

AN EXPECTANT OUTLOOK

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

Danny Hall

I gravitate toward weird news, and several weeks ago I found an article in the Saturday “Religion and Family” section of *The Mercury News* entitled “Many Baby Boomers Are Dying to Find Creative Alternatives to Typical Funerals.” Here is an excerpt:

“Jeweler David D’Aquin knows that he will be stone dead some day. The idea tickles him. At least the “stone” part. That’s because D’Aquin will become a brilliant half-carat diamond that will dangle from the neck of the woman he loves. Similar diamonds will become rings for each of his three sons. D’Aquin is 49 and in fine health. But when he dies, he plans for his cremated ashes to be made into four royal blue gems. One will go to Rebecca Green, who is now his fiancée. He will also design the signet rings bearing the diamonds that go to his sons. D’Aquin, whose nickname is Diamond Dave, had this thought when he heard about his post-cremation option: “I can be Diamond Dave forever!”

D’Aquin’s choice reflects a growing movement toward non-traditional funeral alternatives. The funeral industry sources say people are choosing more personal and unusual ways of making their final farewell. Six feet under? How about 24,000 miles overhead? Your ashes can be loaded into a rocket and fired into earth orbit. Or, if you like, your remains can go to the moon or into deep space. Prefer to explore new depths instead? Then sleep with the fishes. Have your ashes mixed with concrete, cast into a replica of coral reef and sunk at a spot of your choosing. A California company packs ashes into fireworks and puts on a show. A Mississippi firm blends ashes into paintings. And an Iowa outfit stuffs ashes into duck decoys, basketballs or shotgun shells.” (1)

The specter of death has a weird effect on us. We do all kinds of things to deny that it’s going to happen. Sometimes we live in mortal fear of it. Sometimes we are driven to conjure up a bizarre or creative legacy or funeral. But death is one of those sure things in life, and it poses great spiritual and emotional challenges for us.

In our study of the book of 1 Thessalonians we have come to a passage where the Thessalonians were dealing with some issues about death. They had fully believed that Christ would return in their lifetime, but then some of those in the believing family began to pass away. Further, the normal fear of death had become entangled in their misunderstanding about the second coming of Christ. So they were really perplexed and disturbed. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 the apostle Paul begins to answer some questions related to this and directs their attention toward God’s sovereignty in history and his plan for Christ’s second coming. Paul’s complete answer will span the texts for both this message and the next one. In this passage he focuses on the subject of death and their troubled state.

We are in a series of messages I have called *Seven Characteristics of a Healthy, Growing Church*, and we have come to the fifth characteristic. In Paul’s interaction with the Thessalonian church, he gives them a sense of the things they have accomplished in Christ that he is really proud of, and he encourages them to grow in some areas. Using that, we have been laying out these principles of a healthy, growing church. We’ll review them a bit later in the message.

This passage and the following one (5:1-11) have similar patterns. They each begin with a statement of the issues involved. In 4:13 Paul says, “We do not want you to be uninformed.” In 5:1 he says, “As to the times and epochs . . . you have no need of anything to be written to you.” In each he acknowledges what they already know or don’t know. Then he explains the issue, brings home one summary truth that he wants them to hang on to, and gives them an exhortation to apply this truth.

Paul says that the Thessalonians are uninformed about some things. He draws their attention to two mistakes in their thinking about death, the second coming, and so on. One was that in anticipation of the second coming, some of the people had disengaged from normal life. We saw a reference to that earlier in chapter 4, and in 2 Thessalonians 3 there is a more direct reference to that problem. These people were the prototype, so to speak, of all those who have gone off to a hilltop to wait for Jesus to return. They had left the normal flow of life, abandoned their jobs in some cases. They certainly had lost their sense of calling as the people of God in their immediate context, and some problems had arisen from that. In the next message we will deal with the outcome of that and Paul’s admonition.

The other mistake in their thinking was this fear and confusion they had about death. Fear of death has crippled all of us at one time or another. People either don’t want to think about it, or they try to find some way to cope with it, perhaps some spiritual system that will give them some sense of hope. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, so that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.” That’s a profound description of how the reality of our mortality can cause us to be gripped by fear and slavery to that fear.

So in response to the confusion about all this, Paul writes these words in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

In this passage Paul gives them the foundation for their hope, an explanation of their hope, and finally an admonition to apply the impact of this hope to their daily lives.

The death and resurrection of Jesus

First, in talking about the foundation of their hope, three times in this passage Paul refers to those believers who had died as being asleep (*koimao*). Throughout the New Testament whenever that word is used, it refers to believers who have died. Death for believers is merely a transition into the next day, the dawning of eternal life in the presence of Christ. So describing believers as being asleep when they die is very appropriate.

Paul roots the foundation of their hope in something very important in verse 14: “For if [literally “since”] we believe that Jesus died and rose again . . .” All that they looked forward to with great anticipation was rooted in the historical reality of what Christ had accomplished in his death and

resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 Paul writes these words:

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

If we are ever going to be liberated from the things that bring us to the point of despair and discouragement and fear, it will be because we fully grasp all that Christ has done for us in his death and resurrection.

I remember a holy moment a few years ago. I was with a discipleship group of Stanford students. We were meeting in a little study room in one of the dorms. We had been studying the book of Romans together, and we had come to 3:21ff, that wonderful, rich passage describing what Christ has done for us in his death. One week we were doing some word studies of the words “justification,” “redemption,” and “propitiation.” These words are rich with imagery and power and meaning. We started out with all the technical issues like how to use the tools to look up backgrounds and etymologies. Then we started sharing what we were finding out, and as we did so this picture was being built of what these wonderful words were teaching. All of a sudden it seemed as if the Holy Spirit brought every person in that room a moment of clarity when it all clicked, and everything got very quiet. No one could say a word. It was one of those holy moments when the Spirit of God opened up the word and we really understood just a measure of the richness and wonder of Christ’s sacrifice for us.

The return of Christ

Now Paul goes on to explain this hope that is rooted in the foundation of Christ’s death and resurrection. First, notice Paul’s attitude of expectancy. I love this. He is talking about how God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, and then in verse 15 he says, “We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord.” He uses the phrase “we who are alive and remain” again in verse 17. He fully believed that he could very well live right up to the day that Jesus came back! He woke up every day believing that *that could be the day* that Christ came again! This was his blessed hope.

But Paul lived almost two thousand years ago. You may be saying, “My goodness, it’s been an awfully long time, hasn’t it?” If you are skeptical, the Bible speaks to that. Look at 2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-9:

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming?”

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

You see, we get caught up in reckoning time from our human perspective. Two minutes is a long time to

wait for anything in our world, to say nothing of a thousand years. But God, the sovereign Lord of history, has determined that moment when Christ will come again, and he is patiently waiting for his work to be completed. We live every day with the possibility and the hope that this could be the day. But each day that it is delayed, it is because God is allowing more and more people to hear the wonderful news of his grace and love. You and I get to be part of that as we continue to share God's grace and love with people who need him. So rather than being impatient, we should be thankful that in God's sovereignty and love he has delayed his coming for the sake of these people. That's why it's so important to not get caught in the error of disengaging from the world and from our calling.

Paul was full of anticipation and longing for Christ to come again. I get up every morning anticipating other things--dealing with problems of various sorts. I wonder how many of us wake up every morning saying, "This could be the day that I see my Lord face to face!"

Paul then goes on to describe the drama of Christ's return. What a picture! This language is difficult for us to get our minds around. Verse 16: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God...." There is wonderful imagery of several things here. First there is majesty. This incredible shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God are heard throughout the earth. They are announcing the arrival of the King. They signal the majesty and glory and wonder of God himself.

The phrase translated "the coming of the Lord" in verse 15 has been understood in various ways. The word translated "coming," *parousia*, literally means to be alongside or present. It came to be used technically to indicate the arrival of a dignitary or king. I believe this is the sense in which Paul uses it. It is significant that this word was used when a conquering king was returning. The people would rush out to meet the king as he came in and escort him back to be enthroned in his kingdom. The imagery here is of victory. Jesus has conquered death and sin, and he is about to establish his kingdom over all. He is the victorious King who is returning, and his people have gone out to meet him.

Finally, this event is described as a reunion of saints. When the king returned he would bring all those who had been out in battle with him, and those who were still in the town would rush out to meet them in a glorious, grand reunion, a celebration around the victorious, returning king. This is a picture of how Christ with all those who are asleep in him will return, resurrected, and we will join them, and all of us will celebrate our coming King together.

Now, I may disappoint you, but I'm not going to go into the chronology of these events, because it's beyond the scope of what we can do here. Bible-believing, Christ-loving saints of God have disagreed over this for many years and will go on doing so. I don't want us to miss the point of what Paul is teaching us here. This is the dramatic coronation of Jesus Christ, the celebration of his lordship, and the reunion of his saints around his glorious appearing. It is filled with hope for the time when we will see our King face to face.

The final outcome is in verse 17: "We shall always be with the Lord." The day is coming when the physical separation of the Lord from his people will be over. Christ is surely present with us, but his bodily return will be the culmination of this long period of waiting to see him face to face. Then we will be with him forever, never again to be separated from the wonder and glory of his presence in any way, shape, or form. Paul says, "This is a sure thing. This is your hope." In Titus 2:13 he calls this "the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

Comfort one another

Now Paul gives the Thessalonians an exhortation concerning the impact of their hope. Verse 18:

“Therefore comfort one another with these words.” You know, life is messy. I wish it weren’t. But somewhere along the way we will face the gamut of human experience. We will face tragedy and discouragement. We will be overwhelmed and will want to give up. Instead of waking up in the morning saying, “This could be the day when Christ will come,” we will wake up and say, “I can’t believe I have to face another day.” We’ll want to somehow cocoon ourselves away from all the pain. What then?

Well, we will still be part of the company of faith. We will still have the same sure hope. We can walk alongside one another and remind one another constantly that the pain of this life has an end. There is a day coming when Christ will come again to be crowned the King of kings and Lord of lords, when he will wipe away every tear, when justice will be meted out fairly and everything will be set right, when God’s new heaven and earth will come and this place will become what God always intended it to be. In the midst of tragedy and struggle we can stand with each other and say, “Jesus, the one who died and rose again, the one who is coming again, is our hope. This is where we place our faith.”

When we fully understand the glorious hope that is out there for us, when by faith and the testimony of God’s word and the reality of what he has already done for us, we look down the road and anticipate that day when he will come again, then we will be liberated from the slavery of ourselves and the slavery of the drudgery of life, because we are living in the stream of history that points toward that great event of Christ’s return. People who are living in hope are liberated people. People who have no hope are enslaved. People who question their hope are certainly burdened down. But God calls us to live in the hope of Christ’s return and encourage each other until then.

Let’s review for a moment. We have discovered that a healthy, growing church:

1. Has a vital connection to the living God.
2. Has a deep reliance on the word of God.
3. Perseveres in the face of all obstacles as God grows it up to maturity.
4. Has an ever-deepening obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ as it follows him fully and allows him to change it into his own image.

And now we can see that a healthy, growing church:

5. Lives in the liberating hope of the Lord’s return.

Because this could be the day, we will live it to the fullest for his glory. There is more Scripture that talks about the second coming of Christ than about the first coming of Christ. It’s God’s end game. We are anticipating that, and we live in the freedom of that. God is in control of history, and his purposes will be worked out. We can live knowing that one day we will be seeing him face to face.

Several years ago I was traveling a lot for my ministry. Sometimes I would go by plane, and when I flew home Ginger would usually pick me up at the airport with Christopher. He was just a preschooler then. When you come out of customs into the main terminal at the airport, sliding doors suddenly open up and there is this crowd standing right there waiting to meet arriving passengers. And as soon as those doors were open, I’d see Christopher’s little face just light up. His daddy was home! That’s kind of the way it will be when our Lord and Savior comes back, when the veil is lifted and he is there! How many of us can’t wait for our Savior to come back? One day that joy is going to be ours. Today we can live in that blessed hope, free to follow Christ day by day.

NOTES:

(1) Steve Steinberg, *Dallas Morning News*: “Many baby boomers are dying to find creative alternatives to typical funerals.” Published in the *Mercury News*, summer 2003.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4862
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Fifth Message
Danny Hall
July 27, 2003

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2003 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.