

1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 November 2022

Preacher: Arthur Keefer

[0 : 00] We are back in 1 Thessalonians. This is the third sermon I'll preach on the book. Last week, in the morning, we went through chapter 1.

In the evening, we went through most of chapter 2. And I thought with three sermons, I'm going to try to get through the whole of the book, which obviously isn't every word in the book, but try to get through its big ideas.

So we saw it's a lot about God's mission. It might not be all about God's mission, but the book has a great deal to do with that. This is a church, a group of people, maybe we might think about it as churches, around the city that had received preaching and a message from missionaries, Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

And they had started to grow, and they needed encouragement. They had a few issues they were dealing with. And as we'll see, one of the big issues is what to do with Christ's return. What does that mean for people who have passed away?

So it's quite fitting for Remembrance Sunday, as people remember people who have gone before us. But also, what exactly do we do with our own lives if we're here and are thinking, well, Christ might come, and we have no idea when it's going to be.

[1 : 13] But what does that do for us now? Some people think that the book is really primarily all about this return of Christ.

You might know the Bible Project. I've found this a really helpful resource, actually. They make really nice kind of 10-minute, 5-minute videos on each book of the Bible. So far, I really like what I found.

This is their little summary of Thessalonians. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians celebrates a flourishing church. Despite persecution and suffering, the community of Jesus' followers have stood strong in their commitment to Jesus.

Paul encourages them further, pointing toward the return of King Jesus, who will set everything right. This return of Christ, it is very much present in the book.

Chapter 1 ends with this, waiting for his Son from heaven, who delivers us from the wrath to come. Chapter 3 ends with God establishing the believers, blameless in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

[2 : 25] The end is in view across the letter. And the coming of the Lord is certainly a major part, but it also helps us understand, and I don't think we're out of place to talk about mission as something that really captures a lot of the book.

And the view towards Jesus' coming, his return, particularly puts the reach of the mission on display, what I would call the reach of the mission. So, kind of its extent.

How far does it go? Does it go into the afterlife? And yes, of course it does. The letter's not content to show that the mission of God is an authentic one, done in his power, received with similar power, and that it is still active.

It does want to raise our eyes to another horizon, to the future of God's mission, and the implication of that future for today. That's what I mean by the extent or the reach of God's mission.

So, before we get into the text, let me pray for us one more time. Lord God, we thank you again for this time to come together. We pray that you would speak to us, Lord, that whatever words are said would truly only convey your truth, Lord, and that anything wrong or misleading would be stricken from our memory, Lord.

[3 : 47] And I pray these things in your name as we wait for your son. Amen. I spoke at a funeral several years ago, and I mentioned the confidence that Christians should have about seeing this person, again, this person who had died.

I said we should be confident for believers in Christ that this person will be resurrected and returned to us, and we'll have a reunion someday. One of the relatives that was there was talking to me afterwards, and she said, do you really think that's going to happen?

Do you really think that the resurrection and the afterlife will come to pass, and that we'll actually see this person again? I was surprised by the question, and she was surprised by what I had said. She wanted this to be true, I think, but she couldn't help but worry about this family member that she had lost. Will I see this person again?

Well, that's only part of it. It's caught up with worries about what happens after we die, with uncertainty about the process, and I think sometimes about a little doubt that we can have about God's promises, about what comes afterwards.

[5 : 10] The Thessalonians, of course, have this worry too. The church has seen conversions, they've seen growth, they've seen health, and they've seen members of their church die.

Christians give a new life now, promise more life in the future. These people are no longer present for them. It caused a great deal of worry for the church. What happens to the dead?

Will they be all right? And the main reason for this worry actually seems to be a lack of information. Now, we rightly push against the idea that the Bible is just trying to tell us knowledge about God and tell us things.

It's sometimes trying to get us to feel certain ways. It's sometimes trying to reassure us along a certain direction, to tell us something we know again and again and again. But sometimes it is trying to inform us, and it seems that the problem here was just that they really didn't know what to expect and what was going on.

Verse 13 says, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep. The word uninformed refers to ignorance, to not understanding something.

[6 : 21] So it's not half understanding or possessing partial information about what's going to happen. It's really missing out entirely. And so Paul is saying, We want you to know.

We want you to understand what happens to dead Christians. The result of having incorrect or insufficient information is that we grieve like others do who have no hope.

And this is also part of the problem. It's not Christian grief. It's a hopeless kind of grief, which Christians should not have. So one more time at verse 13.

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. Now, this doesn't mean that Christians have to be happy about death, of course.

They're not allowed to grieve for the dead. That's not what he means. Nor is he wanting the Thessalonians to celebrate at a funeral in a kind of really relaxed way.

[7 : 25] He does want them to have hope. What Christians should not do is grieve as others do who have no hope. That's the grief of eternal loss. And no Christian is eternally lost.

We grieve with hope, which does mean that we can think with joy even about those who have died in Christ. So what does Paul want to inform them about then?

Well, there are two pieces of information that he wants to assure them of. And the first is in verse 14. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Part of the assumption here by the Thessalonians is that living has some advantage over the dead when it comes to Christ's return. The church is worried about those who have died, and as we'll see, they're not worried enough about their own life and their own future.

But it's interesting, though, how confident some people and Christians can feel about what would happen if Christ returned now. It doesn't seem to shake us that much. We long for Jesus' returning.

[8 : 35] We think, what a relief. The king has come. No more sorrow, no more tears. It's like we have some advantage because we're here for it. But if we think about Christians who have died or even about our own death, there could be a bit of unease.

It's as simple as being assured of something because you're on the scene. If I'm alive and present when it happens, then I'll be all right. But if you put me on the other side of that, I really don't know what's going to happen.

I'm a bit uneasy about that, that sort of thing. That might not be the case for everyone here, but I know it is the case sometimes. We don't have all the details, but the Bible is clear enough about what happens when a Christian dies.

Jesus tells the criminal on the cross, today you will be with me in paradise. Christian service in the present today, for Paul, means being away from the Lord, as if to die would be with the Lord. The first point here in Thessalonians, then, is that Christ's resurrection means resurrection for the dead. Christ's resurrection means resurrection for the dead.

[9 : 52] You'll notice that sleep, or being asleep, is used to refer to death here. It's possible that the euphemism, sleep, is used several times because Paul wants to emphasize the non-finality of death.

I hope this is accurate. I really like the image. In a way, they're only sleeping because they're going to wake up. In verse 16, Paul calls them the dead in Christ, which surely means they won't stay dead.

They are connected to a living person. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

The final thing to notice here is that this is God's work. God the Father will bring the dead along with him, that is, along with Jesus. Jesus is, as usual, the agent of the Father's action, and union with Christ is the central relationship that Christians have with him.

Christians are united to Christ and share in his benefits. They share in his resurrection. The second bit of information appears in verse 17.

[11 : 07] Have a look at verse 17. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them, that is, the dead, in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.

And so we will always be with the Lord. Life now, or after death, means reunion with Christ. Everyone gets united with Christ.

So we will always be with the Lord. And it also means reunion with each other. However, the living will be caught up together with the dead in the clouds.

We get a few glimpses into Christ's return elsewhere in the Bible. Mark says, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

This passage refers to the sound of a trumpet. But what this is really pointing to is the reach of God's mission, its extent, and its future reality.

[12 : 16] One interpreter says, what lies behind the whole passage is Paul's conviction, shared with the other early believers and based on Christ's own resurrection, that a future bodily resurrection lies in the future of those who believe in Christ.

A future bodily resurrection lies in the future of those who believe in Christ. Paul doesn't have that much to say about where this occurs or what happens afterwards in terms of its geography.

He only twice locates believers in heaven. And here we don't know if we keep going up or keep coming down. We are caught up with the Lord in the air, somewhere in between.

And that's because the concern is with the relationship. So we will always be with the Lord. That's how the verse ends. I don't know if you've had a look at Desiring God.

I feel like I'm recommending resources this morning. The Bible Project, Desiring God. If I am looking for something sometimes and I find an article on there, I'm quite reassured. I take it with a good bit of credibility.

[13 : 26] There are good articles on there. So the website had this to say. What is central to biblical teaching is not where heaven is, but what it is.

Heaven is where God dwells in the unapproachable light of his awesome majesty. Death is gain for believers because we enter heaven, the place where we come into the fullness of Christ's loving presence in a wholly new way which is better than life itself.

Heaven is where God is. That's the where really about it. And upon resurrection, the living and the dead will reunite with each other and be in God's presence.

This information from Paul is an encouragement. It's based on knowledge and it's written for the purpose of hope. We don't need to worry and we should not worry about brothers and sisters in Christ who have died.

Around the first century, the time when the New Testament was written, there were Greek and Roman what are called epitaphs, but they're just, think about them like a gravestone.

[14 : 43] What's written on a gravestone? I have two examples here. Shine while you live. Blaze beyond grief. For life is brief and time a thief.

Another one says this. Does my soul abide in heaven or hell? Only the seagulls in their high, lonely circuits may tell. These aren't very hopeful.

These are not very hopeful. There are a lot of these. And they starkly contrast with the Christian gravestones and what was written and inscribed on those. If you look at those of Christians, you'll find some symbols sometimes.

There were fish drawn on there, which of course represents Christ. There was an anchor drawn on other ones for hope. There's a palm also, which people think refers to victory, victory over death. One of these, a bit later, after the New Testament, quite a while afterwards, said the following. May the God of the Spirit and of all flesh, who has overcome death and trodden hell underfoot and has graciously bestowed life on the world, permit the soul of this man to attain to rest in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the place of light and of refreshment, where affliction, pain, and grief are no more.

[16:14] It's hope. It's not worry. It's not endless grief. Hope is what Christ provides, and it is his gift to us. When it came to others, that is, those in Christ, the Christians who had died, the Thessalonians were worried.

But they had a very different problem when it came to themselves. This one wasn't really a matter of worry, and it wasn't a matter of knowledge. This takes us to chapter 5.

Now concerning the times and seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you, for you yourselves are fully aware. Notice they have full knowledge of this, that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Thessalonians know the truth, like we saw in chapters 1 and 2, and sometimes Paul was always saying, as you know, or you know, brothers, or don't you know this, that? In this case, they're fully aware.

Fully aware, it refers to accurate knowledge, very accurate knowledge, actually. Felix, in the book of Acts, is said to have an accurate knowledge of the way, of the Christian faith. And so there's a little play on ideas here.

[17:39] The church has accurate knowledge that they cannot know when Christ will return. So they're perfectly aware of their ignorance. That's what they know. It's going to come like a thief in the night.

I know, I have no idea. So if it's not a problem of knowledge, like it was with their worry about the dead, then what's the problem? Well, let's read on, starting from verse 4.

It's a bit harder to see, but I think the problem could have been an indifference about life.

What I mean is that they may have been fully aware of Christ's return, but that didn't translate into an appropriate attitude for the present. It's the danger of early admission.

Some universities, as you'll know, offer places for final year students right now, this month, actually. Congratulations, you've been offered a place at Ealing University, and we are pleased to inform you that this is an unconditional offer.

[19:03] An unconditional offer. Right, most students think this is the best scenario. No matter what I score on my A level, so I can go to university. Meanwhile, other students are receiving letters with conditional offers.

Congratulations, you've been offered a place at Ealing University conditioned upon a score of AAB or 3Bs or 2A stars, whatever it is. The unconditional offer is dangerous.

Why is that? Because it takes away from the motivation to study, to make much of anything of your final year in school. If I've been offered a place in November with certainty, what's my attitude towards school work going to be for the next six to seven months?

This is only further enforced when the school system doesn't have high school diplomas. In America, every little thing counts and you have to graduate formally. Now, some employer might want to see my A level grades in the future, so that would be a bit of motivation.

That's probably the best case in this one. But this is the danger of early admission. If the future is certain, the present can feel less important.

[20:19] If the future is certain, the present can feel less important. And it's just as much a spiritual temptation. Christ is coming back, so can't we just take it easy?

My present actions won't change the Lord's return. We could even call this a spiritual nap, and that's exactly what Paul has in mind when he says, so then, let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

By the time of the second letter to the Thessalonians, indifference has become an even bigger issue. Paul accuses people of being idle, busybodies, neglectful of work at all.

2 Thessalonians 3 says, keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness, and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies.

Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. One writer said that the views above share a common but false supposition, namely, that Christ's coming into the world has radically diminished the value of everyday labor.

[21 : 43] people were using some aspect of Christ's teaching, whether it was his second coming or his commission to evangelize the world or his command for radically sharing in the community to justify their idleness.

Paul will have none of it. Responsible Christian living in view of Christ's return embraces work, even the hard work of a first century manual laborer.

Jesus also doesn't hold back on his descriptions of judgment and even more directly wants to shake us out of being lax about what today entails.

I'm going to read a long passage from Matthew 24. It's a well-known one. But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.

This is Jesus himself speaking. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

[23 : 03] Then two will be in the field, one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill, one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming.

But know this, that if the master of the house, and this is where Jesus gets practical, if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

Therefore, you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. Jesus makes the second coming sound like a sucker punch.

People get absolutely blindsided by judgment. And so he tells us to stay awake, be on your guard, be ready. None of us are at home currently if you're here.

We're at church, this is a home, but I don't think anyone has stayed the night here last night. And is anyone here indifferent towards their home getting broken into in the next hour?

[24 : 15] I'm not trying to stir you up to abnormal anxiety and make you think about it, but does anyone really not care if a thief would come in and steal your things in the next hour? I suspect not, I suspect you do care, I care about my own house.

Because Jesus' point is that if we care about that sort of thing and take precautions against house thieves, locking the door, setting an alarm, turning the lights on if we're away, or turning them on if we wake up startled, then we should be just as vigilant for Christ's return.

We should be just as alert, just as aware, just as awake for Christ's return. Thessalonians goes on to make the point with a series of images.

This is verse 7 and 8. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.

There are three pairs of images here, sobriety and drunkenness, being awake, being asleep, and the day and night. The first thread with all of these pictures is alertness.

[25 : 38] It's daytime, you're awake, and sober. You're alert to what's happening. For those in the nighttime are either asleep or they're drunk, they're not alert to what's happening.

And the second commonality or the thread in these images is one of contrast. Paul is clearly aligning the Thessalonians with the alert group. He says, we are not of the night or of the darkness. Since we belong to the day, let us be sober. Christians, in other words, are switched on about Christ's coming. Those who don't know Christ are therefore not aware of what the future entails. I was just speaking with someone about a recent career wobble, what I call a career wobble. He's not sure if he's in the right job.

He's looking back on his accomplishments, forward at the possibilities, and reassessing the whole thing. This is not uncommon. It's not an uncommon thing. So he said he met with a career advisor

recently, a very nice lady with lots of experience in several different industries.

[26 : 47] She was kind, eager to listen, insightful with advice. She was truly helpful. And he told me several things that he wouldn't have been aware of without her help.

But he said, you know, I have to account for something that didn't come up with a career advisor. I have to account for God, for what he's given me, what he's called me to, the people he's surrounded me with, and the fact that he's going to return to this earth as a judge.

The question isn't only whether I've fulfilled my fullest potential, whether I've taken all the opportunities, whether I've expressed all aspects of my personality, or whether or not God will be pleased with my commitments at the end of life.

It's the last part that I really have to worry about. Have I sought to glorify God and enjoy him in all things? Sobriety, alertness, being awake and aware does not mean that we know when Christ is coming back.

Christians will be surprised at the timing, but we will not be surprised that Christ is coming back. Nor should we be surprised that what we do now matters.

[28 : 13] The letter, and this is the last thing, makes this a matter of our spiritual identity. Christians are called children of light, not just awake, not just sober, not just in the daytime, being around in the daytime.

They are children of light. We belong to God as his children, and that belonging entails some awareness of what he will do. This is one of the New Testament's great patterns, to spell out who Christians are and then give them commandments based upon that.

You are children, you belong to the day, so let us be sober and put on faith, hope, and love. How can we be indifferent when that is the truth?

We are children, aware that Christ will return, but uncertain about when, and in that we remain alert, armed, and awake, armed with spiritual armor.

Finally, verses 9 and 10. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

[29 : 29] The passage ends with a sort of unveiling of what it means to be a child of God, not destined for wrath, but for salvation. Back in verse 8, Paul referred to the hope of salvation.

Notice the content of hope. This is a future salvation, one we're destined for, he says. But salvation in the Bible is comprehensive. It's multifaceted.

It's salvation from our past, salvation towards a new future, salvation from current sins and sinfulness, salvation as conversion, as justification, as sanctification, and as glorification.

All of that is included. That's what it means to be saved. It is the totality of God's gift of grace to his creatures.

And it's the fullness of life that Christ himself gave himself for. God's mission reaches to death, and it reaches beyond the grave. So, let us be grateful, let us be aware, and let us not worry about those who have gone before.

[30 : 37] Let's pray.