

The Day of the Lord
1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:3
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At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church. And today, as promised – two weeks ago we looked at the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 – this morning, we return again to that section of Scripture as we look together at 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:3. Two weeks ago, we looked at what the primary meaning that Paul was seeking to teach this church at Thessalonica, seeking to encourage them because some of their brothers and sisters had passed before the Lord's return. They believed that the return of the Lord was imminent, and they weren't sure what that meant for those who pre-deceased them prior to Christ's return. And they were concerned and worried. And Paul sought to address this.

The last time we were together, we looked at what the primary meaning, what he was going for as the primary application point. And I promised that two weeks later, we were to return to deal with the degree of controversy and debate throughout the history of the church as it relates to the rapture and the millennium, the day of the Lord.

I remember as a new convert, I knew nothing about any of this stuff. And I remember that for whatever reason at our Presbyterian church, they invited this music/concert person – and he was not Presbyterian, I look back now and realize that and don't know why he was there. I remember with all of us students, he was teaching us rapture practice. And I remember thinking, oh my gosh, I am losing my mind. And, what is this? And he had a whole song that went with it, and all these people seemed really excited. I was like, what are you people talking about? And so, then I got introduced to the rapture, introduced to a little bit of the millennium.

As a 16-year-old kid new to the church, there were times where I was wondering, why am I here? This sound completely insane. But I've grown in that, and I'm no longer running from the church. I now have the opportunity to teach in it. So, please note that this is not meant to be everything that can be said, obviously. We will have any slides that are used this morning along with recommendations for reading more deeply available this week on our blog. So, with that, let's do some rapture practice by reading the word of God, not by dancing. The day of the Lord, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:3. Hear now God's word.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Lord, we ask that you would now open our minds and hearts and open your word through the power and presence of your Spirit to equip us as a people to trust in you more fully and to be able to have a theology that rightly shapes our lives according to the Scriptures. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

So, a brief history. How did we reach this particular debate, this particular teaching among the church? Believe it or not, it really didn't appear until the 1800s. There had always been differences of interpretation. The last time I was able to teach, we used the word "hermeneutics" which is the science of interpretation. Hermeneutics as it applies to the Scriptures, how we rightly interpret the Scriptures to be able to understand what it is teaching and what it means, and therefore, the consequences of what that means for our lives.

The church has for a millennia and longer been interpreting the Scriptures. But this particular debate really didn't arise until the 1800s, one person in particular, John Nelson Darby. And it wasn't until the early 19th century that those believers who discussed the rapture believed it would occur in conjunction with the return of Christ at the end of the tribulation period. But it was the contribution – and here, I'm reading from an encyclopedia of evangelical theology – "It was the contribution of John Nelson Darby to eschatology," that is the study of end times, "that led many Christians to teach that the return of Christ would be in two stages. One for His saints at the rapture," which is what is referenced here though the word "rapture" does not appear; that this is the meeting Him in the clouds, we have here in 1 Thessalonians. So, the first appearance of Christ, His return at the rapture with the saints,

"and therefore, with the saints at the rapture and along with the other saints to control the world at the close of the great tribulation. According to this interpretation of Bible prophecy, between these two events, the 70th week predicted by Daniel in Daniel 9:24-27 would be fulfilled. And the antichrist would come to power with the church removed from the scene, God would resume His dealings with Israel at that time."

This view would have great influence in Britain as well as in the United States. In fact, in the early 20th century and in the 19th century, what we have is a great growth of this belief, and it would capture what would later become known as evangelicals. And it would capture the imagination. And by and large, even though much of what Darby taught is no longer taught in very few seminaries in the world, it has still captured the common imagination as people think of the return of Christ. Of course, that's been popularized by a series of books called *Left Behind*. With that said, there was also the development of the Scofield Bible. The Scofield Bible in 1909 was the leading Bible and that which was referenced in many of the great seminaries in the United States. And it also contributed to a popular view which had been taught by Darby.

And so, during the great upheaval that was the 1960s, it would also see a growth in evangelists and others who saw the growing business – which is what I will call it – of eschatology. And so, there were many popular TV radio teachers and preachers who sought to, if you will, seize on this moment of national upheaval for a resurgence in the teaching of the end times oftentimes playing on people's fears and anxieties.

So, that's just one part of the discussion. The truth is, what the reformed church believes – and by the reformed church, the church that came out of the reformation of which we are descendants – have largely believed the same teaching as it relates to the millennium, as it relates to what is popularly called the rapture. Yes, there are distinctives among particular teachers, but by and large they are commonly held beliefs. It was not as controversial until you have the mixing and then the popularizing of what Darby taught and what was given in the Scofield Bible.

So, with that said, in this brief history, you have what's coming together of a theological school of thought that then began to be taught at the seminary. And by and large, churches generally speaking are 15 to 20 years behind what is being taught in the seminaries. And it makes sense, because those who were being taught in seminaries largely will not reach places of influence in churches for some 10 or 15 years. So, what's being taught in the seminary today has an influence on the future church. And so, you have this growing train of theological thought also along with the great intellectual and theological upheaval of the early 20th century. Then you have the first war, the second World War, then you have all

sorts of wars after the second World War, and then you have the 1960s and the 70s and the 80s. And along with the great theological train, you also have a great political change. With all this political and theological and church and cultural upheaval, people began to seize their beliefs and convictions. And so, you have churches along one stretch of highway that can have several different views of what the Scriptures teach about the end times. I said it was brief. That's the best I can do this morning with the time.

So, what do we do about what is really at issue in this text? In this text in 1 Thessalonians 4, we have what is the key intersection. The key intersection, as the Scriptures teach, two things come into play. One, you have the second return of Christ, or the return of Christ. After His resurrection, He's reigning in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. After His death and resurrection, He now reigns. And He promises to His disciples – and you can read it in the gospels, you can read it in the book of Acts, and it says – I will come again, and when I do, I will bring judgement. The day of the Lord. So, you have the return of Christ and you have this other key point that the Scriptures teach. That is, what happens after that, what is referenced in Revelation 20, the millennium?

How do we understand the return of Christ? Which here as we looked at two weeks ago is Christ coming again, and the dead will rise, and those who are also alive will also raise and they will meet with Him, and He will come in glory and in judgment. This is what has been called the rapture. And so, what happens after that? How do we fit this together with Revelation? How do we fit this together with what Jesus says in Matthew 24?

So, what I'd like to do this morning is we're going to have on the screens the four primary views. The first is what we call dispensational premillennialism. Now, if you're visiting with us, we don't normally do this. But I promised I would do this, and so, I'm doing it. Now, this is a very complicated chart. But note this, dispensational premillennialism holds that a seven-year tribulation will precede a thousand-year period – Revelation 20 – during which time Christ will reign on the throne. Immediately previous to the time of the great tribulation, all the dead saints will rise from their graves and all the living members of the church shall be caught up with them to meet with Christ in the clouds – 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

This is known as the rapture. During this time of tribulation, there will be a three and a half year of world peace under an antichrist figure – Daniel 7, Revelation 13, and Revelation 17 – followed by three and a half years of greater suffering – Revelation 6. At the end of this period, Christ will return and judge the world and bind Satan for 1,000 years and raise the Old Testament and tribulation saints from the dead. And so, what you will note here on this chart is you have not one, not two, but at least two and a half, maybe three different raptures, or resurrections, rather.

So, this is really the child of what Darby was teaching. And what he was seeking to do is he was trying to put together the different points of Scripture that talk about the return of Christ, the rapture, and then this millennium. What's also very clear is that Darby taught that the Lord's providence, the Lord's will is won, but He has one track for Israel and one track for the church. That's important to remember. One other important thing is that this is all to happen in the future. This has not yet happened. That's the first. And even if it is not taught, oftentimes when people think about eschatology, they think of this. If they don't know it, if they haven't even studied it, still, this is largely what is taught and what has infused and shaped the imagination of the writer or writers of the *Left Behind* series.

Next chart. The next chart is what is called historical premillennialism. In historical premillennialism, what's important to note is the following. That rather than a belief of an imminent return of Christ, it is held that a number of historical events – the rise of the beast and the false prophet – must take place before Christ's second coming. The second coming will be accompanied by the resurrection and the rapture of the saints – 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18. This will inaugurate the millennial reign of Christ. The Jewish nation, while being perfectly able to join the church in the belief of one true faith in Christ, has no distinct redemptive plan as they would in the dispensational perspective. That is,

it's a little less detailed with regard to the Jewish Israel coming to faith. The duration of the millennial kingdom under this particular view is unsure. It could be literal, it could be metaphorical.

So, you see it's still rather complex, but also takes what we would call a more literal reading of Scripture like dispensational premillennialism. Like that view, it also has one train for Jews and another train for the church. This particular view is held by a wider swath of those even from the Presbyterian and reformed tradition. Although not many, it is certainly a minority, it is still held by some professors in the reformed and Presbyterian tradition. But it is important to note its distinctives are a little less literal and still have that thousand-year reign as literal, or it could be metaphorical. But what you also see is that the righteous dead are raised along with those who know the Lord who are alive. But it does teach that there is the second temple to be rebuilt, the priesthood and sacrifices are restored, but there is also an opportunity for Israel to come to Christ.

Next slide. The third view is post millennialism. Now, notice it's a little less complicated. So, what you have now, what we're living in, is the present age. They do not teach that there is a literal thousand years because of the nature of the eschatological language of Scripture and the use of metaphor. So, they do not believe in a literal thousand years. But what is believed is that over the course of time and prior to Christ's return, there will be another golden age of the church, much like we saw in the early chapters of Acts. The world as a result will become better. The gospel will increase and advance. And there will be a greater Christianization of the world. And at Christ's return, there will be a resurrection of the righteous and the dead, both righteous and wicked, and there will be judgment. And then there will be eternal life either with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth or judged by Him and separate from Him for all eternity.

And so, here you have a post millennial view which also takes up a good amount of space between Presbyterian and reformed theological thought. But it is oftentimes favored because it stresses heavily the covenantal relationship that God establishes with His people beginning in the Old Testament stretching all the way through the new of how God establishes His relationship with us by way of covenant, God's promise, God's fulfillment, God's work, and our receiving that covenant relationship by faith in Jesus Christ alone. This is a view which I am, if you will, positive towards. My own person view is the following.

I tend to be an optimist except on Mondays. And so, as such, what I tend to think is I want to believe that there is going to be another golden age of the church. I do. But that's emotional. I have no idea. And so, sometimes I call myself an optimistic amillennialist, which we'll see in just a moment. Amillennialists tend to be a little more jaded and negative on the future of the world. I get it. That's my Monday.

Let's go to the final slide. The final slide is amillennialism. Now, I will say that amillennialism is perhaps the most widely held view among the Presbyterian and reformed church. It suffers from a misnomer. When you hear the word "amill," it thinks that it doesn't believe in any reign or there's a lack of a reign of Christ, or what do we do with a thousand years? But really, although not much better of a name, but inaugurated millennialism, meaning that at Christ's resurrection and establishment of the church, His reign began. And He is reigning in heaven and He is reigning on earth. But He's doing so from the throne room of heaven at the right hand of God the Father.

You see the present age, it would say that we are now in the millennium because the millennium is not seen as a literal thousand years. So, there is an already of experiencing the reign and promise of Christ. But there's also plenty of not yet. It does not try to situate particular historical events, wars, or nations, or people. It does not try to situate them within an eschatological teaching. Meaning, they don't see Russia or some other country as the great Satan. It doesn't try to pin down a world war as the beginning of the end times. It would reject any way or any possibility of trying to ascertain the actual date or timing of Christ's return. But we still look to the future when Christ returns and all will be fulfilled, and all will be consummated, and we will enjoy a relationship with the risen Christ coming again to restore all

things, a new heaven and a new earth. And those who know Him whether they are dead or alive, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, will rise and be resurrected and will be with Him. And those who are alive, too, will be with the Lord forever. And those who do not know the Lord both living and the dead, too, will come into judgment with the Lord. And they will either spend eternity with Christ as a gift of the work of salvation through Jesus Christ alone, or they will spend eternity apart from Him. Although knowing His existence, they will be separate from His grace and will experience His wrath.

These four views, believe it or not, are not all the views. They just get more intricate or they get more detailed. But I will say these are the four large views. Important to note that as it relates to post millennialism and amillennialism, there is not a separate track or will of God for Israel versus the church. For we hold in this church that the Scriptures teach that Israel and all the promises are fulfilled in the church. So, the church is now Israel. That no nation has favor in the eyes of God. It is His church that belongs to Him. That is the teaching and distinction from the other views.

These, believe it or not, all arose over a debate around the passage which I read earlier. When we read in 1 Thessalonians 4,

For this we declare to you by the word from the Lord that we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who fall asleep, for the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of a command, with the voice of an archangel, with the sound of the trumpet. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will always be with the Lord.

These verses have served as an ignition point for thousands and thousands of pages and books and sermons and radio and TV. This has been the fodder that has fed it which is why two weeks ago, we looked at the more intricate detail specifically as it relates to this text. But as we've heard the brief history, as we've done an overview of the four views, in this passage along with Revelation 20 and Matthew 24 and Daniel 7 and Daniel 9, what we have is a growth of an eschatological, industrial complex. There are books to be sold, churches to be started, ministries to begin and be supported around this kind of industry.

Where are we left as a church? What are your own views? Have you thought about this? So, as we come to this final point of the importance of theology – and this will be working towards the conclusion of where I'm going this morning is the following – first, as I read this passage as he writes to them and says to them, "I want you to encourage one another," notice what he does. He doesn't say, I'm going to encourage you with the details. I'm encouraging you with the fact of Christ's return.

And what it teaches me even as I prepared for this Sunday, even as I went through seminary, was examined on it, I am reminded – and I want to say this particularly to those who find themselves at home within the Presbyterian and reformed tradition, but I also say this to the church of Jesus Christ – when it comes to theology, we must begin with a humble approach. We must be humble in how we approach theology and the word and how we hold to our own theological convictions. That humble stance is a recognition that we study the context of the word of God, the original context in which these letters were written and why they were written. But humility is important because we can only do so much research. But the humility is also needed because of the following fact, though we might seek to study the original meaning, the original context, the writer, and all the original languages, we do so as interpreters who have our own context. We bring our own presupposition or our own views, our own world views to bear as we study it, meaning none of us in the history of the world ever come to the word of God without already held beliefs and biases. And that bias can be all kinds of things. So, we must recognize that we approach this with humility. And we ask the Holy Spirit and we seek the best resources that we can, but it is always from the position of humility.

Secondly, the importance of theology is we must avoid the spectrums. The spectrums are this: oh, this stuff doesn't matter, I'm not even going to worry about it. The other end of the spectrum is: no, I want to treat the Bible like a Google search and I'm going to get down and try to figure out all the detail and I'm going to get it all worked out into this system. But thanks be to God, your system nor my system saves us. It is Christ who saves us. You can be saved, you can know the Lord Jesus Christ before you've ever cracked open one theological text. If you profess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and you believe in your heart that He is the Lord and only through Him is salvation, you can know the Lord. More time has been spent in the history of the church with congregations that could not read than the history of the church that has spent time in its ability to read. It is Christ who saves, not our systems.

Does that mean I shouldn't study? Of course, that would be ridiculous. Yes, we ought to study and give ourselves to it because to say it doesn't matter is, quite frankly, a cop out. And to say that it doesn't shape how we live would be ignorant. So, it does matter. Let's ignore the spectrums of either ignoring it or thinking we can build a perfect system.

Third, a reminder of this, that we as the church of Jesus Christ are called to interpret the Scriptures humbly. And as we do so, we seek to explain and interpret – like I'm doing this morning – and we seek to study the Bible. In fact, Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 2 to rightly divide the word of truth. That is what I have been ordained to do along with pastor John and pastor PD. You, too, as a congregant are called to divide the word rightly, but to remember that the Bible cannot be used like a Google search or a phone book – if you still use such a thing – where we can find the exact answer that we're looking for.

So, what do we do? We recognize the place of theology, its importance. And while I believe that the Scriptures teach first and foremost, we are and we practice what we love before it is, we are what we think. What we think matters because what we think and believe shapes our practice. And so, an example of this. If you believe that it's all about seeing the individual saved and nothing else, you will miss the importance of why in the world you and I go to work Monday through Friday. The Lord is not just about saving individuals. He is about saving individuals to be a part of a corporate body to bring restoration to all things. And your belief as it relates to eschatology begins to shape how you view your work, your relationship with others, and your trust in the Lord. What we believe does shape the trajectory of our life, our practices, our habits, our hopes.

Which leads me to these final verses. 1 Thessalonians 5:1, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you." Guess what? Knowing the time doesn't matter. It doesn't mean we shouldn't study it. It means that's not the point of why he's writing. He says, "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." In fact, Jesus says these words, "But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the sun, but the Father only." Jesus is trusting the Father. We are called to trust the Father. It's not about the time or the season.

But what is it about? He says, verse 3, "While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." Here's what he's saying. We don't know when Christ will come again. It could be in the next ten minutes, it could be within the next 150 years. We don't know. But know this, we can't know it. So, all we can do is say, Lord, I want to be ready. And the only way to be ready is not to get your life in order, it's to ask the question, where is your peace? Notice what they're shouting. He says, "While people are saying 'There is peace and security.'" They're saying, there is peace and security outside of Christ, let's try to create it ourselves through nation states, through our zip codes, through our jobs, through our families, let's try to create peace and security that way.

So, my question for you is this, as we reach the end of this it says Christ is coming again and when He does, He's going to judge the living and the dead. Where is your peace and security? Where is your shalom? Where are you trying to build your well-being and your identity? If it is anywhere outside of

Christ, my only invitation to you is, Jesus invites you to Himself. He invites you into finding well-being, forgiveness, and grace, and mercy not just for our sin, but for all of life in Him alone.

And for those who are professing believers here this morning, what does it mean for us? It doesn't mean we don't study these things. It means we come back to that which is very clear, that you and I and all the earth are actually called to trust the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in His sovereign, providential, merciful, loving hand, and to hear the words of Scripture when it says in Micah 6:8, "O man, what does God require of you? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God." To do justly, to care for the orphan and the widow, to feed the poor, to give homes and housing for those who are homeless, to care for the sojourner, to be a generous people, and to seek justice, and to walk in mercy. Mercy is also this word meaning loving kindness, to love as you have been loved, to show mercy as you have been shown mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Lord, have mercy on us, for you are the Lord and not us. You are the good Father, not us. Have mercy on us, walk with us, fill us with your spirit that we may worship you. To walk humbly with our God is simply to see that all of life is worship. He gave it. He sustains it. And He will come again.

I know this has been expansive. I know it's been long. I started late. I did the best I could. Let's close in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word. I want to thank you for the patience of this people. I want to thank you for the riches of your word, the areas where there is great debate and lack of clarity, and beautiful mystery. Lord, help us to hold it with humility, trusting that you are the Father, trusting that you know, knowing that you've given us your Holy Spirit and you've called us to walk with you, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you. Help us to do this as the church of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.