

"Death is nothing at all...." perhaps you are familiar with the poem that is often used at funerals. I'm afraid I can never get past that opening sentence.

"Death is nothing at all...." really? Trying telling that to the person who wrote on a website about the death of her father, "To say we are devastated is a huge understatement. My world will never be the same. I literally don't want to go on."

I would say that for many of us losing a loved one brings those kind of emotions. Death is something many of us struggle with.

Bill Bryson in his book *The Lost Continent* expressed his own difficulty in dealing with death. "I went through the cemetery gate and had a look around. My eye was caught by this particularly handsome stone...the column logged the copious deaths of Hurds and their near relatives from Captain Nathan Hurd in 1818 to Frances H Bement in 1889. A small panel at the back said, "Nathan H died July 24 1852 4 years 1 month; Joshua F dies July 31 1852 1 year 11 months. Children of J & C Pitkin." What could it have been I wondered that carried off these two little brothers just a week apart – a fever? It seemed unlikely in July. An accident in which one died and the other lingered? I pictured the parents crouched at Joshua F's bedside watching his life ebb away praying to God not to take him as well and having their hopes crushed."

Death does mean something.

Bereavement is a very profound human experience. However firm our Christian faith may be, the loss of someone close to us causes a deep emotional shock. To lose a loved one is to lose part of yourself. It calls for huge adjustments that may take months and years and unfortunately in some people are never made.

Bereavement raises many emotions; the primary one being sadness. Sadness because we are never going to see that person again in this life, perhaps sadness of regret for missed opportunities, things not said or not done or for things said or done. There is always sorrow and often tears at a death. But along with that primary emotion of sadness there is often a secondary emotion of uncertainty. Death causes us many questions. Where is my loved one? What has happened to them? Are they all right? Will I see them again? These are common questions that come to those who are bereaved and are occasionally voiced.

But worse than the questions is, as Bill Bryson put it, "having their hopes crushed".

That I think is what made Paul write this section of 1 Thessalonians.

Here were these new Christians just come to faith looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ and probably a few had died. It raised questions but more it had crushed hope as Paul wrote in v13 "do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope."

Their loved ones had died before Jesus returned and they presumed that meant that when Jesus returned those who were alive would join him and those who were dead would miss out. They would not see their loved ones again – that surely is a large part of the pain of bereavement isn't it? The pain is because we are not with them and the fear is we may never see them again.

Paul wrote to help and encourage them.

As he said in v13, they were ignorant, they didn't understand, they didn't know and so Paul took the opportunity to explain to them so they would know. For people like me a mobile phone is a nightmare what on earth do I do with it? I have to have each function explained so I can begin to use it.

In the following verses he set out seven things to explain about those who are Christians and who die before the return of Jesus and those who are Christians and will be alive when he returns.

1. Jesus' resurrection, v14

"we believe that Jesus died and rose again". This is fundamental to all Paul is going to say. He is going to speak about the return of Jesus and those who have died and here he makes it clear to them that all he would say is in the context of the fact that Jesus died and yet rose again. Point number one death is not the end of the matter. I hope we know that. At the end of the apostles creed it says, "I believe in the life everlasting" – do you?

2. the sleeping come too v14,

"and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him".

Note the "and so" this is dependent upon the death and resurrection of Jesus. That those who have died as his followers he will bring with him. Fallen asleep is not just a euphemism but is indicative of the nature of those who are dead in that they are asleep ready to be woken. God the Father who did not abandon his son to death will not abandon those who in Christ are his sons and daughters to death. Instead he will raise them so that when the Lord returns they will be with him. Here is comfort for those of us who have loved ones who were followers of Jesus and have died. They are not lost to the Lord.

3. no advantage to the living, v15

those who are alive when Christ returns will not precede those who are dead. It is no disadvantage to die in the Lord. We should be aware of that from Paul's words in Phil 1:23, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."

We live in a world which is very confused we do everything we can to prolong our lives and yet we are also faced with the idea of assisted suicide for when we judge life becomes or might become unbearable. For Paul in life now and life eternal the key is to be "in the Lord" that is in a relationship with him and if that relationship is strong then to die and be with him is a joy or in those words in Philippians "better by far". The thing these Christians were worried about was that those who had died in faith would miss out and Paul's clear reply is not at all.

4. Return with authority, v16

What else did Paul believe and teach those Christians? He believed in the personal return of Jesus Christ as King and judge, v16, "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". The images used are there to help us see the authority of the one who will come. We will spend plenty of time in the next month thinking about the humble unassuming circumstances of his birth but this is totally different. He will come in person but in authority. I remember when I was a boy at Secondary school that when the Head came into the classroom, which wasn't often, everyone would immediately stand, even the teacher. Into the room came a sense of presence and authority. Here we see the authority of Christ on his return.

5. resurrection of the dead, v16

those who were dead would rise first v16. When the shout comes and the trumpet blows it will be like a celestial alarm clock to wake those who are asleep in the Lord. When Jesus returns those who are dead will be raised. So the Thessalonian Christians need have no worries about their friends who were dead. When Jesus returned those who were dead wouldn't miss out indeed they would rise first.

6. Rapture and reunion, v17

Then those who are still alive will be caught up or snatched up with them. This is often referred to as the rapture. They will be caught up together with those who have risen. Here the great concern of those left behind is dealt with for there is a reunion of living and dead. Here Paul echoes the promise of Jesus from John 14:3, "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Christ will come to take us to be with him but also to be with those who have died in the Lord.

I know that many of us like these Christians miss relatives and friends who were "in the Lord" and if we do here is God's word to us we shall be reunited with them on that day when Christ returns.

7. Eternity with Jesus, v17

We shall be with the Lord forever. The meeting with the Lord will not just be a brief one but for all eternity. We shall be with him in his presence for ever.

So what was it that Paul wanted to leave with these Christians and with us centuries later?

1. Don't be ignorant about death. All that he has said is in terms of belief. He wanted them to know clearly what they should believe as Christians. The same is true for us. All we have seen is part of the Christian understanding of death resurrection and the return of Jesus. We may still have questions because Paul doesn't answer everything in these verses but he does lay out the basics for them and us

2. Don't grieve - again looking at v13 "we do not want you ...to grieve". But of course in saying that we have missed the rest of the sentence "like the rest of men who have no hope".

So Paul was not saying don't grieve. As many of you know I went to funeral on Wednesday. The man had been a man of faith and the whole service was in that light of "we know where Arthur is now". There was a confidence in the fact that he was "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8) as we were reminded from the reading we had at the funeral from 2 Corinthians. But there were also a few tears because we naturally miss our loved ones and parting from them brings pain and that pain is often shown in tears. That is natural as Jesus showed when he wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The point Paul is speaking about here is not grieving as such but grieving without hope.

These Christians, because they didn't understand where their Christian friends who had died were or what their future would be, were grieving for them as those without hope. Paul explains about their friends so that they won't, in his words, "grieve like the rest of men who have no hope."

Paul wanted to remove this hopeless grieve and he did it by reassuring them that their friends were with Jesus and that they would be reunited with them. However he did make that distinction between those who are asleep in Christ and the rest of men. The grief of those who don't know Christ he saw as hopeless.

I have to say I think the opposite is true today.

When I read that phrase "we don't want you to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope." I felt it didn't ring true with what I experience so often. I go to a home of a person I don't know to prepare for the funeral of a person whom I have never met. As I listen all that I hear suggests to me that the deceased and the relatives have no personal knowledge of God. As I see it, and I recognise that I can only see part of the picture, but as I see it there appears no real faith evident. But far from being as Paul puts it "like the rest of men who have no hope" as I listen the opposite seems to be the case. There seems to be plenty of hope. They talk of the person being in heaven, with God, with relatives who have already died. Walk down any grave yard and you see that hope on many stones, "safe in the arms of Jesus", "reunited" etc. There is plenty of hope it would seem in the rest of men but just as the lack of hope in the Thessalonians came from ignorance so this excessive hope of many today comes from ignorance. Ignorance of who God is, of what God has done in Jesus and of what makes someone acceptable to God and this ignorance leads to a false hope and false comfort.

Paul being aware of their grief for those who had died wanted to explain to them that their grief was unnecessary and indeed inappropriate because one day they would be reunited with their loved ones in Christ.

3. Have hope. Instead he wanted them to have a real hope. All he has said in this passage was so that they and we would be firm in our hope for those who have died in faith. Here is the clear point of the passage that we can have complete confidence that whether we die in the Lord or are alive when he comes we will be with him together in Eternity. This is our certain hope based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A friend of mine some time after her husband died wrote a small book entitled 'Learning to die' and in it she said this, "When John died I discovered the difference being a Christian makes to facing bereavement. Instead of bleak despair one has the assurance that one day you will be reunited with your loved one...you know your beloved is safe in God's keeping."

Death is something but it is not the end for those who die in the Lord for our hope and confidence is in him in death as in life.

In that respect I quite like this epitaph of Benjamin Franklin: The Body of Benjamin Franklin Printer; Like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stripped of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believed, appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and Amended By the Author.

That is our hope for those whom we love and who die in the Lord and it is our hope for ourselves. No wonder Paul ends this section with "Therefore encourage each other with these words"!

Friends this is solemn stuff I realise but many of us have been touched by the death of loved ones and here God speaks to us to encourage us and to lift us in our sadness but also to challenge each of us that we are living our lives in a relationship with Jesus so that now and at our end we know his grace and love.