

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:28: Evident Hope

Lasting Hope

We now come to the final of the three sections of the book we are addressing. The first was **their faith** as revealed in how they took in the gospel and the Word of God, resulting in lives of ministry and a great reputation. The second was **the love Paul had for them** and that they had for one another. That love was an example of the sincerity of Christ's gospel and leadership, and the glue which holds together a community. We now come to **their hope**, which needed strengthening in light of the persecution they were undergoing from people opposed to the gospel.

In chapter 4, verses 13-18, Paul encourages them about believers who have already died. He wants them to not lose heart when their loved ones die. In so doing, he gives some of the clearest teaching in the Bible about the "snatching" – the Rapture of the church when Jesus comes for His bride.

Then in chapter 5, verses 1-11, he encourages them about Christ's subsequent return to the earth in judgment on the nations and all who have rejected Him and warred against Him and His church. He then closes in verses 13-28 with some final pastoral instructions for the church.

The Death of Believers

First we will focus on how Paul wanted to encourage their hope. People with real faith and demonstrated love will be the kind of people who draw others to Christ and who themselves enjoy the life of Christ, but they must be strong in hope.

Just as was true for the Thessalonian believers, we have heard that Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins. Fortunately, the Bible says that everyone who has that hope in them — *the confident expectation that God's Only Son Jesus Christ has borne the penalty of our sins and purchased for them eternal life* — will be delivered from the judgment of God concerning hell.

But as surely as the Bible tells us that Jesus was crucified for all the world's sins and that He was raised from the dead as confirmation of who He was and that He had power to cancel our debt, so too it tells us that He is coming back to earth.

Read Acts 1:11.

Read Revelation 1:7.

(cf., Daniel 7:13. Matt. 16:27, 24:30, 26:64. Mark 13:26, 14:62. Luke 21:27. John 14:2-3)

Some of us have not thought a lot about Jesus' return. Some Christians have not been taught that Jesus will literally come back to earth. I think many believers, if He came tomorrow, would be so surprised they would say, "*Wow, He really did come back! That stuff was true! I mean, I guess I thought it was real. But, well, you know, it's so different when you see it for yourself.*"

That's not what God wants. God wants us to be confident in and expectant of Christ's return. And as we see today, He wants us to understand two different elements of His return: one in the clouds and one onto the earth.

Let's begin in verse 13. "*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.*" Paul lets them know that their questions are important, including questions about those they have loved who have now died.

In the difficulties they have faced, one of the greatest has been loved ones dying and being separated from them. Since they had been taught already that Jesus was coming again, they eagerly anticipated meeting their Lord. But the separation from their loved ones made them wonder if maybe those who had died were not going to see Him and, just as bad, that maybe they wouldn't see them.

Paul's encouragement begins by referring to their deaths as "*being asleep.*" Two-thirds of the New Testament uses of sleep refer to what we call "death." It is an implication that for the believer in Jesus Christ, the hope at death is so great that it is like going to sleep. However, as we will see later, the person's soul going to sleep is not in focus, but the person's body.

His basic message: Do not worry about those who have died as if they will lose their part in the glory or as if you won't see them. You have good reason not to grieve as those apart from Christ grieve, people without hope.

He is not saying that there is no grief for believers when they lose someone to death. Rather, His message is that their grief is unlike that of those without Christ. One late scholar, J.B. Lightfoot, says that death was entered into so differently by the two groups that evidence is even found in ancient markings in tombs. *"Most striking is the difference between the inscriptions on the magnificent tombs of the heathen and those on the poor graves in the catacombs. On the one hand there is the dreary wail of despair, the effect of which is only heightened by the pomp of outward splendor from which it issues. On the other the exulting psalm of hope, shining the more brightly in all ill-written, ill-spelt records amidst the darkness of subterranean caverns."* (p. 138, quoted in L. Morris NICNT 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

Dr. Leon Morris quotes a letter from one without Christ: *"Irene to Taonnophris, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done, together with my family. Nevertheless, against such things there is nothing we can do. Comfort each other."* As he comments, they had little to offer.

The experience of losing someone is acute for all people, believer and unbeliever. It's a sign that the person occupied a significant part of the life of the one left. However, it is God's comfort to us that He has made a certain provision which, if meditated on, causes our grief to not carry on in such despair. It is a grief which is designed to be increasingly swallowed up by the joyful certainty of reunion, with the loved one and, even more spectacularly, with the Lord.

After introducing the idea that believers ought not grieve as if despairing, he goes on to explain why not. Verses 14-15: *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 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, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

Paul bases what he is getting ready to say on two most important foundations. First, "If we believe that Jesus died and was raised." He says this in a way in Greek which means, "If we believe and of course we do." So the first basis of reliability of what he is going to tell us is that of the gospel itself.

Second, he says, "We say this to you by the word of the Lord." This means, I received this from the Lord Himself or else it was well-known that the Lord had said this but it wasn't included in our gospels. John told us in John 20 that Jesus said and did many things not recorded, but that the few recorded were sufficient to enable us to believe on Jesus Christ and, believing, to have life in His name.

These two foundations are the two strongest bases of authority which Paul could point to. Therefore, what he is ready to tell us is important that people believe as authoritative, and at the same time it was something new to them, unfamiliar.

And what is it that he wants to declare to us with such unequivocal authority? One thing, stated twice. He does so once as a positive and once as a negative.

- (1) God will bring with Jesus those who have died in faith ahead of us;
- (2) We will not go ahead of them.

Since Paul's goal here is building their hope (and ours), he knows that the real test of faith is how we are able to rest in suffering and difficulty. It is in suffering and difficulty that many move their focus off Christ because He has not performed in the manner that they expected. As a result, Paul's desire is to strengthen faith in Christ right up to and through death, the greatest difficulty we face.

What's the encouragement? If you know a Christian who has died when the Lord comes and you are still living, he or she will be raised before anything happens to you. The encouragement is twofold: (1) Don't grieve as if despairing about those who die — they're fine; (2) Realize that God also has plans for you in the reunion.

We have God's authority by word and by resurrection. We have plans for deceased Christians to be brought with Jesus. We are told what will happen to us.

But is there more? Let's look at vv. 16-17. *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 shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

Here we have a crescendo. Paul gives a brand new revelation, never recorded in such detail. You could say that Paul has been setting us up. Your "sleeping" believing loved ones will be rescued somehow, and that before we will. But what else? Here we have it.

First, the Lord Himself is coming. There's that statement again.

Second, He is coming from heaven with a shout. That He comes from heaven points to His eternal authority. The shout is equivalent to a military commander summoning troops. It, too, signifies authority. It also points to what John 5 told us: at His shout, the dead themselves will hear from their tombs and be raised. It is reminiscent of Lazarus — Jesus shouts and the dead heard Him. Only now the difference is that at His shout, believers whose bodies fell asleep will be raised all over the world.

Third, He is accompanied by an archangel's voice and a trumpet. That it is an archangel signifies that the highest created heavenly being is being brought in for this moment and the trumpet likely signifies either a victory blast or an anticipatory battle call.

Fourth, we are gathered up in the clouds with those who have died. Though the dead went first, the word here used for "then" means "right on the heels." As soon as all of them are there, we will be gathered to them — *literally, snatched in an instant* — right in the clouds. Not only will we be reunited with them but we will collectively with them then meet Him face to face for the first time.

The scene we have here is of the Lord of heaven and earth being greeted by all of us believers, in the air, in the clouds. The word used is a unique word used for what you do if you meet a dignitary. As we reflect on that moment, which has been promised to us to come as surely as the resurrection, we notice Paul's next comment, verse 18. *"Therefore comfort one another with these words."*

It is an interesting combination, *strengthened hope and comfort*. But just like 2 Corinthians 1, where we are told to comfort others in the way we have been comforted ourselves, the outcome is increased hope. Sometimes it is easy to believe what God says. But as life hardships mount with relationships, children, work, finances, health, it is easy to grow hard. It is easy to fall away from the activeness of earnest, expectant faith in Christ and all He has said. Here we see that we need to be comforted with the certain plan of reuniting with loved ones and with the Lord.

What we have so far is something Paul wanted them to know for faith to be strengthened. A new teaching that those who die before Jesus returns will be first to be summoned and snatched, straight out of their place of burial, and brought for us to be reunited with in the air, then to meet the Lord Himself in the clouds. An incredible portrait of a coming event in history.

But now what? Does the same idea continue? I think not. I think it seems easiest and most direct to understand the following verses to refer to a separate incident, but one also clearly related to the Lord's return. Let's look at verses 1-2 of chapter 5. *Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.*

It seems right off that we are talking about something related but different. It, too, is likely to have as its purpose to build up faith's response to Jesus Christ. But follow along with me as we look a little more closely.

First, Paul says "Now," a word used to set it off from what went before just as "But" had been in verse 13 of chapter 4. Second, the issue raised is different. Where before they wanted to know "what happened to believers who died with respect to the Lord's return?", they now want to know about some "times and epochs." The word "times" means "the days or era during which something (yet unspecified) occurs" and the word "epochs" means "a given event."

While we don't know what it is yet as of verse one, we shall soon see. We only know that it is something, in contrary to what we looked at in chapter 4, that Christians don't need to know.

In the second verse we see that they already know a good deal about it, a "sufficient amount" according to Paul. Namely, "these times/epochs will come without warning when people don't expect it, just as a thief comes when people don't expect it." Paul refers to what the Lord Jesus is recorded as having said several times in the gospels — the Day of the Lord will come when people do not expect it. And that — *the Day of the Lord* — mentioned in verse two is apparently the "times and epochs" about which they had been asking questions. This "day of the Lord" has some features very different from the event we just looked at. What else do we see about this "Day of the Lord?" Let's read on in verse three.

While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

This verse is somewhat reminiscent of what we would read later in 2nd Thessalonians by Paul. There he tells us, *The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and ... who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.* Peter says much the same thing in 2 Peter 3:10 - *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.* Each of these is consistent with about 90 references in the whole Bible concerning the Day of the Lord. Rather than rescue, destruction, judgment and wrath are in view. Rather than those in Christ in view, we have here those outside Christ.

Paul has already said that the Christians do not need to know more. He said in verse one and will say again in verse four that they are brethren. But having addressed up until now "you," he now switches to "them." *See again in verse three: "They are saying..." "Destruction will come upon them..." "They shall not escape."* All these warnings refer to a "they" not in mind when Paul speaks to the brethren.

What we have here is a statement of faith of the non-brethren and what will happen to them. Their statement of faith? *"Peace and Safety."* It means that just before God's wrath is poured out to the utmost — called *a destruction they will not escape* — those apart from Christ will be telling each other that all is well, all is at peace (as in Noah's day). They will have rejected God and His Son as the world's only Savior. Imagining His law is not against them and deluding themselves, they think all is well.

In verses four-five, he explains why he need not go into more detail. *"But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness."*

Paul reminds them of their identity and their protection. As Sons of Light, he says they have nothing to fear from this "thief in the night" appearance from Jesus. Paul reminds them of their identity as Sons of the Day and of Light (pointing to their identity as redeemed people, purchased to bear Christ — the Light of the World). In so doing he contrasts them with those of the night and of the dark. He does so for what comes next in vv. 6-8. Here Paul exhorts them. He has given them good reason for their faith to be strengthened. But God does not strengthen our faith merely to strengthen it — He strengthens it so that His purposes may be achieved in our lives.

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

Paul's exhortation has to do with our spiritual alertness. Let us be "alert and sober," he says. Paul's focus is not on alcohol here, for there is no need for that here. The focus of the passage is that Christians would take seriously the coming events.

We are to order our lives in such a way that when — not if — these events occur, we will not be ashamed and the Lord will be pleased and we will love His appearing.

Elsewhere we are warned that we may not “shrink back in shame from Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28). Why would we be warned of that unless it was a possibility? This is exactly what gives rise to his warning for us to be sober minded – because it is not automatic for believers in Christ. We need to stand in the battle He has placed us in, protected by ever-growing faith and love, and guarded by the hope generated by the salvation He has given us.

Finally, Paul reminds us of the reason we can protect our minds with a helmet of the hope of salvation, as we see in verses 9-11: *For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.*

Again, Paul finishes this section as he finished the one before: *Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.*

Encourage each other with these words. Much encouragement: The day will not overcome us. We are children of the day not the night. We can stand in the battle girded by faith, hope and love, mindful that the battle has already been won by our proxy, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

Discussion

1. As a group, list the elements of comfort you find in Paul’s teaching in 4:13-18 about believers who have died ahead of us?
2. What are the indications in the passage that the section in 5:1-11 refers to non-believers? What are some things that stand out that you’d be able to share with someone who wanted to know?
3. Compare and contrast Jesus’ coming for the bride in chapter 4 and Jesus coming to judge in 5? What are the differences?
4. How do we put on this sober mindedness which he exhorts?