**The Glorious Coming of the Lord**

November 15, 2020

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Key Verse 4:16 “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first.”

The second coming of Jesus Christ is the most essential doctrine of Christianity. The Bible is crystal clear on what is to come in the future, and we don’t need to be living in this world worrying about what is going to happen to the planet earth or to the nations or in the future politically or economically, because the final chapter of human history has already been written in the Bible. Why do we have to live a holy life, not like the ungodly? Because Jesus will come and judge all the ungodly. Why do we have to love one another? Because Jesus will come and reward our good deeds. When Jesus comes again, he will clothe us with glorious resurrection bodies, and all our suffering and agony and pain will be gone. and this is our living hope. In this passage, Paul responds to a misunderstanding that had caused a lot of grief to the church in Thessalonica. Paul had taught that Jesus was coming again to gather his people, that is, the church, in order to be with him forever. But after some time had passed, and Jesus not returning as soon as they hoped, a few of them started to die. So they mourned, wondering what was going to happen to their loved ones who had died. Were they going to miss the Second Coming? Paul must have felt heartbroken. So, he wrote in order to bring them comfort.

Look at verse 13. “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who had no hope.” In 2017 around 56 million people died in the world. That is 153,000 per day. People die everywhere all the time. But until it happens to someone close to us, we tend to ignore it. We live as though our lives in this world will never end. So it usually comes as a shock to us when a loved one dies, and we grieve. Some Thessalonian believers may have been grieving over the death of loved ones; they had to face the reality of death. They wondered, “What happened to them? Where did they go? Will we ever see them again?” Honestly speaking, we have the same questions when our loved ones die. Grieving is necessary to some degree. But believers do not have to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. Those who have no hope view death as the end of everything. How we view death has a serious impact on our daily lives. If we think death is the end of everything, our lives in this world are all that matter. We try to hold on to money, power, family members and friends as a matter of life and death. We try to enjoy a few moments of pleasure at every opportunity. This makes people very selfish and hedonistic. And the grief they experience at the death of a loved one is overwhelming; they are inconsolable.

Paul did not want the Thessalonians to be uninformed about those who had fallen asleep in the Lord (13). He taught them to have a Biblical view of death. To believers, death is the gateway to the glorious kingdom of God. It is the beginning of new life. Look at verse 14. “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.” Paul describes a Christian’s death as sleep. This metaphor originated with Jesus (Jn 11:11). Sleep is very important. According to several credible university and medical center studies, there are many benefits to getting proper sleep: improved memory, longer life (getting too much or too little sleep reduces one’s life span), stronger health, greater creativity, better grades, sharper attention, lower stress and less depression. A most cruel punishment is to deprive people of sleep. Then, how is death like sleep? This is only true for those who believe in Jesus. In fact, death is God’s punishment on mankind for our sin (Ro 6:23). But for Christians, death is not punishment. It is the end of constant groaning due to the misery of our fallen bodies and this broken world, and the beginning of eternal rest in paradise. This is why St. Paul said, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php 1:21). Revelation 14:13 says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor.’” In death a person seems to be sleeping. Our word “cemetery” comes from a Greek word, meaning, “sleeping place.” Every night we act out this symbol of death, and every morning is like a resurrection.

In verses 15-17, Paul describes what will happen when Jesus comes again. According to the Lord’s word, those who are still alive when the Lord comes will not precede those who have fallen asleep (15). Verse 16 tells us how Jesus will come again: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Our Lord Jesus will come down from heaven! After Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. All things are being put under his feet as Sovereign Ruler of the universe. At the same time, Jesus is the everlasting high priest for those who come to him. Now Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. At the last day, this Jesus will come down from heaven. He will not send a delegate; he himself will come down. The day of his coming is the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come. This is the Day of the Lord. It is the day of final judgment.

When we think of God’s judgment on the people of Noah’s time, or on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, we tremble. But this day will be much more serious. Jesus’ second coming will be much different than his first coming. Nobody will be singing, “Silent Night.” It will be universal, with an authoritative, divine proclamation. It will not be a local event, but a cosmic event. Paul described the power, glory and majesty of Jesus’ coming in three ways: with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. It seems that God’s favorite instrument is the trumpet. These three sounds dramatically express the triumph of Christ over the power of death and all his enemies. Paul described this elsewhere, saying, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed” (1Co 15:51-52). At that moment, we will all be immortal, glorious, powerful and spiritual (1Co 15:42-44). In a word, we will be like Jesus. When Jesus comes, all his holy angels are with him (3:13b; Mk 8:38). “He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Mt 24:31).

Look at verses 16b-17. “…the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Here the words “caught up” come from a Greek word that means “to grab or seize by force.” In Latin, it was translated “raptus” from which we get the word “rapture.” It is the only place this word appears in the New Testament. Many people are curious about the rapture. Many people think that Jesus will come secretly and true Christians will be raptured suddenly. But this passage does not say that Jesus will come secretly. There are two interpretations of rapture. The first interpretation is that Jesus will come secretly only for Christians. He will not come down to earth. He will meet the believers in the air and bring them to heaven, and there will be a wedding between Jesus the bridegroom and his bride, the church. Then there will be 7-year Great Tribulation on earth where God brings judgements on the ungodly. At the end of the 7-year period, Jesus will come to earth with his saints and establish his kingdom on earth. So this interpretation puts rapture and the second coming separate events. The second interpretation puts rapture and the second coming as the same event. In this case, the believers are raptured to meet the Lord in the air and welcome him, as they would welcome a king. Then they come down to the earth together to live forever. In this view, the rapture is simply a reference to the bodily resurrection of the saints. Regardless of what one believes about the rapture or its timing, it is not a matter of orthodoxy and heresy if believers disagree. When Christ returns and the church is with him in glory, nobody will be disappointed or argue about how or when it all occurred. The point is that when Jesus comes, those who died in him and those who are still alive will be united with him. We will be with the Lord forever. The separation from loved ones that happens at death is just temporary. At Jesus’ second coming, there will be a most happy reunion and we will all meet again and live together eternally. This is really encouraging. So Paul said, “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (18).

Thus far, Paul encouraged those who worried about loved ones who died. Now Paul encourages each of the Thessalonian believers personally. In verses 5:1-3 Paul reminds them of what he had already taught in regards to the times and dates of Jesus’ second coming (1). Paul uses two metaphors to describe its suddenness. The first is a thief in the night (2). Thieves do not send notice of their break-in. In fact, they do their best to come at the most unexpected time. They always look for the easiest target. If they see two houses, one locked firmly and the other poorly locked, they will choose the latter as their target. The best way to prevent theft is to always be vigilant. The other metaphor is of a pregnant woman in labor. Though she expects labor pains, when they come it is all of a sudden. In the same way, when people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly and they will not escape (3). As God warned the people of Noah’s time that his judgment was coming by water, so he has warned the people of our time that judgment is coming by fire. As the people of Noah’s time ignored God’s warning, so do the people of our time. They say, “Everything is going on just fine as it always has been and it always will. The sun rises and sets as usual; it is a beautiful day; don’t talk to me about judgment.”

We Christians are different. Paul said, “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness” (4-5). Why did Paul remind them of their identity? While living in this world, we are engaged in problems and struggles just like worldly people. It is easy to forget about our identity and worry about our future. This is why Paul affirms that we are children of the light. We don’t need to be scared of the Day of the Lord. We can have the assurance that the Day of the Lord is the day of our salvation. When we have this assurance, we can live differently from unbelieving people. In verses 6-8 Paul exhorts us how to live by saying, “let us not be like others…let us be awake and sober…let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” Does it mean we should never go to sleep again, or never take a drink? No. It means we need to be awake spiritually, and sober spiritually. Here “be sober” means not only not getting drunk from wine, but not getting drunk from anything in the world which causes our minds to become hazy or crazy or lazy. That is a lot of things. Alcohol is not the only thing in the world which causes us to get drunk or unalert. We hear the phrase “drunk with power.” But we might insert any of the following words in place of power: money, career, reputation, authority, new X-box, sex, even family and friends. All of these things can cause us to lose our spiritual focus. We can become unalert to spiritual things and spiritual truths. Our drunkenness or mental intoxication with these earthly things can blur our view of the Bible and our understanding of God. And, with that will often come a misunderstanding of God’s standards and his desire for our Christian walk. There is nothing more pathetic than a drunk stumbling and mumbling around, headed in no particular direction. And that is the exact spiritual state Paul wants us to avoid. Likewise, if we do not have a clear hope of Jesus’ coming again, we are not clear minded, and we will stumble and fall.

Look at verse 8. “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” People who have no hope indulge their flesh by getting drunk, using drugs, yielding to various kinds of addiction and immoral behavior. But our lifestyle should be different. We put on faith and love as a breastplate. Breastplates protected the vital organs of a Roman soldier. Faith in God and his love protects our hearts. The hope of salvation guards our minds. We need to put on this armor every day. Faith, love and hope protect us from fear and anxiety. We can look forward to the full redemption that comes when the Lord returns. It is not wishful longing but certainty. This anticipation is a very purifying reality in our lives. If you knew that Jesus was coming this afternoon, it would change your behavior this morning. If you know that he is coming tomorrow, it would change your behavior the rest of the day. If you know he is coming in a week, it would change this week dramatically. That is how he wants us to live, so that when he comes – and we can’t know when, we will be ready to welcome him. Our Lord Jesus said, “No one knows the day nor the hour.” So we need to live in every moment as if he were coming in the next, so that we will be found blameless and holy at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

Big Idea: Jesus is coming again; be ready