

WEDNESDAY

Bible Study

The Marks Of A Model Church

'The Hope Of Christ's Coming' - 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:10

20 November 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction The church in Thessalonica mistakenly believed, along with many of the early Christians, that Jesus would return during their lifetime and it looks as though this created a bit of a crisis. Paul responds to their concerns and answered their doubts; giving words of encouragement and explaining how Jesus' return offers hope to the believer and comfort to the broken hearted. Jesus' return is, probably, one of the most mind-boggling, difficult, and supernatural aspects of the Christian faith to understand and, as a consequence, has been lost in endless controversies/speculations - yet it's one of the most distinctive Christian beliefs we have. It is known as eschatology (Not to be mistaken for escapology!). It's a theological word that has its roots in two Greek words *eschatos*, meaning last and *logos* meaning word. And so, when we use the term eschatology, it literally means the last word and is known as the doctrine of the last times.

Some people ridicule this doctrine/belief of the Christian faith and argue that the Church has been waiting for 2000 years and Jesus has not returned yet. However, Peter points out (2 Peter 3:9) that God keeps his promises whether we believe them or not and, whilst His seeming delay is a trial to the church, it's an opportunity for the lost to find Jesus before it's too late.

1) Return: Jesus is coming again, 4:13-15. Paul taught that Jesus was coming again and wrote, vs15 that this hope was: *According to the Lord's own word* (John 5:24-29; 11:21-27). Paul uses the word sleep to describe believers who died - a term that is never used in the NT of anyone but believers. Jesus said of Jairus daughter: *She is sleeping* (Mark 5:39; John 11:11-13.). There's a wonderful comfort in this - death, for the believer, is nothing more than sleep. The soul goes to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:20-24). The OT taught this (Job 14:13-15; 19:23-27; Psalm 16:9-11; Daniel 12:2) and Jesus taught it (Matthew 22:23-33). However, the word sleep is not applied to Jesus. Paul was very careful to state that Jesus died vs14, rather than fell asleep and, it is because He died and rose again that the fear of death is taken away. But let me tell you, as someone who regularly takes funerals, that the desperation and despair amongst those who 'have no hope' is very painful.

2) Resurrection: the Christian dead will rise, 4:16. All of us have lost loved ones. And no matter how long it's been, we never stop loving them; we never stop missing them and, if they died a Christian, we never stop longing for the day when we can be together again. Christians have a hope in the resurrection and a hope that we will meet our Christian loved ones in the most joyful reunion there has ever been! Of course, Christians aren't the only ones who have a belief in an afterlife. The ancient Egyptians had very elaborate views of the afterlife; Likewise, the Greeks and Romans believed in the immortality of the soul in a place called Hades. Mankind has tried to solve the mystery of what happens after death for thousands of years. Many study the occult, hoping to find a clue to the answers. Spiritualists, allegedly, communicate with those who have died.

Paul writes, vs16, that Jesus himself will come down from heaven and give a shout of command just as He did outside the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:43).

In John 5:28 we read that those: *in the graves shall hear His voice*. Paul writes, vs16, that the voice of an archangel will sound (suggesting that the angelic hosts will share in the victory shout when Jesus comes) followed by the trumpet call of God. In the Bible, trumpets were used to announce special times, events and seasons; to declare war; and to gather people for a journey (Numbers 10). When God gave the Law to Israel, the event was preceded by a trumpet blast (Exodus 19:18-20). 1 Corinthians 15:52 indicates that this will happen so suddenly that it will be over in the twinkling of an eye.

3) Rapture: Living believers caught up, 4:17. The word rapture is not used in these verses, but that is the literal meaning of 'caught up.' The Latin word *rapto* means 'to seize, to carry off' and we get the English word rapture from it. It's worth spending a few moments thinking about the different Greek translations of the word rapture because each meaning adds a special truth to our understanding of Jesus' return.

*To catch away speedily / To seize by force / To claim for one's own self
To move to a new place / To rescue from danger.*

Theologians continue to debate when Jesus will return and there are several different schools of thought:

- Post-millennialist: who believe that Jesus will come after the 1000 years (Revelation 20:1-10) and that this will usher in a period of peace and prosperity which will usher in the second coming.
- Pre-millennialist: who believe that Jesus will return before the 1000 years and set up his kingdom on earth.
- Pre-tribulation pre-millennialist: who believe that Jesus comes before the millennium and before the tribulation.
- A-millennialist: believe that it is not to be interpreted literally at all and only exists in the life of a believer.

Some of you may have read the *Left Behind* series of novels based on the book of Revelation and end time prophesy by the American authors Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins. They give a plausible explanation for the way in which the anti-Christ comes to power.

The world will be caught by surprise because they will not hear God's Word or heed His warnings. God warned Noah's generation the Flood was coming; yet only eight people believed and were saved (1 Peter 3:20). Lot warned his family that the city would be destroyed but they would not listen (Genesis 19:12-14). Jesus used the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of his return in Matthew 24:37-39 and Luke 17:26-30. In Matthew 24:40-41. Jesus said: Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. The parallel passage in Luke 17:34 reads: On that night, two people will be asleep in one bed; one will be taken and the other left.

4) Response: It is our Responsibility, 5:1-10. But Paul's teaching doesn't just stop there. He recognises the eternal differences that Jesus' return will make for those who believe and those who don't, so he asks them to consider their response to the Gospel of Jesus.

a) Expectancy or Surprise? 5:1-3: The Thessalonians were asking about times and dates, just as the disciples had asked Jesus (Mark 14:4; Acts 1:6). Why were they asking this question? Not, it seems, out of idle curiosity, but for practical reasons. The Thessalonians thought they could be better prepared for the judgement if they knew when Jesus would return - slightly naïve, perhaps, but understandable none-the-less. In Mark 13:32, Jesus said: *No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*. Jesus told the disciples before he ascended to the Father, Acts 1:7: *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority*.

Paul was able to say, 5:2: For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night ... Thieves don't tell us when they are coming. They make no announcement of their arrival and it's not their habit to send us a postcard in advance. That's the way a thief operates. He enters silently and unobtrusively, does his work and that, says Paul, and Jesus, is the way Jesus will come. In vs3, Paul is referring to those who are complacent; those who say peace and safety (that is, they imagine they are secure – a false sense of security) destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. Jesus said in Matthew 24:44: The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Revelation 1:7 makes the point that when Jesus returns: Every eye will see him. We don't quite know how that will work. God is omnipresent and so it should present him with little difficulty! However, with the advance of global communications, live satellite links etc., any occurrence, anywhere in the world, can be on our TV screens within seconds of it actually taking place. Whilst, a few years ago that might have seemed an impossibility, today it's a reality. The world will be enjoying a time of false peace and security before these cataclysmic events occur (Read Joel 2:31; Zephaniah 1:14-18; Isaiah 2: 2-21 for a description of this great period).

Whilst we don't know what the sign of Jesus' return will be, it will be so terrifying, so frightening, it will produce fear among the nations of the earth, Luke 21:26: *Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.* As we look for signs of Jesus' return there will be false messiahs, telling us that they are the Second coming of Jesus. Jesus knew this would happen, Luke 21:8: *Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name claiming 'I am he' and then 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.*

Babies, like burglars, don't make an appointment before the turn up. But the point about being pregnant is that the baby is definitely coming at some point. You don't know when, but there's an inevitability about it. A pregnant woman needs to have her bag packed and be ready for the baby's arrival. And it's the same with Jesus' return. So, putting the two illustrations together, we can say that Jesus' coming will be *sudden and unexpected* (like a thief in the night), and *sudden and unavoidable* (like labour at the end of pregnancy). We don't know when and we can't find out. But it's definitely going to happen and, vs3, no one will miss it

b) Light or Darkness? 5:4-5: Paul is reminding us, once again, to live holy lives. Why? *Because we are sons of the light and we should not live as those who belong to the darkness.* Paul is talking about Christian discipleship. Romans 13:12-13: *The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light ...* So the question Paul asks us, is this: Has the light of Jesus Christ shone upon us (John 8:12)? Do we belong to the night or to the day? Do we know Jesus, the Messiah as our own personal Saviour? A mark of a true Christian is their eagerness for the coming of Jesus. As we grow in the Lord, we not only look for His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). Because we have this hope in Him, we keep our lives pure so that we may not be ashamed at His coming (1 John 2:28-3:3).

c) Sober or Drunk? 5:6-8: To make the contrast more vivid, Paul pictured two groups of people: one who were drunk and asleep while the others were awake and alert (To be alert means: being sober-minded; living with our eyes open; wide-awake and ready). So darkness, sleep and drunkenness are three reasons why people are unprepared for the return of the Lord. So, when it comes to the return of Jesus we must all be awake, alert, sober and ready for the dawning of that wonderful new day. Sober-minded believers are not complacent, but neither are they frustrated and afraid. They hear the tragic news of today yet don't lose heart. They experience the difficulties of life, but don't give up. They know the future is in God's hands and live each day calmly and obediently. Paul highlights the need for us to be properly armed for the Christian warfare. When we dress up we are to put on, vs8: *faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.* Only the 'armour of light' will adequately protect us in these days before our Jesus returns. It's time to wake up, clean up and dress up.

d) Salvation or Judgement? 5:9-10: The prophet Amos said: *Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light ... pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness.* Some Thessalonians were afraid of Jesus' return and Paul responds to these concerns. Firstly, vs9: *God did not appoint us to suffer wrath (to endure the condemnation our sins deserve) but to receive salvation (rescue from judgment) through our Lord Jesus Christ.* Christians have always experienced tribulation but I don't believe Christians will experience the day of the Lord - that awful period of judgment that God will send on the earth - it's not part of God's plan for us. Secondly, Jesus died for us so that, vs10: *... we may live together with him if we are awake or asleep.*

Conclusion Paul was writing to a group of 'faint hearted immature Christians' to give them comfort with the news of Jesus' return and taught that we have absolutely nothing to fear if we live according to His plans and purposes. Paul wrote how we need to be ready for Jesus' return. How we need: to live in the light, not the darkness; to be alert and self-controlled; to be responsible and sensible and not descending into immorality. How we shouldn't: give up our jobs; expect Jesus to come back at 2am in the morning; fill up our lives with so many activities that we have no space to think and pray. But let me ask you a question: are you ready for Jesus' return? It's a very important question because we need to be ready.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: Revd Paul suggested that the doctrine of the return of Jesus is: "... one of the most distinctive Christian beliefs we have." Do you find the physical return of Jesus easy to accept or do you struggle with this core belief?

2: How is Paul's teaching about the 'resurrection of the dead' a comfort to those who mourn the loss of loved ones? In what ways might grief be different for a Christian than for a non-Christian, 4:13-18?

3: Are the examples of a thief and labour pains, 5:2-3, helpful analogies of what will happen on the day of the Lord? How or why?

4: The return of the Lord Jesus can be a frightening thought. Take a few moments to: a) reflect on, and affirm, your own relationship with Jesus; b) pray for those nearest and dearest to you who don't know Jesus for themselves.