

We've all been there. You get a phone call telling you a loved one has died. There are plans and arrangements to be made. Funeral directors and pastors to meet with. Visitation. Funeral. Cemetery. Your mind goes numb with shock. We've all been there, or if you haven't, you will. Eventually, you will.

Let me tell you one thing the Bible never says. The Bible never says, "Thou shalt not grieve." Grief at the death of a loved one is normal and natural. That's because death is unnatural. Now, we're sort of used to the fact that death is real, but that doesn't make it natural. There was no death in the world until the decision to sin was made. Death is an invader, and when it invades, it is devastating, because it wasn't supposed to be this way. Our faith allows us to feel this pain. It never says "deny your grief," or "stuff it down where no one can see." Look at Jesus, standing outside of the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He is deeply moved and "greatly troubled." He cries. He cries, even though he's about to bring Lazarus back to life! Jesus, the Lord of Life, shows us that grief is an appropriate reaction to death. He honors grief as something that can be holy in the face of great unholiness. So again, the Bible never says "Thou shalt not grieve." Here's what it does say:

"...we do not want you to be uninformed...about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

The Christian is permitted—even invited—to grieve, but it is grief with a difference. The Christian grieves with hope.

What does that mean? It means that the brightness of hope sits right next to the darkness of grief, and the fact that bright hope is there enables the believing Christian to keep living with confidence. This "hope" is the expectation that all of God's promises will come true. So here's the expectant hope we can have right alongside our grief, from 1 Thessalonians 4:

- The risen, living Lord Jesus is coming back.
- When He returns, there will be a physical resurrection from the dead.
- If you're alive when this happens, you will be miraculously drawn to Jesus and all believers.
- And so we will always be with the Lord. That is heaven.

Let's look at each of these.

- The risen, living Lord Jesus is coming back. If you are a believer, doesn't your heart yearn for this to happen? It's the last prayer in the Bible. "Come, Lord Jesus." Paul writes that "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." Why is the Lord descending? He's coming to pull us out of the reach of despair, violence, and death. That day really is coming. We get to finally see Jesus.

- When He returns, there will be a physical resurrection from the dead. What started on Easter continues here. Jesus brings the souls of those who died in Him, and as Paul says, “the dead in Christ will rise first.” Expectant hope looks forward to a time when you will live in a resurrected, perfect human body. In the resurrection and life of the world to come, you will run, jump, and hug people in a body that never lets you down. Never degrades. Never gets injured. Never needs surgery. The promise of a resurrected, glorified body is real and is a major source of Christian hope, especially for those enduring suffering.
- If you’re alive when this happens, you will miraculously be drawn to Jesus and all believers. Paul says “...we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” To be totally candid, I have no idea how this works. It indicates that suddenly, reality as we know it changes, the old passes away, and we’re now able to be with Jesus and all believers in the clouds. But the emphasis is not on the ‘special effects,’ as it were. The emphasis is on reunion. Again, Paul writes, “...we will be caught up together with them (in the clouds) to meet the Lord...” Who is “them”? Every single believer who died in Christ, whose soul has been joined to a risen body; all the saints; the whole family of God, re-united, to meet the Lord Jesus. Reunited with those you’ve been longing to see. The Great Reunion happens when Jesus returns, which goes right into...
- “And so we will always be with the Lord.” There are beautiful, mind-expanding pictures of heaven in the Bible, most notably in the Book of Revelation. But, for what it’s worth, this is my favorite description of heaven. We will always be with the Lord. Think about what that means. If you would, I’d like you to envision one person that you love to spend time with. If you have free time, this is the first person you call. OK. Got that person in mind? I’m going to guess that there is a frustration in that relationship, and the frustration is, that when you spend time together, it goes too fast. You might even wish you could freeze a moment in time, because you don’t want it to end. Well, that’s exactly what Paul says is on the horizon for God’s people. “We will always be with the Lord.” Always. Not only will you be in direct contact with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but you will never have to say good-bye. You’ll never have to “wait until next time.” “Always be with the Lord” means uninterrupted joy and happiness. It also means that reunion we were thinking about with those who have gone before us in faith never has to end either.

If any of these promises are lifting you up; lifting your spirits; helping you see beyond your circumstances; if you are having a “yeah, let’s go!” reaction to these words, you are experiencing hope. Paul concludes by saying, “...encourage one another with these words,” and it isn’t hard to see how they would. This is what the Lord Jesus sets right next to your grief, to battle it and finally overcome it. This is what you and I have to offer in the hospital, the hospice center, or the emergency room. This is what you and I can offer at the funeral home, and the cemetery, and the graveside. With compassion you can encourage the hurting, even when the hurting is you, with words of promise.

Jesus is coming back.

A physical resurrection is on the way.

A reunion celebration is promised.

We will always be with the Lord.

And all of this—the whole package—comes to you as a gift of grace. A gift paid for by Jesus death and resurrection. A gift of hope.