

Living in Light of the End
1Thessalonians 5:1-11
BPC 5pm Service – 21/3/2021

It seems to me that anxiety about the future is the new normal in our society. The Sydney Morning Herald published an article called “The Future for young people looks bleak as the world’s problems pile up” citing global markets, domestic wars, and climate change as major causes.

In what has been called a majestic documentary, *A Life on our Planet*, David Attenborough says he is casting a vision for the future when he says our planet is headed for disaster. And it seems that 2020 really has exasperated many of these concerns.

There is anxiety about our economy and the mountains of debt that have been created, anxiety for many whose businesses or jobs didn’t survive the repeated lockdowns and the list goes on.

And although it would be nice to sit back and just see these as problems that other people have, I think most of us do or will experience this from time to time. I felt this quite recently as my wife Holly and I rushed around to look at different kinder options for our son Thomas to enrol for next year.

What if we choose the wrong one? What if he doesn’t like it here? What if he doesn’t like the teachers? What’s more important? The impressive toy espresso machine and mini café at one or the large assortment of transformers at another? And all of this was compounded by each teacher at each centre reminding us that if we don’t enrol on time he might miss out!

There really is no shortage of things that can trouble us when it comes to the future. Will uni really set me up for a job, will that job actually be satisfying, will I be able to buy a house, will I get married, will I be healthy, and I imagine you can add any number of things to that.

And yet I imagine that for a vast majority of our world and perhaps even for many of us, concern for what we just read about in 1Thessalonians 5 and the return of Jesus in judgement has scarcely got a look in. And yet central to the teaching of Jesus and to Christianity is that not just that Jesus came but that he will certainly come again.

And so living in light of the end, of Christ’s return, is central to following Jesus. Paul began exploring this question last week in 4:13-18 as he addressed what happens to believers who die before Jesus returns. But tonight we move from what happens when we die to what happens at the end.

And it seems Jesus’ return was on their mind. The death of some, perhaps many, from within the congregation as well their ongoing experience of persecution may have had them wondering how long this would all go on for, when would Jesus come and end it all.

And so Paul comes to address this question to reassure them that Jesus certainly will come and Paul does so by a classic sneaky technique of telling them that don’t need to be told anything only to then tell them all about it.

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Even though Paul was only with the Thessalonians for a short time, clearly teaching them about Jesus' return was a vital aspect of what he covered. Fascination with dates and times has a long history in Christianity with many seeking to predict the exact moment Jesus would come back. Which just seems crazy if they only listed to Jesus himself!

Because Paul draws on the teaching of Jesus' own words that could not be clearer: Matt 24:36, *But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

I will come again says Jesus but as for when, I don't even know! So Paul needs not write to them about dates and times but he does want to expand on or develop their understanding.

And we see that in v.2 where he calls the return of Jesus the 'day of the Lord'. The day of the Lord is spoken of and anticipated throughout the OT with often the same emphasis: it is final, the last act of history, the supreme act of judgement where God himself will show up to defeat his enemies once and for all and hold the whole world accountable.

And this day of the Lord is the return of Jesus, it's why Paul calls it the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6). It's the same event Paul was talking about last week in 4:13-18 when Jesus will raise his people from the dead to be with him forever, but now the focus is the other side of the coin, on judgement.

It's why the pictures of this day that Paul uses in vv.2-3 are negative, focussing on those who are not ready or expecting his return. You might find it strange to describe Jesus' coming as like a *thief in the night*. But Paul is drawing on Jesus' own teaching and the point is not that he comes with bad intentions, but that his coming will be both sudden and a surprise.

³ *While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

Now I have limited experience with labour pain and only as a spectator but the point is quite clear: labour is painful, often comes on without warning, and is unavoidable. This point is made chillingly clear if those final words of v.3, *they will not escape*.

And so we come here to one of the most awkward, confronting, politically incorrect, and yet one of the most pressing truths of the bible: those who reject Christ will suffer the wrath of God forever when he returns.

This is a reality we all need to reckon with, especially if you're here tonight and not yet a Christian. In his great book *The Rage Against God* Peter Hitchens details how he was led to faith out of atheism.

He tells of when travelling France he came across the 15th century painting called The Last Judgement.

He says at first, "I scoffed. Another religious painting! Couldn't these people think of anything else to depict?" But as he gazed open mouth at the figures in agony, he continues, "These people did not appear remote or from the ancient past; they were my own generation." He says, "I did not have a religious experience. Nothing mystical or inexplicable took place – no trance, no swoon, no vision, no voices, no blaze of light. But a large catalogue of misdeeds, ranging from the

embarrassing to the appalling, replayed themselves rapidly in my head. I had absolutely no doubt that I was among the damned.”

And so why does Paul remind them of what they already know? Because there is a difference between knowing it and knowing it – actually getting it, and having it shape your life. Because it is so counter-cultural, so ignored or scoffed at by the world it’s actually easy for us to get it but move on.

Especially when our world is saying and enjoying, as quoted in v.3, peace and safety. When Paul wrote this to the Thessalonians, the Roman world was marked by peace and safety. The *Pax Romana* or ‘peace of Rome’ was written on coins and monuments to celebrate and remind everyone that they were living in good times.

When living in prosperity, peace and safety, as we certainly do, the temptation will always be to just live for the now, to forget even confronting things that might come in the future, or as our cultural narrative loves to suggest, to just live for yourself in the here and now because you deserve it.

But central to the Gospel of Jesus is that he will return, to bring final salvation as he raises us to new life as we heard last week, but also to bring the final judgement and hold the whole world to account. And so if you are a follower of Jesus this evening, is this reality central in your thinking?

Are you ready, even willing, to lovingly speak of this reality and be convinced it’s actually loving to do so? Has this reality actually gripped your heart and life that it shaping all of your being?

Because having reminded them of the certain coming of the day of the Lord, Paul urges us to make sure we are ready and are waiting for his return. But what does that actually look like?

On the one hand it’s easy to laugh at the Christians who get this wrong. Like those who quit their jobs, racked up thousands in debt because they were so sure they know the day Jesus was coming. Or those who take out Rapture Pet Insurance because what happens to our pets who are left behind when Jesus comes is vital to prepare – I know it’s scary right, they even quote 1Thessalonians!

So what does it actually look like? Because Paul makes it clear in vv.4-8 that readiness shows. And he uses quite a mixture of metaphors that can be a bit confusing. But what he says essentially breaks into two categories: who you are and how you should live because of who you are.

⁴ 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.

Darkness and light is a commonly used metaphors in the bible. Darkness is the dominion of sin and rejection of God, light comes from God himself, it is to know God and live his way.

Jesus declares himself as the light of the world (Jn 8:12) and we see this darkness/light imagery clearly in John 3: ¹⁹ *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.* ²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth*

comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

And so notice how clear Paul is about the identity or status of the believer: you are not in darkness, you children of the light and of the day. We do not belong to the night or darkness.

As Peter says, to be a Christian is to be called out of darkness and into God's wonderful light (1Pet 2:9). And because we are people who have come to know God, Jesus' return is not a surprise to us.

When God shines the light of the Gospel into our hearts we see everything clearly. We know God himself, we know ourselves and our world, we know right and wrong, we know why our world is the way it is and especially we know where it is going.

The light God shines in the Gospel is revealing, piercing, exposing and also comforting. And so Paul reminds us our identity as believers, that we are children of the light and the day not to say we don't need to think about Jesus' coming, but to see the world through the lens of that coming.

To know you are a child of the light is to know the world is in darkness, to see the spiritual blindness and sin and apathy of our culture for what it really is. And this perspective is no small thing! It is to be given hope in the face of death, confidence in the face of chaos, and strength in midst of weakness.

⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

To know who you are in Christ changes everything. We see this as Paul contrasts the behaviour of the believer with the unbeliever, the light from the darkness, what he calls the 'others' in v.6.

⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 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.

We are to be awake and sober. The two work together as a picture of someone who is careful to live in light of who they are in Christ. To have all systems turned on and functioning, someone who is calm and balanced - neither apathetic or distracted, focussed, aware but not panicked.

And especially to be awake and sober is not to be sleepy or drunk. Paul uses these metaphors not simply because they fit with his darkness theme but are vivid pictures of being unaware, unprepared and not in control.

Before bible college I was a chef and every restaurant I worked in there was issues with both of these. Sleepiness from the long hours and drunkenness as alcohol was a commonly used coping mechanism. And both of these were generally overlooked or tolerated.

However I vividly remember one morning our pastry chef had started the day with drinking and didn't seem right. He had slurred speech and general vagueness about everything going on. But as he stood over the stove with a pot of boiling sugar syrup swaying left and right, my boss pulled the trigger to send him because he was a danger to himself and to us!

And Paul is urging us to make sure our Christianity is never like that. A spiritual life that is so lacklustre, so oblivious to what is going on around us, or so compromised that we might as well be asleep or drunk or both.

That's why the armour language that Paul uses in v.8 is so fitting. The Christian life is a constant battle for focus, to be alert and sober in every season of life. The armour language reminds us that it is a battle to live for Jesus, sometimes against our own laziness and sinful desires, but also as Paul says in Ephesians 6 where he expands on this armour, because there are spiritual forces fighting against us.

And so wearing the armour is a picture readiness: being prepared and equipped to live in the light, to live as a follower of Jesus whatever comes. It's why the point of v.8 is not to put on the armour but to know you are already wearing it.

The NIV translates v.8 rather unhelpfully, the ESV has it better: ⁸ *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.*

Paul comes back to his favourite three word summary of the Christian life, of what God calls us to: faith, hope, and love. We saw the same triad in the 1:3. And so here, faith and love become a double strength breastplate and hope takes pride of place on our head with the helmet of salvation.

And Paul comes back to his favourite triad because the Christian life is about trusting God in the present (faith), loving others in the love God himself provides, and persevering until then end while waiting for Jesus. And by wearing this armour you will bear the fruit of faith hope and love.

This is what Paul said back in 1:3, *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*

And so it might seem a bit underwhelming or unimpressive, Paul describes a life that is ready and waiting for Jesus is one that is consistent, steady, and reliable – of faith, love, and hope.

And although this might not seem shocking or ground-breaking, the longer I'm Christian the more I realise not only is it rare, but the how impressed and inspired I am to see it. To see brothers and sisters and Christ who have faithfully toiled in following Jesus for decades longer than me, whose faith is not pushed around by circumstances the trials of health or pandemic or hardship.

To see perseverance in the face of losing a spouse or even a child, consistency in the face of opposition and pressure, and confidence in the face of struggle.

And isn't that what we should long for? To be consistent in our trust in Jesus, our love of God's people, and our hope in his return regardless of whether we are at uni or work, single or married, unemployed or over-worked? Not wavering from week to week, not thrown around any and every circumstance, not dictated to by what is happening around us?

Is that the kind of Christian life you have? Is it the kind of Christian life you are praying and longing for? Is your Christian life steady and balanced or a bit dozy and inebriated? Does your life consistently display ready? I know who I am Christ and my life shows it!

If Jesus was to return today would he find consistent readiness or good intentions and excuses? Now I know that is a hard question because if we are honest we know we do struggle, we ebb and flow between spiritual excitement and exhaustion.

And I think that's why Paul finishes this section on addressing how to live in light of the end, how to wait for Christ's certain coming by giving us assurance for that day not grounded in how hard we try or how much faith, hope, and love we show, but in Christ's finished and sufficient work.

Confidence is found in firstly looking to what Jesus has saved us from: v.9 ⁹ *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Christian life should be marked by joyful confidence in Christ's coming as Paul takes us the very purpose of God in saving us. *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath.* The day of the Lord will be a dreadful day of God's wrath, his just anger poured in judgement on the world: but not for his people.

It will be a day of salvation. This is what Paul said back in 1:9, speaking of the Thessalonians conversion, *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

On the cross, Jesus took God's wrath on himself in our place – so that now, with God's wrath against us satisfied, our confidence for the future is secure – his return is salvation as we realise and experience the fullness of all Jesus bought for us with his blood.

We are saved from wrath, v.9, and for relationship, v.10, ¹⁰ *He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.*

Christ's death was for us, in our place, taking what we deserved, to bring us to God – *that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.* Here Paul deliberately connecting what he said last week in 4:13-18 with this week. In 4:13 sleep is the language of a Christian who has died and is waiting for Jesus to return and the resurrection.

And so regardless of our physical condition, whether asleep (dead) or awake (alive) when Christ returns, we will together meet him in the air to be, 4:17, *with the Lord forever.*

Christ's death alone saves us from wrath to bring us to God. Something we know and enjoy now but will ultimately realised when Christ' returns and we see God face to face.

It's why we should never tire of or let it become mundane to sing "my debt is paid it is paid in full." It's why we should be praying and longing that as we come to Easter we'd be captured again the Gospel of grace that God stepped into the world in Christ that we could know him!

As John Piper says, "The ultimate good of the gospel is seeing and savoring the beauty and value of God... The ultimate aim of the gospel is the display of God's glory and the removal of every

obstacle to our seeing it and savoring it as our highest treasure. “Behold your God!” is the most gracious command and best gift of the gospel.”

But I think if we are honest we know that zeal and appreciation for what Christ has done to and for us is so easily lost. It’s why Paul finishes this section the same way as he did last week, v.11, ¹¹ *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

We know it don’t we: we are easily distracted and often discouraged. The world can be a harsh place and any number of things can rob us of joy. And the God-given remedy to this? *Encourage one another and build each other up.* Paul borrows language from construction to describe what our conversations are designed to do.

And so if we take that seriously it will mean we’ll actually need to know each other, we’ll need to take time and make it a priority to talk about Jesus with each other. To go deeper into what we’ve heard or what you’ve been reading or study. It will mean being open and honest, even willing to potentially call out or be called out for behaviour that is inconsistent with a child of the light. Ed Welch says,

“The heart can be veiled and hard to know. We prefer to hide its less attractive thoughts and some of its hurts. But when we are willing to be a little more vulnerable, and others handle our hearts with care, we discover that knowing and being known are part of our design. These conversations are a pleasure, and they are essential if we are to care for, help, and encourage one another well.”

And so I hope you see that what we are about to do over supper, what we do at growth group or over dinner or any time we meet, is it not trivial but vital. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, it is by *speaking the truth in love* that we leave the danger of spiritual infancy and immaturity and grow and mature.

Look around this room. When you go to growth group this week, look around at each individual. They need you and you need them. Confidence in the face of death, readiness for the return of Christ, living as a child of light in a world of darkness, growing in understanding and appreciation for the cross is all promoted and achieved through our conversations. Isn’t that profound?

Living in light of the end is sustained as we encourage one another and build each other up, so let’s pray we’d take that seriously and do it.