

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Introduction

Two things that New Testament scholars often analyze when they look at the various letters of Paul is the tone of the letter and its theological complexity.

Paul's letters to the Galatian and the Corinthian churches are examples of letters where Paul is writing in a rather harsh tone and dealing with complex theological issues.

While Romans, is extremely rich in its theology, Paul's tone is much more amicable than it was to the Galatians or Corinthians.

Finally, letters like Philippians, and Thessalonians are **very** positive letters. In fact, scholars argue over whether 1 Thessalonians or Philippians is Paul's most positive letter.

1 Thessalonians was written rather early in Paul's corpus (some scholars think it might be Paul's first letter) and the reason for its writing is very straight forward. In [Acts 17](#) Paul visited Thessalonica and was forced to leave the city. Paul had established the church but was forced to leave before he wanted to. Paul travelled from Thessalonica to Athens and out of concern for the young Thessalonian church he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the church was doing.

Paul met back up with Timothy and heard the report of how the Thessalonians were doing and, by and large, the Thessalonian church was doing very well. There were only a few matters of concern that Timothy had relayed back to Paul that are addressed in his letters. One of the issues were matters of eschatology or about Jesus' second coming

Since Paul had left, certain members of the Thessalonian church had died and the Thessalonians were concerned over the fate of those who had died before the coming of Christ. Given these concerns, the Thessalonians also had questions as to when Christ would come again. Paul addresses these two concerns in our passage this morning.

1. In [1 Thes 4:13-18](#) Paul answers the concern of the Thessalonians that had died by telling the Thessalonians that all have ***hope because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.***
2. In [1 Thes 5:1-11](#) Paul addresses the Thessalonians concerns about Jesus' second coming by telling them to live as children of light who belong to the day and not to the night.

Hope in the Resurrection (4:13-18)

As already mentioned, here Paul is addressing a concern of the Thessalonians. They have accepted the gospel and know that they have hope in Christ. But what about those who have died. Or as Paul says, "those who are asleep."

Paul's desire is that "***may not grieve as others do who have no hope.***"

The overarching theme of all of these verses is the theme of hope. Here in these verses it is hope for those who have already died in Christ and in the coming section it is hope that all Christians will obtain salvation on the day of the Lord.

There is an important distinction to see here. Paul does **not** say that Christians should not grieve but that Christian grief should be shaped by hope. Christians grieve, but we grieve the death of Christians in hope.

In verse 14 Paul grounds this hope in the Christian's union with Christ: "***For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.***"

All throughout this series on resurrection, I have drawn on this theme of union with Jesus Christ. For Paul, union with Christ is what gives hope and assurance to the Christian for their own future. Because Jesus died and rose again, so too will those who have died in Christ be raised with Jesus on the last day.

As Christians, we should grieve the death of our fellow believer, but we should grieve in such a way that is informed by our ultimate hope, that all who die in Christ will be raised with Christ.

Verses 15-17 expand on the basic theme of hope from verses 13-14. In these verses Paul offers some explanation of what that last day will look like.

Paul explains that when Jesus returns, those who are dead in Christ will not be left in the grave. But rather **they will rise first and then those who are alive will be raised as well.**

In verse 17 Paul writes that Christians, “**will be caught up together with Jesus in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.**”

There are a couple things to notice here:

First, whenever there is language of “clouds” in the Bible, it is almost always an allusion to the glory cloud of Yahweh that led Israel out of Egypt. When Paul speaks of Jesus returning on the clouds and all those who are in Christ being caught up together with Jesus in the clouds, Paul is alluding to God’s final victory over the powers of death and sin and Satan, just as God was victorious over Egypt and Pharaoh.

Moreover, the language that Paul uses for “meeting” Jesus in the clouds is language used to speak of the inhabitants of a city meeting a victorious king or military leader outside of the city to cheer his victory as he returns to the city. It is much like Jesus’ triumphal entry, where the people in Jerusalem met Jesus outside the city to usher Him into the city in parade.

And this makes sense of the fact that Paul concludes this first section with the instruction that the Thessalonians should “**encourage one another with these words.**” When we consider the fact that at Jesus’ return, all of his people will be caught up to meet with him in his triumphant return as the king of kings and lord of lords we should be encouraged in this.

All too often Christians lose sight of how the New Testament treats the topic of Jesus’ return. It isn’t some complex diagramming problem to be solved. No, when the apostles speak of the coming of Christ, they speak of something that should be of great encouragement to believers. When Jesus returns, we will always be with him.

Of course we don’t sit around waiting for Jesus to return and neglect all of our duties. But we must always remember that Jesus is never an interruption. When Jesus shows up, whether we are talking about the end of history, or when He shows up by His Spirit in our lives before His second coming, the correct response is to give Him your full attention and obedience.

Belong to the Day (5:1-11)

The second thing that the Thessalonians were concerned about was the particular timing of Christ's return but apparently Paul had already told them this.

In chapter 5:1-2 Paul says, "**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.**"

Paul tells the Thessalonians what he has already told them, nobody knows when Jesus is going to return.

Paul uses the language of the "day of the Lord" which is another important theme from the Old Testament. The "Day of the Lord" is a day when God shows up to bring blessing and judgement.

When Adam and Eve fell and God showed up, it was the "day of the Lord". When Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt it was the "day of the Lord."

Whenever God shows up, it is "the day of the Lord" and God shows up bringing salvation to his people and judgement to the wicked. Whenever God shows up both of these things are occurring. For all who are covered by the blood of Christ, God's presence is the highest blessing you can receive. But for all who have no covering, it is a fearful thing to come into God's presence.

God is patient and the "day of the Lord" is often delayed for the wicked. And the constant temptation before the wicked is to take God's patience for granted. God's patience should lead men to repentance, but man, in his sin, presumes upon God's patience and says, "**There is peace and security.**" Paul says that sudden destruction will come upon these people.

But the Christian does not live in darkness and "the day of the Lord" does not come as a surprise to us. "**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.**"

Part of the reason is because the great and final "day of the Lord" will not surprise believers is because it arrives every week for the Christian when we

gather for worship. Every week when God calls us into his presence and we are presented with a moment of crisis in our lives. How do we respond to the breaking in of the eternal and infinite God into our temporary and finite lives? How do we respond to the presence of a holy God in our state of unholiness?

Every aspect of our service “cuts both ways” just like the “day of the Lord”. It is blessing for the faithful and judgement for the wicked. Confession of sin, hearing God’s word, and the sacraments are all blessings for God’s people. But for those who come to them falsely, they are a source of God’s curse and judgement.

We are not in the dark. We are trained each week for the coming of the Lord, because the Lord comes to us each week. But we must still take Paul’s instruction. We must “**keep awake and be sober.**”

Moreover, we must “**put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.**”

In [Isaiah 59](#), it is God himself who puts on armor as he prepares to deliver His people. Here in Thessalonians, Paul tells God’s people that they are to put on armor, they are to join in God’s battles. And we fight the good fight by arming ourselves with the theological virtues of “faith, hope, and love.”

And particularly in this context, it is the virtue of hope that is of the most practical importance for the Christian. It is a hope, as verse 9-10 puts it, that believes that “**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.**”

Conclusion

I conclude with Paul’s final instruction from our passage. “**Encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.**”

For Paul, the reality of Christ’s second coming is something that should lead Christians to live upright and sober lives and to live in the light and not in the darkness.

So let us encourage one another and build one another up in these truths.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.