

A World of Difference
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May 28, 2018

1 Thess 4:13

(NA 28th ed.)

Οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν,
ἀδελφοί,
περὶ τῶν κοιμωμένων,
ἵνα μὴ λυπῆσθε καθὼς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ
οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες ἐλπίδα.

(EHV)

We do not want you to be **uninformed**,
brothers,
about those who have fallen asleep,
so that you do not **grieve** in the same way as the **others**,
who have no **hope**.

“Uninformed” is of course from a-gnoeo, as in “agnostic.” The rest is more or less first year vocab, like “to have” and “brother.” The “others,” *loipos*, includes everyone outside of the church, the people of God, who do not share our resurrection hope.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to know the truth about those who have “fallen asleep”—i.e., died—in order to spare them from hopeless grieving. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (v14). The “dead in Christ will rise first” (v16). And together with them, we who are left “will always be with the Lord” (v17).

The interesting thing is that Paul does not actually assert that Christians do not grieve. To my reading, the EHV seems to bring this out the clearest. Christians *do* grieve. We *do* feel bad. We get depressed. We get wracked with anxiety at times. We get very angry. And so on.

To an outside observer, the responses of Christians to adversity and loss may not seem any different than that of an atheist. Take grieving the loss of a loved one, for example. A household of believing Christians will cry, and mourn, and seem haunted, just like the *loipoi*.

In fact, one could say that the difference in the manner that a Christian and a non-Christian grieve is only a small step. Hardly any difference at all.

And yet—it is also a vast chasm. There is something going on spiritually that may be hardly perceptible, even to the Christian who is experiencing it. But there is a sustaining presence that can prevent the downward slide from going too far. On the one hand it is an almost unnoticeable difference. On the other hand, it makes all the difference in the world.

This is what my friend Andy, a ruling Presbyterian elder, has to say on the subject:

Eighteen months ago today, Debbie, my dear wife of 37 years, died from cancer. Debbie was my help-mate and best friend, the one with whom for decades I spent hours talking with every evening just because we enjoyed each other's company so much.

What does it feel like having her taken away from my side? It feels like my heart has been ripped in two. It feels like I have been kicked in the stomach. I cried every day for 3 months.

Being separated from Debbie has been very painful. The loss of great love is always accompanied by great pain. Will the pain ever go away? I really don't know. Yet even in the pain, I have been able to grieve with hope. Paul tells me in 1 Thess. 4:13 that grieving with hope starts with being informed with correct theology. God is sovereign, God is good, and God will never leave nor forsake me. He knows what is ultimately for my best, and He will in His perfect plan bring that to pass. Paul also tells me that our departed loved ones in Christ are in a far better place than they previously were before death. (For to live is Christ and to die is gain.) Paul also reminds me that I will also be saved and raised up on the last day. Knowing my destiny and that of Debbie is essential to my ability to grieve with hope.

Can pain and sadness coexist with joy? Yes, and we have the greatest example of that in Christ. Hebrews 12:2 says that Christ, for the joy set before him, endured the cross. His joy came from looking forward to the promise of His Father, not from the pain he was enduring on the cross. I also have joy from the promise that God will be with me, both as my life continues to unfold after loss, and when He brings me home to be with Him for eternity.

Finally, I give thanks for God's goodness, for what for He has done and for what He promises to do. This helps me in my grieving. A thankful heart may hurt, but a thankful heart will not be angry or bitter.

Our grieving is real, but our hope is just as real and can give us peace.

May we all, like Andy, learn in Christ to grieve with hope, and not like sullen atheists. Amen, Come Lord Jesus.