How We Comfort One Another

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Preacher: J.D. Edwards

[0:00] We're pausing in our Covenant Theology series, and this summer we'll be back in the Psalms. So next week we'll be in Psalm 139, and then we'll continue where we left off last summer in Psalm 9 and onward.

So we have a special little message today unrelated to Covenant Theology or the Psalms, and it's a message of comfort. It's a message for those that will face death and dying.
So hear these words, 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 13 through 18. As I read this, I read it believing that this is God's inspired, inerrant, infallible, clear and sufficient word.
It's God's very own word for you, His people. When I'm done reading, I'll say this is the word of the Lord. If you receive it that way, you can say thanks be to God. 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 13.
But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.
[1:03] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.
Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.
Therefore, encourage one another with these words. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.
Let's pray. Lord, may your word go forth like the rain.
[2:27] May it bring refreshment to those who are in a desert. May it bring food to those who are hungry. May your word wash over each one of us, making us more like your Son, Jesus Christ.

For your glory we ask. Amen. There was an old preacher, and he confessed that his goal was simply to preach, as never to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.
That's been my prayer as I think about each of you this week in preparing for this message. There's nothing more important we could think about for the next 30 to 40 minutes than your life and the life to come.
John Flabel, I told you a little bit about his life and biography back in the fall, so I won't repeat that now, but he was a faithful Puritan minister at the height of persecution in the 1600s.
Listen to his words on this topic. Neglecting to prepare yourself for death is not brave but foolish, like going blindly into war.
[3:45] If you're wise, you will use your life to prepare for your death. That's the end of Flabel's quote. To prepare for death in a time of peace without physical persecution is a discipline.

In persecution, preparation for death is a daily requirement. This was the case for the church in Thessalonica. It was planted by Paul.
We read of this in Acts 17. It's that story of when the Judaizers of Thessalonica, who were among the most fierce and the most aggressive, they chased him, and he had to be lowered out the window of Jason's home.
Do you remember that story? Christians in Thessalonica were hunted down. They were often hurt. Thinking about death was routine.
That's what it meant to follow Christ. John Gill commented on this church in Thessalonica. Those who had not been directly attacked or persecuted would have had someone close to them removed

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from the church by violence through the rage and fury of their persecutors for whom their surviving friends were pressed with sorrow and grief.
[5:05] Think of a church like ours. If only one of our members, one of our regular brothers and sisters with whom we are used to fellowshipping every week is all of a sudden removed because of persecution, we would grieve this.

We would grieve it most likely for years and years. The clinical definition of grief is anguish experienced after significant loss.
Each of us has experienced significant loss. Grief often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future.
So beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the message I want to bring to you today is how do we as Christians comfort one another? That's what Paul is doing with these words to the church in Thessalonica.
That's what I pray the Holy Spirit will do among us. Teach us how to comfort one another.
Christians need comforting, don't we? So I've got five ways in which I think we can learn to do this from Paul.
[6:17] The first is that we recognize Christians must grieve to. Christians must grieve to. When you have the opportunity, we should hear this story from one another.

When have you felt the burn of pain and grief? I see three things in verse 13. The first is this.
Grief over a loss is not a sin. It's a necessity. To grieve loss is not a sin. It is a necessity. Look at verse 13 again with me.
We don't want you to be ignorant brothers concerning those who have fallen asleep so you don't grieve like the rest who have no hope.
He's implying that Christians do grieve but we grieve differently. John Flavel acknowledged this as well. To bury a child, any child, must needs rend the heart of a tender parent.
[7:19] A child is part of the parent made up in another skin. To lay a son in the grave, a son who would continue the name and support the family, this is a very great affliction.

How could a Christian not grieve great loss? It's not a sin to grieve because Jesus grieved. In John 11, 33, we saw this.
Jesus, as he's approaching the tomb of Lazarus, he sees Mary, Martha, and the Jews weeping.
And Jesus, our sinless God in the flesh, he groaned in the spirit and he was troubled.
Ecclesiastes 3, 4, can be paraphrased as the ancient Hebrew paraphrase gave it, there is a time to weep for those that sleep.
But God doesn't waste the grief. He uses it. Flavel pointed out, God often uses a person's grief to get your attention. God could continue stripping a person of all he cares about until he is finally willing and ready to face his own death as well.
[8:33] I know some of you are grieving. Some of you had loss very recently. The Lord wants you to think about your own life and yes, even your own death because there is a time for Christians to grieve painful loss.

You must grieve but you must grieve differently. Second observation on verse 13. Without hope, your grief will paralyze you.
Here's why you must grieve differently. To not grieve differently than the world, it's devastating.
Hopeless grief degenerates your nerves. It numbs your soul.
It holds your mind hostage. And grief can paralyze you. Have you experienced something like that?
In verse 13, Paul writes, don't grieve like the rest who have no hope.
They have no hope of ever seeing their friends anymore. The thought of that friend must be entirely lost to them. They will never meet, see, or enjoy those loved ones that they lost outside of Christ.
[9:47] Christ. And this would drive the church in the ancient world to extravagant actions. One commentator said it would make them do bizarre things that we would see now as culturally crazy, you know, like downright madness, furious transports.

We get a glimpse of this also in the pagan world in Deuteronomy 14.1. Part of the civil law for national Israel was to not grieve over the dead the same way the pagan nations do.
That verse says that you are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead. That's what the pagans do.
But you're children of God. You grieve differently. Humans can be driven to those extreme actions because death is so real.

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No one can deny the reality of death. And our conscience can be pricked when we see that so close. That's why the western world has tried to sanitize death is because we don't want to have to deal with our conscience.
[10:56] John Flavel wrote your conscience is either your best of friends or your worst of enemies because it indicates to your body in this life what destiny you are headed to for eternity.

So without hope grief will paralyze you. But the third observation in verse 13 is that there is a medicine for this pain. The balm for grief is truth.
The balm or ointment for grief is truth. Notice what he says at the very beginning of verse 13. Here's why we don't want you to be ignorant.
You need to treat that burning pain of grief with the right ointment. The only ointment that can soothe. And that's truth from the word of God. Spurgeon said, Oh, there is in contemplating Christ a balm for every wound.
Well, how do you get this medicine? How do you get that? That's the fourth observation on verse 13. As your soul receives the truth from God's word, it leaves a residual effect on the pain and that's hope.
[12:11] He says, don't be ignorant as those who have no hope. Instead, through the truth of God's word washing over us, what we're left with is a hope that's different than what the world can offer.

So if you are suffering now and you are grieving, you must grieve. You don't grieve like the world, though. What you do is you put yourself like you are now under God's word.
You let God's word wash over you as truth. The residual effect as you go home again after the service, you will have more hope than someone outside of Christ.
Psalm 34, verse 18 says that the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and he saves those who are crushed in spirit.
If you are crushed in spirit, if you feel like your heart is broken and you are grieving, the Lord is for you and he is near you. So Christians must grieve too.
[13:17] The second way that we ought to comfort one another in grief is to remind one another of what we believe. Remind one another of what we believe.

What is that truth that gives Christians hope? Notice how Paul gets right to it. Here is the crux of the matter. In verse 14, he says, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again.
I want to point out to you in verse 14 two things. First, what the Lord Jesus secured and secondly, for whom he secured this. So first, what did our Lord Jesus secure?
He secured eternal life. He says, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Christ.
Your eternal state and mine, it hinges on that one little word, if. First John 2.23 says, no one who denies the Son has the Father.
[14:22] Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also, you must believe in Jesus Christ savingly to have the hope of the gospel.

We confess this with the Apostles' Creed. We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who for us and for our salvation came down and was made flesh and entered humanity and suffered and rose the third day.
Why did Jesus do this? To secure eternal life. He didn't need it. He secured eternal life for you who believe in him. Octavius Winslow pointed out, Christ did this because he took your cup of grief, your cup of the curse, and he pressed it to his lips and he drank it to the dregs, every last drop.
Then the Lord Jesus filled it with his sweet, pardoning, sympathizing love and he gives it back to you to drink and to drink forever.
forever. That's what the Lord accomplished. He secured eternal life by coming to earth, dying, and being risen again. Now for whom did he accomplish this?
[15:35] There's still the condition, if you believe. Even so, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Notice the next two words. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus.

There is nothing more certain or more comfortable, one commentator pointed out, there's nothing that we should more firmly believe than this.
If you die in Christ, you are secure in Christ forevermore. 1 Corinthians 15 verse 21 gives clarity. For since death came by man, Adam, the resurrection of the dead also comes by man, Jesus Christ, the last Adam.

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Jesus Christ secured eternal life for all who believe in him as Lord and Savior. He secured this now, applying it to you by the Holy Spirit while you are alive so that when you die and go to sleep in Christ, you can know forever your soul is in him.
You are united from him that will never be undone. how can this truth be balm? How can this give us hope and comfort and how can it be medicine for our suffering soul?
[16:59] John Flavel preached a sermon and the title of the sermon I think answers that question. It was a funeral sermon entitled The Balm of the Covenant.

That's the covenant of grace applied to the bleeding wounds of afflicted saints. And in this sermon he tells the widow who lost her husband this is a sovereign balm the blessing of the Holy Spirit on you for your wounded spirit who are groaning under the strokes of God.
Here's the promise that same moment that your soul came to Jesus in faith had passed from death to life that soul is no longer under the law condemning unto death but it's under the grace that Christ secured forever.
So you and I have the opportunity every time we think about our death every time we think about resting in Christ we have the chance to prepare for that eternal state what comes after this life.
Did you notice how the apostle Paul calls death falling asleep if you're in Christ? If you're in Christ to die is simply to fall asleep.
[18:21] Every night that we lay our heads down on the pillow we are practicing for our death. We fall asleep in Christ we trust that he will bring his own back to life with him.

John Gill pointed out what do death and falling asleep have in common? In both death and sleep there is no exercise of the senses the persons are at rest and both rise again.
Both death and sleep are common to all men and they are proper and peculiar to the body only. That's why you can have a dream while your body sleeps. It's a wonderful analogy that the Lord has given us and even wiring us and he makes you sleep not just once a month he makes you sleep every day learning to rest in him practicing for your own death one day.
Well let's remind ourselves next this is our third way to comfort one another remind one another by the word of the Lord how it all ends. So having said that there's only hope for those in Christ he reminds us next of how this all ends and this is another way that we comfort one another.
Look at verse 15 for we tell you by the word of the Lord that we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will in no way precede those who have fallen asleep.
[19:53] He says that if you're in Christ now and you're still alive this is how it's going to end for you and what about those who are already dead when Christ returns? Well this is how it will end for them.

Verse 16 the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout with the voice of the archangel and with God's trumpet.
This is imagery of war. it's a cry of command coming from heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ in his glorified body descending coming to take what's his which is the whole world as the supreme authority and it's a command to all his soldiers living and dead and the voice of the archangel that's the general of the angelic army and with the sound of the trumpet this is imagery of a Jewish shofar which was the trumpet made out of a ram's horn that was used when the walls of Jericho come tumbling down and the first Yeshua is calling the people to take the land Jesus Christ will be coming back leading the army taking the land taking the whole world that is his own this is how it all ends in Luke 12 verse 49
Jesus said in his own words I came to throw fire on the earth and I wish it were already kindled the Lord Jesus with the gospel in his first coming is gracious he's inaugurating the kingdom of heaven on earth and this fire will spread throughout the world it's the fire of the gospel it's the image of the Holy Spirit hovering over the church as they gather in his name until every one of the nations peoples and tribes are gathered under Jesus their king and as one generation passes and their bodies are buried they're being prepared for that great day when the fire of the heavenly kingdom will consume the whole earth the new heavens and the new earth are brought down by the Lord Jesus himself with the host of the angels armies with all of those who had died in Christ being risen and all those who are still living when he returns being transformed and brought with him this is how it all ends this should comfort us who mourn now
Jesus ascended into heaven we read in our creed he is seated at the father's right hand and he will come again to judge the living and the dead his first coming was gracious calling all to repent and his second coming is a time for his kingdom to be here constantly where every knee will bow to king

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Jesus one way or the other remind one another by the word of God how this all ends the fourth way we comfort one another is we think of him with whom all believers will be think of him with whom all believers will be verse 16 we read that the dead in Christ will rise first there are Christians who have been tossed over ships there are Christians who have been burned alive at the stake their bodies were consumed by the fire there are others who have been buried in the dirt and turned to dust their bodies have been eaten up by worms the Lord
[23:36] Jesus says that when he comes those who died in him will rise the one who created you who formed you and me and this whole world out of nothing he will recreate each one of us he will join body to soul that's the only way we can be with him the Lord Jesus died and his own body was resurrected and his own body ascended to the right hand of the father this mystery is explained at least as much as God wants us to know for now in 1 Corinthians 15 42 notice how Paul explains this you're welcome to turn there I'll read it for us 1 Corinthians 15 starting at 42 the body is sown perishable it's the image of our body once the soul has left it being put into the earth into the dirt perishable but it is raised imperishable the body

God will raise to life when he comes again will not perish it is sown in dishonor a funeral is a picture of what our sin deserves it's the curse that we're under that we've piled onto with our own sinning but that same body because it's united to Christ by his work will be raised in glory the body is sown in weakness but it will be raised in power so if you die in Christ your soul will be separated from your body until the second coming of Christ but you can look forward to that day that great reunion your body will be transformed so that you can be with the Lord body and soul and what about those who are still alive when Christ returns we read in verse 17 of our sermon text then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air the phrase in the air is used throughout the Bible and the
Old Testament as not the seventh heaven or the highest of heaven but that place between heaven and earth it's the mediating presence of Christ in the air it means the presence of the Lord where he's bringing heaven and earth together and there's going to be a great reunion of all those who died in Christ and all those who are now still living in Christ 1 Corinthians 15 51 says behold I tell you a mystery we will not all sleep but we will all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye the last trumpet will sound the dead will be raised incorruptible and we will be changed this perishable body must become imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality the Lord will transform all of us those who died in him those who are still living in him at his second coming the reason he will transform our bodies is so that we can be with him in his glory
John Flavel explained this mystery this way your body must be refined it must be cast into a new mold or else that new wine of heavenly glory would break it is not union with Christ infinitely more desirable than union of your soul with this body oh cherish your union with him then shall your souls be happy when your bodies drop off from them at death and what's more your soul and your body shall be happy in him in that great resurrection at the second and final coming of our Lord look at verse 17 think of him with whom all believers will be verse 17 we have this glorious promise in this way so we will be with the Lord forever we will be with the
Lord forever Romans 6 5 says if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death we also will be part of his resurrection that's how we will be with the Lord forever we're with the Lord now spiritually one day we will be with the Lord body and soul the new heavens the new earth forever forever whatever what greater comfort could a person ask for this is the high part of our passage it's the Lord Jesus himself your savior your creator your good shepherd you are with him for all eternity but that's not where he ends this thought because you and I are still here in the church we're still in this life in these bodies and we long for that day that we'll be with our Lord forever but now what do we do while we grieve while our flesh is weak and he ends with verse 18 comfort one another with these words comfort one another to comfort is to lessen a friend's sadness or sorrow it's to minister comfort to give someone a pleasant feeling or being relaxed more free from pain it's to restore a cheerful outlook to strengthen by inspiring them with hope and how is it that the
[29:35] Lord does this well he does it through the church we are part of ministering such comfort to one another and how do we comfort one another with these words if it's man's words to one another it brings no hope but from God who alone has the words of eternal life through his people the church there is great comfort Jesus said in Mark 13 verse 31 heaven and earth will pass away but my words shall never pass away we take the word of God that shall not pass away and we

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minister God's word to one another the Holy Spirit takes our humble attempts at comforting one another from God's word and he blesses that Psalm 55 verse 22 says cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you he will never permit the righteous to be moved comfort one another with these words we all need comfort from one another we come to the church we want to hear from

God and God ministers and he speaks to the church through the church hasn't that been true in your experience you're so blessed every time you leave and you just never know where the Lord's gonna minister to you but it happens as you're setting up an element of the service in the meal just passing in the hallway we listen to one another we minister to one another just as we prepare for death as a discipline now we also need to be prepared for persecution and for more serious grieving within this body we need to be equipped to minister and to comfort within this body we don't know what the Lord will bring I'm reminded every time I read of another part of the world or another time in Christian history how much persecution little churches like ours seeking to be faithful to God's word have endured one last example from John Flavel's life during the the reign in England when it was prohibited to minister from
God's word to one another you had to use a book of common prayer and be regulated by the government pastors like John Flavel spent time in prison then there was a five mile act where they had to be five miles away from the village where there was an official parish because it was outlawed to minister God's word to comfort one another and John Flavel was not popular his opponents made an effigy of him and burned it as a protest against puritanism and the free ministry of the word on another occasion his congregation would meet him in a field just to minister the word of the Lord to one another and worship with freedom of conscience there the city of darts is on the mouth of the ocean and these rivers bring that salty water in and so there was one island called the south stone rock and this is an estuary in England and here the sailors would come and they would they would put their ships and they would march out and the people from the village would join while the tide would blow they would take their little boats onto this rock and they would hold a worship service where they couldn't be persecuted and then as the tide would rise that same little island would get buried by the water
John Flavel took the truth of the gospel and he put it as a question and answer for these simple sailors it was called a catechism for sailors and listen to his words on death ministering this comfort to men like that to die is to pass through a raging maritime tempest that strips the ship of its worldly cargo and though all earthly things fail at death yet neither the soul nor its well-grounded hopes can fail the anchor of a believer's hope is firm and sure amen Jesus Christ is the anchor of every believer well Satan wants to attack you in your grief he wants to accuse God to you in your grief as you suffer loss you can feel empty bruised deserted and spiritually parched and Jesus says to you you who mourn in him are blessed
Matthew 5 4 how can a person mourning be blessed Jesus says because you shall be comforted Christ comforts you in your grief he fills you who are empty he brings water to you who are in a desert I love how John Newton the same pastor who composed the lyrics to amazing grace he put it this way in a poem see the streams of living water springing from eternal love well supply thy sons and daughters and all fear of want remove who can faint while such a river ever flows their thirst to assuage grace which like the Lord the giver never fails from age to age so church comfort one another with this all you who are in our Lord Jesus Christ all your loved ones who die in our [35:06] Lord Jesus Christ and the whole church who is united in the Lord Jesus Christ from all generations all peoples nations tribes and tongues will be with the Lord forever comfort one another in this truth let's pray Lord now we receive your truth by faith we believe help our unbelief we do pray Lord for those who are still grieving those who have suffered great loss we pray that the truth that we are secure in Jesus Christ and that the anchor of our hope will not fail we pray that that truth once again today

Lord will stir up in our hearts a hope in you for your glory we ask amen

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