

The Gospel and Hope

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you. It's great to be opening God's Word with you this morning, and there is a church app you can follow along with if you're online taking notes.

And I should say, if you haven't met me before, my name's John, and I'm on the team here as well. So I'd love to chat over morning tea, especially on this topic. It's a very interesting topic. Soren Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish theologian, poet, social critic, and considered to be the first existentialist philosopher.

In part one of his book, *Either Or*, a novel which portrays two life views, the choice between an aesthetic, ethical life or a religious life, he writes this.

A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public. They thought it was a joke and applauded. It's hard to take me seriously with a red nose on, isn't it?

This is the point. He repeated it again. There's a fire. To much greater claim. The acclaim was even greater. And Kierkegaard goes on to say, I think that's just how the world will come to an end.

[1:21] It's a general applause from wits who believe it's a joke. REM sing the song, it's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.

But should they? There are countless movies about the end times, not just ones with a theological bent, like the *Left Behind* series. Some have a meteorite hitting the planet.

There's one based on the Mayan calendar. Some have aliens from another planet, or even apes rule the planet. The *Terminator* franchise, as AI machines rule the world in the future.

What about science?

What does secular scientists have to say about how it's all going to end? Scientists predict the world will end in one of two ways. Gradually, as a dying sun engulfs and vaporises the Earth in about 7.5 billion years' time, or the Earth could end much sooner from a catastrophic event, like a major asteroid impact, severe climate change, or unchecked AI.

[2:55] Sounds like a movie plot. After beginning with a bang, the most certain long-term end to Earth is linked to the eventual death of the sun, which on expansion would boil away Earth's oceans and consume the planet with fire.

What happens in the end? It's a higher order question. It's a question that's puzzled humankind since the dawn of civilisation. Poets, writers, philosophers, songwriters, have been thinking, what's the end going to look like?

And I'm sure at times you've probably thought that as well. You've also, at other times, allowed it to be this as far from your thoughts as possible. Who wants to think about this?

There are too many things to worry about today and too many things to deal with today. So who cares about the end of the world? It's going to happen sometime, far, far in the future.

It's quite impractical to worry about it. You know that a lot of people peddle this market worrying about the end of the world. Have you heard of doomsscrolling?

[4:03] Consuming negative news and information? Or preppers? People who gather materials and make plans in preparation for surviving a major disaster or global cataclysm.

Do you remember this event? Do you remember that? September 2009. I can remember getting to work and finding it really eerie.

And people had come into work early because they wanted people around them because they weren't sure what was going on. And I did speak to someone and they thought it was the end of the world. And they actually said, I got down on my knees at the edge of the bed and now I realise I was just a dust storm.

I was like, no, that's a wake-up call. Anyway. Whether you're reading weekly world news or listening to the radio or watching news on TV, there's an underlying assumption depending on your world

view of how all these events fit in the whole span of history from the beginning to the end. Christians and even non-Christians need to see what kind of framework we put those views into. What is history all about? Where did it come from? Where is it heading? And that's exactly what Paul is addressing here when he writes to the Thessalonians who at this point were quite worried. [5:18] They were afraid. They were being persecuted. And Paul is telling them to stand firm, be encouraged, hold on to your hope because there is an end coming.

And what's at the end is the return of Jesus when all things will be made new. Last week, Pastor Steve spoke about how this topic relates to our view of death. And Paul intertwines what we learned about last week and what we're reading in this passage. This week, we see Paul is turning the end of the world into what we should know about how we are to live.

The end of the world informs both our view of death and our view of life. Knowing about Christ's return is incredibly practical. Although it seems obscure and futuristic that no one should care, I want us to see from Paul's writing to these Christians in Thessalonica how knowing what happens in the end has practical implications of how we live day to day.

The technical term for this is eschatology. It's from the Greek word eschaton, which is the study of the last days. And what Paul is saying here is in the last days, we know how it's all going to end. [6:33] And our hope for Christians is something we need to hold on to. There's a structure Paul's thinking here. He first questions what he sees as a false hope.

But then he contrasts false hope with what he says is the true hope that Christians ought to hold on to. And then lastly, he takes that true hope and he works it out practically in day-to-day living. So that's the order we're going to follow. False hope, true hope, living with hope. So first, false hope. The false hope Paul talks about we can find here in verse 1 when he says, Now brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

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.

There's an assumption here of Jesus' return and times and dates was of a concern for the Thessalonians and Paul is saying if you speculate on when the end is coming, you're in error and if you think you know what's going on, you're in for quite the surprise.

[7:54] The way to have false hope in the future is to think you know the facts about it and all kinds of people think they know the facts about the end. gurus, cults, astrologers, astrophysicists, there are a multitude of wacky ideas about the way the world's going to end including in the modern church.

How do we test these ideas? What's the framework which allows us to dismiss them and just politely say well that's interesting? Take for instance the Jehovah's Witnesses.

They really push this end time stuff and they've made a lot of predictions over the years. In fact, Jesus began his invisible presence I don't know if you knew this and his heavenly rule in 1914. Oh, that's interesting. Or the pre-millennial or post-millennial view of a thousand years of the rule of the Antichrist and the mark of the beast where the temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem and all the Christians escape this tribulation in the rapture.

That's interesting. There's been hundreds of recorded and failed doomsday predictions over the centuries. There's this one 999 becoming the year 1000.

[9:09] Pope Sylvester II in 1000 AD predicted that or 999 but it didn't happen. There's this guy William Miller who really got the crowds going and in 1844 he's coming back Jesus is coming back and that's now referred to in history as the great disappointment.

disappointment. The great disappointment of 1844. In 1910 they thought Hayley's Comet was bringing something. I don't know if you remember 1999 but we thought something catastrophic was going to happen with the Y2K bug 2000.

Then there was the 2011 rapture of Harold Camping. That's interesting. In the past it may have caused catastrophizing and mass hysteria for some but these days it's a bit ho-hum.

I've heard it a wall before. People are sceptical. Well I'll believe it when I see it. They may just think at best that's interesting. Or again consider the secular scientist who operates from the assumption there is no God.

No God orchestrating history. They conclude we might be stuck here for a long time before it all fizzles out so let's look after the planet and let's get along. That's interesting but if you go to scientists for the answers on how it's going to end understand they are speculating.

[10:32] It's impossible to undertake any experiment on the future because it hasn't happened yet. So in the same way secular science can propose a hypothesis mainstream Christianity has a view of the end of the world but we can't just write this off as strange or one of the many guesses as it has a good and true and plausible basis.

Every view about the future of the end of the world is based on an overarching assumption of the whole world and you've either got God in the picture or you've taken God out and that completely alters your whole view of how the future is going to happen and also alters your view of how we live today.

When it comes to the end times there's going to be a lot of crazy stuff. There's plenty of people out there who think Christians are the ones who have all the weird stuff to begin with. You know that caricature image?

A person walking around with a sandwich board? Someone saying repent the end of the world is nigh. That's the stereotypical view of the Christian idea of the end times.

But it's a false notion of the Christian view of the end of the world because it's speculative and Paul says it's dangerous. If we fool ourselves into thinking we know how the end is going to happen then we're like the people who let the thief come in the night.

[11:54] We're like this pregnant woman in labour. labour. What happens in both these metaphorical cases is that there's a surprise. You don't know when the thief is coming to break into your house and you don't really know when labour is going to come.

But it's interesting when we look at the example of the pregnant woman in labour, there's a certainty, there's an inevitability. If you're pregnant and you're in your ninth month, those pains are going to happen.

For those women who've gone past their Dubai dates and both our kids were nine or ten days late, they may feel like it's never going to happen. But it is going to happen.

It's got to. What Paul is trying to say here is the end of the world, Christ's second coming is going to happen but we just don't know when. Therefore as Christians we must be expectant and we must be prepared.

We cannot fool ourselves into thinking we know when and how it's going to happen. Two thousand years ago they thought Jesus was coming back in their lifetime. It's dangerous when we speculate and try to guess what's going to happen because it leaves us unprepared.

[13:08] The woman who doesn't prepare for labour, the person who doesn't prepare for the fact that a thief might enter their home, is caught off guard and it's dangerous. In some cases it can be a life and death situation.

Paul has a sense of urgency and expectancy that he's trying to drive home here. Jesus is definitely coming back but we just don't know when. It may take thousands of years but it might be tomorrow or next week or next year.

And so as Christians we need to live in the balance between the potential that Jesus' return could be far in the future or it could be tomorrow. That's how the Christian ought to grip the future and be hopeful about it now because we know Jesus is coming back.

When Jesus returns there's going to be judgment. And while that sounds frightening we don't have to fear this. It's something we should be excited about. It should fill us with joy in all believing.

And this is my second point in how we test these ideas about the end of the world. For Christians true hope is based on something that's already happened.

[14:19] and that's Christ's resurrection. Every other view of the end of the world is simply conjecture. But the Christian view is not speculative. It's based on the fact of things that have already happened in history.

Cemented, an empty tomb, 500 eyewitnesses, Jesus' bodily death and physical resurrection. So Christians can look back to something and have a certain hope knowing what the future is all about. A Christian can look at Jesus and say, he's already done the beginnings of the end and I'm in him. Jesus says in Luke 12, 40, you also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Or in Matthew 24, Jesus says, but about that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore, keep watch because you don't know on what day your Lord will come.

Jesus is certain that he's coming back. He's as certain as the fact that he died and has been raised to life for our sakes. And so the Christian that is in Jesus can be hopeful about the future because the Christian knows that just as they are in Jesus now, they will be in Jesus and with Jesus come judgment of the living and the dead.

[15 : 50] The driving issue for us today worries us though is where are we now? How close are we? Is the end near or is it still far off?

To understand this, we must understand the way the New Testament looks at history. This is critical and I hope we can see how this works. Is the Old Testament had a linear view of history.

All of history was leading to the point in the future, along this line of history, at the right time Christ would enter in and the old order of darkness, the evil age of now would be ushered in by a future new age of holiness, of light that the Messiah would bring.

And so every Old Testament prophet was looking ahead for the time when the Messiah would come and bring about the change, the new heavens and the new earth. In the New Testament, because of Jesus' incarnation, his death and resurrection, that view of history not only was fulfilled, but then radically changed.

What we've got in the New Testament understanding of history is a linear progression in time, but now there's a second layer. We have the Old Testament, what the Old Testament prophets couldn't see.

[17 : 11] Looking back now at the New Testament, we can see that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, did come and ushered in the new kingdom of God and it's running now to the future.

But at the same time, the Old Age is running in parallel and it will culminate at a point when the Messiah comes a second time.

So where we are today is an overlap of the ages. And this is behind what Paul is teaching us in the New Testament about history. We live in an era where Jesus has ushered in the new kingdom, but the old kingdom is still passing.

This affects our understanding of history and how we see the present day. Another way of describing it, Christ has come and already ushered in his kingdom, but it has not yet come in all its fullness.

significance. We are living in a tension of now, but not yet. So what kind of effect does this have in our life? It means there is light and there is darkness.

[18 : 19] Paul talks about it here in verses 4 to 8. He contrasts those that are living in the light with those who are living in the darkness. Notice he doesn't say that right now everyone is still in darkness until Christ comes again.

And he doesn't say that right now is the light because Jesus has already come. What he is saying is because we simultaneously live in the now and the not yet, there are those in the light and those in darkness.

Those who are in the kingdom of the future and those who are in the kingdom that is passing away. Both exist at the same time and we're in between ages.

Therefore, while we await Jesus' return, what does living with hope look like? How do we work this out practically in our day-to-day life? There is a tension between this now and not yet and we need to strike a balance.

Some Christians focus on the not yet. They might see the world full of darkness. Until Jesus returns, it's going to get worse. So they become pessimistic and cynical about change.

[19 : 31] They'll tend to shield themselves from the darkness of the world and live in a Christian bubble of people that are light to keep them warm and safe. They're not going to be overly concerned about the physical well-being of this world and about other people because it's all passing away.

If you feel like you're in a broken world and nothing good will happen until Jesus comes again, then you're too much on the side of not yet. You're not recognising the fact that Jesus has already done something magnificent, something wonderful, something so dramatic it changed all of history.

Light came into the world. Jesus became our darkness on the cross so that by faith our darkness within can be extinguished and we can become light in him now.

On the flip side, there's Christians who focus solely on the now and they can be naive about the place of sin in their lives, naive about the fact that some people struggle really hard before they can change, naive about the fact that Christians and non Christians alike suffer, that this world really is in many sense a hard place.

Their prayers are bless me Lord now, prosper me Lord now, things should come easy, I just need to have enough faith, there's nothing much left to come, we can have heaven here on earth right now.

[20 : 57] But what if a crisis hits? What if the change that you've been desperately asking for doesn't happen quickly? There's a danger in living in just the now and not recognising that the kingdom has not yet come in all its fullness.

So how we live hopefully is to hold them both in balance. Absolutely be confident now but realise there's more to come.

Be grateful and thankful for everything that Christ has done but also realise there'll be struggles and trials. So hold on with both hands to that hope.

A lifestyle of hope means living in that tension. It's to be responsible for the now with the hope to the future. So how do we do that? We need to grasp God's perspective.

The Christian who has an overarching view of history is not surprised by wars, by things that seem to go wrong with the world around them and they don't fall apart. By holding a biblical grasp of history we can be confident as we grasp God's perspective.

[22 : 08] Justice and the new creation are coming. As Christians we're to be sober minded. We can be clear in our thinking realising that there's more to come.

In the meantime we're willing to love people who struggle. We're willing to go out and feed the poor. To rebuild houses.

To generously give financially and invest in people's lives. Jesus might not come back for a long time. So we're called to be responsible stewards of this planet that he's given us to rule.

And that's what being sober minded and being responsible about today means in the midst of the hope for the future. If we understand where we are right now in history we can be incredibly confident in the gospel.

We can look at someone who is hard hearted. Who refuses the gospel. And we don't give up on them. Because we know Jesus has ushered in a new kingdom.

[23 : 10] We know the gospel can change lives. So we're determined to share this good news message. We remain hopeful. And helpful. As Christians we need to engage with the world.

We aren't to go off and hide. We need to engage with our culture because this is the place where God has put us right now. And yes, a new world is coming. But this is the old world and we're still called to make it beautiful.

We're called to be thankful for all the great gifts that God has given us. The light has come. And as Christians, we're free to enjoy that. We don't have to hide it.

We can go out there and be on the forefront. In fact, it's an imperative. We know Jesus is returning and not only do we need to be ready, we need to love others and warn them.

Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up. Just as in fact you are doing. Put on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

[24 : 20] We are the church. We are part of something bigger than us. A global community waiting together for Christ's return. What Paul says here is encourage one another.

Along the way, we're going to be discouraged or forget or fall off balance and focus more on the now or more on the not yet. So Paul says as a community, build each other up, comfort, encourage. We need to remind one another Jesus is coming back. Hang on to your hope for heaven. In the midst of suffering, we ought to say, understand suffering, understand trial, but one day God will wipe away every tear from my eye and your eyes as well.

We need to remind each other about our future, our future home. It's coming, it's certain, and that's what we ought to be doing to encourage one another.

That means we walk with others, we cry with them, we laugh with them, we share joys and sorrows till we see this journey through. And it means together we say, come Lord Jesus, come back.

[25 : 27] When we look at the sweep of history, we know what happens in the end. Jesus' return. Because we know Jesus, the one we believe in and know has been resurrected, he says he's coming back and he will.

That's our living hope. Make sure you're on the right side of history. Make sure you're pointing others to Jesus to share the truth in love. Amen.
Amen. Amen.