

To God Alone Be The Glory

Can your enemy ever become your friend? Sure. History gives us several easy examples. England was our enemy in the late 1700s. By the early 1900s the friendship between England and the U.S. had made us allies against Germany. Germany is another example. We fought two world wars against Germany and one against Japan. Today these two friends are among our best allies. Enemies can become friends. This is why, from our perspective, a lot of us have difficulty understanding why the Palestinians and the Israelis can't set their differences aside and become friends.

Until peace comes to the middle east, the intractable war there makes a handy picture of what it's like between us and our spiritual enemies. You know whom I'm talking about, right? We can never make peace with Satan. He has nothing to gain from being nice to us or allowing us even a moment of spiritual rest. Attack, attack, attack—that's all he knows. Most of the time it's a sneak attack because he found that making believers choose between 'death' and 'denying God' doesn't work. We would rather die than deny our Savior. We may die, but then we win! So Satan found that sneak attacks work better. For example, desensitize everyone to all aspects of sexuality. Slip it into advertising. Slip it into songs. Slip it into TV shows and movies and novels. Make it available for discussion or for viewing on the internet. If he can hook people into thinking that life is all about sex, they won't think about the Lord as much. Not interested in sex? How about money or influence? "Yesss, yesss, life is all about accumulating money and using it to get what *you* want." Sneak attacks.

Although sometimes Satan succeeds, Jesus destroyed his power to control us (1 John 3:8). But Satan can still tempt us. Satan has an ally, a traitor that lurks within us, our sinful flesh. But Jesus gave us the victory over our sinful flesh too. Whenever we confess our sins to God, we drown it under the waters of Baptism. We have allies too, like our faith and God's Word. We strengthen our faith whenever we feed it by reading a portion of the Bible at home or in church. See why I want you to have meaningful contact with your Bible each day?

Our enemies are relentless. That stinkin' sinful flesh never tires of sinning, never ceases to worry, never stops arguing with God's will or boasting about what you have accomplished. It's a good thing Jesus rose from the dead. At least we know that our heavenly Father counts Jesus' death as payment in full for the multitudinous mountains of mistakes we make. So even though we're not perfect, each new day is a triumphant celebration of God grace. Satan and sin—losers. With Christ's authority we can order Satan out of our sight, and we can shush our sinful flesh by kicking it to the corner.

But try that when death comes knocking on your door. If in his wisdom, Jesus delays his return another 125 years, not a single one of us will be holding death at bay. Worse yet, before our time comes, death will leave a bad taste in our mouth at the funerals of loved ones. Time makes death our relentless enemy.

For this reason the Holy Spirit comes to us through the Apostle Paul with a power-message. He urges us to TRIUMPH OVER DEATH. "Triumph," you say? "How can we triumph over death when no matter what

we do, each sunrise takes us one day closer?”

TRIUMPH OVER DEATH With Tempered Grief (13,14a). The Christians in Thessalonica had it rough. Paul had stayed with them only two to three weeks before riots against him made staying longer unsafe. That’s not much time for instructing people about Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. These new Christians were vulnerable to the half-truths and lies of false teachers. Apparently, sometime after Paul left, someone wrote a letter to the Thessalonians and signed Paul’s name to it. This forgery insinuated that the resurrection of the dead had already occurred. The Thessalonian Christians now believed that some of their dead loved ones, even though they had died in Christ, had nevertheless missed out on being raised, and therefore they would stay dead forever. How dreadful their grief must have been! Grief without hope. Emptiness that wants to be filled. When God’s Word isn’t around to give real comfort, people invent ways to give them hope. Did you know that in some cultures people set up an altar, a shrine, right in their home, and they set out food for the spirits of their dead relatives to eat; otherwise, they believe, the ancestors will not be happy and will bring trouble into their lives. Hopeless grief.

The Thessalonians, it seems, knew grief like that ...until Paul’s letter arrived with the comforting words of our text. “Fellow believers, *we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again*” (13-14a).

Paul does not say it’s wrong for us Christians to grieve. Death has a way of making even Christians feel like they’ve been punched in the stomach. You don’t find Christians uncorking champagne at the death of a loved one, even when death brings a sense of relief after a lingering or painful illness.

“Wait. Why do people think death brings relief? Have they seen the other side of death? How do they know a Christian doesn’t go from the frying pan into the fire?” Because, ¹⁴“*Jesus died and rose again,*” and he says we don’t need to be afraid. That’s why we believers see death differently. Jesus promised, “*Because I live, you also shall live*” (John 14:19). Three times Paul refers to dead Christians as “*those who have fallen asleep.*” Some people think calling ‘death’ ‘sleep’ is like putting make-up on a cadaver to give it some color while it lies there in an open coffin for friends and relatives to pay their last respects. But with Christ in the picture, death really is like sleep. You weren’t afraid to put your head on your pillow last night and go to sleep because you knew you’d wake up to a new day. So also with death. We don’t need to fear closing our eyes for the last time because Jesus himself will wake us up to a glorious eternal day.

But what do you say to someone who is grieving over the death of a Christian? How do you help them **TRIUMPH OVER DEATH with tempered grief**? You could say, “I’m so sorry”? That’s loving and sympathetic. But does it help temper their grief? If all you’re saying is “I’m sad for you,” well, now there are two sad people. Grief not yet tempered. * You could say, “He was a good man.” But then they might

think a man's goodness helps get him into heaven. It doesn't (Eph 2:9). * How about, "God needed her more than you"? But this could make them angry with God, especially if they still feel acutely their need for her here.

Notice how Paul comforts the Thessalonians. He actually tempers their grief by reminding them of Jesus' death and resurrection. Try these same gospel truths on a grieving believer sometime: "Jesus died too. And he rose. That means he has complete power over death. When he returns to earth, your loved one will rise." That's what Jesus told Mary and Martha at Lazarus' funeral: "*Your brother will rise again*" (John 11). And what happened? Jesus ruined that funeral by turning it into a "welcome back party" for living Lazarus. Knowing our dead loved ones will rise again, that we will see them again after some waiting, turns the bitterness of death into bitter-sweet. It enables us to TRIUMPH OVER DEATH **With Tempered Grief**, and at the same time...

With Confident Hope (14b-18). Have you ever attended a funeral where there was wailing? I mean the kind where 'the loss' is the only focus, where hopelessness seems palpable? Or maybe you've experienced a kinder, gentler hopelessness in the words, "Your loved one will live on in your memory." Don't get me wrong: it's good to remember the dead fondly. And it's okay to tell funny stories about them at the funeral dinner, to laugh in between the crying times. But if your loved ones get to live on only in your memory, their immortality could be awfully short. If you forget them, poof, they're really gone. What pressure to

remember! Could that be one reason why some people set up headstones in the cemetery? "After I die, I want other people, even strangers, to see the name on the monument, and remember, so I'm not forgotten into oblivion." That doesn't sound like confident hope.

When children die (and sometimes when adults die), lots of people chime in that the dead become angels. But when you learn what the Bible says about angels, why would anyone want their child to become an angel? The Bible says angels serve humans (Hebrews 1:14). The Son of God became a human, not an angel. This God/man shed his blood for lost humans, but not for the fallen angels. That tells us how much value God places on humans. We are above the angels. When we believers die and go to heaven, we will be holy and immortal **like** the good angels (Mark 12:25), but we will remain human.

Over the years people have shared with me that their dead loved ones appeared to them and said, "Don't worry; I'm okay." I don't have enough knowledge to confirm or deny whether the dead appear to us like this. But because Satan is always trying to divert our minds away from God's Word, my skeptical side wants to ask: How do we know it's not Satan trying to get us to base our hope for the dead on something other than Jesus' death and resurrection for us? If you get more hope from a vision than you get from God's Word, Satan has tricked you into basing part of your faith on something other than God. God wants you to have confident hope. So look at what the Holy Spirit himself says: ¹⁶"*The dead in Christ shall rise*" and ¹⁷"*we who are still alive and are left will be caught*

up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...” Since the Holy Spirit assures us with the promise ¹⁷“*we will be with the Lord forever,*” we have something solid to base confident hope on.

Martin Luther sets us a good example of grieving with confident hope. “News of his father’s death came to him...during the Diet of Augsburg [in 1530]. [Luther’s secretary] the faithful Veit Deitrich described [Luther’s] reaction to the news in a letter to Luther’s wife. ‘Although his father’s death was very bitter to him, he ceased mourning over it after two days. When he read Reinecke’s letter [with the sad news], he said to me: “My father is dead.” And then he took his [copy of the Psalms] and went to his room and wept so much that for two days he couldn’t work. Since then he has not given way to grief anymore.’”

“Two of [Luther’s] children died, and he felt the [loss deeply]. [Little] Elizabeth Luther’s stay on earth was brief, like that of a migratory bird, which remains a short while in transit to bluer skies and warmer climes. Luther’s heart had scarcely begun to entwine itself about the precious little mite when God, who had given her, took her again.

“But it was [harder] in the case of [Luther’s daughter] Magdalena. God seems to have sent her to take the place of Elizabeth; and Luther seems to have loved her [enough for two daughters]. And then after 14 years, after Magdalena had completely captured the big heart of her father by her winsome personality, God took her too. She was old enough to understand the situation...

“As his daughter lay very ill, Dr. Luther

said: “I love her very much, but dear God, if it be your will to take her, I submit to you.” Then he said to her as she lay in bed: “Magdalena, my dear little daughter, would you like to stay here with your father, or would you willingly go to your Father [in heaven]?” She answered, “[Dear] father, as God wills.” Then he said, “Dearest child, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Then he turned away and said, “I love her very much; if my flesh is so strong, what can my spirit do? God has given no bishop so great a gift in a 1000 years as He has given me in her. I am angry with myself that I cannot rejoice in heart and be thankful as I ought.”

“As they laid her in the coffin, he said: “Darling Lena, you will rise and shine like a star, yes, like the sun... I am happy in spirit, but [my] flesh is sorrowful and will not be content; the parting grieves me beyond measure... I have sent a saint to heaven.”

“For a time even prayer could not staunch his burning tears... Later he wrote to a friend: ‘I have conquered the pain of a father, though only by a sort of fuming anger against death. By this counterirritant I have stanchd my tears. I loved her dearly, but I dare say death will find its punishment on the [Last] Day together with him who is its author’ (from This is Luther, Plass, p. 268-270).

These stories from Luther’s life illustrate what Paul says in our text. There is a difference between grieving in Christ and grieving without hope. Christ rose. We can TRIUMPH OVER DEATH even now, just as on the Last Day we will be Saints Triumphant in Christ.