



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start # 443

1 Thessalonians 4:13 *“But we do not want you to be uniformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.”*

This is a difficult passage—not from the standpoint of understanding what is meant, but rather, from experiencing this in life. Paul is writing about death. He uses the expression, “those who are asleep.” In older cemeteries it was common to see R.I.P. on gravestones—Rest In Peace. That term, “asleep” for death, seems to be an expression used only of the righteous. Jesus said that our friend Lazarus is asleep. He said the young daughter of the synagogue official was asleep. Those in the room even laughed when Jesus said that. He spoke this of the death of the righteous. We don’t read of the wicked dead referred to as asleep, nor do we see Jesus using a miracle to bring the wicked back to life.

Paul is writing to Christians. He is writing about the death of fellow Christians. In doing this, he makes a contrast—between those who have hope in death and those who do not. This passage is not intended to answer all questions about life after death, nor is it addressing every angle involved. He will go on to comfort the righteous by telling them where the departed Christians are and what will happen to them when Jesus comes. This passage is comfort, assurance, and hope—the very thing those without Christ do not have.

To die without Christ is the worst type of death. It is to be thrown into eternity without grace, without a Savior and as Paul says here, “without hope.”

I want to look at both sides of this passage—comfort for those with hope and comfort for those without hope. From my perspective as a preacher, it is much easier to preach the funeral of someone who was a Christian than it is for someone who wasn’t.

How do we comfort someone who “grieves without hope.” Maybe they don’t believe in God. Maybe they never followed God, worshipped God, thought about God, or even cared about God. Their life was here. Their world was what you see. They lived, loved and died. Their family grieves. It is a sad, sad situation. I’ve had strangers call me to preach the funeral for their loved one. Families that have no connection to God. They don’t know a preacher. Somehow, somewhere, in the family connections, through someone at work, I’m found. I’m called upon to preach a funeral for someone who most likely never opened the Bible in his life. They want me to preach the funeral and offer hope for someone who chose to ignore God his entire life. I hate those situations. Difficult. They are reaching for hope. They are looking for a divine loophole. They want God in death but not in life.

(OVER)

How do you comfort in those situations? What do you say?

1. Understand, they grieve hard. The loss of any loved one is hard, even among Christians, but without God as an anchor, without the teachings of the Scriptures, all they see is that it's not fair. They may be angry. Tears at these funeral are often uncontrollable.
2. They want their loved one in Heaven. They are hoping for what may not be there. Everyone wants their loved one in Heaven. They will believe it. They will talk about their loved one dancing with angels, fishing with Peter, laughing with the saints. I've heard some very blasphemous ideas such as the loved one cursing in Heaven, drinking beer in Heaven and other dumb ideas that illustrate that they do not know the Holy God nor do they understand Heaven at all.
3. Nothing can be done for the departed. They are in the hands of God. It's not our place to judge nor to determine their fate—God has already done that. In fact, the departed already did that by the choices in their life.
4. Comfort is needed to the family. This is where you can help. Take them to Scripture. Try to connect them to God. They need to see the importance of worshipping God, walking with God and having the hope of God in their hearts.

Years ago I bought a set of books because they were stuffed with old newspaper clippings. I wanted those clippings, so I bought the books. One of the clippings was from the late 1800's. It was a newspaper report of the funeral of Robert Ingersoll, the great agnostic. That report alone was worth thousands of books. The reporter who attended the New York funeral said it was the most solemn and eerie thing he ever witnessed. There were no hymns sung. There were no prayers offered. There were no reading of Scriptures. It was all secular—as Ingersoll had lived.

Two days after the funeral, his body still wasn't buried. Ingersoll's wife and daughters refused to stop clinging to his remains. They couldn't bury him. This is grieving without hope.

5. The most important thing I tell people is that their loved ones are in the hands of God. God loved them. God cared and had blessed them. There are no other hands that we'd want them in than God's. He is just and He is merciful. I remind them that nothing more can be done. Burning candles won't change things. Offering money won't help. What can be done is for us to live with Christ in our hearts. He wants us to walk with assurance so we don't die in fear or without hope.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can live with Heaven deep in our hearts. It's hard to comfort those who don't know God. I don't know if I do any good. Follow up a few days after the funeral will remind them. Invite them to church services. Don't give up on them. It is to the living that we must do our work.

Next week: The hope that the Christian has.

Roger Shouse

