

2021 Vision: Blameless at his coming

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is from 1 Thessalonians 5 verses 12 to 28. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything.

Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put to you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all brothers.

[1 : 2 4] The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Well, if Christmas time was strange, New Year's Eve will be too.

No hordes gathered in central London for the fireworks. Nobody rammed into our living rooms waiting for Big Ben to strike 12. We're heading into 2021, and none of us know what's coming.

There's so much uncertainty. That's the nature of the future, isn't it? But a couple of weeks ago, as we looked in our Advent service, the first half of 1 Thessalonians 5, we saw there is one thing about the future that is certain.

Jesus will return all of a sudden. Just click back to chapter 5, verse 2. Paul says, You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Jesus will return all of a sudden. And so we need to be on our toes, ready, because we don't know when it will be. That was Paul's message to the fragile, in danger of drifting Thessalonian church.

[2 : 4 1] But how will they grow and thrive as a church whilst they wait for Jesus to return? And as we head into 2021, how will we grow and thrive as a church while we wait?

And Paul is delighted that this little church is following Jesus, and he's desperate that they keep on doing that. He prays and his desire becomes clear in 5.23. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's desire, his goal for their life as a church, is that when Jesus comes, they would be blameless. Spirit, soul and body totally transformed.

They've trusted Jesus, so they are completely forgiven, and they will live with him when he comes. But Paul wants the Thessalonians to stick with Jesus and be growing to be like him too, learning to love what he loves and hate what he hates, like adopted children slowly taking on the family likeness.

Paul wants them and us to grow into the likeness of our God whilst we wait. Paul's vision then for the Thessalonians is that they would be blameless at Jesus' coming.

[4 : 16] And if it's a good vision for us, for them, it's a good vision for us. But how? Given all the uncertainty with the very real danger that we drift away from Jesus, as we head into 2021, how do we grow together so we're blameless at Jesus' return?

Well, what Paul writes to the Thessalonians as he closes his letter will be instructive for us. He gives four guiding principles for church life. He shows us where to put our confidence, and three relationships to treasure.

So notice with me where Paul puts his confidence. Look at the start of his prayer in chapter 5, verse 23. Now, may the God of peace himself.

Paul's confidence isn't in Thessalonian work ethic or strength of character. His confidence rests wholly in God. That's where he lands in verse 24.

Have a look. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. May God, he will, Paul says.

[5 : 32] All his confidence for the Thessalonians to be blameless at Jesus' return is in God's faithfulness. So the big headline for us as we go into 2021 seeking to be blameless at Jesus' return is that we trust in our faithful God to keep us.

We trust in our faithful God to keep us. Not relying on our own willpower or intellect. Not, I'm going to grow and I'm going to stay Christian because I've gritted my teeth and I'm determined and disciplined.

Nor, my 2020 was so hard. I don't think I can carry on being a Christian.

I have no energy left. Neither of those. No, we go into 2021 confident he, God, is the one who will hold us fast.

He will give us our daily bread. He will help us persevere. Each step of this coming year, individually and as a church, we need to lean into him, rely on his faithful care to keep us.

[6 : 44] He is the captain of the ship. He will get us to our destination. So my every day of 2021 be marked by our trust in our faithful God.

Now, that doesn't mean that we just sit back and do nothing. This is active trusting. And Paul gives us three relationships to treasure as we trust our God.

First, our relationship with our pastors and leaders. Then our relationship with our church family and our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We're just going to scratch the surface of each.

So you'll probably want to think harder and longer about some of this stuff during the week. But if we made it our aim in 2021 to trust our faithful God and treasure these three relationships, we'll be right in line with Paul from 1 Thessalonians 5.

So let's have a look at verses 12 and 13. Treasure our pastors and leaders. Verse 12. We ask, brothers, we ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

[7 : 58] Be at peace among yourselves. The first part of call is the relationship the church family has with its leaders. It's not that these people are more important, but they are, as verse 12 puts it, those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.

People in the church family who work hard to lead us towards Jesus and teach us God's word. Who prayerfully labour to help us grow and to wait for Jesus well.

Whether it's Simon, our lead pastor here, or Andy and Fiona, or our growth group leaders, or Tim and those who lead at Grace Church Sydenham or elsewhere. We're to treasure our relationships with those people.

To respect them and esteem them very highly in love because of their work. It can be a wonderful role leading in a church, but it can be lonely and isolating too.

And it comes with its responsibilities, notably here in verse 12, to admonish. To admonish is somewhere between caution and correct.

[9 : 07] It's the key part of the leader's role. To tell us when we're going in the wrong direction. If we're drifting from Jesus or dishonouring him, their job is to correct us, to call us back.

Which can be awkward for them and for us, and painful for them and for us, but is loving. Like a shepherd getting a sheep back to safety. If the Thessalonians are going to grow and keep trusting Jesus until he returns, they're going to need to respect and listen to their leaders as they help them stay on track.

Perhaps we can think of it like the team radio in Formula One. That driver gets sucked into the moment and het up on adrenaline, or they make a big mistake and think they've blown it.

So the team boss comes on the radio, settles nerves, gives perspective, calls team orders, encourages, yes, spurs on, yes, and sometimes admonishes, tells it how it is or how it needs to be.

At times that boss on team radio comes across and is a delight for the driver and gives fresh energy. At other times, the driver might wish they could turn it off, but they need to listen.

[10 : 31] You see, we're bombarded with all sorts of messages from our culture. We're told to live for career, not Jesus, to pursue success and comfort, not holiness. We're told, you do you, and follow your heart.

We're flooded with messages that if followed could cause us to drift from Jesus. And so we need an alternative voice to speak into our lives, people who will speak God's word to us, even when it will be challenging.

We don't really like the idea of having anyone lead us. And we certainly don't like being corrected or challenged. But we're to respect and esteem those people for their labour in the Lord on our behalf.

We're to treasure them. Now, this doesn't mean we listen and accept whatever is said without thought. We need to weigh what is taught and make sure it's true from God's word.

And this doesn't give any leader any excuse to abuse power. Those who labour among us to be godly and gentle and full of grace like Jesus.

[11 : 45] But at times, they will need to tell us hard truths for our good. So, in the new year here, there's a preaching series coming up about what the church is and how we play our part.

And some of what is said will cause us to rejoice. But some of it will push against our natural inclinations. We'll want to resist God's word in various ways.

But if we esteem those who labour for us in prayerful preaching, we'll listen carefully and respond to God's word from them humbly. And the more we treasure them, the more they'll enjoy their work and then the whole church family will be helped to be growing together as we wait for Jesus.

We're to treasure our pastors and leaders. Next, verse 14 and 15, we're to treasure our church family. Verse 14.

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all, see that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

- [13 : 09] Simply put, we need each other. That's clear in chapter 4, verse 18, when Paul tells the Thessalonians to encourage one another and in chapter 5, verse 11, where he calls them to build one another up and here, he's urging them to care for each other spiritually.

Family, nurturing one another towards Jesus. Those who are idle, dawdling along spiritually, need admonishing. Those who are faint-hearted, may be doubting God's promises or weighed down by the world, they need encouraging.

Those who are weak, physically, or with illness, or crushing circumstances, or weak spiritually, struggling to keep sin at bay or unable to pray, they need our help.

Just look around for a moment. If you're on Zoom, look at the other screens that are in front of you. Find me someone who has it all together all of the time.

Find me someone, as you look around, who is never idle or faint-hearted or weak. You can't. Let's drop the facade.

- [14 : 29] It's all of us at various points, sometimes all three. we are idle, faint-hearted and weak. So helping each other can't be left to the ones who have it all together because that's none of us.

That means however we're feeling, we have a role to play. Someone who is idle might need you to give them a nudge, even if it's all you can manage because you're struggling yourself.

Now, we'll seek to help and we'll get it wrong sometimes or we'll do it really well and people just won't listen and they'll be annoyed with us.

That's why Paul says we need patience with each other and why we need to respond with good, not evil, even when we've been wronged. Change is slow.

sometimes faint-heartedness lasts for years. Weakness might be with us for a lifetime. That's okay. We don't need to fix each other. We just need to day by day support each other towards Jesus.

- [15 : 44] We're family, helping each other in love. It's like the oil in a car engine, helping everything to run smoothly so we go in the right direction. Or imagine a mountain climbing adventure, maybe your D of E expedition.

A team on a journey like that, they need each other. At various points, different people contribute in different ways so that nobody gets left behind, even if it means stumbling over the line and having to carry some.

When we're stretched like the whole of 2020, our temptation can be to go it alone. But that is to miss out on the joy of helping and being helped.

If I'm idling in my relationship with the Lord, I need you to prod me into action. And a few words of encouragement might be just what your faint-hearted friend needs.

we can confidently assume that people are something of idle, faint-hearted or weak a lot of the time. So maybe we can cut through some of the small talk and get to helpfully encouraging each other a bit quicker.

- [17 : 02] Saying something like, hey, Warren, how have you been feeling faint-hearted this week? I'd love to encourage you. Or, Jake, is there an area of your life where you've just been idle towards your relationship with Jesus?

I'd love to spur you on and give you a nudge. As we enter 2021, we need to treasure our relationships with our church family. Perhaps more than ever before, given we're separated by COVID restrictions.

the danger is that we turn inward when others most need us and we need them. Through 2021, let's be praying for each other and helping each other look to Jesus day by day.

The first two relationships were horizontal. The third is vertical. Treasure, the Holy Spirit. Verse 16. Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies but test everything.

[18 : 15] Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Our God is Father, Son and Spirit. And Paul wants us treasuring the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives, not resisting it.

His primary job is to magnify and shine a spotlight onto Jesus for us. Just flick back to chapter 1, verse 5. Notice, as the Thessalonians heard God's word, it was the Holy Spirit who convinced them to trust Jesus.

And verse 6, it was the Holy Spirit who caused them to have joy at Jesus despite affliction. living in all Christians.

The Holy Spirit's job is to take us towards Jesus like a wind blowing in that direction. And we can either be like a ship and hoist a big sail and be motored on by the Spirit in us or a ship with an anchor down resisting the breeze.

He is working in us that we would, verse 16, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. That's God's will for us and the work the Spirit longs to do in us.

[19 : 34] Now it's not cool to pretend everything's okay all the time but whatever circumstances we face the Holy Spirit wants us to see God's goodness and faithfulness and so rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

Naturally, I don't want to do those things. I push against them when things don't go my way and I resist as if I'm pouring water on the Spirit's fire, quenching or dropping anchor.

Let me try and give you an example of what I think Paul is talking about. Last Saturday when Tier 4 was announced I was grumpy and sad and disappointed and in some sense that's fine.

They're honest emotions, that's how I felt. But then I looked at my phone and the Bible app I've got highlighted a verse of the day flashed up and said rejoice in the Lord always, I'll say it again, rejoice from Philippians 4 verse 4 and I thought no, leave me alone, I don't want to and I put my phone down and I had a little sulk and then I reflected for a moment and thought no, that's right.

Actually, that is the way to go. I have so much to be rejoicing about because of Jesus even when things go badly. Now observing that situation we could think hmm, well done Jake, that's a very good godly response to a tricky situation.

[21 : 14] But I think that would be to give too much credit to me and it would fail to treasure the Holy Spirit because in reality left to myself I see God's word tell me to rejoice and I put my phone down in a huff.

But the Holy Spirit's work is to help me look to Jesus. So like a friend he says from within, hey Jake, come on, just think about it for a moment. Reflect on Philippians 4, come on, I know tier 4 is a pain but Philippians 4 is good.

Let's look at it together, come on, think about it. God's good, look, he's faithful, you can trust him. Look to Jesus, come on. And as I listen to his prompting I can either push against it and quench it and stay in a huff or I can treasure it and look to Jesus and rejoice at how good God is.

If that is one of the ways the Holy Spirit is at work in us prompting us to look to Jesus and rejoice to pray and give thanks whatever the circumstance is don't we don't we need that day by day?

When we're having a tough time and a friend reaches out to encourage us with God's word if we're low we'll be tempted to ignore but the Spirit wants to help us look to Jesus. Don't quench him, treasure him.

[22 : 41] It might well be that you're in a really deep pit at the moment. Paul isn't saying to you stop being silly get over it just rejoice in your faith.

But by his Spirit God does want to draw you close to him and help you to see all you have in Jesus. He wants to help you to cry out in prayer however you're feeling.

Maybe it would just be a quiet murmur to start with but treasure the Spirit drawing you to God and cry out and bit by bit step forwards into the work of the Spirit.

With the uncertainty of 2021 looming let's be attentive to the Holy Spirit as he prompts us to look to Jesus to rejoice pray and give thanks.

Treasure him. Now it's true the Thessalonians don't know what's around the corner for them they do know though Jesus will return and through his letter Paul has given them clear direction he wants them to be blameless when Jesus returns and so he calls them to trust their faithful God and treasure these key relationships and so for us as we head into the uncertainty of 2021 will the vaccine work will our holidays happen will we be able to meet all together again as a church family we don't know all sorts of highs and lows will come our way over the next 12 months under pressure we'll likely disagree with our leaders when they call us to action we'll get annoyed with each other and keep our distance from church family we'll push back against the Holy Spirit's work in us so how do we grow and thrive as a church in 2021 while we wait for

[24 : 43] Jesus return we heed the call of 1 Thessalonians 5 we trust our faithful God to do his work in us we treasure our leaders our church family and the Holy Spirit friends God is faithful he will keep us so let's rely on him and stick together let's pray our great God may you sanctify us completely and may our spirits souls and bodies be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ we've seen that you're faithful we trust you to keep us and do your work in us we pray in Jesus name amen