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WHAT ELEPHANT? 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

There is a commercial on television where a couple are sitting at a table and one says to the other, "Remember that today we need to review our retirement plan." Immediately she starts cleaning the kitchen floor saying, "Gotta clean the floor." Then he says, "Gotta change the oil in the car." The scene shifts back to her trying to wrangle control of a power washer and she says, "Gotta power wash the rose bushes." The message is that they would do anything to avoid talking about their retirement plan. It's a subject they want to avoid at all cost.

Today we have a topic that's kind of like that. It's the topic that might cause us to decide we'd rather go to the dentist or work on our tax forms than think about this. We are all familiar with the expression "the elephant in the room." It alludes to a topic so loud and glaring that it is impossible to miss, but no one wants to talk about it. They'd much rather say, "Elephant? What elephant?" and pretend it's not there. Today we are going to think about the largest, most upsetting elephant on the planet, and it is one that is in everybody's room. The topic is death. Paul hits it head on in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

We come to church hoping to be inspired, uplifted. Who wants to think about death? Three men who are in a support group for patients with terminal illnesses are talking and discuss the question, "When you are in your casket and friends are mourning you, what would you like to hear them say about you?" The first man, a doctor, says, "I'd like them to say that I was a brilliant physician, but also a great family man." The second man, a teacher, says, "I would like to hear that I was a great husband and father but also that I inspired my students and made a difference in their lives." The last man, a sales rep, says, "I'd like to hear them say, 'Look, he's moving!'" We survived talking about sex in the first part of this chapter, so hopefully we will get through this as well.

WE NEED HOPE

Paul told the Thessalonians that Jesus, the Messiah, risen from the dead, is alive and is going to physically return to this earth to reign. We will see that he taught that could happen at any time. That message shows up in every chapter of this letter, so it played a big part in their faith. This created in the Thessalonians an

expectation that Jesus was going to come soon. You can understand this. If a loved one told you he or she was going to leave for a while but would come back, you would assume they meant it wouldn't be too long before they came back. The early disciples of Jesus expected he would be back any day. They believed that he would return in their lifetimes. The idea that it might be hundreds of years never even entered their minds. As a result they had the expectation that they would not die but would be alive when Jesus came back.

However, as Paul wrote this letter some of the believers in Thessalonica have died. This came as an unpleasant shock. They didn't know how to think about that. They were dealing with confusion on top of their grief. Why didn't Jesus come back? Why was he delaying? And what happened to those who are now dead? Did their death mean they miss out on being in the kingdom of God and living eternally? The whole thing was disorienting for them. So at the end of chapter 4 Paul explains how they should think about death in order to restore their hope.

He tells them that we who are believers do not grieve like those who have no hope. His point, as we will see, is that there is still the same hope for those who have died as for those who are still alive. The major point of this passage is that in Christ there is hope for us even after death.

Notice that Paul doesn't say, "we don't grieve." Nowhere does the Bible suggest that believers in Jesus do not grieve when a loved one dies. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. In Acts 9 there is the story of Tabitha, a godly woman who was known for her gracious good deeds on behalf of others. She died, and her death was devastating. Verse 39 says as they told Peter about her the people were weeping. They grieved over her death.

From personal experience I can tell you that if you ever go through grief there will quite possibly be someone who will tell you that you shouldn't feel so bad. After all, God works all things for the good, and there is hope, so you should trust in him and then it won't hurt so bad. However, the Bible never suggests that we should not fully hurt and grieve when we suffer a loss. You will see as we go through this passage that those who tell you that you shouldn't hurt so much fail to understand what grief is about. When we understand it we will see that it is not only reasonable, it is precisely what we should feel when we lose a loved one.

Author Joan Didion wrote in her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* about the effect on her when her husband died. She said grief has the power to "derange the mind." She found it impossible to accept that her husband was really dead. She

said, “I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome.” She was clearing out her husband’s clothes but found she couldn’t bear to give away his shoes. She stopped, trying to understand why. Finally she realized it was because she was thinking he would need them if he returned.

Grief is a pain so overwhelming it scrambles our thinking. If it is all that we have, life becomes nearly unbearable. Death is so terribly and painfully permanent. In the aftermath of death the crucial question has to do with whether death is more like the final whistle of a football game or the whistle at the end of the second quarter. Hey, if it’s only halftime, then the situation is totally different. Yes, there will be a pause, but then we come back for more. But if it is the end of the game then there is no more. For many in the world it is the end of the game. There is no hope. And that is an anguish for which there is no description and no relief.

Paul’s point here is that we don’t grieve like that. For the believer in Jesus death is like halftime. Yes, there is a pause, but there is more to come. Is it not obvious that those two kinds of grief are vastly different? Death is inevitable and if we are ever to live freely and joyfully, if we are ever to be able to not be dominated by fear of death and loss, we must have hope.

One of the most difficult aspects of being a pastor is having to deal with the horrible reality of death. Laurie and I received a call that the 4 year old daughter of some members of our church had suffered an accident in the swimming pool and they were at the hospital. We rushed to be with them, and were there when they got the news that she had died. I vividly remember the day when I was told that there had been an accident involving a train in Cardiff, and it was possible the son of members of our church was involved. We rushed to the scene to be with our friends, to discover that their college age son had been hit by a train and killed.

Then there was the time that we got word that a family in our church had been skiing and there had been an accident on the slopes. In a freak accident a wonderful high school age son was killed. In all of those situations it was young, vital, healthy people who were shockingly yanked out of this life. There was no anticipation of danger or risk on any of those occasions, yet suddenly for those families life took a dark and fatal turn that would affect them forever. There have been so many more. There was the Marine helicopter pilot who was killed in the Middle East. The dad of 3 kids who was killed in an automobile accident. Laurie and I, of course, have gone through it ourselves when our first son died, but it could have happened to us again. Carissa spent the good part of one summer while

in college touring Honduras singing in a Christian rock band that did concerts throughout the country. One day they set up to do a concert in a rural village, and as they were setting up she developed a cough. The cough grew worse and worse until as they began the concert she was having difficulty breathing. It got so bad that they realized she needed help, so they took her to a hospital. At the hospital it began to grow serious, as her extremities began to cramp because they weren't getting oxygen. Increasingly she was unable to breathe. The hospital was unable to help her, so they rushed her to another bigger facility. They got her on oxygen and finally it eased off. Laurie and I knew nothing of this because she was out of contact with us the entire time she was in Honduras. It was determined that she had an allergic reaction to something they were burning in the fields in that village. She could quite easily have died that day, and we would have known nothing about it until we got the word our beautiful daughter was gone.

To this day the horrible, shocking arrival of death in our lives impacts me. Laurie and I were taking care of our granddaughter, Ella. She typically takes 45 minute naps. Anna came to pick her up right about the time she would wake up. But she was sound asleep. After an hour and a half Anna went to check on her and I found myself fearfully praying, "Oh please God, let her be all right." I was afraid Anna would find her not breathing. What a terrible weight.

The unfortunate truth is that death is inescapable. The experiences I just mentioned are a reminder that it can intrude at any moment and totally blow up the lives of everyone touched by it. The only people who don't think they need some way of dealing with death, of having some hope in the face of death, are people who have never had to grieve the loss of someone they loved so much that losing them is far worse than losing a body part. Those who have endured that know that they need some way of coping with it.

What we need is hope. Laurie and I were recently reminiscing about our relationship and how it came about. It didn't happen in the traditional way of a boy asking a girl out on dates. Our relationship grew out of a friendship that just clicked almost from the moment we met. However, there was a period in our relationship when it had become obvious that it was way more than a friendship, but what that meant was unclear. I could no longer deny even to myself that I loved Laurie, but she was young and didn't know quite what to do with me. She told me she loved me, but then decided that she didn't. I asked if she wanted me to go away or was there hope for us. She said no, she didn't want me to go away and that there was hope. As long as there was hope, I was willing to hang in there. Within a couple of weeks she told me she did, indeed love me and that she would not take

that back. And she never did. And a few weeks after that we were engaged. The key was hope. Without hope I would have given up, but because there was hope I did not give up, and as a result got the greatest blessing life could ever give me, having Laurie as my wife.

Hope is the only thing that can enable us to deal with death. And the great news for believers in Jesus is we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Yes, we grieve, but we have hope in Jesus Christ, and that changes everything.

OUR HOPE IS IN THE COMING OF JESUS

Our culture offers us no hope. It says we are mere accidents of chemistry, physics and biology. We are nothing more than chemical reactions and matter. When we die our atoms get recycled back into the universe and that's the end of it. Death seems permanent because it is. Anything to the contrary is purely wishful thinking that bears as much relation to reality as the statements that came out of the Padres camp in spring training that they were going to compete for a playoff spot this year.

Other cultures attempt to offer some sort of hope. The eastern religions tell us we will be reincarnated. This is a tough system to live under. If you don't behave yourself you could come back as a sea slug or a cockroach. I wonder what a cockroach has to do to start climbing the ladder in order to come back as something better after it dies. Then there is the belief that somehow when we die we will all go to this beautiful white light and it will be wonderful.

The problem with every single theory that tries to give us hope is that when you come to the bottom line, there is no solid, believable evidence for any of it. We hear stories of near death experiences and some of them affirm the "go to the light" theory. But have you noted the obvious flaw in all of that? Near death is not the same as death. In the movie *The Princess Bride* Wesley was only mostly dead, and that's not the same as dead. Near death is more like mostly dead. It really proves nothing about true death.

This is where following Jesus gives us so much hope. Verse 14 says, "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." We do not believe in the resurrection because some religious dreamer came up with a theory. We believe it because Jesus died and then rose from the grave. Jesus was challenged by his opponents to give some sign that he was really divine and had the right to challenge their understanding of God and his rules. This ignored the fact that he was giving them

signs all over the landscape with healings by the bushel. But his response in Matthew 12:40 was, “as Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth.”

Let me paraphrase that for you. “You want a sign? All right, I’ll give you a sign. The sign will be that I will die and be buried, and on the third day I will come out of my grave. That will be the sign that I am who I claim to be.” Jesus gave that sign, proving that he was God revealing himself in human form, that he has power over death, and that those who believe in him will come out of the grave just as he did. In John 11:25 he said, “the one who believes in me will live even though they die.” We have hope because Jesus gave proof in human history that there is life after death for those who believe in him.

Suppose you lived at the beginning of the 20th century. What if someone asked you in 1904 whether you believed it would be possible for human beings to create heavier than air machines that would be able to fly and carry a human being? You've never seen such a machine. You can't even imagine how such a thing could be possible. But at that point you could say, "Not only do I believe it, I know it is true, because someone has done it." In 1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright proved it was possible by doing it. Your dream of flying someday would be reasonable because it had been done. That's what Jesus has done for us. We don't believe in life after death because we desperately want it to be true, but because Jesus has proven it in history.

We can believe it with confidence because Peter saw Jesus alive after he had died and unabashedly told people about it, even though his insistence on the truth of the claim cost him his life. So did John, and James, and Andrew and poor old doubting Thomas. Hundreds of people saw Jesus alive after his resurrection. And even Paul, the one who was enraged by people who claimed Jesus rose from the grave, finally had to believe because he saw him. We have hope that is grounded in a real life historical event. We have been given proof that there is reason to hope.

Paul went on to tell us how dead believers will rise from the grave. Christ will appear with the trumpet, the voice of the archangel, and the dead in Christ will rise. Together with believers who are alive at the time of Jesus’ return they will meet Jesus, and then be with him forever. In other words, don’t worry about those who have died. They will be as alive when Jesus returns as those who have never had to enter the grave. This passage raises some eschatological questions. That’s a big theological word derived from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means last.

Eschatology is the study of the last things, or last times. There are a number of theories about the order of events when Jesus comes back.

Some believe that Jesus is going to appear in the air, believers in Jesus will be snatched up to meet him and go to the spiritual realm. The word translated "caught up" in verse 17 is *harpazo* giving rise to the Rapture, made especially famous by the *Left Behind* books. That will initiate a time of horrific judgment, a period of 7 years called the Great Tribulation. At the end of that time Jesus will come all the way back and set up his reign on earth. Others believe that Jesus will come back at the end of that period of severe tribulation. Still others believe there will be no such 7 year period and Jesus will just show up and order everybody out of the pool.

Well, which is it? No one knows for certain, despite the arguments of some theologians. It is helpful for us to remember that the ancient rabbis studied the predictions of the coming of Messiah as though through a microscope. They were Felix Unger thorough in their study and debate about it. And they were all wrong. None of them thought Messiah would be and do what he actually proved to be and do. In light of that it is wise for us to be humble and hold very loosely any position on the way those events are going to turn out. Whatever we think about it will likely be off base in some aspects. For a reason we will see in the next chapter I lean toward that first theory, but I have my doubts and I will not argue with anyone who happens to disagree. As the old joke goes, I'm a pan-millennialist, meaning I believe it will all pan out in the end.

What is most important is to understand that Jesus will come back and those who are dead in Christ will rise from the dead and live eternally in his kingdom of light. We don't have to fear death, and we don't have to hopelessly grieve those in Christ who are gone. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 says, "I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." Verses 54-55 say, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Do you see what Paul is doing in those verses? He is trash talking at death. Where's your big win now, death? It's nowhere. You lose! And you lose big! In your face, Death!

JESUS IS PREPARING A GREAT PLACE FOR US

In verse 17 Paul says having met the Lord we will be forever with him. This is the final destiny of those who believe in Jesus. We will live with him forever in his kingdom. What a terrific experience that will be. On occasion you will encounter someone who thinks that heaven will be boring. They could not be more wrong.

Throughout the Bible there is a thread that runs that tells us that the thing we need and want most is to attain to living eternally in God's kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount, which so many people claim to admire, Jesus began by saying, "blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The heart of that sermon is about what it takes to get that which every human heart longs for, the kingdom of heaven. At the end of the Bible we see in the final chapters of Revelation depictions of that kingdom. God closes his revelation saying, "here is what you desire, here is your hope."

Friday night some friends took us out for dinner to a very nice restaurant. These days very nice restaurants present a challenge to me. I wish it were not so but I am cursed with a palette that would be considered by most everyone to be boring, bland and low brow. I love a good hamburger, French fries, tacos, pizza as long as it's not overly seasoned. I like macaroni and cheese. My own kids just shake their heads at my plain preferences. Fine restaurants usually have chefs that are striving to make creative dishes. Read that "dishes that Rick won't like at all." So I looked over the menu in despair, noting something on the descriptions of the items something I feared I wouldn't like on nearly every one. What I really wanted to do was order a nice, safe hamburger, but it would have been humiliating to admit I'm as cultured and sophisticated as a 6 year old. I ordered one item, but then realized I wouldn't especially enjoy it. Just before our server left I changed my order to something I thought I might not be crazy about. Then the meal came. What I had was incredible. I didn't know I wanted this, but I would love to eat it every week! It was terrific. It was what I really wanted. Heaven is going to be like that. We may not even realize how much we want it, but when we taste it we are going to say, "Where has this been all my life?"

In Philippians 1:23 Paul was in prison, on trial for his life, with the possibility of either being released or being executed. He said, "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." Wait, he didn't know which to choose? Let's see, live or die. That doesn't seem like a very difficult choice to me. Live or die? Duh. I'd take live every time. But Paul said his choice was to die!

In verse 24 he said if he continued to live that would mean more opportunity to serve Christ, and that's a good thing. But if he was given his personal choice, he would go be with Christ. Why? Because he knew living in the presence of Christ in the heavenly realm was better than living in this world. Not just a little better, but better by far.

Suppose I offered to give you a vacation. I have two options for you to choose from and I will give you either one that you desire, all expenses paid. The first option is two glorious weeks at the Motel 6 in Barstow with meals at McDonald's. The second option is two weeks at the spectacular Hyatt Regency on the island of Kauai with all meals at their wonderful restaurants. Would you say, "Well, either one is fine with me. Give me whichever you think best. I'll be good either way"? Would you say, "Barstow! Let me stay in Barstow." Or would you jump at the Hyatt in Kauai? If you're sane you'd take Kauai, because it's not just better, it's better by the width of the universe.

Paul said that being with Christ, dying and going to be with him, is like that choice. It is better by lightyears than living in this world. How did he know? Had he been there? As a matter of fact, he had. Part of the reason he knew it was better is that Jesus told him it was. But part of the reason was that he had actually been given a glimpse of that world. In 2 Corinthians 12 he wrote that God had actually shown him a bit of life in heaven. Having seen what it is like Paul said, "Man, I can't wait. You should see this place. It is spectacular."

In John 14:2 Jesus encouraged his disciples. He knew they were going to be devastated by his leaving. But he said he was going to his Father's house and he would prepare a place for them there. He is preparing a place for us. My question is, what kind of place do you think Jesus would prepare for people he loved enough to die for them? I feel safe in suggesting that it won't be a deal where they will go and be bored to tears, where they'll hate it and wish they could leave. It will be a place where they will love being there and never want anything else.

Randy Alcorn wrote in his book *In Light of Eternity*, "Every joy on earth--including the joy of reunion--is but an inkling, a whisper of greater joy. Niagara Falls, Lake Victoria, the Grand Canyon, the world's great mountains and coastlines, all these will prove to be but rough sketches of heaven." He goes on to say, "the best parts of the old world were sneak previews of this one."

After Michael returned from his deployment to Afghanistan, he and Carissa celebrated by taking a second honeymoon in Bora Bora. When they returned they were effusive about how much they loved it. They talked about the scenery that was out of this world gorgeous, the beautiful weather, the spectacular food, the amazing warm water and the snorkeling and more. They told us they wish we could go there because we would love it. I believe them. I've never been there. I suspect I never will go there. I trust what they tell me and think I would love the

place. I've never been to heaven, but I hear what Jesus, John, Paul, Peter and others tell me, really what God tells me, and I know I'm going to love it.

I know the experience of heaven will be better than anything I can envision. When Laurie and I were engaged we were given a great gift that has affected us ever since. We were given as a wedding present a week in a condo on the island of Kauai. We were going to have a honeymoon in Hawaii. Some friends told us what Hawaii was like and we saw some pictures of it. So we were pretty sure we were going to like it, but the reality was better than I could have envisioned. As we flew in to the islands we landed first at Honolulu. Coming in I was dazzled by the scenery. The turquoise water near the shore was just spectacular. Laurie and I oohed and aahed the entire time of our approach to Honolulu. In fact, throughout our honeymoon we were dazzled by the place. When we came back from our honeymoon we told people about our trip and showed them our pictures. We tried to explain how beautiful the place was. But the reactions we got were mostly, "Yes, it sounds very nice." Even our pictures failed to capture the spectacular glory we had seen. We envisioned what Hawaii would be like, and it far exceeded our imagination. It exceeded our ability to describe it. So it will be with heaven. It will exceed the best that we can envision. Paul said that what he experienced in the vision he was given of heaven was inexpressible. That's just like what we found on our return from Hawaii. We could not adequately put into words what we experienced. That's the glory and joy that awaits us.

So now the Thessalonians and we know how to think about those who have "fallen asleep" in Christ. I know how to think about my son, Joel and my Dad. They are gone, to be sure. But they are with the Lord in that place that is so wonderful we cannot even dream of it. They are free, totally free, of guilt, pain, sorrow and fear and are experiencing only joy.

CONCLUSION

ADMIT YOU NEED HOPE

You cannot have fullness of life until you have an answer, a real world answer, for death. It will stalk you and those you love relentlessly and there will never be a moment free of fear. There will be no peace. You can say that you just accept that death is the end and you're okay with that, right up until the time when someone you love desperately is taken from you. Right up until the doctor says to you, "it's terminal." Until you have hope you will always have that fearful elephant in every room you enter in your life.

In those moments, and really in every moment, the only thing that can help you is hope. Jesus came to give us life and hope. He offers us the certainty of eternal life, of resurrection from the grave. He asks that we put our faith in him. So if you have never made Jesus Lord of your life, accept him today. Put your faith in him and give him your life. He will give you the gift of eternal life and in the meantime you will have peace and hope.

REMEMBER YOUR HOPE

If you believe in Jesus keep reminding yourself that you have this hope and that it is not something you ever need to doubt. John wrote in 1 John 5:11-13, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son, Whoever has the Son has life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

Why did John write? So that you can wonder if you have eternal life? So that you can doubt it? So that you can think that maybe you have eternal life? So that you can wish that you have eternal life? So that you can hope you have eternal life? No, so that you can *know* that you have eternal life! I recall when Toby was going through the process of applying for medical school that it was a demanding and stressful time. He did all he could. He took all the necessary classes and got top grades. He took the MCAT and just crushed it. He applied to lots of schools. When asked to interview he jumped at the chance and did his best, in one case even flying to Texas to interview at a school. After several interviews he felt pretty good about his chances. He believed he did well and might get in. He hoped he would. Then came the day when he was notified by UCSD, one of the top schools in the country, that he had been accepted. He was in, and he knew it. He hadn't started school yet, he wasn't there, but he knew he would be. How he felt at that point was totally different than he had felt before. He knew it, and all the stress was gone.

John says that's where we are. We know we have eternal life in Jesus. And there is nothing in all of creation that compares with that precious gift. What about winning the lottery? What about becoming a movie star or a famous athlete? What about getting your dream home? What about marrying the man or woman of your dreams? Those are all wonderful things, but death makes a mockery of them. They can't help you with death. They may be wonderful things, but they don't even compare with knowing that you have eternal life, because they will all come to an end, but eternal life never will.

Yes we grieve those we have lost. But we don't grieve because they have lost something. In Christ they have gained something unimaginably better than

anything that we can picture in our most creative flights of fancy. We would be green with envy if we truly understood what they are experiencing. We'd be thinking, "how come I don't get to have that yet?" No, our grief is not for them, it is for ourselves. **I repeat, our grief is for ourselves because of what we have lost for a time.** It is sadness because it is painful to be separated from them. We have temporarily lost something. They have lost nothing. They have gained something magnificent and beautiful. So, yes, we grieve because we have lost their presence, but that is an entirely different grief from knowing they are gone forever.

In November 2013 Michael and Carissa moved to Mississippi. We grieved a little, for we love them and miss being with them. When they left I thought, "what if they love it back there? Carissa really likes warm weather, and Michael spent much of his youth in the south, maybe they'll like it there and not want to move back." It would have been very hard for me if they had decided they want to stay in the east. Here's the great news for me. They don't like it there. They are tired of the culture. They were told there was actually a good Thai food restaurant in town. They went there and discovered it was in a double wide. That was the first warning. The second was when a friend ate there and got a bad case of food poisoning. Carissa is a little tired of thunderstorms, tornados and neighbors firing their guns day and night. They can't wait to leave and move back to California. That completely changes how I feel about this time when we are separated from them. I still don't like it, but it's not forever. I can endure it much more easily because I know that soon we will be together again, and it will be as permanent as anything is in this world. So we grieve because we are separated from those who have died, but not as those who have no hope and know they will never see them again.

Value this gift, rejoice in it. Find your peace in it.

ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER

So we have the hope and peace we need. At the core of our being in regard to the biggest issue any human will ever face, we have total peace. We don't need to be afraid, and that allows us to be less obsessed with ourselves. We can instead focus on how we can be of benefit to others. On that basis what we are to do is comfort and encourage each other. We must always be there for each other and remind each other of the great gift that we have been given.