

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Christian Hope – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

It has been said that the only thing you have to do to be bereaved is to live long enough. One day, someone you love, perhaps love dearly, will die. And sometimes with that, to add to the natural grief, goes regret, perhaps a sense of unfinished business, confusion, and loss. For many people it's a time for asking whether there is life beyond the grave, whether there is any hope.

It would seem from this passage that the Thessalonians had questions about hope. And Paul writes to inform them (4:13). Notice that it's not that Christians do not grieve death; it's that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. There's the crucial word at the end of the verse: Christians have a *hope*.

In fact, this is not something new that Paul is springing on us here. He introduced it back in 1:3, and has kept returning to it through the letter (1:9-10; 2:19; 3:12-13; 5:23-24).

So, already we've had reason to say that 'hope' in the Bible is not something vague, but concrete. 'I hope to get a pay-rise next year.' 'I hope it doesn't rain much next week.' 'I hope Liverpool F.C. will win the league this year.' Those things might happen, but they might not. Hope in the Bible, however, is always sure. We're absolutely convinced that something is going to happen, but we're living in anticipation of it because it's not happened yet. Christian hope means we can be *confident* that we will get there in the end.

The passage before us divides into two main sections – 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. Each section starts and ends in a similar way. In 4:13, at the start of the first section, Paul uses the word 'about', which is a way of showing what topic he is dealing with. What is he writing about? He is writing about those who have fallen asleep. Then, in 5:1, the start of the second section, we find another use of the word 'about' introducing a new topic. What's he dealing with here? Times and dates. So, in

4:13-18, Paul is dealing with *death*, and in 5:1-11 he is dealing with *dates*.

If the two sections *start* in a similar way, they also *end* in a similar way – 4:18, marking the end of that section; 5:11, marking the end of that section.

With the overall structure in mind, let's get straight into the first section, 4:13-18.

1. About death: be reassured (4:13-18)

It may well be that some among the Thessalonian Christians had died, and they were wondering why that had happened, or where they were. Or, it may well be that they had expected Jesus to return sometime fairly soon, and he hadn't come back yet. But that in turn might have raised questions: when he did return, would those who had died meanwhile miss out on it? Reading between the lines, it seems to be these sorts of questions Paul is dealing with. And his main aim is to reassure them. Those who have died before Christ's coming will not miss out. They will *all* be there.

(a) Those who sleep (4:13-14)

This is one of the places in his letters where Paul talks about death as 'falling asleep'. He says that the person who has died in Christ will come with Christ on his return. Death is not the end. This may be why Paul uses the word 'sleep'. Sleep is natural; we are woken from sleep – though some of us are easier to wake than others! When the body is tired and worn out, sleep is welcome; but sleep is not for ever. So it is with death, says Paul.

How can we be sure we have this hope? The answer is in 4:14. We can be sure because Christ himself has died and rose again. Christ has conquered death and opened the way to heaven. Because we are *in* Christ, our identity is so bound up with his, that what happens to him happens to us. He died, we died; he rose

again; we rise again. He is the guarantee of our hope.

(b) Those who survive (4:15-17)

Paul now turns his attention away from the sleepers to the survivors. It looks as if those Christians who are around on earth at the coming of Christ will have to get in line and wait their turn (4:15-16)! Christians who have died will be *first*. Those who have died in Christ are still somehow waiting for the last day when they will be given new resurrection bodies. Then those of us who are left on earth will be air-lifted into the presence of Christ for a great reunion (4:17). Jesus comes *down* from heaven and appears to be met by a movement *upwards*.

Paul uses the language of a royal visit with a welcome party. When a special person was visiting a city, a welcome party would be sent out to meet them, and then together they would all return with joy to the city. That is the image here, which implies that once the reunion has taken place, all will come back to the earth. And so, Paul says, we will be forever with the Lord.

(c) Therefore... (4:18)

Notice what Paul says here. Paul tells us to 'encourage one another with these words'. Very often, the way some people handle the topic of Christ's return, you might think that Paul had written: 'wallop one another with these words'! The whole thrust of the passage is that the second coming of Christ is not a horror; it's a hope. Yes, there will be times spent at gravesides; but those are not the end of the story. Yes, there will be times when we grieve; but we will not grieve as those without hope. When it comes to death, says Paul, *be reassured* – and encourage one another.

2. About dates: be ready (5:1-11)

Then we have the second section in 5:1-11, where Paul is dealing with dates, and where his teaching can be summed up as 'be ready'. Meanwhile, while life continues, the Thessalonians are to live in readiness for the Lord in case he comes in their life-time. And Paul has some things to say about that coming.

(a) The coming of Christ will be...

- Unexpected – like a thief (5:2)

The day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night, and we ought to live with the possibility every day of our lives.

- Inevitable – like labour pains (5:3)

Like the delivery of a baby, there is no putting off the the final day. Once the signs appear, the events follow, and there's no escaping the consequences.

(b) And so we must be...

- Awake (5:4-5)

Paul uses a contrast between light and darkness. Those without Christ live in darkness. When Christ comes, they will not be ready for it. Darkness is related to ignorance. Christians, however, says Paul, live in the light; our eyes have been opened, we know it's day. We *already* belong to that future era of light.

- Alert (5:6-7)

Then Paul adds another image: drunkenness. When you're drunk, says Paul, your mind is slow, your vision becomes blurred, your speech is slurred, and you can't walk in a straight line. Spiritual pub-crawling is a night-time activity. But Christians need a clear head and a steady hand at all times. Stay alert.

- Armed (5:8)

Paul talks about armour, as he also does in Ephesians 6:10-20. Here he mentions only two important pieces of equipment – the breastplate and the helmet – both used for protection. What kind of armour gives us protection? It is *faith* – they were putting their faith into practice. It is *love* – their love makes them work hard at their Christian faith. Above all, in this context, being emphasised at the end of the trio, it is *hope* that protects. We have come across these things before (1:3; 3:6-7, 12). In other words, if we want to understand the pieces of the armour, we need to read the rest of the letter. It is faith and love and hope. The

pieces of armour we wear as we wait for the coming of the Lord are qualities which bear the stamp of Jesus and the new creation he brings.

- Assured (5:9-10)

Again, as before, we might ask, How can we know we have this hope? And again the answer is found in Christ. Paul wants the believers to be sure. If you're in Christ, says Paul, there is no doubt about the final outcome. Christ dies, we live. He died so that we may live with him. The new age has dawned, and we belong to it, and we can be assured and have hope.

(c) Therefore... (5:11)

Note that this section ends the same way as the previous one. Paul tells us to stick together. We are to build one another up, encourage one another. In fact, as Paul has said before, so he says again that they are already doing these things. And he encourages them to keep up the good work.

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Segments of Christianity have always been overly fascinated by the future. It wasn't so long ago that thousands of Korean Christians sold their property and left their families to wait for Jesus' return. It was also reported that several expectant mothers had abortions so they would be more easily raptured! Occasionally, Christians have indulged in time-tabling and speculation, peering into our theological crystal balls, trying to decide *when* Jesus is going to come. And, of course, we don't know!

More recently, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have written a whole series of fictionalised accounts of Jesus' return which have been massively influential in some contexts in the USA, because they feed a certain fascination about what's going to happen.

Paul doesn't do that. He does what every other writer in Scripture does, including Jesus himself, and says: 'We don't know... no, we really, really don't know! But we do know it will happen, and we know that it could be tomorrow; so the really significant thing is to be ready, and to be ready today.'

Holding to a particular view of the second coming is one thing. Living a life in the here and now in harmony with that view is something else. Am I ready for that day? Have I been faithful? Are we looking forward to the day when Christ will come back? Are we living our lives now in the light of the future? Are we letting the 'then' affect the 'now'?

The Bible doesn't encourage us to speculate about the timing. Always the important thing is *that* Christ is coming back. The message is: if you're not a Christian, you need to be; if you are a Christian, be ready. We need to have the second coming of Christ pencilled into our diaries as a provisional date for every single day of our lives.

Christian hope, then, always has this double and very significant edge to it. First of all, be *reassured* – Christ is coming back, and we will be taken home once and for all, all of us, and none will be missing. And secondly, be *ready* – we belong to the light and not the darkness, let the 'then' affect the 'now'. God help us to encourage one another and build each other up with these words. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 2 December 2007