

Sunday 10th July 2022 – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 'Living for eternity'

If you could ask God one question, what would it be? I imagine many of you have lots of questions, but if you could only choose one... My guess is that the one which would be asked most often would be something to do with suffering, which will always remain one of the great mysteries this side of the grave. Or perhaps you have a question about the vast variety of different churches, or maybe about science – I knew a friend once who really wanted to know whether there would be bacteria in heaven! I'm sure that couldn't be the only question that bothered him, although he was a science graduate.

The young church in Thessalonica also had a question which really bothered them; but it wasn't any of those that bother us now. In fact, it's one *we* take for granted now as Christians – but it was a huge deal for them. Their question was this: what happens to Christians who've already died? As we mentioned last week, the early church expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, so they were tormented by the fate of those who had died. Did that mean they weren't really Christians? Were they going to miss out?

Thankfully, Paul has good news for them today: his answer is an emphatic 'no': 'we who are still alive... will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.' (v15) **It's OK, he says: we will all get to be with the Lord in glory.** In fact, 'the dead in Christ will rise first.' (v16) And *then* all of God's people who are on earth now.

Can you imagine the weight that must have taken off their shoulders! To know their fellow brothers and sisters were safe in Christ forever. And we too can have that same hope today. Before we go any further, take a moment to hold that thought. **Christ is able to keep all those who are his until the end of time.**

Before Easter we spent a lot of time looking at the subject of heaven and eternity in detail. In many ways this passage feels like a fantastic summary of all those sessions. I'll try not to repeat myself – but then again, some of these truths we can never repeat too often. Ultimately this passage reminds us of three very simple but life-changing things:

First, we will rise again! The basic theology of the Christian faith is that Jesus died and rose, and therefore so will we. And right here, in one of the earliest writings of the New Testament, we can see that this is what the church taught from the beginning: (v14) 'For 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.'

We are resurrection people. We are made to enjoy eternity with the Lord forever. Every time I pray at a funeral: 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life', I am declaring something the church has taught from the very beginning. Jesus rose, and so will we. Death is not the end. For all that we will mourn those we love, and the journey of grief is painful, we have hope. A hope that goes beyond the grave, to eternal life. I pray for myself, and for all of us, that we never lose sight of this hope. How we need it!

(So first, we will rise again, and...) **Second, we don't know when!** This week 77 people in Nigeria who had been waiting for Jesus to return have been freed by police. They had been pressured to stay in a basement by this particular church's pastors, and disturbingly some had been there for a year... just waiting. These pastors were apparently sure that Jesus would return in April – though they now believe it's September.

This sort of tragedy underlines why it's so important to actually read the bible for yourself! I don't know what bible these pastors were reading, but it's very clear from scripture that we don't know when Jesus will return. Even Jesus himself while in his human body said that he didn't know – and Paul repeats Jesus' own teaching here. In fact he quotes Jesus' about the day of the Lord coming 'like a thief in the night' (v2) – which demonstrates that even before the gospels were written down, lots of Christians were taught the words of Jesus directly.

As we looked at last week, the certainty of Jesus' return does not mean we just sit around looking into the sky – no, we get on with living as followers of Jesus. In fact, Paul warns against complacency – first to those who wilfully reject Jesus, or perhaps put off making a decision. The surprise timing of Jesus' return will be bad news for both of those groups of people. And whilst nowadays we tend to shy away from sharing this thought too bluntly, lest we be accused of trying to frighten people into heaven, it's worth reflecting that the urgency of our mission is no less vital now than it ever was. It's true that this first generation thought they only had a few years to get as many people into heaven as possible – but is that any less true today? If nothing else, it does focus our energy in prayer, and that can't be a bad thing!

(So first, we will rise again, second we don't know when and...) **Finally, resurrection life starts now!** If complacency is dangerous for those who reject Jesus, it's also to be avoided for followers of Jesus too. The fact that we don't know when Jesus returns is no reason to drift along: rather we live with purpose, we live with hope – basically we live ready. As Paul says, we are now children of light – so we live with faith, hope and love. He uses a lovely image of a breastplate and helmet – in other words, faith and love to guard our hearts, and hope to guard our minds.

As he draws his letter to close – albeit he crams a huge amount of teaching into the last few paragraphs, enough for two more weeks of sermons! – Paul comes full circle. You may remember **he starts his letter with faith, hope and love. And now he returns to them.** These are the gifts of salvation we receive through Jesus; and they are also how we live now. And what we begin now is what we'll enjoy forever with the Lord – both those of us who have already died as believers, and those who will live to see Jesus return.

Ultimately, Paul finishes today's passage with his reason for writing: 'therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.' And that remains just as true for us now. We can never repeat these truths too often: to know that we are saved, that we are made for life and that this life starts now – this is what continues to fire *our* faith, *our* hope and *our* love today. As I encourage you with these words, can I also urge you to keep encouraging each other too? It feels like life is getting harder for many at this time in our world – so let's keep building each other up. **Jesus is enough.** He always has been – and he always will be. Amen.