

“The Coming of the Lord”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

December 13, 2015

SCRIPTURE INTRO: We’re spending these Sundays of Advent looking a few great New Testament passages on Christ’s Second Coming.

It’s been the practice of the church through the centuries to prepare for our celebration of Christ’s first coming to Bethlehem, by studying and reflecting on his second coming in glory at end of age. Just as the Old Testament believers were made holy and happy by looking forward to Christ’s coming, so we are made holy and happy as we look forward to him.

INTRO: There was a dramatic episode in WWI that became known as the story of the Lost Battalion. I've told you about this before.

600 American soldiers became lost in the Argonne Forest.

They were pinned down in a ravine, surrounded by German forces.

They were under constant fire from machine guns, snipers, and mortar shells. They were out of food and ammunition, and 2/3 of the men had been wounded or killed, and more were dying every day.

But the worst thing was that they knew the American army command had no idea where they were. So if they didn't make contact and get some relief, then they would be wiped out or captured.

Several times platoons tried to break through the surrounding Germans.

But they were always killed or driven back.

Finally, the commanding officer asked for volunteers to try to slip past Germans.

Three men volunteered, and when it was dark they set out.

But a short time later there were shouts and gunshots and two of the men returned. They said, there's no way out—we made it back the other man was killed.

But what they didn't know was that the third man wasn't killed, knocked out.

When he came to, was able to slip through—back to American lines.

While the relief effort was being organized, this man went back.

Crept back through enemy line, back into the ravine, back to his battalion.

They were amazed to see him because they thought he was dead.

And then he told them the most wonderful news—help is on the way.

The high command knows and the American army is coming.

Now, I want you to imagine being there, with that Lost Battalion at that moment. Nothing immediate had changed. Still surrounded. Still being shelled and killed.

Still without ammunition and food. Still in danger of being wiped out.

And yet everything had changed.

Without a doubt, all those American soldiers were encouraging each other with these words—help is on the way.

Don't give up, keep fighting.

They were probably also looking at the bodies of their brothers in arms, and grieving, but also comforting each other—

We will not leave them behind, we will take them with us and make sure that they receive all the honor that is due them and that their families know how died.

No doubt at all that news of army coming, on every man's lips.

Twice in this passage, as Paul is expounding on Christ's second coming he says:

Encourage one another. Encourage one another with these words. 4:18

Encourage one another and build one another up. 5:11

It's also translated in some versions—comfort one another.

Console, cheer up, urge one another to be hopeful because the Lord is coming.
Jesus is returning.

According to one count, the second coming of Christ
is mentioned 300 times in the New Testament.

It's something the Bible talks about a lot, and it's something we're supposed to
talk about a lot too. It should be part of our regular conversation as believers.

We should use it as a source of encouragement and comfort for ourselves
and for our fellow Christian brothers in arms.

In this passage, there are two particular contexts in which the Apostle Paul
instructs Christians to talk to one another about the Second Coming as a
source of comfort and encouragement:

First, when we are grieving over death.

Second, when we are fighting for life.

So let's look at each one.

M#1 When Christians are grieving over death, we must encourage one another with the Lord's coming.

First Thessalonians might be Paul's first letter.

So it's probably earliest book in the New Testament.

Because of that, it gives us a peek at the issues the very first Christians faced. It appears some of the early Christians were expecting Jesus to return immediately. They thought he was coming so soon, that no one would die before he came.

Their understanding of the timing of Christ's return was wrong—
but it was an honest mistake.

What appears to have happened is that some members of the church died, and that had them worried and grieving that these people they loved were going to miss out on Christ's return and all the blessings of his eternal kingdom.

You have to understand that it wasn't just that they needed a little more doctrinal teaching in this matter, they were also being influenced by their culture. This is always the case with Christians, we're more influenced by the ideas and values of the unbelieving culture around us than we realize.

Most of the believers in the Thessalonian church were Greeks.

First century, Greco-Roman culture had a very pessimistic view of death.

Some of the philosophers speculated that there might be a continued spiritual existence after death, but if so, it was nothing more than a shadow of this life. But historians have shown that the average Greek or Roman of that day didn't think much of the philosophers' speculation.

A continued spiritual existence couldn't be proved, resurrection preposterous. Death was viewed by all as a grim and terrible end.

Let me read you some inscriptions found on gravestones from this time.

After Death, No Reviving. After the Grave, No Meeting Again.

I was not. I became. I am not. I care not.

Mother, leave off lamenting, cease to mourn, for Hades turns pity aside.

Do not grieve over the departed

Cheerful stuff!

Now do you understand why Paul says to these Thessalonian believers—

“We do not want you to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.”

There was no hope whatsoever in their culture’s view of death.

Notice Paul doesn’t say: Since you have hope, don’t grieve.

Don’t grieve without hope. Grieve hopefully.

He gives Christians permission to grieve.

Those graves inscriptions just read all basically said—

Don’t bother grieving because death is the end, period. Just makes miserable.

We were watching a movie recently and there was a funeral in this movie
and the minister was saying: Death is a part of life, Death in the circle of life.

Eastern, New Age, Buddhist stuff fairly common in American pop culture.

Message was, don’t grieve. Death not really bad.

In some Christian circles it’s treated like a lack of faith if you grieve too much.

The death of a Christian should be a celebration.

I understand what is being communicated by that, not wrong.

But sometimes implies that Christians shouldn’t grieve too hard, too long.

You should move on. Loved one with Lord. Better place. Don’t you believe?

Once years ago, not in this church, I heard someone criticize a widow,

who they thought was grieving too long and too much for her husband.

The Bible doesn’t teach us to keep a stiff upper lip in the face of death.

The best example of all is Jesus himself in John 11 at the grave of Lazarus.

When he came to Mary and saw her weeping, Jesus wept.

And then there is an amazing statement, when Jesus came to Lazarus’ tomb he was

“deeply moved.” That word literally means “shaking with anger.”

Anger one of the stages of grief, even Son of God experienced it.

Job, when his children were killed, cried out, tore his clothes,

put dust on his head, and sat in the dirt for days—in this he sinned not.

Joseph wept and mourned for his father Jacob for 70 days.

David would not eat or bath when his son was about to die.

It’s not a lack of faith for Christians to grieve a death, to grieve is strongly.

It’s an affirmation that death is wrong. It’s part of the curse.

It’s abnormal. It’s not the way things are supposed to be.

Death is a result of the fall. It’s part of the curse.

Certainly there are times we recognize death is a mercy,

when a person has been suffering terribly and they finally are at peace.
But we would never call the old age or fatal illness that made them suffer good.

As Christians, we know that death is a gateway to life and heaven.

Christ's resurrection has transformed it that Bible calls sleep. Yes! Amen!

Death is swallowed up in victory.

But we still have permission to grieve, as long as we grieve with hope.

The hope, Paul says, is Christ's return and the resurrection of loved one.

Isn't that interesting?

We usually comfort each other by saying the person is in heaven, with Lord.

That's absolutely true and it is a great comfort.

But Paul says: Comfort one another with these words,

that at Christ's return all who have died in him will be raised.

And then he gives us some details. Not many, but some.

Paul says that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

So the souls of believers in heaven will accompany Jesus as he returns.

And the dead in Christ will rise—their bodies will be raised in glory.

Then believers who are alive will ascend with them to meet the Lord in the air.

And then what? Paul says we will be with the Lord forever.

Where? Are we living in the clouds? Go on up with him to heaven?

No we don't. The key is the word "meet." It's a precise Greek word.

Means to meet someone who is coming to accompany him to destination.

Paul uses it in Acts when he says believer met him outside Rome.

They met him not to stay with him outside city, to accompany to destination.

Use to refer to people going out to meet a conquering king, accompany to city.

We're not going to be caught up and taken out of this world, taken back in.

Back to this world but with Jesus, glorified and into a world made new.

And as risen people, we will feast and sing and run and embrace.

Take that promise and rub it deep into your grief.

And encourage one another. We will see Christ and those who have gone before.

So when Christians are grieving over death, we must encourage one another

with the promise of his coming and second . . .

MP#2 When we are fighting for life, we must encourage one another with the same hope. Encourage and build one another up.

Now we come to the second half of this passage, the part that starts in chapter 5. Paul starts out by saying:

Now brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write you.

Remember I told you that the Thessalonians had some things wrong about the Second Coming. They thought they knew when it was going to happen—that Jesus was going to certainly come in their lifetime.

There are Christians in every generation who do this, get preoccupied with dates. And it never turns out well.

Just one quick example: I knew a man who was convinced Jesus returning on a particular date, so he quit job and cancelled all insurance, sat around reading Bible. His wife called me in desperation.

(By the way, this was not a member of our church, but was a Cullman person.)

His teenage daughter said: Well, if Jesus is about to come back, I'm going to miss out on being a mother, that's one of my dreams, so she intentionally got pregnant out of wedlock.

You may think that's an extreme example, but it's not.

Whenever Christians get preoccupied with times and dates it always gets weird!

Paul says: No, no, no. That's the wrong use of this promise.

You have to look at the Second Coming in such a way that it makes you a better Christian, specifically, so that it makes you a self-controlled, encouraging person.

Paul says that for some people, coming of Christ will be like a thief in the night.

They are asleep or they are drunk.

And the thief comes and it's a nasty surprise and they suffer great loss.

But Paul says, you brothers are not in darkness, so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

No. You're awake. You're alert. You're people of the daylight

Then Paul uses a military image. Soldier putting on armor.

He's certainly not asleep or drunk. He's stone cold sober and ready for battle.

The Christian is putting on faith and love as a breastplate,
and the hope of salvation as a helmet. What does that image actually mean?
It means deliberately taking Gospel truths and promises, applying them to your life.
Using the promises of God to fight against sin and to motivate self to do good.
And the greatest promise of all is the promise of his coming.
Another way of looking at this is that Paul seems to be saying that the key
to living the Christian life is to develop a vivid expectation of Christ's coming—
then living as if that day had already dawned.
Before the light of Jesus' second coming shines like day—
you out to start living like a daylight person.

You ought to live as if he has already appeared in the clouds.
You ought to live as if you had just been raised from the dead and are flexing
the muscles of your glorified body and you are about to soar into the clouds
to meet him.
Paul is calling us to exercise our spiritual imaginations.

Read once about family always wanted to go to Grand Canyon.
Their dream was to hike the Canyon, down and back.
So they read all the could about it, and then they all got backpacks,
filled with heavy things, and started hiking the hills of neighborhood.
Did that for months before their actual trip.
What was it that kept them focused?
Imagining how great it would be when they saw the Grand Canyon.
Talking about the stories they had read of by other hikers.
The knowledge the more they trained, more enjoyable their real hike would be.
And if one family member said this is getting old, this is hard, this feels so dumb.
Yes, I know how you feel, but the Grand Canyon is going to be a blast.
Who cares what neighbors think seeing us marching around the neighborhood—
it's going to be worth it.
It's an eye on our future hope that helps us be self-controlled and alert,
and it makes up encouraging people.

In 1914 Sir Earnest Shackleton set out with 26 men
on his famous attempt to cross Antarctica.
But his ship, The Endurance was caught in ice, crushed and sunk.
For five months Shackleton and his crew camped on drifting icebergs.
They finally made it to an uninhabited island.

Shackleton took five men, and in an open lifeboat they set out to sail 800 miles to the island of South Georgia for help.

The remaining 22 men were left on the island under the command of Frank Wild. They waited four months in extreme conditions, hungry and cold. And then, a ship arrived with Shackleton to rescue them.

During those months Frank Wild had kept hope alive in their hearts. Every morning he packed up his own things, got everything stowed and ready to move and then he would say to the men: “Roll up your sleeping bags, boys, the boss may come today!”

That’s what Paul wants us to say to each other.
Live in the lively expectation of Christ’s coming.
Live in the hope of his promise—
the dead in Christ will rise, we will meet the Lord in the air,
and it will be glorious.