

## **Strange questions Christian ask**

Do you remember the first time you realized there was **death** in the world? That people die? I was 9 or 10 at the time and I remember that one of my school friends brothers died. He was hit by a bus. And I remember that although I wasn't particularly close to the person that died, that I cried and cried that afternoon when I came home from school. I remember my mum coming into comfort me. I had my first understanding that people die.

Despite me learning about death from an early age, there are still many things I don't know about death. It's something we all grapple with. Death is one of the biggest mysteries to us. We all have questions about death. We wonder what happens when we die. There are 100's of both non Christian and Christian book written on it. And the Thessalonians were no different. As Christians they knew that they were promised heaven with Jesus upon his return, but as new Christians they had questions about those that died before Jesus came back.

## **The Thessalonians question**

The question they seemed to be asking was **“Will those that die before Jesus returns have some disadvantage over those that are still living when**

**Jesus comes.”** For us that seems to be a bit of a strange question to ask about death isn’t it. But think about the situation that the Thessalonians were in. They were new Christians and had only a small amount of teaching up until that point. Jesus himself as well as Paul and the other apostles were saying that you need to be ready because Jesus could come back any minute. So the Thessalonians were expecting Jesus to return in their life times. In fact the chapter straight after this one talks about Jesus coming at any moment. These new Christians were eagerly anticipating Jesus return in their lifetime. We are in a different circumstance because for us we obviously have accepted that Jesus return, while it could come at any moment, may also not come for another 1000 years. We realize that people already have died and will continue to die before Jesus return and so we aren’t so concerned about the same particular question that the Thessalonians had.

Having said that, while the Thessalonians question may not be directly relevant to us, I believe Paul’s answer is. In answering the Thessalonians question, Paul talks about how we as followers of Jesus are to respond to those who have died while we are alive. The words in this chapter are to encourage the followers of Jesus to have hope and to stand firm even when those we love have passed away. This passage isn’t meant to answer

all the questions that we have about death and in fact it may raise new questions. But even though there are many things we do not understand fully, there are truths in this passage that we can hold on to that will help comfort and encourage us when we are faced with the death of our loved ones.

### **Christians response to death**

Paul starts by telling the Thessalonians that as followers of Jesus they can be different in their grief and have hope. Look at verse 13,

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you **do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.**

There are a number of important things in this sentence.

First, I want to point out, Paul isn't saying do not grieve. He is not denying us the right to cry, He's not denying us the feeling of deep sorrow at the loss of a friend or family member. There is a place for grief when we have just lost someone that we have loved. What Paul is saying is that we should not grieve like the rest of mankind, because there is a difference in our understanding of death, the difference is that we have hope.

What is this hope that Paul is talking about?

It's important to understand what the word hope here means. For example, we can use hope to express the idea of a wish, like I hope it's going to be good weather today. In this way of using hope, there is no certainty, we can 'hope' the day will be good – but at anytime the weather can change. This kind of hope can let us down at any point. Because we're putting our hope into something that is not certain.

This is how the world treats what happens to someone when they die, without knowledge of God there is no hope that tells us about what to expect after we die. The world tries to give hope – saying things like “the person who died is in a better place”. But that hope is uncertain, the world doesn't know for certain what happens, it's a wishful thinking not based on anything. But when Paul talks about hope, it's a different type of hope. It's a certain hope, not a wishful thinking. I tried to find an analogy on the internet for the way we use hope in the bible as I was sure there was something else I could use to describe this sort of hope. But I couldn't find it. When you try searching for certain hope, the only thing that comes up is to do with Jesus. Only when we are putting our hope in God and his words, that are never changing, and always constant can we have a

certain hope. And its that sort of hope that Paul speaks of here.

My grandmother died just a few weeks ago. And it was interesting to hear different reactions from different people. For me there seemed to be 3 different reactions when I told people my grandmother died. As I went to my mostly non-christian work, a number of people asked me how I was. To each I said I was sad but...I trailed off. And at that point I got 2 different reactions. Firstly there were those who saw death as only sad, there were those at work who said to me its hard to lose family and I must be heartbroken. They clearly saw no hope. The second group of people after hearing how old she was answered me saying, “of course she must have had a great life, she lived so long, you should remember the amazing things she did.” That is the joy of the rest of mankind in death, the joy of celebrating a great life led. But that is not hope, its accepting that death is the end and celebrating the past. Thats not a hope looking to the future.

These 2 different responses were contrasted with the response I saw at my grandmothers funeral and the service. It came from the minister, my Christian cousins, her Christian friends. They too had the first 2 thoughts I mentioned before, they were all grieving,

they were all remembering the wonderful life that she lived, but they had something else as well. They had hope. They each said they were glad that my grandmother was now with Jesus in heaven and that they looked forward to the day when they would see her again in heaven. That is hope, that is looking beyond death. That is different to the rest of mankind.

There are 2 hopes presented here in our passage and by those at my grandmothers funeral. The hope of resurrection and living with Jesus, and the hope that when Jesus returns we will be gathered together with other Christians who have died. As almost everyone at my grandmothers funeral said they looked forward to seeing her again in heaven.

Look at what it says in verses 15-17 – according to the Lord's word when Jesus returns then all those who have died will rise first and then those who are living will also be gathered with Christ. Can you imagine this? All followers of Jesus who have died over the past thousands of years will be raised and all living followers of Jesus will be caught up and we will all meet the Lord together and live with him forever. Knowing that one day we will be with our Christian loved ones, means that we have not lost them

permanently. We will be with them again, forever. That gives us hope even in the face of death.

### **Why Christians can have hope in death**

This is the difference in grieving that Paul wants the Thessalonians to have, that we can have. Paul wants to show that even in death we can have hope. But how can we have this hope. How can my family know that my grandmother is in heaven, how can my family know that they will see her again. Paul follows up straight away in verse 14 to explain it.

**For 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.**

Because Jesus died and rose again, we have certain hope that we can be resurrected.

Jesus death and resurrection is the centre of our hope. It is the anchor in our grief. Because Jesus died and rose again we can have hope that those who believe will experience the same. Jesus death and resurrection is the centre of our entire Christian faith. If we take that away from our belief, then we have nothing.

Pauls says in **1 Cor 15:12-14,19** “**12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no**

**resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. [19] If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**

Knowing that Jesus died and rose again doesn't just give us hope in this life, it's not just a nice way to live now, it gives us hope that we will be resurrected and have a life in the future. If we are followers of Christ then our lives are bound with him. Because he rose again, we will rise again. Paul goes on to say after verse 19;

**20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.**

Because Jesus died and was raised to life we have a rock solid promise that we and our brothers and sisters in Christ will also be raised with Jesus when he returns. This promise is something that you can cling to. It affects our response to death, by giving us hope. But it should also affect the way we live.

**How that effects the way we live**



I have 5 things that I have thought of that will affect us or that we can do in response to this hope.

1. We've been talking about standing firm throughout this book. These words are to encourage us to **stand firm**. The death of a loved one is probably one of the toughest things in life that we will face. From speaking to others, this time can be filled with hopelessness and can be a time when we are shaken and we can be prone to turn away from God. So Paul wants to remind us that we need not be overwhelmed by hopelessness, instead we should remember that as followers of Jesus, there is a rock solid hope, and that when Jesus returns we will ALL be together, forever, with him.
2. In wanting the Thessalonians to stand firm Paul has often emphasized the benefit of being with others in faith. Its no difference here. The last verse says Encourage each other with these words. When we see others going through tough times, especially with the death of loved ones, we are called here to **encourage each other**.
3. Knowing that we have a certain resurrection in Jesus means that we can **be bold** in our Christian lives. For instance, those that face death in persecution can stand firm in their faith because

they know that they will be with Christ when they die. We do not need to be afraid of death.

4. We can also be bold and different in our witnessing. As we don't grieve like the rest of mankind we **stand out**. We can show that we have hope in death. I know that I have seen this in action. People find Jesus because they have seen the hope in a Christian after the death of a loved one. People see that their Christian friends don't mourn like they do.
5. Fifthly, This hope that we know should also give us a great passion to **share this hope** with those who don't have any. To the rest of mankind. You see believing in Jesus is the only real source of hope, without Jesus death is the end but with Jesus we can have hope. Hope is what we offer when we talk to others about Jesus, we can give people hope.

Before I finish, I want to briefly address our grief for non Christian love ones who die. Firstly we can always pray that they had a death bed conversion. Jesus himself promises the criminal on the cross beside him that he will be with him in paradise. But even if they don't convert we can still have hope, we can have hope because we know that God is a loving, perfect and just

God. I don't say that to imply that all people will go to heaven, the bible does not teach that, I say that to help remind us that God's plans are perfect and we need to trust that ultimately whatever happens, it is the right thing. Now I am not saying that's easy to hear, I know it's one of the hardest things to accept. In fact it can be very upsetting. But don't feel guilty about that. I suspect if you are like me, the reason you are upset is that your non-Christian loved one, is dead, that they didn't know Christ and that they are not going to heaven. These are all things that are good to be upset by. They are all horrible things. God doesn't like death, God wants people to know Christ and God sent his son so that people can be with him forever. We need to let that grief drive us to focus on the living and bring them the only hope that matters.

So when you face the horribleness of death, and we all will in this world, let us remember the hope we have and stand firm, let us remember that Jesus died and rose again, let us remember that because Jesus rose again we will too, and that when Jesus returns all those who follow and believe in Jesus will be gathered together with him and live forever. Let us encourage each other with these words. Amen.