

The Difference a Certain Future Makes

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: 29 August 2018

Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0 : 00] Good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. We're going to be looking at a one-off today on 1 Thessalonians. We're going to be reading from chapter 4, verse 13 through to 511. Before we turn to that, let's pray together.

Father, we give you thanks for another week and with another Wednesday, another opportunity to come together with brothers and sisters to listen to you speak to us through your word. And as we prepare to do that now, would you be working in our hearts to help us respond to you?

And would you help us to leave aside anything that might hinder, anything that might distract us so that we can hear you speak and respond to you with all of our hearts?

We pray that you'd be with us now in Jesus' name. Amen. So 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, and we're going to be reading verse 13 through to chapter 5, verse 11.

It's on page 987 in the Church Visitor's Bibles. Paul says, But 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.

[1 : 26] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we here alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we here alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.

For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying there is peace and security. Then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman.

[2 : 35] And they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day.

We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 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.

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. Therefore, encourage one another. And build one another up. Just as you are doing. Amen.

[3 : 35] This is God's words. Please do keep that open. Now, I am not a great fan of going for runs. But some friends a few years ago convinced me to join Park Run.

A weekly race through a park. It was a very humbling experience. I tend to be able to start a run off quite quickly. Over taking people all over the place. But before long, I can't keep it up.

And my friend, who is twice my age, runs past. Taps me on the shoulder. And keeps going. Well, the Thessalonians are a young church. Paul spent only a short amount of time with them.

Probably somewhere around a few months. And they've started well. They're running well. All over this letter, we find phrases like chapter 1, verse 3.

Paul remembers their work of faith. Their labor of love. And their steadfastness of hope. He says elsewhere, they've become imitators of Paul. Their faith has gone forth everywhere.

[4 : 40] They're well known. Paul even says at least eight times. Something like, as you knew. Just as you knew. Just as you're doing. This is a church that started well.

Well, they're known about throughout the region. They've received Paul's teaching as it really is. The word of God. But for every church, and indeed every Christian who starts well, there's something they need in order to keep going and finish well.

It's no good starting quickly, only to give up. The only time I managed to finish that race without slowing down or stopping was when I had a friend running alongside me saying the whole time, don't worry, the finish line's not far.

And having the end in sight is vitally important. That's the key thing Paul teaches the Thessalonians. And it's something we must see clearly so that we can deal with death and live for Christ until we face death or his return.

In any church, there are going to be a spread of people. Some who've started well but feel like they're lagging. Maybe the initial optimism, the initial energy's worn off.

[5 : 51] The Christian life's now difficult. Seeing clearly what the end looks like is just what we need to be re-energized to see again the real hope that we have. Or maybe others have been running for a long time and they wonder if it's worth it.

The prospect of the body increasingly giving up leaves you worried about what's coming. Maybe you've been wearied by being in the trenches. The world's agenda that seeks to belittle and squash and marginalize Christians just feels like it hurts too much.

It's too close for comfort. These are common feelings and fears. But Paul offers us the tonic, the wonderful tonic of Christ's return to soothe these, to sharpen our focus, and to point us again to the only hope that can keep us walking the path of a life lived for Christ.

The Thessalonians were a church born out of the fires of persecution, so this hope was a vital one. It was a pressing one. It was a young church that has started well but one that needs clarity on what's in store in the end.

And so this is a backdrop. Paul writes and says three things in this passage. First, he says in verses 13 to 18 of chapter 4, Christians can have confidence.

[7 : 13] Then he says in chapter 5 verses 1 to 4, because we have clarity. And then finally in chapter 5 verses 5 to 11, because of these we must have constancy.

So first, the end of chapter 4, Christians can have confidence. The prospect of death, indeed the reality of death for Christians, is completely different to those who are not Christians because of the hope that we have in Christ.

Recently I sadly read of the death of someone my age, born in the exact same day as me that I knew growing up. A young guy, supposed to have his full life ahead of him, struck down.

And that's a tragedy. Death is an aberration. It's a curse. It's the strongest reminder to us all of the result of the fall. It ought to sound like a siren to us about the reality of sin.

Death is not natural. And yet when it's faced by a Christian, it can be dealt with completely differently. For the world around, death is completely uncomfortable.

[8 : 28] People don't want to face up to it. So when faced with this young guy's death, all sorts of fairly meaningless expressions are thrown around. He lived the fullest life.

Rest in peace. Sleep well. We can't wait to see you on the other side. Or heaven's gained another angel. Death is an outrage.

But look at verse 13 of chapter 4. Paul is writing here that Christians may not grieve as others do who have no hope. This is in the midst of Paul's instructions for the church to live distinct Christian lives.

And what is the hope that Christians have in the face of death? Well, it's verse 14. Resurrection. Because Christ has died and risen, through him, God will bring with Jesus all those who have died. As surely as Christ has been raised from the dead, so too will those who are joined to him be raised with Jesus. This is not a forlorn hope.

[9 : 40] It's not wishful thinking like those hollow expressions. Jesus' resurrection confirms ours. Verse 16. In fact, the dead in Christ will rise first.

So whilst death is an outrage and a horror, it's not ultimate. The future of God's people is verse 17. To be caught up together to meet the Lord. To be raised. To be renewed. To be with Jesus forever. Both in this letter and in 2 Thessalonians, this very thing seems to be doubted or undermined.

And when we doubt that, it will only lead to difficulty. The certainty of resurrection through Christ is the only comfort, is the only hope in the face of death.

When another Christian dies, we aren't left with just empty platitudes. We're left with more than just tears. For while we grieve, whilst we still feel the loss of loved ones, in Christ, we grieve with hope.

[10:56] We can truly rejoice even as those real tears stream down our face. We can truly rejoice even as the real sense of our loss sets in. Because Christ has died and been raised.

Christ has died and all his people will be raised together with him. In the face of death, we can couple the true outrage that death is, knowing how tragic and awful it is, we can couple that with the real hope of resurrection.

and so we don't have to live life worrying about death. Christians can be at peace with their mortality. We don't have to worry about fitting into this life all the experiences that this world affords. We don't have to worry every day about doing all that we can to stave off death. No matter how many trips to the gym there are, no matter how many anti-aging products are consumed to try and hide it, it is still coming.

But, we can come to terms with our mortality because we have confidence. We know our future. And so we can use the years that we do have.

[12:11] We're free to use the life that we do have here and now as best we can for the Lord. Because our future is secure in Christ. And so as a church, what's the result of this?

Verse 18. Encourage each other with these words. Whilst the world around are distraught or in denial, whilst they don't want to have to face up to the reality of death, the church can continuously spur one another on, can continuously comfort one another because we know that through Christ our future is secure.

And isn't that a real witness to the world? To nurses, to doctors, to family, to friends, to all sorts, when a Christian is facing death and they do so with confidence, that they can explain why they don't have to fear it.

Despite, yes, despite it being a tragedy, they can still explain why they have hope in the face of it. It's a very powerful witness indeed. Our wonderful future that is tied inseparably to Christ is one that gives us confidence even in the face of death.

Well, secondly, Paul goes on to say that we can have this confidence because we have clarity.

Chapter 5, verses 1 to 4, we have clarity. If we trust Christ, we don't just grieve with hope when someone we know dies, but we're actually freed to live here and now with hope, guarding ourselves, being prepared for the judgment that will come, freed from worrying about when.

[13:59] You see, February the 25th, 1524, has been and gone. Sootu has March 25th, 1988, and the 21st of May, 2011, and Sootu has December the 21st, 2012.

All these were dates predicted for the coming of some sort of apocalyptic last day, recorded predictions for when the world will end. And these kinds of dates, these kinds of predictions stretch back for thousands of years.

There's great intrigue about what will happen and when, but, chapter 5, verse 1, concerning times and seasons, you have no need to have anything written to you.

You knew that the day of the Lord will come, and it will come like a thief in the night. There will be a suddenness to Jesus' return, like a thief. We don't know when it's coming.

But, for those who trust Christ, we will expect it. We know He is coming. Look closely at verses 3 to 4. Whilst people are saying there's peace and security, whilst they think things are okay, it's not going to happen, maybe it's already happened, then sudden destruction will come, and they will not escape it.

[15:17] It does seem that some in Thessalonica believe that the resurrection might have already happened. Some seem to think, verse 3, that there's some sort of peace and security now, that maybe them believing or acting like the peace and security of the new creation has come already, or whatever it is that that means.

really what it's saying is they're not living in a way that expects Jesus to return. They're ill prepared for it. If we have no hope in Christ, or we live like we don't, then His return is going to be a real shock to us.

But, verse 4, those who do trust Jesus, we are not in darkness for that day to surprise us like a thief. In short, Christians expect that Jesus is going to come back. We have clarity that He's coming, and He could come at any time. And so, knowing that He is coming back, knowing that He will come to

judge those who scorned Him, and to vindicate those who trust Him, we can be prepared for that day.

And what does that preparation look like? What should the clarity and comfort influence lead to? Well, that's our final point. Verses 5 to 11. It should look like constancy.

[16:42] It means living out the expectation that Jesus is coming back so that we're not caught out now, so that we're not found to be sleeping, so that we aren't complacent.

And so, Paul spells out that we need to remember which family we belong to. See, he contrasts those who belong to darkness, those who are children of darkness, with those who are children of the day.

And there's a link between where we're destined for and this life now. Our future shapes how we live now, and how we live now shows what we believe about the future.

To Christians, Paul says, verse 4, you're not in darkness about Jesus coming back. It won't be a surprise. Verse 5, instead, you are children of light, children of the day.

Those who don't know about Jesus' return, those who deny it, those who put their fingers in their ears and feel to listen to him, they will, verse 7, be caught asleep. They're associated only with darkness.

[17:47] It's familiar to us, isn't it, that dark means bad and light means good. All you have to do is watch any film with a villain in it and you'll see them meeting in the dark with their cohorts. And it's the same in the Bible.

All the way from creation, darkness has been the negative contrast with light. The world that was without form and void was in darkness and God said, let there be light and then he saw that that was good.

And from here in creation all the way through to the end where revelation tells us there'll be no night in the new creation. Those who belong to the family of darkness that's only a bad thing.

They will not be prepared for Jesus' return. It will be bad news for them because he is going to return and he's going to judge those who scorn him as he rescues those who trust him.

So Paul's saying pay attention to the family you belong to. We are children of the light. Paul's wanting to encourage this church that they're the real thing, that they really are Christians, that they are children of the light.

[18:58] He's saying we belong to Jesus and his new creation that will be completely lit up by the glory of God. That's our future. So belonging to this family means living lives that are ready for Jesus' return and so steady in following him.

Lives that are marked by constancy. So then as children of light he says we mustn't be caught napping so that when Jesus returns we're only interested in what we care about here and now asleep to God's priorities snoring through all that he says to us thinking that we'll get around to listening to him later on will take him seriously in the future.

That's what napping looks like. But instead Paul wants us to be prepared. He says now is the time to be ready to be awake living constantly with the prospect of Christ's return in our mind.

Let us not be caught napping and betraying the Christian life. We knew Jesus could return at any point so we can live longing that he would greet us on that day not with away from me I never knew you but instead being warmly greeted with well done good and faithful servant.

Being prepared for Jesus coming is living the life of a faithful servant now geared up prepared for that day by living each day to honor Jesus by obeying him in our lives and by serving him in his work.

[20:43] Why? Because verse 9 we're not destined as children of light for wrath but to obtain salvation through Jesus who died for us so that whether we're awake or asleep we might live with him.

As we trust Christ we have hope in life and in death and the real hope of a resurrected life with Christ in the new creation. so then whilst we live now we live for him and we live with him.

Today's passage comes in the midst of instructions for how Christians are to live so we see at the start of chapter 4 and the question is will we live the life of faith will we walk in the obedience of faith so that chapter 4 verse 1 we please God by our walking or constancy means chapter 4 verse 3 that we take seriously our sanctification by fighting things like sexual immorality or chapter 4 verse 5 it's to live distinct from the Gentiles from the world around who do not know God to be markedly different or chapter 4 verse 9 it's to keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters and doing so

more and more in all of this Jesus return is the motivation for a present faithful life so for those who would scorn him those who would ignore him be warned he will come back and when he does it will be too late but for those who know him those who love him those who have his word at work in us and we're longing to be faithful each day then we are preparing ourselves for his return and when he returns he brings with him real peace real security we're in we're we're in forever we'll be raised imperishable that's what he says elsewhere in 1 corinthians jesus return will be our vindication it will be our resurrection it will be what makes this life all worth it it's where the world will see that we belong to jesus the thessalonians have started well running at a good pace but it's imperative that they and we do not tire out and stop altogether as a church we share together in the greatest hope this world knows and that changes everything it changes how we see death and life it makes the hard slog of serving our churches and living for jesus worth it but we easily forget and so paul finishes this passage by repeating the words encourage one another build one another up we had a visiting preacher with us last year and when he was talking about listening to sermons he says we listen with one ear for ourselves and one ear for everyone else verse 11 and chapter 4 verse 18 command us not just to cling to this future hope for ourselves but to fuel the ongoing mission of the church by reminding and encouraging each other of christ's return like the friend i had running alongside me whilst i ran encouraging me to keep going that's a picture of the church with each other we run the race alongside each other reminding and encouraging each other about these realities the finish line is coming jesus is going to come back and it'll be a glorious day for those who keep running so that whether in life as we might be tempted to stumble into sin or in serving the church when we might be dipping towards lethargy or bitterness or the prospect of death itself and we begin to worry and lose perspective and focus as the church as Christians as brothers and sisters with one other we accompany each other as children of the light who can point to Jesus who knew that he's coming back can point to Jesus who's risen who's reigning and who one day will return to draw together all his people to himself having this hope clear in our minds will keep us going as Christians it will give us confidence if we're clear on it and that will fuel us to live constantly for Jesus it will fuel us to keep doing what we're doing well and to help us to do it more and more so let us spur one another on to live for Jesus to make him known for Christ is surely coming bringing his rewards to to sing to sing let's pray father we thank you that your words your gospel deals with the deepest realities of life and death so so that we can know and be sure and have confidence that this life isn't it that we don't need to fear what's coming but instead we can get on with this life living for you because we know you're coming back and that is a glorious thing we pray in Jesus name amen amen