those who have no hope. That is why Paul writes the rest of 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4. And that is why we have scriptures like 1 Corinthians, chapter 15 about the resurrection. It is not to give us complete understanding, or to eliminate grief altogether, but it is to help us in our grief. I will tell you that some of the things that Paul lists here in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4 do make a difference.

As a pastor, I have the occasion to do funerals of people who have embraced the Christian message and believe what I am about to say to be true. And, I have had the occasion to do funerals of those who have not embraced the Christian message and don't really know some of the things I am about to say. I will tell you there is a difference, a marketable, tangible difference in the funerals of Christians and non-Christians. No where is the difference more evident between those who are Christian and those who are not than at a funeral. There is grief mingled with hope and partial understanding. And there is grief with no hope and no understanding, even partial understanding. That grief with no hope is like a dull hammer thud. There is a senselessness and a dullness even to the pain. With Christians there is grief mingled with some hope and some knowledge.

And so what are the handholds that the Holy Spirit gives us through Paul? Paul writes in 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." It says something so helpful, we believe that. We believe that. It almost sounds like a recitation of a little catechism. You know, when the world is swirling around you, one of the things that you need to do is talk to yourself and repeat those

certainities, those basic truths that you have come to believe in, that you have been taught from the time you are a child, or that you came to embrace as an adult.

I have had some friends of mine who were raised in the mainline church say that as they went through some very dark times, frightening experiences. In the midst of that experience, suddenly it was like a tape went on in their head and those old catechism lessons began to play. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father from whom all things were made." Paul is saying let's recite together what it is that we have come to believe.

You know, I think you see this kind of recitation of what we believe in Psalm 42. Psalm 42 The Psalmist says vs3 My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?." So, here is his emotions, he is crying, he is grieving. But then he begins to speak to himself and he goes through the basic kind of a catechism. These things, (vs5) "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why you so disturbed within me. Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." But then his emotions take over again. "My soul is downcast within me." "I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" My bones suffer mortal agony. Then he reminds himself again and speaks to himself. And he says (vs11) Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

What I see in Psalm 42 is this rhythm back and forth between the emotions and the recitation of what a person knows by way of faith. Laten Ford who worked with the Billy Graham Team for many years wrote a powerful book about the death of his son Sandy. He said, that the tough thing for the Christian who loses a child or a loved one is trying to pull together your emotions and your faith. But we need to at least have some kind of dialogue there between emotions and faith. And I think that is what Paul is advocating, and that is what we see in Psalm 42. It is so you don't sink completely, and so you don't just get totally overwhelmed by your grief.. There is grief tinged with the hope or grief tinged with faith. You recite the old catechism. This is what I believe, yes, and it provides you with a handhold.

So, what is it that we believe. Regarding the most basic matters of the Christian faith, we believe that Jesus died. As we reflect together on the death of Christ, this is a great help to those who have suffered death.

I was down in Florida a couple of years ago. My wife, Marlene, and I were with the two kids. We were along a pier in Key West and they were having a little street carnival there. There were jugglers and magicians and street vendors there. There was a man preaching the gospel on the pier. There were a very few of us who stood around and listened. But, an English woman began to interrupt the man who was preaching and she kept saying: I have a question.

The man shut her down and he would talk for a little while longer and she would say: I have a question for you. He told her to be quiet and to wait and I was really stirred as I looked at that woman because I could see the sincerity and the earnestness with which she was questioning. I felt that she would never have interrupted like that or been as personally embarrassing to herself if there wasn't something really bothering her. Nevertheless, a person in the crowd who I assumed was a Christian, you know he had his top collar buttoned to his neck and he just looked like what Christians look like went over to her and began to argue with her. I watched the two of them and I thought that this guy had completely misinterpreted this woman's sincerity. And I heard him say: You are just playing games. She stormed off and I thought to myself that that was the last thing this woman is doing is playing games. She is a sincere questioner. And so I prayed right there on the spot and I said to the Lord: Lord, please let me find this woman again. [Now there was this huge crowd.] If I find her, I will go and talk with her Lord.

There was a huge crowd, there must have been ten thousand people on the pier and I walked away to get my kids and it was about ten minutes later. We were in the enormous crowd that stretched over seven blocks. Once I got my kids we were walking along and who is coming toward me—right face to face, but this woman. I went over to her and I said: You know, I heard you trying to ask that preacher some questions. She just went off like a rocket and said: Yeah, they are all hypocrites. I said: OK, OK, but what was it that you wanted to ask the preacher? She said, with tears in her eyes: What I wanted to ask him was this—if God is so loving, why did he let my 35 year old husband die of cancer? I got choked up right there on the spot and I said: I don't know. I don't know why God let your 35 year old husband die of cancer. But, I know that God understands how you feel. Her jaw tightened and she said: Oh yeah, how does God understand how I feel? I said: Because God lost a loved one also. Because God watched his son, Jesus, die.

You see what this affirmation here in 1 Thessalonians 4 is saying is: We believe that Jesus died. Do you understand the comfort there? God, himself, has tasted death. God, himself, understands grief. When I feel like no one else can get it and no one can step into my shoes and can experience my suffering and I am all alone in my apartment, Paul says: I know that God knows. And I know that if no one else understands, God understands. We believe that Jesus died. That he walked in our shoes and felt what I feel.

Paul goes on to speak about Jesus' resurrection as a second thing that we hold on to when we speak to ourselves about, when we are grieving. These are the things that we know. And he says: We believe that Jesus died and rose again. He doesn't only understand, which is wonderful in itself. But you know the Christian life is not just about God's understanding of us, or even our ability to empathize with each other, it is also about power. It is about God's ability to do something regarding our situation and our condition. He doesn't only love us, although He does do that and that is wonderful. But He can do something to actually help us and deliver us from our situation. So often the message of Christianity is presented without any power and we end up a kind of Christianity

is which we can hold each others hand and we can care for each other, but there is no change. The resurrection means that there was a change and that this enemy death was defeated. Death was overcome in the case of Jesus, and because it was overcome in the case of Jesus, those who belonged to Jesus will have death overcome for them as well. He says that 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.

Jesus is presented in the bible as the first fruits of a coming harvest. You go out in the Summer time and there are those initial first fruits. The first tomatoes on your tomato vine. Those first tomatoes aren't all that there is going to be, they're just a signal to you that more is coming. Jesus was only the first fruits of a greater resurrection that is going to come, that there is coming a day when the dead in Christ, those who belong to Jesus and have trusted in Christ and are now resting in Christ are going to rise.

Let me put it in really simple terms for those of you who may be experiencing grief. In very simple terms the resurrection of Christ means that the end is never the end for a Christian. You may feel like the book is closed and you have read the last chapter and now there is a great finality to all that has occurred. That it is over and it's done and nothing else can be added to this book. There is as I have referred to before that never again quality that death brings. Death seems to just slam the door in our face, but the resurrection means that, that finality is overcome. And I know that, that can only help you in part because the finality isn't overcome right now. It's overcome in the Day of the Resurrection. So this requires endurance.

We're talking here about a faith that can cling to something in the future. I know that, that can only help you in part but, as I said earlier on partial help and partial knowledge is a lot better then no help and no knowledge at all. This is a handhold, something to keep you from sinking. The end is not the end.

There is more to come in this story. There is a sequel to this relationship. He has a third thing: He speaks about the lost one as those who have fallen asleep in Him., and he goes on in verse 15 to use that same phrase "receive those who have fallen asleep." The most common phrase for the death of a believer in the New Testament is those who have fallen asleep. Have you ever noticed that death of the believer in the bible is referred to as sleep.

I think that there are a few reasons for this. When somebody goes to sleep, they wake up. And that is the anticipation for those who are attached to Jesus, that there is coming a day when they'll wake up. They're going to rise, this isn't a permanent state, that there is a day of resurrection coming. I think it is referring to the death of a believer as sleep because there is a rest from ones labors in ones life and there is a ceasing of striving. Sometimes that can be a great comfort, particularly when a person has battled disease or has had a hard life, and that they are at rest. And that whatever difficulty they had in this life, whatever physical ailment, that is over.

Sleep also implies to me the absence of sting. Sleep is peaceful. Sometimes we wonder about our dead loved ones, are they at peace? Yes, the bible says that if they are in Christ they are at peace. Now, do not take from the

phrase sleep, that this person is not consciously aware of Jesus' presence. There has been a whole doctrine formed by those who didn't understand the use of the word sleep in the bible, referring to death as this whole doctrine called "soul sleep,," that a person who died in Christ is really not consciously aware of the presence of the Lord. There is simply no support for that idea in the bible. When your loved one dies their spirit is immediately transported to the presence of Jesus. And I believe that if you have lost someone in Christ right now,. they are consciously enjoying Christ.

That 's why Paul writes in another place that to live is Christ and to die is gain. We gain an appreciation, an immediate apprehension of the presence of Christ when we die. To know my loved one is with Christ, enjoying His presence and their pain is ended. Whatever it was, it's over. Whatever frailty in their body, whatever frailty in their personality and whatever frailty in their morals, that is over. That is a help.

And then Paul speaks about the blessed hope, which is the fourth handhold if you will. He says in verse 15: According to the Lord's own 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. (vs16) For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, 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. (vs17) 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.

There is an order to the last things, there is an order. First of all, the Lord Himself will return. Christ will come back with a trumpet call loud enough to raise the dead. This is not a secret coming. It is a manifestation of His glorious coming. The dead in Christ will rise. And then after that, we who are alive will be caught up in the air with them. When will the rapture happen, at that last trumpet, when the resurrected dead rise.

The blessed hope for the believer who has lost a loved one is not only the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The blessed hope includes the fact that we will be together with our loved ones. After that, we who are still alive and are left, will be caught up with them.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 says "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered" and the NIV is so weak here. It should literally read and are being gathered together to him.

The blessed hope is not only the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the gathering together of believers, you with your loved ones.

The book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time for everything under heaven. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. This life is mainly a life of separation, casting away. As one after another we lose people who are important in our lives. And for those of you who are older, for those of you who are elderly, you experience this more often than those of us who are young. But you find the longer you live, the more you experience the pain of separation. There is a time for everything under heaven. A time to cast away stones, but there will be a time for gathering stones together that's coming. There is a great reunion.

Let me put the matter real plainly for those of you who have lost a loved one as your thinking about what is the meaning of this. We all know the feeling of regret that I spoke about before. The fact that you didn't get to say to the person that you loved everything that wanted to say. You didn't get to express your appreciation to that person maybe to the degree and extent that you wanted. You didn't get to acknowledge how much you really love that person, particularly if the death was sudden. Suddenly, your father was taken, or suddenly your mother was taken. You didn't get to take back what you shouldn't have said, or maybe to have your relationship fully healed. All the regrets that are so much apart of human grief.

The great reunion, the gathering together, means that we get to say all that we want to say. And we get a chance again to make it all right. You know, the beauty of the Christian life and our anticipated future is not just that we'll see Jesus, and get to say to the Lord all that we need to say, and get to be before the Lord all that we should be. But, we get to be with our loved ones, and finish writing the chapter that we wanted to write in this life.

The never agains are overcome. And so Paul writes, therefore, encourage each other with these words.