

Living with Christian Hope

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- [0 : 0 0] There are several songs called Worthy is the Lamb and the words of one didn't match the music of the other. So, our apologies.
- We may like to open the Bibles at page 960. This is the second reading and it's part of a sermon series from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.
- And page 960. And I'll pray for us as we come to hear God's word preached. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word now.
- Write it on our hearts that we may believe it, that we may hope in it, that we may obey it, so that we'll be ready for the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns.
- Amen. Some of you will remember Rod's predecessor actually is our Assistant Minister here, Paul Dudley. And during the week, Paul rang me to say that he just heard that his father had terminal cancer and may not live at the end of this year.
- [1 : 0 6] Paul's father's 60 and he has cancer through the stomach and the bowel and the pancreas. And the operation was, in the end, inoperable, that is.
- They couldn't do anything. It's less than one year since Paul's mother, age 57, died of cancer. Grief strikes all of us. And sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly.
- Many of us, and I know many of you here, have suffered deep pains of grief in your life. The loss of a spouse or a child or a parent or some other loved one.
- And certainly as a minister, one of the hardest things is ministering to people with deep pain of grief. People whose hearts are broken by death. People who are going through the anguish of having lost somebody they loved very dearly.
- And seeing the pain of loneliness and hopelessness often etched on their faces. Inevitably, in those times, people scratch around for some form of hope.
- [2 : 1 7] Some comfort or consolation in hope. You hear it in things like, apparently Peter Brock was looking down on Bathurst this year. You hear it expressed when somebody who's died has gone to be with somebody else whom they loved, who'd predeceased them.
- You hear it expressed when they say, well, their spirit will live on in some place or way. You hear it expressed when people say they'll live on in our hearts forever.
- But even though those expressions are very common, they are not actually real hope. It's a sort of clutching with wishful thinking to give some sort of weakening to the idea of death.
- It's a sort of desperate attempt in some ways to ease the pain of death's finality. But it's not actually real hope.
- The Apostle Paul was in Thessalonica in northern Greece for just a short time. He taught there and brought some people, several people perhaps, to Christian faith.
- [3 : 3 2] It was the first time the Christian gospel had ever gone to Thessalonica, into northern Greece, in about 50 AD. But with opposition, Paul and a few that were with him were forced out and went further south to Athens and then to Corinth.

And he, in anxiety about them, sent Timothy, his compatriot, back there to find out about how they were going. And Timothy's come back to him now in Corinth. And Paul is now writing this letter, having heard Timothy's report of how their faith is going.

Overall, he's expressed great joy at what he's heard about the Christian faith that they're exhibiting as young believers in Thessalonica. And Paul, while he was there, had taught them several things about the gospel.

And in particular, he told them to be ready for the Lord's return, that Jesus was coming back. And indeed, we see that reflected at the end of chapter 3.

He prayed for them in this letter that they may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus. So, Paul had taught them, and he reiterates it in that prayer, that the Lord Jesus is coming back, and perhaps soon, and praying that they will be ready for him when he comes back.

[4 : 50] Paul has had to move on from Thessalonica. And one of the things it seems that he's heard from Timothy, where Timothy comes back with this report, is that the people in Thessalonica seem somewhat distressed or facing the dilemma, perhaps because some Christians have died in that intervening period.

It's not a long period, it seems, just maybe a few months. But in their anticipation of Jesus coming, and coming probably very soon, now some Christians, or one Christian at least presumably, has died, and they're facing this dilemma, well, what does that mean?

Do we have to somehow cling on to living on earth until Jesus gets here? What happens if others of us die in the intervening period before Jesus returns? So, Paul is addressing that issue in these verses.

And his purpose is pastoral, to comfort them and strengthen them in their faith, to reassure them in their faith. But he deals with the pastoral issue, as always the Bible does, with theology, that is, with coming back to the gospel as the grounds on which we find pastoral care and comfort.

So he says to them in verse 13 of chapter 4, the beginning of today's passage, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

[6 : 12] Paul's concern is pastoral. It's for their grief. He does not tell them not to grieve, but not to grieve without hope.

All of us are to grieve when we lose someone whom we love dearly. Grief is right and appropriate. How we grieve matters. And for believers grieving believers' deaths, we are to grieve with hope, not without hope.

For Paul, hope is not wishful thinking. See, we often use the language of hope really to convey a wish. We hope that we'll win back the ashes this summer.

Or we may feel confident and cocky, but it's not actually certain. We may hope that such and such a day is going to be fine or pleasant or whatever. But that's wishful thinking.

It's not actually Christian hope. What follows in these verses is going down to the bedrock of Christian hope. Something that gives us certainty and confidence and assurance of the future.

[7 : 26] A guarantee, not just wishful thinking, but something that is certain and sure for the future. And for Paul, you see, wrong gospel, wrong theology doesn't help.

Pious platitudes don't help. Not light or empty comfort. That doesn't help. What helps bring hope is the truths of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the basis of that, he goes on in the next verse to say, For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have died.

See, the bedrock of Christian hope is that Jesus died and rose again. That's what gives us hope in the face of death. That's what gives us hope when believers die.

Jesus died, but it's not full stop. Jesus died and rose again. Therefore, we have real hope, sure hope, certain hope of the future destiny and life of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 31] You see, it's the death and resurrection of Jesus that is the bedrock on which our hope is anchored and built solidly and surely for eternity. Because Jesus rose, he conquered death.

Therefore, death has lost its sting for us. So much so that actually the way verse 14 is written, you can see it actually in a footnote. Literally, Paul says, Even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Not just dead, but in a sense fallen asleep. The idea is that when we believers die, there's a sense in which we sleep because Jesus died for us.

We can sleep because the pain of death has been removed by Jesus' death for us. We can sleep because the sting of death has been drawn out of death by Jesus dying for us.

So that death holds no fears now. When we die as believers, Paul can say in effect we sleep. Not because we're busy snoring away and unconscious and we've got all sorts of vivid dreams or not.

[9 : 46] Sleep in the sense of being secure and especially being temporary. It's not the permanent thing. Indeed, there are other parts of the New Testament that indicate after death and before the Lord's return, we actually may well be conscious of being with the Lord.

So it may not be a state of unconsciousness. The analogy is of temporary but secure place when we die. The sting removed, the pain removed, the separation from God removed by Jesus dying for us.

Any hope that's not anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus is in the end vain hope and wishful thinking only.

For death is our final enemy. And the only conquest of death is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And there and there alone lies hope.

Hope for those who trust in Jesus. Hope for eternity. Yes, we grieve death, of course. We grieve believers who've died, whom we've loved, of course.

[10 : 55] But unlike non-believers, unlike the pagans, unlike our world around us, we grieve with hope. Not wishful thinking, not clutching at straws, not a desperate attempt to find some solace, but with real sure hope because Jesus died and rose again.

And so a Christian funeral, unlike any other funeral, is not actually a celebration of life. That's the trend over the last 50 to 100 years of funerals, even Christian ones, that it becomes actually very human-centred.

Christian funerals ought to be rightly and properly focused on the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There's no other hope. And life is meaningless without that hope.

Jesus died and rose again. Surely that's why we are believers, if we are. Because Jesus died and rose again. Because death is conquered.

Our sin has been forgiven. Death's sting is removed. Real, sure, certain hope. That's far more important, actually, than celebrating human life, no matter how good, noble and loving that human life has been.

[12 : 12] Celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And encouraging ourselves in hoping and trusting in Him. So then, the issue for the Thessalonians was, well, what about those who've died?

Paul says in verse 14, therefore, that since Jesus died and rose again, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who've died. That is, they're not at disadvantage, because they've died before the coming of the Lord.

When Jesus returns, because Jesus has risen from the dead, those who've died with faith in Him, they will come with Him, or be with Him on that day. What about then, those who are still alive on that day, when Jesus returns?

That could be many of us. We don't know. Paul goes on to say, 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.

Paul's not saying he thinks he'll be there, but he's still alive. So we who are alive, that is, those of us who are left on that day, which may or may not include Him, and clearly hasn't now from 2,000 years later.

[13 : 16] What about us? We'll by no means precede those who've died. That is, don't worry about those who've died in faith. They're not at a disadvantage. We, in fact, will not precede them on that final day.

He explains that in the next two verses. For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then, we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air. And so we'll be with the Lord forever. For the last few months, I've had a university student staying in my house, one of the members of our Chinese congregation.

And I guess, typical of university students, he doesn't normally surface before about lunchtime. Even though exams are imminent, it seems to me, I suspect, he's up very late at night, and I don't usually see him before midday, at the very earliest, in fact.

And there was one day, a week or so ago, he said, can you wake me up at 10 o'clock? So at 10 o'clock, I called out outside his bedroom door, Evan, wake up. And a minute or two later, when I hadn't heard anything, as I walked past the door again, I shouted out again.

[14 : 32] And after a couple of times of that, it was a sort of murmur. And I tried once or twice again. And I suppose it worked, because he was up just before 12 that day.

Now, all my loud shouting outside his bedroom door really couldn't quite disturb a sleeping student who was far from dead. Can you imagine if I walked through Templestowe Cemetery or Melbourne General Cemetery?

Or maybe if all of us came together, that would be a bit louder. And we walked through the graves and said, come on, wake up! Do you think anything had happened? I can't see or imagine that the gravestones would move.

I can't imagine that people would rise up, wake up from their sleep, in inverted commas. But on the day when Jesus returns, think of this.

The same one who stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, four days dead, and said, Lazarus, come forth, and out he came alive, will issue what's called here a cry of command, an authoritative, powerful word.

[15 : 51] And we don't know the exact words, but we can imagine it'll be something like, come forth, rise. And imagine the gravestones moving and the believers in Christ rising from the dead on that day.

What a powerful word that will be. What an amazing day that will be. The dead in Christ will rise first on that day.

Jesus' cry of command, an authoritative command of a military general is how the word is used sometimes. Backed up by the archangel's words, we don't know the name of the archangel, often people call the archangel Gabriel, but he's actually only called an angel in the Bible.

Michael is an archangel, maybe a different one. And the trumpet, which is often associated with God's authoritative word in the Old Testament and also in some New Testament passages as well. And the result, the dead in Christ will rise first.

What powerful words they'll be. Several years ago, I visited Rome and went down to the crypt of a church that used to be run by the Capuchin monks.

[16 : 59] And after one of the monks would die, they would wrap the body up and after a year or so, when the flesh had rotted away, the bones were left and so they would stack the bones up or sometimes make sort of displays.

So there were sort of floral displays and a clock and other things. So the floral displays would have what looked like flowers, but they're actually little finger bones and arm bones and so on. I remember saying to the friend that I was with, I don't think I want to stand here on the day of Jesus' return.

Because when Jesus issues that cry of command, imagine all these bones joining up again, ready to meet him. Now we may laugh, I suppose, and it's hard to imagine quite what it will be like.

But on that final day, that word of Jesus will bring to life those who are believers who are now what we call asleep.

The dead in Christ shall rise first. And for those of us, if any of us are alive on the day of Jesus' return, verse 17 says, and then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up, snatched up or grabbed up.

[18 : 07] It's a word of almost some violence actually to be with Jesus in the air. If we're still alive on the earth. The Latin word for this caught up is from where we get a word rapture.

We often think of the word rapture even in some of our hymns as being full of joy. You know, we're unrapturous in praise and so it should be at times. But the rapture, theologically, is when we're snatched up to be with God.

Now Paul doesn't make any comment about what's left on earth at this point and some of those modern books I think probably are a little bit fanciful on that matter. But the idea is that both the dead will rise and then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up, snatched up, to be with them, together with them is how it's expressed in verse 17.

Quite an emphasis in fact on all together, dead and alive, all believers in Christ, of every era, of every place, of every age and so on, dead and alive, coming up to meet the Lord.

It's not a sort of casual meeting. The word of meet that's used in verse 17 is the word where in the ancient Greco-Roman world people might go out of the city because they know the dignitary is coming and they formally meet and then bring into the city that person.

[19 : 16] It's got a sense of the dignitary. Jesus is the dignitary who's coming and we will all be gathered up together, dead and alive in Christ, to meet Him and then come with Him when He comes back to earth.

So then, the result is, the end of verse 17, we will be with the Lord forever. No more death. No more separation physically.

No more crying pain. All believers in Christ, dead and alive, now alive, with Christ, forever. What a blessed hope that is.

But not wishful thinking, not an idle hope, not a clutching at straws, not a desperate attempt to ease pain. It's real. It's sure and certain because Jesus died and rose again.

We can have confidence and assurance that this is not fantasy, but reality. Therefore, Paul says at the end of verse 4, encourage one another or literally comfort one another with these words.

[20 : 23] Think about it when a believer is grieving a believer's death. comfort one another with these words, with the words of the gospel that Jesus died and rose again.

That's the best comfort you can give a believer who is grieving a believer's death. Jesus died and rose again and He's coming again and on that day, all of God's people will be reunited, dead and alive, with Christ, with whom they'll live forever.

Paul at the end of this chapter 4 has been dealing with what will happen. We're not told everything that will happen, but we're told enough to give us hope, real hope, sure or certain hope of the future.

Now he deals with the issue, well, when? And it seems that perhaps the Thessalonians have slightly misunderstood the sense that Jesus is coming soon. Some of them, as we saw last week, we'll see again next week and in two Thessalonians, think that Jesus is coming so soon we might as well stop our jobs and sit and wait.

Be idle. No, says Paul. He is coming, He's coming soon. We don't know when He's coming is what he now says at the beginning of chapter 5. Concerning the times and seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you, that is, partly because Paul may have already told them, partly because they ought to know the teaching of Jesus even.

[21 : 42] For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. An expression that Jesus Himself uses about that final day when He comes. He will come like a thief in the night, suddenly and in one sense without warning.

So you don't usually get a note under your door or a message on your phone to say, hello, I'm a thief, I'm going to burgle your house on next Thursday night at 3am in the morning. People over the road from me had their car stolen, broad daylight actually, through the gates.

They think they were home, they had a dog, that did nothing. Those thieves didn't write a note saying, beware 5.40pm two Thursdays ago, we're going to be finching your car from your house. Thieves don't do that.

It'll be sudden, at one sense, without a warning, at least for that precise time. And Paul adds to that image in verse 3 when he says, when they say, there is peace and security, that is, they think there's safety on earth.

They don't think Jesus is coming. He's talking about pagans here, unbelievers here. Then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman. That is, suddenly, you know it's coming, in a sense, but you don't know precisely the minute it will come.

[22 : 51] Suddenly, there is pain for those who are unbelievers. And there'll be no escape, no warning, no escape. But for Christians, for believers, no warning, no escape, but no surprise.

Paul says in verse 4 here, you, beloved, are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief. We're not in darkness.

He sort of mixes, in a sense, the images of dark and light and the thief coming in the night here. The dark and light that he now talks about is really a moral category. Darkness is walking in lack of faith, lack of belief in Christ, lack of moral character that reflects Christ.

Christians are not like that. We live in the light. So we're not going to be surprised when Jesus returns on that final day is what he's saying about. So he's hinting here by using the categories of dark and light, moral categories that actually tell us how are we to be ready for when Jesus returns.

Not just sitting there twiddling our thumbs. We don't have to be on our knees praying all the time until Jesus returns. But to get about our daily life as we saw last week, don't be idle, don't be busy bodies, do your own work, but be ready with faith, love and hope for when Jesus returns.

[24 : 14] Christians belong to the light. We'll have a moral category of seeking to be like the Lord Jesus Christ in character and obeying God's commands. And we've been told to be ready.

In verse 5, you are all children of light and children of the day. We're not of the night or darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep. It's actually a different word from the sleep bit of chapter 4.

This is falling asleep as in being lazy or inattentive. Let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake or alert and be sober, literally self-controlled.

And remember last week as Paul exhorted them not to engage in sexual immorality, but rather to control your body, here is that expressed now generally for the Christian life. Self-control is to be how we live our life.

It's how we are to be ready for the coming of Jesus on the final day. In contrast, verse 7 describes the unbelievers as those who sleep, they sleep at night and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

[25 : 14] That is, we live in the day, that is, we're to be ready for Jesus' return and live upright self-controlled lives, whereas those who are unbelievers, they're not in control of their lives.

The drunkenness here is metaphorical as much as real and physical and their sleep here in verse 7 is again a metaphorical idea of laziness and inattentiveness to Jesus coming again.

So then, the exhortation for the believer in verse 8, since we belong to the day, let us be sober or self-controlled and put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

It's the language of armour to denote a readiness for something to come. How are we ready? It's those three great Christian graces we saw at the beginning of this letter, faith, love and hope.

The breastplate of faith and love, the helmet of hope. The same three characteristics that Paul prays the Thessalonians for back in chapter 1, verse 3. He says, that's how you're ready for the coming day when Jesus returns.

[26 : 25] And just to make it clear that our future destiny to be with the Lord does not depend upon our own moral uprightness on that day, something that we've achieved. He doubly underscores that it's actually God's grace.

Verse 9, he goes on to say, for God has destined us. That is, God's taken the initiative for us as believers not to have a destiny for wrath, that is to face God's anger for sin, but rather to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we obtain salvation? Not through our own right doing, but as verse 10 says, who died for us. We obtain salvation because Jesus died for us, taking away our sins, dying in our place as our substitute on the cross, carrying our sins so that we may live and live with God forever, freed from our sins.

So that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live with him. And then the section finishes just like chapter 4 finished. Therefore, encourage or comfort one another and build each other up to Christian maturity as indeed you're doing.

Keep doing it more and more is what he's in effect saying here. Paul is exercising pastoral care to grieving Christians who haven't quite got their theology right yet and therefore their grief is quite distressing.

[27 : 51] Paul corrects their theology and therefore issues real pastoral care grounded in the bedrock truths of the gospel that Jesus died and rose again and is coming again.

He doesn't give them pious platitudes. He doesn't give them vain hope. He gives them real hope based on Jesus' death and resurrection because of course the gospel, the true gospel of Christ is real hope in the face of death, in the face of all the meaninglessness of this world, in the face of tragedy of this world.

It is only the gospel of Jesus Christ that is real hope for eternity. Sure, certain hope. Death cannot separate us in the end from the love of God in Christ because Jesus died and rose again.

And yes, we are to grieve a believer's death but not without hope, but with real and sure hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Notice too that we have a mutual responsibility to encourage each other in the gospel.

It is not my role alone as the minister. So verse 18 of chapter 4 said encourage one another. Verse 11 of chapter 5 said encourage one another and build up each other, that is each one of you to each other, that is a mutual encouragement and comfort with the words of the gospel so that we hold fast to the death and resurrection and future return of the Lord Jesus.

[29 : 15] There's one final point to make here. We often look forward with what we think is Christian hope at being reunited with our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ who've died.

And fair enough there is a sense here of the dead in Christ rising and those who are alive in Christ being together with them when they meet Jesus. True, there will be reunification of God's people, all of God's people on that day.

But the primary focus and the primary hope and the thing above all things that will bring us even greater joy is not to be reunited with our dead brothers and sisters in Christ.

Joyful though that will be. It is to be with Jesus forever. For he's our greatest joy. He in fact himself is our hope. So the whole purpose of this comfort is that we will live with Jesus forever.

Now that will imply that we live with all of God's people forever but even better we will live with Jesus forever. forever. Now I say that because sometimes I think we Christians slightly humanise our hope and we look forward to heaven because then we can be with our beloved again.

[30 : 35] Now that's a good thing to look forward to but I'm trying to get it into perspective biblically. Our greatest longing ought to be to be with Jesus forever. For Jesus is our greatest joy and on that day when we go out to meet him yes it will be great to be reunited with our brothers and sisters in Christ but our eyes will be focused on Jesus and he will be our joy and he is our hope on the day that he returns and he is the focus of heaven and he is the one who will bring us endless comfort, endless bliss and endless joy when we're reunited with him on that final day.

He is our greatest longing even more than being reunited with our dear brothers and sisters in Christ. It is Jesus himself who is our greatest joy, our greatest treasure and our greatest hope.

Amen.