

# Comfort One Another With These Words

Easter 2020

*1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14*

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**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. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14).**

## **Introduction**

I do believe enjoy one of the grandest vocations available to a human-to be in the ministry. In saying this I am not suggesting it's an easy job. Emotional highs and lows are common. Controversy abounds. Hardly a day goes by when you're not joining someone on the pinnacle of their joy (the birth of a child or a wedding or someone receiving good news about their health) then rapidly moving to a pit of another person's heartache (death of a loved one or a family in disruption). The calling is not for the faint of heart.

But what other career requires one engage in the uninterrupted study of the Scriptures? To pour for hours over a passage, digging deep into its meaning; meditating upon its richness! Jeremiah, even though his prophetic messages were almost uniquely in the negative, said that God's word was in his heart like a burning fire. Of God's word he wrote,

**...there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (Jeremiah 20:9).**

Similarly, Amos wrote of the impossibility of keeping God's word to himself:

**The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy (Amos 3:8)?**

Paul also communicates the almost volcanic nature of the word:

**...for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16b)!**

Being a pastor grants you a small taste of these explosive proclamations. This is true with virtually any portion of Scripture one puts their heart to. But there is no topic which nourishes one's soul as that which I had the joy to examine this week-the resurrection!

But I found this week, within myself, a difficulty. As I took the time to canvas the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, with the resurrection in mind, and its deep theological implications, I was comforted. One might ask, why is that a difficulty? It's a difficulty because in my own devotions I needn't explain to others (and at times don't fully grasp) the consolation of those moments.

What I am trying to say is that I can't always draw a clear line between what I'm meditating upon and why it is bringing me such peace. But preparing a sermon, though consoling to the soul, requires that I bring that peace (or perhaps admonishment, or even rebuke) to others; and in such a way that they can easily perceive, readily grasp and enjoy the waters of the fountain.

One of the great volumes that has withstood the test of time and history when it comes to the Christian faith are the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. Having looked at many passages in Scripture on the resurrection, I then thought I would have a look at what this work had to say. He made three points which I will briefly share. But before I do that, allow me to try to help you understand why I find these observations by Calvin (which I believe to be firmly biblical) a source of comfort for my soul, that it may be so for you as well.

I have been on the receiving end of this as a participant in a lecture by an apologist, Gary Habermas. Interestingly enough, I didn't even agree with this man's apologetic methodology (though clearly a wise Christian man), but I don't think that matters much for my current point. It was a lecture where he was arguing for the extrabiblical warrant to believe in the resurrection. His argument was interesting, compelling and not without some value, even though (as I said) I wouldn't generally take his approach.

But then something very interesting happened.

He shared with the audience how he had recently lost his wife, who was a believer. His strengthened belief in the resurrection wasn't merely something that benefited him as a professor or author or Christian minister. He found his studies of greater value, the value of knowing he would one day see his wife again. It was personal.

If you will indulge me as I seek to help you grasp how this is personal to me in hopes of it being personal for you. Paul caught my attentions well:

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).**

My earliest affliction as a believer almost immediately followed my conversion at the age of seventeen. As a junior in high school I was one of the best track and field athletes in the state and had been approached by colleges. I was going to be our families first collegiate student and athlete. It was exciting. Within a few days of coming to Christ I sustained an injury that sidelined me for years. It was devastating for a young man. But the lesson wasn't lost. I learned early as a Christian how easily things can be taken from you.

In time, I recovered and managed to earn a scholarship to a reputable university. I was a decent, Division One athlete. My first year out of college found me on participating on a Christian athletic team. I had again injured myself. Playing volleyball against the defending national champions, Pepperdine Waves at the Firestone Fieldhouse I tore ligaments in my ankle. I was not devastated this time. It was not a terrible injury and I had learned my lesson.

It was as a member of this team that I publicly shared the gospel for the first time. Though hobbled, I could still do that and was excited to. It was mere hours after I shared the gospel for the first time that I received a phone call in the middle of the night that my father had lost his life in an automobile accident. It was this event that changed the structure of my soul for the rest of my life.

The pain was overwhelming. I could barely breathe. My heart raced from the moment I woke up until I fell asleep. Then I would wake up and

hope, just for a moment, that it had been a bad dream. We were very close, and it hurt badly. I remember wondering if I would ever laugh again or if I would be motivated to pursue my continuing education and career. This wasn't merely more difficult than my prior pain, there was no rehabilitation. I couldn't work hard to get better.

Death is a formidable opponent. Whether it's the death of a loved one or contemplating our own, it is a taunting and inevitable darkness that we generally avoid talking about. Yet it's looming, like a cloud on the horizon which will unavoidably arrive. Though the pain has subsided, and I have learned to laugh and enjoy my days, I still miss my dad. But there is a comfort God has given me that I seek to extend to you. His funeral was the first I ever did.

But I've done hundreds of memorials since. Many very close friends. And every time I walk into that room of mourning and sorrow, which always accompanies the loss of a loved one (even Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus), there is Good News to be given. There is information eagerly seeking the floor. Paul put it this way:

**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. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14).**

Death truly is a formidable opponent. But it was defeated. Its fangs were removed. And here is where I found the three observations by Calvin so helpful. Because the empty slogans of well-meaning friends (things like you're loved one living on in your heart or death is just part of life-the list goes on) were of little help. I didn't want to grasp the thought of my dad. I wanted to grasp my dad.

Here are the three reflections on which we can finish or meditation this morning. Firstly, the resurrection renews and restores our righteousness in the sight of God. I was recently made aware of an interview between a popular pastor of a church called Hillsong and Oprah Winfrey in which she asked him if people can have a relationship with God apart from Christ. He (in a staunch denial of the text of Scripture) said 'yes'. She seemed quite pleased with that answer, but I don't think God was.

Of course, it can be said that people can have a relationship with God apart from Christ, just not a good one. The Scriptures teach (and even most children can testify) that God is of such a holy character that He cannot even look upon sin.

**You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong (Habakkuk 1:13).**

We often speak of Jesus dying for us. But we must recognize that is what is known as a synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is meant to represent the whole). If Jesus merely died for us, we would still be in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17). This is one good reason why our focus should not be upon a crucifix.

The cross, death and burial of Christ show only weakness. To be sure, in His death we have the satisfaction of God's justice, the removal of the curse and the penalty paid. But Peter teaches us that it is not merely by His death, but by His resurrection that we are begotten again to a living hope.

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3, 4).**

Hebrews teaches us that Jesus was raised for our justification (Hebrews 4:25). Let us prayerfully enjoy the comfort, expressed by the wise reformer who said of this:

**By his death sin was taken away, by his resurrection righteousness was renewed and restored.<sup>1</sup>**

By grace through faith alone, when God sees those who have called upon the name of Christ, He sees the righteousness of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, J., & Beveridge, H. (1845). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (Vol. 2, p. 65). Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society.

Secondly, the resurrection is the basis of our life and hope-the effective cause of new life in us. It is no doubt true that in the death of Christ sin is abolished and death is annihilated. But it is by the resurrection that righteousness is restored and life is revived. Peter, writing of Jesus, tells us that God...

**...raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:21).**

Paul's earnest desire was to walk in the "**power of His resurrection**" (Philippians 3:10). We have living High Priest who died for us, rose for us and ever lives for us. In his great denunciation of any and all who would seek to condemn God's children or suggest, in any manner, that the love of God could somehow be extracted, that Paul writes of this High Priest.

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is God who justifies.* <sup>34</sup>*Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us (Romans 8:33, 34).***

Jesus did not come merely as a great teacher, though He was certainly that. Nor was He merely a great example or inspiration, though He was all that and more. It is quite unique to the Christian faith that we have, not one who points us to salvation, but One who saves us by the power of His own "**indestructible life**" (Hebrews 7:16).

Not only in His death does He accomplish all that is necessary to vanquish sin, in His resurrection He ever brings us near that we might walk in light-walk in Him.

**We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).**

Finally, the resurrection of Christ assures us of our own resurrection. In our own deaths and eternity, we do not merely become a drop of water in an ocean of spiritual ambiguities. Where is the comfort in such a

nothingness? It was the natural inclination of the women, upon encountering the resurrected Christ, to take **“hold of” him (Matthew 28:9)**.

In the solitude of our quarantines (with all of our electronic meetings), we miss the contact. I don't want to see an apparition or some virtual of my father. I want to hold him, hear his actual voice. Hear the victorious and consolatory words of Paul:

**But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:20, 21).**

It is with great pastoral love that the Apostle Paul, in his brief discourse on the final resurrection, that he exhorts us to **“Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18)**. It is my prayer that these words are a source of encouragement. But there is also a warning.

For it is in reference to the same day that Jesus taught:

**Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:28, 29).**

There will be on that day a separation of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:32). All of the comforts of the resurrection are contingent, not merely on faith that Jesus rose again (many saw the resurrected Christ), but that He rose again for you. That He died and rose again for you!

If you believe this, then it is through that faith alone, in Christ alone that the victory of the resurrection is yours. You are then called to be baptized and become member of the body of Christ in a church which believes these things that you may be nurtured in your faith.