Comforting hope for the dead in Christ and for the living (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)

The tragedies of war are distant, but the realities are made evident, are just as true here as there. Life is fragile and brief. There is evil in human hearts. Though God's love is powerful, there can be much grief. Grief can be real to us. Some is right, some is understandable, some is wrong.

The Thessalonian believers were grieving for their brothers and sisters in Christ who had died, like those who grieved without hope. That shouldn't be. Paul gave them truths to correct that misplaced grieving, truths with which they could comfort and encourage one another. The broader picture, which they knew and Paul assumed, gives us the same basis for comfort and encouragement in trials and for believers who die. True comfort is based upon well-informed hope or firm expectations.

1. ***Expect the return of Jesus Christ at any moment.***
   a. The return of Christ was not the point of ignorance for the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess 1:9–10; 1 Cor 11:26).
   b. The early teachings included this truth (John 14:1–3; Acts 1:11; 3:20–21).
   c. Paul anticipated Christ's return within his lifetime, i.e., at any moment (1 Thess 4:15, 17 "we who are alive and left; cf. ch. 5).
2. ***Expect a future resurrection of the redeemed in Christ.***
   a. The future resurrection of the redeemed in Christ was also not their point of ignorance. It is assumed in Paul's argument (v14) and vigorously defended elsewhere when denied.
   b. It was an early teaching from the Old Testament and Jesus Himself (Daniel 12:2; John 11:24–25).
   c. Those united with Christ would participated in both His death and in His resurrection (Rom 6:5, 8; 8:11).
   d. The resurrection is affirmed in Paul's argument. The death and resurrection of Jesus (14a) is the foundation for the promise that God with bring with Jesus those who sleep (14b) and necessarily assumes their resurrection. It explains the use of "sleep" (vv 13, 14, 15) and "died" (v 14) and "dead" (v 16). The unusual "asleep in him" (v 14, literally "asleep through him") may then mean that through the work of Christ death has become merely sleep for believers.

   This is no basis for so-called "soul sleep", since the Bible clearly teaches elsewhere continued consciousness after death (Luke 16:19–31; 23:43; 2 Cor 5:6; Phil 1:23; Rev 6:9–11).
3. ***Expect the full participation in all the blessings and glory of Christ's return for all those who are in Christ.***
   a. The Thessalonian believers did not know how Christ's return and the resurrection fit together chronologically. If this was their particular "ignorance", it explains the emphasis on chronological order (v 15). This truth had been revealed by the Lord probably through a New Testament prophet.
   b. Until about 300 A.D. the majority view of the future kingdom was that Jesus would return to reign on earth for 1000 years. If this was their understanding, the Thessalonian believers would have anticipated a glorious, blessed reign of Christ on earth. They might have thought that those who died would not.
4. ***Expect with joy to spend eternity with Jesus Christ.***
   a. The future hope is primarily to be with Jesus, not merely in heaven (John 14:3; Revelation 21:3). If you are more interested in heaven rather than Jesus, there is a problem.
   b. Believers are instructed to comfort or encourage one another with these truths.

Our need for comfort is not isolated to this special instance. The basis for true comfort is always the truth. Some comfort comes from knowing that Jesus can return soon. The dead will be raised, the living transformed. True believers will forever be with Jesus.

The basis for our comfort is the truth. Some of those truths concern the future. Jesus is returning at any moment. The dead will be raised. We will be transformed and join them in the air to meet Jesus. We will be with Jesus forever.

These are certain facts. There is comfort in that. They cannot be reversed. These things are good for every believer. There is comfort in that. There is a reunion with other believers. There is joy in that.

Eternity is before us and we can be prepared to enjoy it.

© 2017 David Manduka