



1 THESSALONIANS

living in hope

JESUS IS COMING BACK BUT IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

Sunday 20 November 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> *Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11*

We can divide this portion of scripture into three sections:

- 4:13-18 > What will happen at the end?
- 5:1-5 > When will it happen?
- 5:5-11 > How do we live in the meantime?

What happens at the end?

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, 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. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

This is a popular topic. We are fascinated with how it ends and then when it ends, or when our lives end... and then what? It's even a major theme in film these days. Scan Netflix and you'll find dozens of films about the end of the world... It might be asteroids, aliens, zombies, viral

outbreaks, an environmental disaster, nuclear annihilation, terminator robots, interdimensional or demonic beings...

But let's start with the context: "*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

While he was in Thessalonica, Paul had enough time to preach about the resurrection and the return of Christ being something that could happen at any time. But as we learnt, he had to make a hasty exit - and in the period he has been away some Christians have died, perhaps by persecution, and word has gotten back to Paul that people are concerned about the fate of the dead.

How did the culture think about death and the end? If you've ever seen the movie 'Gladiator', Maximus was longing for Elysium to be reunited with his slain family. Before the battle scene in Germania at the beginning of the film, he says, "If you find yourself alone, riding in the green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled. For you are in Elysium, and you're already dead!" Elysium was some positive, spiritual realm for hero's and demigods that might have been their hope - but in general, in the Greko-Roman world it wasn't so optimistic. Death was a mostly vague and negative topic. Their idea of a spiritual underworld was the descent into hades. Death was a place of retribution or nothingness. Tombs were often inscribed with the words "I was not, I am not, I care not."

Whereas Paul had taught the Thessalonians a new vision in the Gospel: "*For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*" (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

The Thessalonians had no concept of bodily resurrection, no hope of renewed life. The resurrection and return of Jesus to raise His disciples was a whole new vision for life, a whole new basis for justice, for hope. But they were confused. People have died and they are grieving for them and fearful that if Jesus returns the dead ones will miss out on the 'Parousia', the arrival of Jesus.

But, Paul says: "*According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:15) In other words, Jesus is coming for the living and the dead. No one will miss out! "*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16)

As a basic summary of the future (spoiler alert!): Jesus returns. There is a resurrection. A final judgement. And the recreation of all things. In a re-creative act the immaterial part of

you will be reunited with a new physical you – not ghosts or spirits, but like Jesus, alive, flesh and bones minus all signs of the fall (don't ask me if you will have your 25-year-old body or your 75-year-old body – I don't know but my preference is the 25-year-old Scott!). This is the good news and the hope of orthodox Christianity. All Christians believe this throughout history everywhere. None of that is debated as these are first-order foundational biblical beliefs.

Paul continues: *"After that, 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. And so we will be with the Lord forever."* (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

This bit is debated! This is one of two passages (see also Matthew 24) that people get the idea of a 'rapture' (to be caught up or snatched up) which comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word 'rhapio'. The idea is that a few billion living people will suddenly vanish and float up into the clouds to meet Jesus who will take them away – meanwhile the world will descend into utter chaos for all those left behind...

Many people do not realise that the concept of the rapture is a modern biblical interpretation that has only been around since the mid 1800's. It became famous in the mid 1900's in America in particular with Hal Lindsay's 'Late Great Planet Earth' and in the Tim LaHaye 'Left Behind' book series which became a Hollywood movie in 2014 when Nicholas Cage played the lead role... (He certainly didn't win any academy awards and, actually, I think Nicholas Cage was not a great pick – it should have been Liam Nielson. Then he could have played 'Taken' and 'Left Behind'!)

This is really common theology in America and, from my observation, anyone who likes to do 'research' on YouTube. More broadly, this intersects with other big words and ideas about the end times like:

- dispensationalism (the relevance of the modern state of Israel)
- millennial views which is the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth (pre, post, A, pan)
- tribulation views (pre, mid, post)

In my opinion, (and that's all it is) it's all a jumble of ideas that I personally think are largely secondary and somewhat speculative in nature. If you feel strongly, that's ok; I respect that – and you don't need to enlighten me; I've read the arguments each way. They are entertaining and sometimes interesting, but watch out that you don't make this your primary obsession or lens for interpreting the world or the Bible. Over the years what I have repeatedly witnessed is that when you do, it has poor outcomes for people spiritually, missionally and relationally.

Like I said earlier, all Christians believe that Jesus returns, there will be a resurrection and judgement, that God will shut out all evil, and there will be a recreation of all things. That's

what matters and that is our good news.

In the Bible by default, all talk about the future is metaphorical – but we get tempted to read it as literal, like:

- being 'caught up in the clouds.' Clouds are often associated with God appearing or making Himself visible. As a general rule when you see clouds in Scripture, think God is close by.
- 'To meet the Lord in the air.' The air represents the position of God reigning over all.
- And first century Thessalonians would understand Paul's idea of coming out to meet Jesus. A 'Parousia' was when a delegation would go outside the walls of the city to meet a visiting dignitary and escort them back into the city – think red carpet treatment. If it was the Caesar or king, the whole city would come out and welcome him in. You weren't going out to be taken away, but you were welcoming them in. That same image is here: the people of Jesus go out to welcome Him and escort Him not up but down to earth. That's how they understood 'Parousia'.

Paul is saying there is coming a day when Jesus will return to rule over all creation, and that's why you meet Him in the air because He is King over all the cosmos. We will go out to meet Him and we, together, will walk Jesus back into His world where He will take up His throne. It's not disappearing, it's not floating off and exiting the world, but it's the renewal of this one.

Overall, remember Paul's point here is pastoral. Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11. He is writing to encourage a church in mourning, not to give them a teaching on the end times. He is saying, "Don't grieve as those without hope. Death is not the last word for the living or the dead."

When will it happen?

"Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief." (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4)

The short answer is: suddenly and unexpectedly. People have been asking "when" forever. People love to speculate, decipher the 'Bible code', define the mark of the beast, identifying the antichrist... People are still asking "when," but in Mark 13:32 Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Jesus says no man knows the day or the hour! Only the Father knows. So, if only the Father knows and someone tells you they know when Jesus is returning – and there has been a bunch of them – then direct them to Mark 13:32.

Paul uses two metaphors:

1. Like a thief when people least expect it - living like all is well, living their best life, and suddenly without warning it happens...
2. Like a woman whose waters break and she is going into labour - it's dangerous, painful, inescapable, there's no getting around the fact that the baby is coming, it's happening.

And "*the day of the Lord*" refers to the return and judgement. Judgement in Hebrew is less about vengeance and more about healing and renewal. But at a cosmic level evil has to go away. All evil. Therefore Judgement is essential in the renewing work of God and it is also a reminder of the good news that God doesn't turn a blind eye to injustice.

Finally, how do we live in the meantime?

Expectantly and distinctively: *"You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."*

(1 Thessalonians 5:5-11)

I think this is the real concern for Paul: in light of the return of Christ and the hope we have in life and death, how should we live?

Paul says it's as distinctive as day and night. Some belong to the night - the night being a life of darkness, of revelry, if it feels good do it, of slumber but not necessarily of rest, of laziness, ambivalence - and some people live as though this is their life. You can go through life this way: a vocation-less life.

And some belong to the day - children of the light are awake, sober and disciplined, with meaning and purpose, dressed and ready for the day.

Paul is contrasting people on autopilot to their desires and culture compared to people intentionally living in their call and vocation as children of God. They are living from faith and love and hope... There are those three words again. And this is so vital in our polarised world today. What are we to be known for? Is it our moral judgements on people's lifestyles? Is it our high-production church services, celebrity preachers and worship music?

No. It's our faith hope and love.

Faith is faithful living out of God's Word.

Love is self-sacrifice for others.

Hope is the absolute expectation of good coming, based on the character of God.

In the light of salvation, in the light of the return of Jesus, the making all things right and all things new - how are you going to live your life?

So then, may our lives be thoroughly devoted to Christ, faithfully living out His Word in all its radical distinctiveness. May our lives overflow with a quiet confidence that Jesus is working all things together for good in my salvation, in His return and judgement. May our lives be known for how we love extravagantly, looking to give ourselves away and love those who won't love us in return.