

Gospel Hope (1 Thess 4 & 5)

You might have heard that story of the preacher who travels across the world. And when he lands, they ask him to speak straight away. And he is not really prepared. And he gets up in the pulpit and he announces his text. But he's suffering from a bit of jet lag when he calls out his text: Behold I am coming to you soon—from the book of Revelation. And his mind goes blank and he can't think of what to say next. So he decides to call it out again: Behold I am coming to you soon. And his mind goes blank again. So a third time he think he will call this out as loudly as I can and something might happen. And he yells out, 'Behold I am coming to you soon!' And he says it so enthusiastically that he falls out fo the pulpit into the lap of a little lady in the front row. And he looks up and says, "I am terribly sorry". And she says, "well don't apologise, you told me three times you were coming!"

Our piece of Bible is about the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ - his return. Something that he promised to do didn't he. He promised again and again he would come back. So Jesus said, for example in:

John 14 "I will come again and take you, my people, to be with me".

In Luke 17 he said "The Son of Man will come".

In Luke 21 he said "The Son of Man will come with great glory".

In Mark 13 he said "He will come and he will gather his people".

In Mark 25 he said "He will come and all nations will gather before him and he will separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats".

Jesus' is a trustworthy person and his promises are trustworthy. Even if it means a lot of patience on our part. And that's what Paul wants to remind the believers in Thessalonica. We're going to look at the section from chapter 4:13 to 5:11. Now at first glance it might look like Paul is addressing the same problem, the second coming. But he deals with two problems here. Two of our biggest problem as human beings: death and judgment. And here we see how the gospel fills us with hope. So let's look at this section under two headings:

1. hope in the face of death.
2. hope in the face of judgment.

1. Hope in the face of death (4:13-18)

Notice how Paul starts in v. 13 of chapter 4? "But we don't want you to be ignorant brothers about those who have fallen asleep, that you may not grieve as others who have **no hope**." Now I think the problem the believers in Thessalonica had was bereavement. Something which all of us experience when we lose a loved one. We feel an intense sadness. Grief. Death tears our loved ones from us. And where have they gone? What happens after death? Are they alright? These are the questions we wrestle with aren't they. These are the intense emotions we feel. And notice we're not forbidden to grieve. Our Lord Jesus wept when he stood at the grave site of his friend Lazarus. It's not no grief the apostle Paul is talking about, but a hopeless grief: "that you may not grieve as others do who have **no hope**."

The ancient pagans of Paul's day had no hope. For example, the Greek poet Theocritus said, 'hopes are for the living, the dead are without hope.' Christian and pagan attitudes to death were radically different. They were back then. And they are now.

There's a world of difference between a Christian funeral compared to a non-believer isn't there. Why? One has hope, the other doesn't. And by hope I don't mean wishful thinking. An example is a saying like, '*they live on in our hearts and minds.*' What does that even mean? What is a claim like that based upon? It's wishful thinking isn't it? The secular narrative has no room for hope. Let me illustrate this by a story of a boy named Jimmy whose cousin died at the age of three.

Jimmy runs to his mum and says

"Where is my cousin now?"

His mum doesn't believe in God or the afterlife, and so she couldn't tell him about heaven with integrity. Instead his mum said this...

"Your cousin has gone back to the earth,
From which we all come.

Death is a natural part of the cycle of life.

And so when you see the Earth bring forth new flowers next spring.

You can know that it is your cousin's life that's fertilising the flowers."

Jimmy screamed, "I don't want him to be fertiliser!"

And ran away.

A secular world has no hope in the face of death. Only wishful thinking, and that doesn't cut it. But the Christian has a sure and certain hope in the face of death. Based on fact not fiction. Based on reality.

Notice Paul says, we don't grieve like those who have no hope. Why? Check out verse 14: Because we believe that Jesus died and rose again. There's only one expert on the afterlife. There's only one who has the expertise; the lived experience. We need somebody who's gone through and come back.

I only know one person who has gone through and come back. I only know one person with the credentials: Christ. Therefore he is the only expert on this subject.

Notice, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” His resurrection changes everything! It means we will rise! It means death is only a nana nap. And notice the contrast - Jesus died... so we get to sleep. On the cross, He experienced the full force of God’s justice: death. Absolute death. He has experienced death so your experience will be to sleep.

Twice Paul has already said, “those who are asleep.” He means those who have died. But for those who are in Christ, death is a nap. Jesus talked about death in the same way. Remember Jarius’ daughter who died (Luke 9)? And Jesus gets to the house and everyone is weeping and wailing. And Jesus says, “don’t weep, for she is not dead but sleeping.” She was dead. But for Christ, the one who has power over death, its just a sleep. Jesus says the same thing about Lazarus on his way to the grave site. He says to his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” Lazarus had been dead and buried for 4 days at this time! The Lord Jesus transformed the tragedy of dying into something temporary. An incidentally, the word “cemetery” comes from the Greek word for sleep.

So how will this resurrection happen? Check out verse 15. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that those who go first, rise first. And those who are waiting will rise second. But all believers will join Christ and all believers will join together. And as Jesus said the future will be like one big party.

There’s one thing that absolutely certain for all of us who are here: that is that we will meet Jesus. You see, you may not die

– you may be among those millions and millions of people who will never physically die because Christ will come in your lifetime. We need to watch out when we say “everybody will die” because actually if Christ comes first, we won’t die but we will all meet Jesus.

Let me say a few words about the rapture. Notice in verse 17, “we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The word rapture means scooped or grabbed. This has caused many believers to think they’ll be snatched away from the world. And this had led to some good laughs. Christians have played pranks on each other at camps by leaving the electric shaver buzzing in the bathroom. And shoes near the sink. Or a speed boat spinning around a lake with no one in it. This spawned the Left Behind series. You can imagine the anxiety and tragedy of being left behind. That’s horrible. Some of this is based on Matthew 24 where Jesus says, “two will be in a bed and suddenly one disappears.”

Now this isn’t teaching any disappearing act that secretly happens. It’s about the return of Christ isn’t it. It’s at his return one will be taken another one won’t. When it comes to those being left behind, we need to think in categories of believers and non-believers. The believer is safe, the non believer is not. Paul is talking about when Christ returns. It’s not a secret act, but everyone will know. The point here is that NO believer is left behind! Those who have died first and those still alive will be with the Lord forever! It will be one big happy reunion. And we’ll all be yelling, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and power forever and ever.”

I’m going to take verse 18 at the end of the sermon. But let’s keep going. The gospel fills us with hope in the face of death. And hope in the face of judgment.

2. Hope in the face of judgment (5:1-11)

The other big problem for humanity is judgment. What will happen at the end of history? What will happen before the great white throne of judgment? That's what Paul deals with in chapter 5:1-11. There's a wrong solution to getting ready for the second coming. And that's trying to work out the date and time. Christians get themselves into all sorts of trouble trying to work this out don't they. But notice in verse 2 Paul says, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." It's likely the Thessalonian believers had some questions about when the second coming was going to happen. They wanted to be ready. In Joel we see the day of the Lord is a fearful day. A day of darkness and gloom. It's a day of judgment. The sun and the moon are darkened. And the Lord will come with his armies! And so many believers try and get ready by working out times and seasons. But Jesus himself taught that he will come like a thief in the night. The problem with burglars is you never know when they're coming do you. So the second coming will be unexpected. No warning. And verse 3 teaches that it will be unexpected and unescapable. Like labour pains coming upon a pregnant women. No escape. No warning.

People will be saying "peace and security" and then suddenly, destruction.

Jesus said on one occasion that his return would be like the days of Noah. I used to think the days of Noah were like the movie *The Road*, a dystopian future where everyone has turned against each other. And I guess they probably were but Jesus says – in the days of Noah they were eating, drinking, getting engaged and having weddings. Now most people here this evening eat,

drink, occasionally get engaged and have weddings. There is nothing sinister about that. And what Jesus is saying is that ***in the days of Noah, everything was so normal***. The Word of God was going out and everything was so normal and everybody said there is nothing to listen to; there is nothing to take notice of and then BANG! The rain came – the tiny group of people who had been listening to the Word of God were spared and a very great tragic number who are not listening were lost.

So What are we meant to do? Well there's a world of difference between the believer and an unbeliever when it comes to the Christ's return. Notice in verse 4, "But you are not in darkness, brothers, for the day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of the light, children of the day." What Paul is contrasting here with darkness and light are the two ages. The Bible says there are two ages. Or two kingdoms. The kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of the Son (light). When Christ came the first time he ushered in a new age: The Messianic Age promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. And with him he brought light, those sitting in darkness have seen a great light. At the moment the two ages are overlapping. But when Christ returns he will do away with darkness once and for all. But right now, you either belong to one age or the other. You are either in darkness or in light. The day of the Lord is a terrifying day for those in darkness. Because it is a day of judgment. But if you repent and believe in Jesus. The day of judgment becomes a day of salvation. Anyone can become a child of the light. Every believer is a child of the light. We don't need to fear the coming judgment. The day of the Lord has become the day of our salvation. Check out verse 6, we aren't meant to nod off. We aren't to wonder around half asleep in our pyjamas. But we're to be ready. We belong to the day. It's our big day! So let's be ready.

And put on the breastplate of faith and love. And the helmet - the hope of salvation.

Application (5:9-11)

Well let's finish where Paul finishes this section, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing." Both sections end with a similar exhortation don't they, chapter 4:18 and 5:11. All of us get discouraged don't we. We all get a bit dispirited and depressed in life and the Christian life. We might have personal problems like bereavement. Or we could have a spiritual problem like lack of assurance, or fear of judgment. So God wants his church, that's you and I, to be a community of encouragers. Comfort one another. Encourage one another. Build one another up. That's our job as a church.

The question is how do we encourage one another? Paul focuses on one thing here in 4:18, "Therefore comfort one another with **these words**." The 'Therefore' in both sections is there because of the doctrine he has unpacked. There's nothing that encourages and builds us up in the Christian life like Christian truth.

Some words don't comfort do they. Some words do. Remember Job's mates, their words made things worse. Their words were cold and conventional. And made Job's suffering worse not better.

But some words do comfort, if they are true and loving. And we are to speak the truth of God to one another. What are these words we're to speak to one another? You could say, "the truth of the second coming of Jesus." But that's only part of the truth. The major truth was the gospel in all it's fullness. Not just that Christ is coming again. That strikes some people with terror. The comfort is that the same Christ who came and died for us on the cross and rose again is the same Christ who will return. That the

coming King is our crucified Lord and Saviour. So we're looking back at the death and resurrection of Jesus and looking forward to his coming. *The power of his first coming prepares us for the power of his second coming.* Why? Because on the cross Christ conquered our two biggest problems: sin and death. Releasing us from the power of death and the wrath to come. Nothing to fear. Not death. Not judgment. Our future is secure. Check out verse 9, "For God hasn't appointed us to wrath but to get salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him forever." Amen.

Songs of Response: My hope is built on nothing less.

Benediction

Encouraging words:

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Roman 8:37-39)