

Hopeful grieving: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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by [James C. Howell](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

My wife is afraid of heights. She didn't like flying out west, and she didn't want to peer down into the Grand Canyon. I wonder how she would feel at the end of time, "caught up together with the saints in the air to meet the Lord." I know she'd prefer that this reunion happen down here on solid, flat ground.

Mark Allan Powell has suggested that biblical critics have ruined the apocalyptic by fixing it in a context of long ago and thus "depriving everyday Christians of the heartfelt expectation of their Lord's return." I feel the opposite: it's *because* the biblical scenarios speak to a situation long ago that they provide bearings for my life now. As Christopher Lasch says, "Children need to learn about faraway times and places so they can make sense of their own surroundings."

For many Christians today, apocalyptic scenarios are coming closer and closer, and kindling a fire of anticipation as they do. Not for me. If I have been deprived of a heartfelt expectation of the Lord's return, I blame Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye, with their blockbusters *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the Left Behind series. Church members who've never shown up at Bible study are plunking down money for the latest installment of Left Behind. This hip, modern spin on the apocalyptic has become a surrogate religion, making me want to have nothing to do with things apocalyptic.

Problems creep in as readers absorb more and more LaHaye stuff. Readers begin to think, "This is Christianity." Faith becomes irresponsible, an elitist gnosticism. Shamefully, apocalyptic misconstruals even seem to influence America's foreign policy.

Perhaps the most insidious by-product of modern apocalyptic scenarios is that grief is shoved right off the table. This is what Paul addresses, saying that the Thessalonians do “not grieve as others do who have no hope.” In LaHaye’s fiction, those who grieve are those who have no hope; they discover that they did not listen to the preacher who told them they could be caught up in the air, and now they are stuck on earth—and so they grieve. Believers, on the other hand, do not grieve at all. With immense satisfaction they relish having flown away just in the nick of time. As horrors unfold on earth, they lick their chops, taking perverse delight that the bowls of wrath are being poured out right on schedule.

LaHaye’s fans may be more pious than I am. But when I see what’s going on in the world, I veer from outrage to a numb, intense sorrow. LaHaye might say, “Rejoice and be glad! God knew all this would unfold, and if you’re among the elect, then dance a jig: you’ll be flying at any moment!” But Paul does not say this. “Do not grieve as those who have no hope.” We are to grieve, but as those who have hope. How do the hopeful grieve?

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* is a book worth handing to grieving friends. After his son died, Wolterstorff believed that for the rest of his life he would look at the world through tears. “Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.” Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn,” Wolterstorff notes. “The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God’s new day, who ache with all their being for the day’s coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. . . . The mourners are aching visionaries. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s mourning, weep over humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.”

What do those who grieve with hope do while waiting for that day of peace? They grieve—and when they grieve, they draw near to the God who grieves. Through tears they understand the old bumper sticker I saw a while back: “Jesus is coming: Look busy.” The apocalyptic does not relieve us of responsibility down here on solid ground. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, and instead of flipping through LaHaye to pinpoint the event, we pray, protest and labor for peace. We hear of poverty or the AIDS crisis—and we do not even blush to read Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs’s audacious proposal (*The End of Poverty*) that our generation can choose to end poverty. We say not, “Don’t bother, Jesus is coming soon,” but “Jesus is coming, so let’s eradicate poverty.” We grieve as those with hope.

Clarence Jordan offered an interesting reflection on “Blessed are those who mourn.” To him, “real mourners” grieve over injustice in God’s world. “There are ‘fake mourners’ who say, ‘Sure, the world’s in a mess, and I guess maybe I’m a bit guilty like everybody else, but what can I do about it?’ What they’re really saying is that they are not concerned enough about themselves or the world to look for anything to do.” Mourning elicits courageous, hopeful engagement. Jordan, who was clearly no fake mourner, warned: “You’d better watch out when a fellow gets that certain gleam in his eye and a certain set to his jaw. He’s getting ready to ‘mourn.’ And he’ll be awfully hard to stop, because he will be receiving tremendous strength and power and encouragement from seeing his mourning become deeds.” We grieve as those with hope.

Jesus is coming. Look busy—busy grieving and busy working. We will begin to recover that “heartfelt expectation” of our Lord’s return. But please, a reunion that’s held not 17,000 feet in the air, but on solid ground. My wife is grieving and working too, and I want her by my side.