

# In the Right Place at the Right Time

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[ 0 : 00 ] I invite you to take up the Bible that's in the pew in front of you and open to page 192, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 that was just read for us.

The nine o'clock service, we had five babies baptized and I was joined during the sermon by a kind of chorus. It was remarkable actually that each time I'd get to an important point, all five babies would join in unison singing together a kind of Gloria.

I loved it and I think the congregation enjoyed it because they couldn't hear a word I was saying. I once heard an English bishop say at the beginning of a sermon after a baptism, that babies are like New Year's resolutions. They should always be carried out.

And it won him no friends and I don't think it's very much like Jesus. However, there were lots of disturbances including sirens during the nine o'clock, so there must be something here for you to hear.

This is a wonderful time of the year to be baptized. This is the time the church has set aside as a preparation for the coming of Jesus called Advent, which just means coming.

[ 1 : 34 ] But if you've ever looked at the prayers and readings during the season, the focus is not on Jesus' first coming, it's on his second coming. If you look at the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer, and I've said this before during, if a sermon is dull, you could do far worse than to pick up the Book of Common Prayer and look through it.

So if I look down and see anyone doing that, I'll know to hasten on. However, the prayers during Advent, they touch on Jesus' first coming to quickly focus our vision towards his second coming, his Advent.

And I want to teach you a Greek word this morning. The word in the New Testament to describe his coming, it's a word full of meaning. It's the word...

That's not how I pronounce it, but...

All together now? Oh, that's terrific. Actually, I thought it was pronounced Parousia, but pronounce it any way you like.

[ 2 : 56 ] Where were we? This is a word that means the royal coming of a king and the revelation and appearing of God.

It's a technical term. It's right at the centre of our passage in verse 15, the coming of the Lord, the Parousia. And it's a good thing for you to know this Greek word because it's so full of implications and wonder for us.

At the very heart of the Christian gospel, at the heart of our hope, at the heart of our faith, at the heart of salvation, of the coming Lord, at the heart of the gospel, is the Parousia.

Aaron said last week, the centre of gravity in the New Testament is not the first coming of Christ, but the second coming. And I think that's right. It's always been at the centre and focus of the gospel, the gospel that Jesus preached, the gospel the apostles preached, the gospel by which we're saved.

And I want to show you how foundational it is. If you just turn back one page to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verse 9 and 10, the apostle describes what happened when the gospel came to Thessalonica in these words.

[ 4 : 16 ] Halfway through verse 9 he says, you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

That is the basic fundamental response to the Christian gospel. We turn to God from idols and we long for and wait for the Parousia.

And the new Christians at Thessalonica were so filled with hope and expectation, it was so much part of who they were that their lives literally leaned with eagerness toward the coming, the Parousia of the Lord Jesus.

And so leaning were they that some of them left their day jobs. And then a problem arose because a number of Christians in Thessalonica died, but the Parousia hadn't happened.

And so they sent a message to Paul to ask a question, what is going to happen to our loved ones who have died? Will they miss out on the Parousia?

[ 5 : 24 ] I mean, have they died and gone to be with Jesus? Will they be raised? If they've gone to be with Christ, how will they see the coming of Christ? So on top of grief for those who they loved who had died, they were fretting about what would happen.

So Paul writes this passage in chapter 4 from verses 13 to verse 18. It is one of the most wonderful and remarkable passages in the New Testament. It's full of tenderness and full of truth.

It would be a very good use of our time this morning and I think it would have been a much better use of our time at 9 o'clock if we'd just all learned it off by heart. Very simple. I'm not going to say anything terribly original.

It's all there. It's written to encourage us. It's written to people, as Paul says in the next chapter, who are faint of heart. This is a great expression.

It means little hearted. When our hearts feel diminished, never more than by grief, never more than grief over one who may be dear and precious to us. It's written to us who are faint hearted.

[ 6 : 34 ] And in verse 13, the apostle says, we would not have you ignorant brothers and sisters concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who do not have hope.

He says, this was part of the gospel as I preached it to you and it's very important for each of us, he says, to think Christianly about our own death and about the death of others.

That the only true medicine for genuine grief is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Don Curry told me that when he was in Pakistan, when Hindus convert to Christianity, one of the last practices they let go of is their Hindu death rituals.

And I think so it is for us. It's when it comes to death that our inner superstitions are hard to let go of. But because the gospel is the gospel, it's meant to affect all of us, even down to grief itself.

We are not to grieve, says the apostle, as others who have no hope. Listen, he is not saying don't grieve. In fact, he supposes that we will grieve.

[ 7 : 46 ] That's right and natural. What a terrific send-off we had this Wednesday for Joan Turner, a woman who lived before God for so many years with grace and determination and compassion and steadfastness.

It was great joy. And it's a wonder when you come to a Christian funeral that there is this sense of deep joy and even victory, but it's joy through tears.

Death is not a natural part of life. It is not the next thing in your evolution. It is the result of sin and it always brings separation. Did not Jesus himself weep at the grave of Lazarus?

He did, even though he was going to raise him from the dead. Paul is not interested in turning us into hard-hearted, stoics, unrealistic with our emotions. And he doesn't want to stop us from grieving, but from grieving without hope, as others do.

He's not forbidding grief, but he wants us to bring our grief to the Lord Jesus Christ, to mix our grief with Christ so that our grief is transformed in hope.

[ 9 : 01 ] Now, you know that when this letter was written, there were all sorts of theories about the afterlife in Thessalonica and in the culture roundabout. All sorts of speculation about what happens after you die, but the simple reality, the apostle says, and the Christians believe, is that if we die without Christ, there is no real objective hope.

But Paul says, those who are asleep, he uses this word three times, asleep, those who are asleep in Christ, because, although it's used in other cultures, this idea of death being sleep is a uniquely Christian idea.

Do you remember when Jesus was alive and Jairus' daughter had died? Jesus went to Jairus' daughter and said, she is not dead, she is asleep, for the simple reason that I can wake her.

Or do you remember when he went to Lazarus' tomb? When he heard that Lazarus had died, he said, Lazarus has fallen asleep, and for that, I'm glad, because I go to wake him up.

The idea that death is sleep for Christians is because death is temporary. Death cannot separate us from the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10:10] If you're someone who is trying to follow the Lord Jesus, who's turned to him in repentance and faith, when you die, the Bible says, you will go to be in Christ's presence immediately.

Jesus taught this, the apostles teach it. And I am tempted to explain the difference between dying and going to be with Jesus.

Let me tell you that the Bible says two things, that when we die, we go to be with Jesus. It also says on the last day, those who have died will be raised, but the New Testament never tries to reconcile the two.

There are all sorts of things. If you are new to Christian faith, there are all sorts of things in the Christian faith that are beyond our understanding. Can God be three in one? Can Jesus be fully man and fully God?

Can God know beforehand and yet change his mind? Can there be evil in the world? What happens when we pray? All these things are beyond us. And the truth is not in the middle, sort of averaging out the two ends.

[11:10] The truth is at both extremes. So what does Paul say here? What is the heart and core of our Christian hope? And he says two things.

Our hope is the coming, the parousia of Christ, and secondly, our going. Let's look at the coming first in verses 14 and 15.

If you look down at verse 14, you'll see that Paul starts with the most bare bones, fundamental, essential core of the Christian gospel. We believe that Jesus died and rose again.

And within that truth, there are two consequences, he says. Contained within that truth, if you say that as we have this morning, there are two truths that flow out of it.

One is, through Jesus, God will bring those with him who have fallen asleep. So if you believe that Jesus died and rose again, included in the fact that he died and rose again, is that he will bring all those who have fallen asleep when he comes again, because those who have fallen asleep will not be separated from him.

[12:24] In the original it reads, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. The emphasis is we die, those who died through Jesus will be brought with him.

The crucial importance is for every single one of us, whether at the moment of our death we belong to Christ. God is not going to bring all who died, but those who died through Jesus.

Every person who died in the faith of Christ, God will bring with him when he comes. That's the first consequence of believing Jesus died and rose again. And the second is verse 15.

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Paul says that if the Lord Jesus were to come, those of us who are still alive have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. He says the dead in Christ are not going to be left behind or excluded.

[13:34] Neither group has any advantage or any precedence. No one who dies in Christ is going to miss out. When the parousia happens, those of us who are alive will see it, but so will those who have fallen asleep, because he will bring them with him.

So that is the coming of the Lord. Now how can this be? What is actually going to happen on the day? And we move secondly from his coming to our going.

Verses 16 to 17. Now I am aware in the passage, the apostle seems to be aware of how overwhelming this is.

I mean it's remarkable what I'm saying to you. So what he does in verse 16 is he slows down and stretches out and he points to three remarkable actions, three pivotal events that are going to happen on that day when Christ comes back.

And the first event is verse 16, which is all talking about the one thing that's going to happen. Verse 16, For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

[14:53] The day of the parousia will begin with a massive, worldwide, audible proclamation, announcing the end and giving summons to the dead to rise.

These are three pictures of the same thing. The cry of command from the Lord Jesus, the archangel's call, the trumpet of God, they're all pointing to the fact that the Lord Jesus himself, the Son of God, will come on the clouds and the cry of command from Jesus is addressed to those

who've died in Christ.

And the content of the command is, get up. With his voice he will raise the dead. As he said in John 5, the day is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth.

It is the Lord himself who is going to descend. Do you remember at creation God spoke and it came to be? Do you remember at the tomb of Lazarus Jesus spoke and Lazarus came forward?

So on that last day when the Lord himself descends he will speak and all who have died in Christ will hear his voice and be raised. It is a personal, final coming of the Lord himself.

[16:06] Universal, authoritative. And the first thing that happens is the great summons that the dead in Christ will rise. They will not miss his coming.

They will be raised before we are. They will be taken up to him as he descends and they will fully participate in that day. They will not be separated from him.

They died through him. They sleep in him. They will rise with him. They will come with him. That's the first thing that happens on that day. The second is in verse 17.

Then, next, we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. It's very simple.

After the dead in Christ are raised, then all of us who are alive in Christ will be caught up, brought up together to meet the Lord in the clouds.

[17:08] Now, this is where the idea of the rapture comes from. I grew up almost never hearing the word rapture, but in North America this has become a kind of pivotal word.

It's the Latin translation of the word being caught up, snatched up, seized up. And I want to point out to you that there's no complicated timeline here. There are no conspiracy theories to make it juicy.

The simple truth is that as soon as the dead in Christ are raised to the descending Lord, then we will be caught up with them in the air and we will meet him. And the word was used for the royal welcome party going out to meet the king.

And I think we need to be honest with this passage, frankly. It doesn't give us all the details. It doesn't tell us about the judgment. It doesn't tell us about the new heavens and the new earth.

It doesn't even tell us how in being caught up to the Lord Jesus those of us who are alive will put on the resurrection bodies and somehow our mortality will be swallowed up by immortality.

[18:11] It just doesn't answer those questions. But what it does say is that the first action is that Christ will call those who have died in Christ to rise to himself. And then the second action is that we who are alive will be caught up to be with them in the air.

And then the third action, and this is the crucial point, at the end of verse 17, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

That's where the Apostle's been going. After the resurrection of those who've died, after we are caught up to be with them, what follows that is everlasting fellowship with Christ and with each other.

Because Jesus has died and risen again, there is an unbreakable solidarity between Jesus and his people. It doesn't matter whether they have died, it doesn't matter whether we are still alive, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Three times in this passage, there's this little word, with. God will bring with Jesus those who've fallen asleep. We are alive, caught up together with them, but then this final one, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

[19:34] So I want to say, if you are grieving the pain and loss and separation of someone in the Lord, this passage instructs you not to grieve without hope, for you will be together with them and with the Lord forever.

And if that's true, we need to bring our grief somehow to God. Or if you know you are near the end of the journey yourself, and you are fearful and uncertain about what will happen, here is the promise of the risen Christ, that you shall be with him and with his people forever.

The manner and the timing of your death, nobody knows, but the Christ who died is the Christ who raised, and when he comes, he will take us to be with him forever.

And if you're someone who knows you don't yet trust Christ, and you've never really thought about your death, I want to say to you, Jesus did not die and rise again for his own sake. He did it for you and for me.

And his desire is that you be with him and with his people enjoying his presence forever. And the lovely thing about this passage is that Paul himself makes the application for us in verse 18.

[ 20 : 55 ] What are we supposed to do with this good news? Look at verse 18, please. Therefore says the apostle, comfort one another with these words.

It hasn't been written for our intellectual stimulation. The passage is not even written in the first place to comfort you and me. It has been a gift that is given to us that we have to give to others. That is, we are meant to comfort and encourage and strengthen each other. There is a letter that comes from the second century in Egypt found a few years ago.

A woman called Irene is writing to some friends who have lost a son who has died and she has lost a son who has died. She weeps for herself and she weeps for her friends. She finishes the letter with these words.

Nevertheless, she says, against such things we can do nothing. Therefore, comfort one another. It's a very different kind of comfort, isn't it?

[ 22 : 00 ] Without Jesus, we have nothing really to offer each other in grief. There is nothing we can do against such things. But the Christian comfort is built on these words of the Gospel.

Our true encouragement, our strength, our comfort for one another comes from the Gospel. Do you know, I think that's why in the middle of verse 15 the Apostle stops and he says, this we declare to you by the word of the Lord.

It's not that the rest of it isn't the word of the Lord. He knows how remarkable this is. He's speaking about promises that are beyond our imagination and heartbreakingly lovely.

God wants us as a congregation to be a community of mutual support and comfort. This is not just the privilege of a counselling elite or a professional pastoral group.

we are meant, we are commanded here to comfort one another with these words. It's the picture of who we are. We are supposed to be a group who depends on each other and pastors each other and true pastoral care is directing each other as kindly and graciously as we can to the words of the Gospel.

[ 23 : 16 ] and I hope you'll do this. I hope you'll tell one another that the same Jesus who came and who died will come again in glory, that he will raise up those who've died, that he'll take those of us alive to be with him and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Therefore, comfort one another with these words. Amen. Let's kneel for prayer. Let's kneel for prayer. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[ 27 : 40 ] Amen. Amen.