

Living in the Hope of the Resurrection and the Return of Christ

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[0 : 00] Well hello everyone and welcome back to St Mark's online again. We didn't think we'd be here but unfortunately here we are. It's the third wave of coronavirus. It's lockdown level 4 and it's likely to stay that way at least until the 11th of July.

Now imagine for a second knowing that you could never die, that you would never die, that your body was totally indestructible. What kind of life would you lead? I would live a life of total adventure.

Just exploring planet earth. Swimming down in the oceans, not worrying about the sharks eating you, climbing the most beautiful mountains, not worrying about falling down and killing yourself. It would just be so much fun.

But it probably wouldn't be that much fun if only you were allowed to live but all your friends and family were going to live a normal life, a mortal life and they were going to pass on. I think it would get kind of lonely. I don't think that would be a lot of fun.

Well in today's passage we're going to learn about the promise of having a body that cannot die and of what kind of life we should live in the light of that.

[1 : 11] And the promise is not only that our bodies won't die but that all our friends and family who also trust in Christ, they've got the same promise. And so we've got this promise of everyone that we know could potentially live forever along with us.

Now in our passage today, Paul is answering two questions that the church in Thessalonica were asking about. What happens to their dead friends and family and how they must live knowing that Jesus is going to return.

Now Paul had only been there with them for a short while before he had to leave. And so they were confused about what was going to happen at Christ's return and what would happen to their dead friends and family.

Were they going to miss out on the resurrection? Were they going to miss out on something in the future? And Paul is going to show them that they've got nothing to worry about. And he's going to do that by contrasting the hope that they've got, that the Thessalonians have in Christ, with people who don't hope in Christ.

And so the first point that Paul makes is about the bitterness of living without hope. So let's start by looking at what Paul says, if you don't have any hope in Christ.

[2 : 27] Have a look at verse 13, chapter 4 and verse 13. Brothers, 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 have no hope.

Now those outside of Christ have no reason to hope for anything beyond the grave. And they grieve deeply. This is the kind of pain that has a deep, dark, and unrelenting bitterness to it.

And not only that, they've got no hope for their friends and family that pass on, because they don't know what's going to happen. But because people without Christ are aware that they're also going to die, they have no hope for themselves.

And this is in fact how the pagans used to live, and in fact how the Thessalonians, remember the Thessalonians, were coming out of that pagan mindset. And the pagans were essentially fatalists. And here's some quotes to give an idea of what they thought about death.

On one tombstone was written this epigraph. I was not, I became, I am not, I cannot.

[3 : 34] And so there's no real hope for anything beyond just staying in the grave. Aeschylus, an ancient Greek playwright, has these words. Once the dust has drained away all of a man's blood, and he is dead, there is no raising of him up again.

And he uses the word anastasis, which is the Greek word for resurrection. There is no resurrection. And what's important about those words is that those words, Aeschylus has those words spoken by the god Apollos.

And so not even the Greek pagan gods had an answer to death. They couldn't even bring people back from the dead. And this is what living without hope looks like. And this is how so many people today still live their lives.

Not knowing what's going to happen, thinking that all there is is they're going to die, and that they will never see their loved ones again, and there's no hope for them either. Now contrast this hopelessness with the amazing real living hope that Paul says the Thessalonians have because they are in Christ.

And that hope is in Christ's real physical bodily resurrection from the dead and his bodily return to earth. And so let's look at the reality of real hope in the resurrection.

[4 : 50] The reality of real hope in the resurrection. Firstly, having hope in the resurrection means that we can have hope that we and our loved ones will one day come back from the dead.

Look at verse 14. We believe that just as Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

And this is a rock-solid promise that we will get to see them again with our own eyes. We'll get to talk to our friends and family again. We'll get to laugh with them.

We'll get to eat with them. We'll get to plan adventures with them and make new discoveries and make new memories with them. And the foundation for that hope is the reason it is a real hope and not just merely wishful thinking is of the rock-solid truth of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

The word for resurrection in Greek is anastasis, which means literally to stand up again. It's not a spiritual thing. It's a physical thing. Jesus was physically dead in the grave for three days.

[5 : 59] And then he physically stood up out of the grave and came back to life again. And he himself makes this kind of promise to his believers that they can have the same power that raised him from the dead in their lives.

In John chapter 11, Jesus says this. Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives by believing in me will not stay dead forever.

And he gives a challenge. Do you believe this? Let me ask you, Christian, if you're watching this, is this your hope? Paul says he wants the Thessalonians to know this truth in verse 13.

He doesn't want them to be ignorant. That means to not know. He wants them to know these things. But he wants them to know this truth about the resurrection, that it's real and it's physical. We're not to make up our own version and believe our own pet theories about what happens to us once we die.

Our hope must be based on the hope that Paul teaches here. The hope of the resurrection of dead people coming back to life again. And if you're not yet a Christian and you're watching this, then this promise of life is as much for you.

[7 : 12] You do not need to live your life in dread. Not knowing what happens when you die. Or worse, that death will have the final say in your life. Jesus promises that this possibility of life can be yours as well.

So the Thessalonians are to live in the real hope of the resurrection. And then secondly, they're to live in the real hope of the physical return of Christ.

Now notice also that the resurrection is so powerful that it totally diminishes the problem of death. Death turns out to be nothing more than a snooze. Paul again and again comforts the Thessalonians saying how the dead are only sleeping.

It occurs throughout this text. Now, I don't know about the last time you pranked your friends or family. But all it takes to wake up someone when they're sleeping is to make a loud noise. And maybe that's why when Christ comes back to the world, the world is going to get this cosmically loud wake-up call so that the dead in Christ will hear and come out of their sleep.

Have a look at verse 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 will rise first.

[8 : 28] Now that word for loud command is the shout a captain makes when he wants his armies to charge into battle. You remember the ride of the Rohirrim and Lord of the Rings. It's something like that.

Except here, Jesus and the hordes of angels in heaven don't shout, DEATH! As they do in the movie. But they're going to be shouting, LIFE! This loud command is like a, COME ON!

YEAH! As they return to earth. It's going to be so much fun. And as he comes down out of heaven, something equally amazing happens. the dead start coming back to life again.

Not in any zombie-like form, but with renewed bodies, indestructible bodies, empowered with this new creation life. The same life that's coursing through Jesus' veins. And if that's not enough, Jesus' return is so powerful, that call is so strong, the risen dead start flying.

Yes. Just like in the movies. Have a look at verse 17. After that, we who are still alive, and are left on earth, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.

[9 : 49] And so, we will be with the Lord forever. Now, notice what happens here. The sequence is important. The dead get to rise first, and they get to fly first.

Imagine that. How fun that must be. You know, as kids, you often chat about what superpower you would like to have. And we all watched Superman as a kid, one of the first superhero movies we saw, and he's flying around.

It is so much fun. Well, that's what's going to happen to believers in Christ. But notice what happens. The dead get to rise first, and they get to fly first.

Then, after that, those who have not yet died, join them in the air. And so, we get to fly as well, if we're still alive at the return of Christ. Now, remember the Thessalonians are worried about their dead missing out on these events.

And Paul is saying, they've got nothing to worry about, because in fact, the dead are going to be the first. They're going to get the front row seats at the resurrection and the return of Christ.

[10 : 50] So, far from being disadvantaged by dying before Christ returns, it's actually an advantage to be dead when Christ returns, because you get to see him first, and you get to come back to life.

You've got this new body, and you get to take off and fly around in the air for a bit. Now, we need to think clearly about what's happening here. And this event is known as the rapture.

Many Christians call it the rapture. I don't call it that. I call it the return of Christ, and we get to fly around a little bit. But too many modern day Christians have misunderstood this event, and they call it the rapture, and they think it's all about going to be with Jesus in heaven.

But that's not what's going on here. This is not Jesus fetching believers and taking them back to heaven. He's not going to come down out of heaven, hang around in the middle of the air, and then go back to heaven.

He's going to come down out of heaven. We're going to come up from planet earth, and then together we're going to descend to planet earth. Jesus is bringing believers back to earth. And Paul's audience, the Thessalonians, would have known exactly what Paul meant and what was going on here.

[11 : 58] And the reason is, this whole event is describing something that they knew well what took place in the ancient world. It's describing what happens when a king would visit one of the cities in his realm.

And so what would happen is that a king would let the city know that he's visiting, and the word that they would use for that visit, the royal visit, is the word parousia. And that's the same word used of Christ's return in verse 15, the coming of the Lord, the parousia of the Lord.

The city would, so when the king would visit a city, they would send a notification, and the notification would read something like, the date of the visit, the date of the parousia of Lord Caesar, or Lord so-and-so, would be the following.

Okay? And the city rulers would then prepare delegation, and to go and meet the king, so that as the king approached the city, they would open the gates, and there and the citizens would come out of the city, and meet the king on his way into the city.

And the reason you do that is to show that you've got friendly relations with the king. You keep the gate closed, and the kings don't go anywhere without their army. It's basically a declaration of war, and then the king is going to burst those gates down and come in and kill everyone.

[13 : 13] So you open the gates, you say, hey, we're friends, and you go and meet him outside the city, and it's basically just good manners. The same way we rise out of the chair when someone important comes into the room. Now the word for that meeting, when they come out of the city, and they go and meet the king, the word for that meeting is a technical word.

In the Greek, it's *apantesin*, and that's the word that we find in verse 17, when it talks about being caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

That's that Greek word meeting. And then what would happen? They would meet them together as a delegation, and then they would accompany them back into the city, and form a kind of a procession as they walk back into the city.

In fact, we've got a record of this kind of thing, both in ancient literature and the Bible. And it's important for understanding of what's happening here with this event, what many Christians call the rapture event.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, records just as an event when Alexander the Great was welcomed to Jerusalem in 332 BC. It's actually that he actually conquered Jerusalem, but it was done in a way that he didn't have to kill everyone.

[14 : 29] This is what Josephus records. When Jadus, the high priest, understood that Alexander was not far from the city, he went out in procession with the priests and the multitude of the citizens.

The procession was venerable, and the manner of it different from that of the other nations. Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, with the priests clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet, he approached by himself and saluted the high priest.

And when he had given the high priest his right hand, the priests ran along by him, and so he came to the city. When he came into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God according to the high priest's direction, and magnificently treated both the high priests and the priests.

So, you see what happened there. Alexander approaches the city. That's his parousia. That's his arrival, his royal visitation.

The delegates go outside the city to meet him, the apantesin, and then they all together go back into the city. Now, why am I making such a big deal of this? The point's very simple.

[15 : 34] What's happening in 1 Thessalonians 4 is what people call the rapture. It's not flying off to meet Jesus in the air and then going back to heaven. What Paul describes is of Jesus' parousia, his royal visit to planet Earth, and of his people meeting him in the air, and this isn't important, but coming back with him to planet Earth.

And that's what verse 17 means when it says, when we will meet him in the air, and so we will be with him forever. In this way, we will be with Jesus forever.

That's not in heaven, not going back to heaven, but accompanying Jesus back to Earth. And he's coming back as its Lord and King to rule over his resurrected people forever and ever.

All right, so that's the sequence of events in 1 Thessalonians 4. Christ descends from heaven. The dead are raised to life. They start flying in the air to meet Jesus.

Those who are still alive get to join them. They then form a procession as they welcome back Jesus to Earth to establish his kingdom. It's the mother of all triumphal entries.

[16 : 50] And Paul's point in all of this for the Thessalonians is that he wants Christians to encourage each other with these words. Verse 18, Therefore encourage one another with these words. Now, let me ask the Christians watching this.

Paul says you must encourage each other with these words. That is, with the truth of what he is teaching. Can you think of any better help to offer Christians struggling with anxiety or worry over the death of their friends or family, for those who have died in Christ, than to tell them that all that is happening to the dead is that they're having a lovely, long, refreshing sleep, the mother of all Sunday snoozes, and that one day when Christ returns, they will wake up, we will get to meet them and him in the air, welcome him back to Earth, and begin living our absolute best lives together forever and ever.

I can't think of any better news to tell someone who's worried about those things. What if you're not yet a Christian? What better hope for your future happiness can you have than what is offered here in Christ?

But, you can only receive this encouragement, it can only be an encouragement for you if you come to Christ. Because the alternative to having Christ as your king is described in the next section, and it's not something you want to face without him as your friend.

So the next section, Paul addresses how the Christians are to live, living day to day, in the hope of what's called the Day of the Lord, which is really the same event, but viewed from a slightly different angle.

[18 : 29] So the next question that Paul addresses is how the Thessalonians are to live in the light of Christ's return. This is about living day to day in the hope of what he calls the Day of the Lord.

In chapter 5, Paul talks about the Day of the Lord, which is the same event, but as Jesus returns to earth, but like all kings, when they visit a city, they do so for a reason, and that's normally to make judgments, to hand out justice, to right wrongs, and to punish those who have done wrong.

And again, like in the previous section, Paul contrasts the difference between Christians who have hope in Christ, and people who don't have hope in Christ, who have not yet hoped or trusted in Christ.

Those who have no hope in Christ will be caught out, like when a thief comes in the night, to steal their stuff, and they will by no means escape the judgment. Have a look at chapter 5, the first few verses.

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates, we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, while people are saying, peace and safety, destruction will come on men suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

[19 : 47] These are people looking for their own version of peace and safety, but will suddenly find themselves facing the king they never knew, nor cared about, nor served, and it will be their undoing, their destruction.

They will not survive the return of Christ. And the reason is that they lived like people who belong to the night. We all know what naughty things people do in the dark. They do the things at night that is going to get them in trouble on the Day of the Lord.

Have a look at verse 7. We're in chapter 5 now. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. Now, it's not the same sleep as in chapter 4.

It's more the metaphor of sort of sleep walking through life. Living a life that's not concerned about Jesus or serving Him as King, but rather just thinking about myself, not really thinking about anything else.

That very often does look like getting drunk a lot. Anyone who has non-Christian friends knows this is one of the things that marks out their lives. They literally love to get drunk. I remember once in the UK going to a work party, and the guys would just smash the bottles back.

[20 : 58] And not through the course of the evening, right at the start of the party. The intention was to get as drunk as quickly as possible. And the thing is, at the beginning of the evening, everyone is friends, everyone's laughing, making jokes, but at the end of the evening, after drinking heavily, there would be fighting, there was tears, everyone was unhappy with each other, and shouting.

It was just a nightmare. The only thing that those who live like that, who live like they prefer the night, can expect, the only thing they can expect, is the destroying wrath of Jesus when He returns in judgment.

Okay. If that's how unbelievers live, living in the dark, sleepwalking through life, drowning their pain in alcohol, and finding joy, drowning their pain in finding joy in alcohol, how does Paul want the Thessalonians Christians to live, and what can they expect, on the day of the Lord?

Well, they are to live as people, who belong to the day, being awake, and alert, not getting drunk, but being prepared to do good works, and fight the good fight, in service of their King.

Have a look at verse 5. You are all children of the light, and children of the day, we do not belong to the night, or to the darkness. And in verse 8, but since we belong to the day, let us be sober, some translations have self-control, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

[22 : 32] Now, Christians have a radically different outlook on life, we have a radically different hope for the world, and so we must live a radically different life, compared to those who don't have what we've got.

For one thing, our lives must not be characterized by being drunk. It's fairly obvious, fairly straightforward, and that's at the very least. And it's amazing how many people can only stop drinking, when they come to Christ.

And that's not to say, it's an automatic thing, we've got to learn to live like this. But it also means to be sober-minded, to be awake and alert, to be aware of what's going on, not to lose our heads, or lose control of our emotions, or to give in to despair or hopelessness.

Belonging to the day, means being active and productive for God's kingdom, and serving Jesus as the King. You notice the triad of faith, hope, and love again, that Paul talks about in chapter 1, verse 2.

When he got the report back, he was so overjoyed about what he heard, about their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 38] And so, this is all busy language. This is work language. And that's because they have hope in the Lord Jesus. Because they have hope in the Lord Jesus, they are going to get stuff done.

Well now, what about us? While we wait for Jesus' return, we mustn't walk around in the day in our pajamas. You know, it's just the worst image ever. But we must get dressed, putting armor on, so as to be ready to battle the evils of the world, and to establish little outposts of Christ's kingdom, in our daily lives.

But now, this kind of work is hard. We can't do this alone. In fact, it talks about it as a battle. We need the help and encouragement of our fellow kingdom fighters, freedom fighters.

Paul ends a section like he does the previous section, by telling the Thessalonians in verse 11, to encourage one another, and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

You know, well-trained soldiers, when they face the enemy, when they face enemy fire, are in constant contact with each other, checking on how the others are doing. Hey man, you good?

[24 : 44] You need anything man? What's up? They're giving constant encouragement. Hey man, you've got this. You can do it. Let's go. Let's get this done. Christian encouragement should look and kind of sound the same.

Maybe not with a fake American accent. The goal of all of this is to ensure that we all get to enjoy the return of Christ together. And so we need to constantly encourage each other to continue to live as people of the day and to be sober-minded and to do works of faith, hope, and love.

And if we do this consistently throughout our whole lives, until we die, or until Christ returns, look at what we have to look forward to. Verse 9. Christians have got nothing to fear, but everything to look forward to.

And so we have every reason not to be debilitated by despair, by the pain of losing our loved ones in death, nor of...

We don't have to be worried about what will happen on the day of judgment. Jesus has got it covered. We're good to go. And so let's get busy with works of faith, hope, and love, and encouraging each other to do this along the way.

[26 : 16] Let's pray. Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for this word from Paul, and which is really a word from you, about the wonderful hopes of the resurrection and of your return.

Lord, help us each to live our lives daily, knowing that you are going to return. And so living hope, putting on a breastplate of faith and love, and the hope of salvation as a helmet, being properly prepared.

But Lord, to also encourage other Christians along the way with these truths of our resurrection, of your return, and of living together forever in the new kingdom and the new earth.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.