

Jesus' Return

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Unfortunately, over these past few days, we have been witnessing another devastating hurricane. Thankfully, we do live in a day when technology allows forecasters to know these things are coming and to give far warning. And so for those who will pay attention there is plenty of information that can help people to take steps to protect themselves. It was well over 10 days ago when they first started talking about Irma being a possible threat. And so people have the opportunity to act in light of what they know. In some cases they evacuate. In other cases they find a good shelter. The wise person will take these steps to act in light of future realities.

A similar thing is true in the spiritual realm. There are future realities that have been revealed to us that ought to affect how we live in the present. Scripture reveals to us that Jesus is returning. Our doctrinal statement calls this the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). We don’t know when, but we do know that it is coming and so wise people will take steps to live in light of this future reality.

Today, as we continue our study of 1 Thessalonians, we are looking at a lengthy passage of Scripture that speaks of Jesus’ return and how we live in the present with wisdom in light of his return. We are looking at 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11. The first truth that we see is that . . .

I. **Jesus’ Return Gives Us Hope** (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

Timothy had apparently brought word back to Paul that the Thessalonians had concerns about their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who had died. What would happen to them at Christ’s return? Would they miss out on aspects of Jesus’ victorious and glorious return? In the final verses of chapter 4, Paul focuses his attention on these concerns and in answering what is going to happen with those who have already died in Christ he communicates a number of ways that Jesus’ return gives us hope. Let’s start reading in verse 13:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

Those who are asleep are the believers that have died. Paul says that he doesn’t want them to *be uninformed* about what is going to happen to them. Because if they know what is going to happen to them, they would not need to *grieve as do the rest who have no hope*, in other words, as do unbelievers.

Paul goes on to explain what actually is going to happen to those who have already died when Jesus returns.

¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Are departed believers going to miss out? Are they at some disadvantage? No! They are actually going to participate in the first act of Jesus' return. When it says that God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep, this is presupposing their resurrection. They will be resurrected and Jesus will bring them with him as He returns. And he says that those who are alive when Jesus returns *will not precede those who have fallen asleep*.

¹⁶ *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

This shout will awaken those who have fallen asleep in Christ. And so the dead in Christ *will rise first*. And then those who are still living at Jesus' return will be reunited with them. Verse 17:

¹⁷ *Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.*

This term, *caught up*, is where we get the term "rapture." "Rapture" comes from the Latin translation of this word. Paul says that at Jesus' return, believers who are still living will be *caught up together* with the departed loved ones who have just been resurrected and He says we will be *with them*.

When my sister died 17 years ago, I spent a lot of time reflecting on this passage. I remember this phrase, *caught up together with them*, came alive in a way I had never known before. One little preposition, *with*, took on great meaning for me. I was grieving, but I found great hope in the truth that I could look forward to being reunited with Kim. I still find hope in this truth. We have this hope.

And so those living at the time of Jesus' return will be reunited with the resurrected dead and then together, we will *meet the Lord in the air*. And then he says *and so we shall always be with the Lord*. This is our ultimate hope. Being with Jesus. Forever!

Jesus' return gives us hope. **Jesus' return gives us hope as we grieve the death of fellow believers.** Paul is not saying that we don't grieve or that we shouldn't grieve. I've known Christians who have said it is wrong to grieve the loss of a loved one who is a believer because of the hope that we have for them. But that's not what Paul is saying. We do grieve. Grieving is a good and normal part of what happens when we are separated from a loved one. But because we have some future realities revealed to us we do not grieve without hope.

Jesus' return gives us the hope of being reunited with other believers who have died. Again, Paul says that we will be *with them* (v. 17). This is an encouraging promise. We have the hope of being reunited with those who know Christ.

And Paul says that **Jesus' return gives us the hope that we will always be with Him.** This is our ultimate hope – eternity in the presence of the most kind, beautiful, wise, gracious Savior. And so no matter what trial or difficult you are facing; no matter how much pain you are experienc-

ing in this life, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this is your hope. And it is a hope that helps us endure and persevere.

Jesus' return gives us hope and so in verse 18, Paul says:

¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Now, as we move into chapter five, Paul continues to focus on the return of Jesus and he tells us that . . .

II. Jesus' Return Should Motivate Us to Live Watchful and Godly Lives (1 Thess. 5:1-11)

A lot of times the main thing people want to know when they think about Jesus' return is WHEN it's going to happen. But that misses the point. What matters is knowing how to live in light of the certain return, not predicting when it will happen because the Bible is clear that only God knows that. And so Paul's focus in these verses is on how we should live in light of this truth. And so he says in verse 1:

¹ Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.

They had already been taught about this. But though they knew the general events, Paul feels the need to exhort them concerning what it means for their daily lives. And so he says:

² For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. ³ While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

The *day of the Lord* is talked about in both the Old and New Testaments. It is the day when God will vindicate His righteousness and will execute judgment on His enemies. It's a day when God will establish His rule over the nations and Jesus will be revealed in glory and will usher in salvation for God's people. This day, Paul says, will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Paul uses a couple of metaphors to communicate this. This day *will come just like a thief in the night*. The point is that you don't know when a thief is going to come, right? A thief comes when you don't expect it.

The other metaphor is of a woman experiencing *labor pains*. The point here is suddenness and the inescapability. Once real labor starts there is no avoiding it. It's going to happen. So too the day of the Lord. It will come suddenly and unexpectedly and there will be no avoiding it. At the very moment that people are thinking that everything is *peace and safety*, this day will break in; *destruction will come upon them suddenly*.

That's the experience of those who don't know God, but for the believer, though this day will come suddenly, it will not come as a day of destruction. Verse 4:

⁴ But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;

When he talks about being *of night* or *of darkness*, he is speaking of unbelievers. This is who we all were at one time. In Ephesians 5:8 Paul says, *for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light*. In Christ we are *sons of light and sons of day*.

And so as children of light, we seek to do the things that belong to the day – things that please God. And so, Paul says, since you know that Jesus is returning, and since you know that you are children of the day,

⁶ so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

Knowing that Jesus is returning and knowing that we are of the day should lead us to be *alert and sober*. Paul is calling for watchfulness – a watchfulness that is expressed by living in godliness. Now, the fact that Paul gives this exhortation to the Thessalonians suggests that though we are not of the night it is still possible for us to adopt a lifestyle of those who are of the darkness. We must not do this. In light of the certain return of Jesus, we are to be sober and alert and to live a godly life.

To live this way requires that we are outfitted with the appropriate armor, because life in this world is a battle. And so in verse 8 Paul says:

⁸ But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

To live sober, watchful lives we need *the breastplate of faith and love*. And we need *as a helmet, the hope of salvation*. These are virtues for which Paul has already commended the Thessalonians for back in chapter 1 (v. 3), but they must continue to put these on and grow in them because these are the very things that will help them stand strong. They need faith. They need to walk in love. And they need this *hope of salvation*, which is a confident expectation of God's saving work. This is how they will live this sober, watchful lives.

In verse 9 Paul talks of our destiny:

⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

This is good news, right? *God has not destined us for wrath*. His wrath will be poured out on unbelievers on the Day of the Lord. But believers in Jesus will not experience wrath, because we have been destined *for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*. This salvation includes escape from God's wrath, but it also includes all the blessings of the Gospel.

And the basis for our salvation is what Jesus did for us in His first coming. He *died for us* so that we might *live together with Him*. And so whether at the time of Jesus' return we are *awake* (i.e. living) or *asleep* (i.e. dead), *we will live together with Him*. Paul again states this hope of being with Christ. We will live together with Him! Jesus is returning and His return should motivate us to live watchful and godly lives.

Our statement of faith talks about Jesus' return in article 9. Here's how the second part of article 9 captures what we've talked about today. It says:

The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

This is exactly what Paul is communicating in these verses. We know that Jesus is coming back. This truth demands constant expectancy now. We must be alert. We must live today in light of that day. And a big part of living consistently with that day is godly living. It is living in a way that will please Jesus when He returns. Jesus told parables about a master leaving and giving his servants jobs to do. The ones who were doing those jobs when he returned were praised. They were the ones who heard, "Well done good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:14ff). Jesus has given us a job to do while he is gone. And part of that is living a godly life.

Are you living in a way that is consistent with the return of Jesus? Are you living in a way that will cause Jesus to say to you, "Well done good and faithful servant?" Or would you say that you have not been alert and sober; that there are things in your life that you would be embarrassed by or feel shame over if Jesus were to come back now? Jesus' return should motivate us to live watchful and godly lives.

If you were here last week, you that know we looked at the first part of chapter 4 where Paul urges us to pursue sanctification and to abstain from sexual immorality. This is how we are to live in light of the certainty of Jesus' return. It is the only thing that makes sense. We are to live lives of growing holiness. But living in light of Jesus' return applies not just to this area; it applies to every area of our lives. Are you pursuing sanctification? Are you growing and walking in holiness?

I'm guessing that for many of us we feel a need for the truth of Jesus' return to motivate us more consistently. I know I do. Far too often I don't think about the return of Christ. But I should. And so, let me give you a little experiment to try this week. All of us can think areas of our lives in which we struggle to obey Jesus, right? We have sins of omission and sins of commission. It may be heart attitudes; it may be sins of the tongue. You know what it is in your own

life. This week, take some time to reflect on how you would want to live in that area if you knew Jesus was returning today. Get clear in your mind about what would make the most sense, what would be most pleasing to Jesus on the day He returns and then pray for God to give you the power to live that way. This truth of Jesus' return should serve as a strong motivating factor to live watchful and godly lives. He really is returning! It could be soon. And that truth should have a great bearing on how we are living now. Let's live watchful, godly lives!

Now, because all of this is true, Paul finally says in verse 11:

¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

He is calling all of us to take these truths that have been revealed to us and to encourage and build up one another. This is mutual ministry that we are all called to carry out that we might grow to maturity.

Now, as we come to the end, I want to say a word to those who do not yet believe in Jesus. Though this passage is written to be a source of encouragement to those who DO believe, there is a warning here for those who DO NOT believe. Paul is essentially saying that there are two types of people who are going to experience very different things at Jesus' return. To those who have trusted in Jesus to save them the return of Jesus will be a day of salvation, joy and blessing. But to those who have not trusted Jesus this will be a day of judgment and destruction.

My appeal to you is that you would heed the warning here and that you would humble yourself and come to Jesus. Jesus died on the cross for you. It is only through His death and resurrection that we can be forgiven for our sins and find life in Him. You can't earn it; you don't have to clean up your life first. All you need to do is come to Jesus in faith and confess that you need Him. You need His forgiveness. You need the life that only He can offer.

As we close today, I want to say a prayer that you can pray if you want to trust Jesus this morning. And so in the quietness of your heart you can pray these words after me to Jesus:

Jesus, I do confess that I need you. I have sinned against you in thought and word and deed. I believe that you died on the cross for me; that you paid for my sin. And so I trust you. Thank you for forgiving my sins. And I believe that you rose from the dead to give me new life. I invite you to come into my life and to take control of my life. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer with genuine faith, God has heard your prayer and forgiven you. And he has made you a son or a daughter of light. Let me encourage you to tell someone today that you made that decision.