

Living with hope

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[0 : 0 0] It's a delight to be with you this morning. Over the past 20 years or so, I've often! enjoyed fellowship with the church here, but not been with you for a while. It's a delight! to be with you again this morning and to see how you've grown as a church, which is wonderful to see. Now, it has to be said that the preaching of this sermon has come upon me rather like a thief in the night, so I need God's help to preach His Word. We all need God's help to hear, to understand, to believe, to trust, and to obey His Word. So let's pray for that help. Heavenly Father, thank you that in the unknowns of life, the uncertainties, that your Word is certain, the Lord Jesus is certain, His coming again in glory is certain. Speak to us clearly through your Word of these realities and encourage our hearts, and may your Word fulfill the function intended for it, which for this part of the Scripture is to build us up. May we be strengthened, encouraged, and built up through the preaching of your Word this morning. Amen. It is sometimes said, rather humorously, that the world is divided into two sorts of people. There are those people who think the world is divided into two sorts of people and those who don't. Well, when it comes to Christian people, we might say that Christian people seem to be divided into those who are somewhat obsessed with the return of the Lord

Jesus Christ and those who ignore the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. So the first group tends to be preoccupied with when it will happen. And so they behave, perhaps at times, a little bit like sort of conspiracy theorists, trying to put together all the little bits of clues and evidence from the Bible and applying it to history and trying to map what the Bible is saying to what's happening in history and to events in the world in their own day and age and try and work out when the Lord Jesus is going to return. They make their predictions and then experience profound disappointment when events prove them wrong. For the second group, those who don't pay much attention to return, it's as though his return would actually be an unwelcome interruption to their plans, perhaps plans to build heaven on earth.

They play down the end and they concentrate on the present. They're looking for happiness now. They're looking for heaven to be built on earth now. And again, since we can't build heaven on earth, they are in for disappointment. And the tragedy of all this is that both groups miss out on the encouragement and the strengthening that is intended for us in all that the Bible has to say about the return of the Lord Jesus. Just look at the last verse of chapter 4. I do hope you've got a Bible open in front of you. Looking at 1 Thetianians 4, verse 13 onwards. We're on page 1188. If you've got one of those church Bibles from the back there, page 1188. But you see the final verse of chapter 4?

Therefore, encourage each other with these words. And you see verse 11 of chapter 5? Therefore, encourage each other with these words.

And that's the marker that you have the marker that you have the marker that you have the marker that you have the wants them to be built up, to be made stronger together as Christian people living in the now, looking forward to the return of the Lord Jesus. And in fact, a healthy and a clear focus on the return of the Lord Jesus runs through this letter as it does through the whole of the New Testament part of the Bible. Just look at the very end of chapter 1, the verses that Phil read for us when he opened our service. End of chapter 1, pick it up halfway through verse 9, they tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and then verse 10, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. You see that focus on the return of the Lord Jesus. See the end of chapter 2, verse 19, he's writing about how much these believers, these Christians in Thessalonica mean to him, and he says, for what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, when he comes, is it not you? He's talking about how much he's going to rejoice when the Lord Jesus returns, as he sees these believers there with the Lord Jesus in glory. Or look at the end

of chapter 3, the final verse of chapter 3, verse 13, may he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

[6 : 13] We'll look at the very end of the letter, chapter 5, and verse 23, may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. So do you see how there is a healthy perspective on the coming of the Lord Jesus that runs through the whole of this letter? It's striking to me that here is one of the earliest letters of the New Testament, written to a very young church, and it speaks to us of things that Paul has already told the church in those few weeks he was with them, things he wants to remind them of, and amongst those things of primary importance, the very first things that you would teach new Christians and new church, of primary importance, are all the things in this letter, including the return of the Lord Jesus and that clear focus on it.

And as we come now, we come to this morning, is the passage in the letter that is most intensely focused on this theme of the return of the Lord Jesus. Here, Paul is teaching about it with the greatest clarity. And we're going to see, first of all, that as he writes about the return of the Lord Jesus, he wants these believers to have assurance instead of anxiety, and he wants them to have confidence instead of confusion. Assurance instead of anxiety, and confidence instead of confusion.

So let's see if we can have a right perspective on the return of the Lord Jesus and how we can have assurance and how we can have confidence. So first of all, assurance instead of anxiety. We're looking now at chapter 4, verses 13, to the end of that chapter. See, verse 13. Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. When Paul writes about those who have fallen asleep or those who fall asleep, he's writing about Christians who have died. So the death of loved ones in the church, is a cause of anxiety to the Thessalonian believers. It seems that their expectation of this future coming of the Lord Jesus, his return in glory, was so great that they had become convinced that it would happen very, very soon, and they hadn't really thought it through that some of their number might die before the Lord Jesus came back. They hadn't expected that to happen. But now, as a little bit of time has passed by, of course, some of them have died. And that caught them off guard. They hadn't expected it. They didn't know what to make of it.

And so they were anxious about those who had died before the Lord Jesus returned. What would happen to them? Would they be separated from Christ?

[9 : 54] Would they ever see them again? Would their separation from them be permanent? What would actually happen to these people when the Lord Jesus came back? And Paul says, we do not want you to be ignorant. No, you need to be informed about this.

And we don't want you to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. Now, of course, grief, when someone close to us dies, it is very natural and is very proper.

Some of you may have lost people very close to you, and you know the pain of bereavement. That may be recent for you. I spent some time just over the past few weeks spending some hours with somebody who had just lost his brother.

And who is in deep pain over it, a lot of grief. That's very real. The pain of being separated from one you love is great. As the English writer C.S. Lewis wrote after his wife had died, he said, it is hard to have patience with people who say there is no death, or death doesn't matter.

There is death, and whatever matters. Death is a painful reality. So there is nothing here in these words that Paul writes that denies the reality of that pain, or the proper place for grieving.

[11 : 39] Jesus himself wept at the graveside of Lazarus, his friend who had died. But Paul says in verse 13 that he does not want us to grieve like the rest of people who have no hope when they grieve.

They grieve without hope. Christian people can grieve, but with hope. So Paul is calling there to be a difference between the way that Christian people grieve and the way that everybody else grieves, the pagan people of society around.

Both Christians and non-Christians feel the pain of separation, but the Christian response to that pain is to be different. It's to be distinctive. It is to be transformed by hope.

We are a people of hope. Paul writes to stimulate their hope. He writes to encourage their hope. He writes to feed their hope by making up for the shortfalls in their knowledge.

See, how they react, how they respond, will be informed by how they think and what they understand and what they know. So he wants to change what they understand, fill up their knowledge, stop them being ignorant of these things, so it will change their response and reaction and they will be able to have hope in the midst of their grief.

[13:08] We do not want you to be ignorant. He wants to correct their thinking and change their anxiety into assurance. And he does this by showing them the future outcome that will make sense of their present pain.

And there are two parts to his teaching. The first part concerns those that have died. And he, sorry, the first part of his teaching is that those who have died are not separated from Jesus.

That if they know Jesus in this life, they are with Jesus now having died. So verse 14, we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Those who have died in Jesus, believing in Jesus, trusting in him, are still with him. They are in his presence. That's why in another letter in the New Testament, Paul can write that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord.

Death is a separation of soul and body. So if the soul leaves the body, where does it go? If it's a Christian soul, it's to be with the Lord, to be at home with him.

[14:28] And so when the Lord Jesus returns, God will bring with Jesus all those who have fallen asleep in him, without exception. So those who have died trusting in Jesus are with Jesus and will come back with him.

The second part of his teaching here is that all of God's people will be united at the coming of the Lord Jesus. So you see verse 15, according to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left to the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

And after that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

And so, you see what the outcome is, and so we will be with the Lord forever. So he's saying there will be no advantage for those who are still alive when the Lord Jesus returns over those who have already died.

[15:51] They will certainly not precede, they will not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. Now, when Christ returns, the dead in Christ will rise first.

But you might say, as I thought when I read this, well, how can the dead both be with Christ and return with him, and rise from the dead when he returns?

Well, the reason for that is because when Christ returns, that will be the moment when the souls of those who have died are clothed with their new resurrection bodies.

So, in another letter, in the letter to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians, in chapter 15, Paul tells us that the bodies of those who have died, the mortal bodies of those who have died are like a seed sleeping in the soil waiting for the loud command of Christ's return.

And at that command, that mortal body that's been sown into the ground will be raised a new spiritual body, a resurrection body, a body that will not grow old or decay.

[17:14] I hope you realize that the hope of having a resurrection body in the future for eternity, a body that will never grow old or decay, that that is part of the Christian hope.

There's a well-known speaker who speaks of having a friend in Australia, and I don't know whether this friend has now died, but he used to talk about going to visit this friend who had all sorts of bodily ailments, all sorts of diseases, all sorts of things wrong with him, and whenever this speaker asked his friend how he was, he would say, nothing that a good resurrection won't fix.

So we are going to get new bodies, and at that same moment, or as the bodies of those who have died in Christ are raised, so those resurrection bodies will be reunited with the souls of those who have died that have come back with Christ.

It is the soul coming back with Christ to be united with the resurrection body. And at that same moment, as Paul says in verse 17, those who are still alive, those who have never experienced death, will be caught up together with those who have already died.

And Paul uses a word that describes it, a sudden, violent action. They will be sort of seized with an irresistible force and snatched up to be with Christ. And again, 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that those

who are alive, those of us who are Christian believers who are alive when Jesus returns will be instantaneously transformed to have these resurrection bodies.

[18 : 52] So all those who are in Jesus will be united together with him and clothed with new bodies. The separations of death are totally cancelled.

See, death is all about separation, isn't it? The soul being separated, torn apart from the body. It's about loved ones being separated, snapped, pulled apart from each other in death.

And that separation of death will be reversed. The soul back together with the resurrection body. Christian believers back together, no longer separated from each other.

And so, we will be with the Lord forever. forever. So that's the content of the Christian hope. It's not just the hope of heaven.

It's not just the hope of a resurrection body. It's not just the hope of being together again. It's actually, ultimately, it's the hope of being with the Lord Jesus. Do you love Jesus?

[20 : 01] You've not seen Jesus, I've not seen Jesus, but I know about him through the pages of the Bible, and I love Jesus because of what I know of him in the Bible. Do you love Jesus?

Well, if you love Jesus, you want to be with him, don't you? So that's your, that's the very center of your hope to be with Jesus forever. The hope that gives us comfort in grief.

That's the future outcome that makes sense of present pain. But notice the basis for this hope. It is based on the reality of past events. Do you see verse 14?

We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that Jesus will bring, God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. Certainty about the future rests upon certainty about the past.

The reason that we can have hope for the future is that we know that Jesus came, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again in the past. Have you noticed in this passage that Jesus is the only one who is referred to as having died?

[21 : 15] Because Jesus died, Christians only fall asleep. so Christian death is described as simply going to sleep.

Jesus faced the full horror of death. He faced separation from God the Father. But because he was without sin, death could not keep hold of him.

And so on the third day he rose again, having conquered death, having removed the sting of death, having taken away the bite of death, and leaving death a defeated foe for all those who trust in him.

And so death is transformed for the Christian believer. For those who trust in Jesus, death becomes the gateway into the presence of Jesus. Their bodies merely fall asleep waiting for the trumpet call.

When I was a student, I went to a conference in Germany for Christian students from all around Europe.

[22 : 23] And I slept with lots of others in a school, a school for young children with them. And we slept in the classrooms. And there was a central hall.

And what they did in the morning was somebody came into the school with a trumpet, stood in the assembly hall in the center of the building and played the trumpet.

And that is how we were woken up from the dead. Well, from the sleep. Student sleep is very close to death. And only a trumpet can wake students from their sleep.

But it would be like that. Bodies raised from their sleep to be reunited with the soul in the presence of the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with words.

It's important to remember the purpose for which Paul writes. His purpose is to turn our anxiety into assurance. It is to encourage us as we go through bereavement when we lose Christian loved ones.

[23 : 30] It's not to answer academic, theoretical questions about the return of Jesus. It's about to encourage us. And give us assurance. Of course, there are lots of questions we might want to be answered.

But the Bible's not here to satisfy our curiosity, but strengthen us in our faith. It teaches us all that we need to know to be saved.

And it teaches us all that we need to know to be encouraged and strengthened in our faith as we wait for the return of the Lord Jesus. Assurance instead of anxiety.

Secondly, Paul wants to give them in chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, confidence instead of confusion.

Confidence instead of confusion. Because just as anxious about those who had died and what would happen to them at the coming of Christ, they were also confused about how the living should

prepare for his coming.

[24 : 37] And their concerns are valid. Back in the Old Testament, the prophet Amos said, why do you long for the day of the Lord? Which we now understand is the day when Jesus will come back.

Why do you long for that day, says Amos? That day will be darkness, not light. Pitch dark without a ray of brightness. Why? Because it will bring judgments, the judgment of God, the wrath of God upon sinners.

Are you a sinner? I'm a sinner. If I stood here and claimed I wasn't, you would just need to speak to my wife and children and they would soon put you right.

How can sinners be ready for the day of the Lord, the righteous day of his judgment, the judgment of the righteous God? Well, it seems that the Thessalonians were proposing their own solution to the problem and asking for Paul's help.

But Paul rejects their solution and puts the right solution in its place. You see chapter 5, verse 1? He says, Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you.

[25 : 55] I think the Thessalonians had been asking Paul about times and dates. And their motivation wasn't idle curiosity. No, they wanted to know when Christ would return so they could make suitable preparation for that day.

if someone told you that the Queen was going to visit you, you'd have two questions, I think. The first would be, why?

But then the second would be, when? When is she going to visit? Did I need to, oh goodness me, how much vacuuming and dusting and cleaning up the house and tidying up and doing all that painting that we hadn't got round to and mowing the lawn and all that preparation and all the food and maybe I'd go out and buy new furniture.

I need to know when so I can be ready when she comes. And the Thessalonian believers thought it would be much easier to be ready for the return of the Lord Jesus if he knew when he was going to come.

But Paul, whilst he shares their expectancy that the Lord Jesus will come back, he rejects their request to know the when, the times and the dates.

[27 : 13] We do not need to write you about this, he says, for you know, see verse 2, you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

He had no doubt already pressed on them the teaching of Jesus about the way that Jesus would come like a thief in the night and what Jesus had said to his disciples that it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Jesus had taught his disciples very clearly that we could not know and will not know when he's going to come back. And he reminds them of the two illustrations of this.

First, that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night and then secondly, verse 3, while people are saying peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly as labour pains on a pregnant woman and they will not escape.

The thief in the night, the labour pains of a woman who is pregnant. both illustrations teach that the coming of the Lord Jesus will be sudden.

[28 : 29] Suddenly, the thief, the burglar, breaks into your house. Suddenly, the labour pains come upon the expectant mother.

But there is a difference. Both might be sudden, but while the arrival of the burglar is usually totally unexpected, the labour pains are expected.

In fact, if all is going well in pregnancy, the labour pains are bound to come at some point. So, Paul's second illustration teaches us that the day of the Lord, the day of Christ's return, is a certainty.

It must come. But we don't know when. But he says it must come and with it, destruction will come on those who are not ready.

The world doesn't even know it's going to happen. People are out there living their lives not even knowing that this day is coming. Not even knowing the Lord Jesus is coming back.

[29 : 42] And while they are saying, peace and safety all is well, destruction will come suddenly upon them and there will be no escape. Well, the Thessalonian believers hope to find security in knowing the dates.

But Paul disappoints them. He says it's not for us to know the dates or the times. So, what alternative does he have to offer? If Christ is going to come suddenly, unexpectedly, but

unavoidably, how can we face that day with confidence?

He is coming, we don't know when, how can we be ready? Paul's solution is to make sure we belong to the day.

Make sure you belong to the day. See verse 4? But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

There are two reasons why people are taken by surprise by the nighttime burglar. The first is that he comes unexpectedly during the night.

[30 : 57] The second is that the household is normally asleep. We can't change the first of those, but we can change the second by not being asleep.

In the same way, Christ's coming is definitely unpredictable. We can't change that, but we can stay awake and be alert.

And even if the timing of his coming is unexpected and sudden, we'll be ready for him. We'll not be taken by surprise.

Let's see how Paul expands this argument. So burglars take people by surprise if they come at night. At night, it's dark and we don't see them coming.

At night, most people are asleep. Or if they are awake, unless they're out doing shift work or something, if they're awake at night, they're usually getting drunk at a party. So he says, verse 7, for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

[32 : 05] So darkness and sleep and drunkenness are those three reasons why people are unprepared for the burglar at night time. If only he'd come during the day.

Then it would be light and we'd see him coming. Then it'd be daytime and we'd be awake and then we wouldn't be drunk. We'd be sober. Well, the coming of Christ is just the same.

So the question is, will he come during the day or the night? And you know, the astonishing thing is it depends who you are. For you, whether he comes in the day or the night, well, it depends on who you are.

for unbelievers, for those who don't know and love and trust the Lord Jesus, he will come during the night because spiritually they are in darkness.

But, verse 4, you brothers are not in darkness. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day.

[33 : 15] if we are Christian people, we do not belong to the night and we don't belong to the darkness. What does Paul mean? Well, the Bible divides history into two ages.

And from the perspective of the Old Testament, they were seen as the present age, which is evil, and the age to come, which is the time of the Christ, the Messiah.

And those two ages are sometimes depicted as night and day. So the coming of the Messiah would be like the rising of the sun after a long night.

When Messiah comes, he'll flood the world with light. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is that long awaited Messiah. And when he came, the new age began.

spiritual daylight began with Jesus. He said, I am the light of the world. He's come to a world of darkness, this present evil age, but he's come as the light, the daytime, begins with Jesus.

[34 : 32] But at the same time, at the moment, the old age, the nighttime, is not over. We live in this period of overlap. between the old nighttime, this present evil age, and the new day, the day of light that's begun with Jesus.

The light of the dawning day shines, but the darkness lingers. So do you belong to the old age that is still in darkness, or do you belong to Jesus and so you're with him in the light?

Just let me try and illustrate this. Just imagine that you're with your family on holiday. You're enjoying a lovely summer holiday, and one evening, the sun goes down and you draw the curtains and you all go to bed.

And you really do want a good night's sleep because you're all looking forward to the visit of Uncle Ted. Uncle Ted is coming the next day, and you all love Uncle Ted. Uncle Ted is the best uncle in the entire world.

He's better than anybody else's uncle. And in the morning, the sun rises, but you know nothing about it because you sleep with the curtains drawn.

[35 : 42] Only one member of the family rises early, and she is the youngest. And she gets up, and she runs downstairs, and she flings wide the curtains, and the sun streams in, and suddenly there's a knock on the door, and she rushes to open the door, and there is Uncle Ted, and his arms are full of presents, and she gets all the presents.

She is there ready to welcome Uncle Ted because she is awake, and she is alert, and she is in the light, and the rest of you are you're covered in confusion because you're still asleep in the darkness. She belongs to the day, the day that's dawned, but you still belong to the night, curtains closed, lying in the dark. Well, unbelievers belong to the darkness.

They're still in the night time, the darkness. But those who belong to Christ have been transferred into the new age, into the light. So being ready for the coming of Christ doesn't depend upon knowing the time, it depends upon belonging to the day.

If you are a Christian, then you are a child of the day. You are in the light. It need not take you by surprise. So the question that Paul's teaching here raises for us is do we belong to the day or the night?

[37 : 14] Are we asleep or are we awake? Has the light of the Lord Jesus come into our lives or are we still in darkness? Are we alert and ready for his coming or will that day overtake us with destruction?

salvation? But if I do belong to the day, then well, how do I get ready? And Paul's answer is, well, just live like someone who belongs to the day. See verse 6?

Let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. Verse 8. Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

Let's be awake, let's be alert, let's put on the century's uniform, let's put on faith and love as a breastplate, let's put on hope as a helmet of salvation.

But wait, is that it? Is that all we have to do to get ready? Well, there's nothing new in that, is there? You're quite right. No, back in chapter 1, we saw that the marks of gospel obedience are the work of faith, the labor of love, and the endurance of hope.

[38 : 40] Those are the three emblems of the Christian, faith, love, and hope throughout. Those are the signs that we are, not that we are good enough for the judgment day, but we're ready for the judgment day.

Faith, hope, and love are the signs that we belong to Jesus. And if we belong to Jesus, we're ready for that judgment day. So here in chapter 5 and verse 9, these are the signs that God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not through our own efforts, but through our Lord Jesus Christ. So our confidence lies not in our preparation, but in the fact that Jesus has died for us.

And we're ready for his coming, if we belong to him, and we have faith, hope, and love.

And for those of us who belong to Christ, well, that's the future perspective that helps us to live rightly in the now. And it's the future perspective that gives us comfort in our suffering.

[40 : 05] We shall all be together with him in the end. And so there's only one way to live now, which is to walk by faith, to keep laboring, working in love, and to endure in hope.

We don't need to be anxious, and we don't need to be confused. We don't need to fear the day of his coming. We can face it with confidence because God has appointed us not to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation.

Therefore, we can encourage each other, and therefore we can build each other up with these words, just as we've been doing this morning. But if this morning you know that the reality is you still belong to the night, well, I hope you've come to understand just how much you need to belong to the day.

And you can only belong to the day by belonging to Jesus, trusting him, loving him, putting your faith in him. You don't want the destruction to come upon you suddenly with no escape.

You want to look forward to the day of his coming as a day of salvation, not a day of wrath. death. I don't know when you will die.

[41 : 25] I don't know when I will die. I don't know when the Lord Jesus Christ will return. But I do know the Bible tells us that if we don't belong to him, we're not ready and we will face destruction.

But if we do belong to him, we are ready. We're children of the light and we will receive salvation. salvation. In a sense, that's the most important thing you'll ever hear.

So make sure you respond rightly to that message that God has spoken clearly to us in his word. Let's pray.