

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, January 28, 2024
10am

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Theme: People of the Light: The Coming of the King

[prayer]

In 1995, American minister Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry B. Jenkins published *Left Behind*, the first book in the popular apocalyptic fiction series *Left Behind*. The series tells the story of a group of people left behind to endure the last days of earth after the true believers in Jesus Christ are raptured into heaven. More than 65 million copies have been sold and several books in the series became *New York Times* bestsellers. The series has also inspired several film adaptations, graphic novels, a video game, and even a series written especially for pre-teens.¹

I was a recipient of a few books in the adolescent series – unimaginatively called *Left Behind: The Kids*. If being “left behind,” in any sense of the phrase, fills you with anxiety as an adult, imagine the terror it inspires in an impressionable child. No one wants to be abandoned, but it seems especially cruel to imagine God perpetrating this judgment on helpless children. We don’t need to imagine God abandoning children when human beings already do this regularly.

If you read these books and enjoyed them, you do you, but this pastor is not a fan. I agree with critics who charge the books with being anti-Catholic, homophobic, and fixated on violence and war. But above all I disagree with their theology. The *Left Behind* series teaches a very particular interpretation of the Bible called dispensationalism.² Dispensationalism teaches that history is divided into periods or “dispensations.” In each dispensation God acts differently toward God’s people. At the end of our current age – called the age of Grace – true believers in Jesus Christ will be raptured – taken up into heaven. A Great Tribulation will then happen where God will pour out His wrath upon the earth. Afterwards Christ will

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>

reign for one thousand years in Jerusalem before God executes his final judgment on humanity.

This theology is pulled from a handful of verses in Scripture, primarily the Book of Revelation. The distinguishing mark of dispensationalism is the Rapture. Dispensationalists point to Paul's words in this very letter, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: "The Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet. First, those who are dead in Christ will rise. Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air" (CEB; cf. Matt 24:29-31).

Whatever Paul is describing here, he does not call it the Rapture. The Rapture is a term invented by John Nelson Darby in the 19th century. Darby developed and popularized dispensationalism in the 1830s. Before Darby, the Rapture was not part of Christian doctrine and teaching about the end times. Traditional Christian doctrine has always focused on the words of Jesus: "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows" (Matt 24:36). After Paul writes about the Thessalonian Christians meeting Jesus in the air, he reminds them that the day of the Lord is going to come "like a thief in the night" (5:2). This is a direct quotation of Jesus (Matt 24:42-44).

The United Methodist Church does not teach dispensationalism or the Rapture. We don't teach it because Jesus did not teach it. We do believe in a final judgment and the promise of heaven. But we choose to heed the words of Jesus and avoid speculating about the details of that judgment. Instead, we focus on Jesus' words in Matthew 26: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41 NIV). Our emphasis is on the here and now, and our calling to grow in holiness and love for God and our neighbor.³

So, what are we to make of Paul's comments about the end times to the church in Thessalonica?

Let's consider the context. The early Church believed that the Parousia, the Second Coming of Jesus, was imminent; they believed it would happen in their lifetimes. Before Paul, Silas, and Timothy were forced to flee Thessalonica, they instructed the Thessalonian Christians to believe in the Second Coming. The

³ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-where-does-the-rapture-fit-into-united-methodists-beliefs>

missionary team taught that the Thessalonians would receive Jesus in his glory, but they apparently did not have time to address the issue of what happens to believers who die *before* Jesus comes again. And so, when some of their number did in fact die, the Thessalonian Christians were deeply distressed. They were afraid that their dead friends would be “left behind” and left out of Christ’s glorious return.

This is the issue that Paul is addressing in this section of his letter. His words are not intended to detail the mechanics of the end times. Instead, his words are a pastoral response to a very human problem: Grief. Paul wanted to comfort the Thessalonian Christians who were grieving their dead siblings in Christ and wondering whether they would see them in the kingdom of God.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that those who have died in Christ will participate in his return. “Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus” (4:14). In fact, Paul says, the dead in Christ will be the very first believers to meet Jesus. When Jesus comes again, these dead believers will be raised to life. The already living believers will then join the resurrected believers in welcoming Jesus (4:15-17). The language of being taken up into the clouds to meet Jesus is likely meant to invoke images of an imperial reception. Crowds of people would line the streets as the emperor, returning victorious from battle, processed into Rome. Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that they will receive the victorious Christ with even greater acclamation.

Paul concludes his explanation with these encouraging words: “We will always be with the Lord” (v. 17). For Paul, the important thing to know about the Second Coming is not when it will happen, or even how it will happen, but its meaning for those who have put their hope in Jesus. And what it means is this: Not even death can separate us from God and each other (cf. Rom 8:38-39). At the end of time, those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus will enjoy eternal union with each other and with God.

When I read the *Left Behind* books, the emphasis was not on this eternal union, but instead the threat of eternal separation. This narrative caused me great fear, and that fear evoked a spiritual crisis that lasted several years. I questioned whether I was truly saved and feared I would spend eternity apart from my family.

By the grace and love of God, and the assurance of the Holy Spirit, I eventually overcame that fear. But it saddens me to think about the spiritual pain I suffered because of the theology in these books.

Paul's teachings about the Parousia are not meant to inspire fear. Quite the opposite – the Parousia is meant to comfort us. Paul wanted the Thessalonian Christians to know that no matter what, their future was secure in Christ. Even as they grieved the reality of death, they could find hope and consolation in the promise of the resurrection. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die" (John 11:25). Our bodies will die, but this is not the end of our stories. One day our bodies will be restored to us, and we will be raised to eternal life with God.

This promise is part of God's covenant with humanity. Covenant theology is the opposite of dispensationalism.⁴ Rather than changing from age to age, God's actions toward human beings have always been consistent. God made a covenant with humanity to be our God and God has been faithful to that covenant from the very beginning – so faithful that He sealed this covenant with the blood of His own Son. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that "Jesus died for us so that, whether we are awake [alive] or asleep [dead], we will live together with him" (5:10). God's faithfulness and loving-kindness forms the basis of our salvation.

This faithfulness leads us from darkness to light, so that we are no longer people of the darkness but people of the light. Paul writes,

"But you aren't in darkness, brothers and sisters, so the day [of the Lord] won't catch you by surprise like a thief. All of you are children of light and children of the day. We don't belong to night or darkness. So then, let's not sleep like the others, but let's stay awake and stay sober" (5:4-6).

Paul used the term 'sleep' to refer to death – 'falling asleep' was an idiom for dying. But Paul also used 'sleep' to refer to ignorance about salvation. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they have received the revelation of God's salvation in Jesus. Unlike people who remain ignorant of this revelation, we do not need to fear the day of the Lord. The Second Coming will not be a day of wrath for us, but a day of rejoicing in our union with Jesus and each other. The Parousia will

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covenant_theology

mark the end of the old age with its suffering and death. In its place will be eternal life with God.

As we keep watch and pray, Paul encourages us to put on the armor of faithfulness and love, and wear hope as a helmet (5:8). Hope, love, and faith will be our defense against suffering and death. Our distinctive hope in the resurrection and Second Coming sets us apart as people of the light. This is our identity as Christians! We are called to live our lives in the light of the Parousia. This means living with the awareness that this life is not the end-all-be-all. Neither pleasure nor suffering will be our reality forever. Instead, we must orient our whole lives in the direction of our hope in the resurrection. We must be vigilant in our hope. To be vigilant in hope means to practice living out our faith every day and to look for our coming King everywhere we go.

Amen.