

Study 4 Waiting for Christ's Coming

1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11

We should never cease to marvel that we know how our history will conclude, not in its detail but with respect to who will have the last word. Nothing less is meant by saying that Christ is King, a king who will return to complete the work he has begun. It is this claim that secured Christ's conviction (Matt. 26:63-66). It is alluded to on the day the church is born (Acts 2:20) and clearly articulated soon afterwards (Acts 3:21). It is this claim that got apostles into trouble or earned them disdain. However, the coming again of Jesus Christ is an essential part of Christian faith and proclamation. The great work God is about remains unfinished until Christ returns—as the next letter to this church makes clear (2 Thes. 1:6-10).

There is no snobbery in saying that we know how things will end. The whole matter of God's intervention on our behalf through his Son is the revelation of his grace. We were caught fighting God like the rest of mankind but found mercy. The moral validity of our situation is purchased by the death of our Redeemer—he died in our place. On the basis of his resurrection, we know death is defeated—our death, and that our expectation of a glorious future is entirely valid. Christ has shown, among all the leaders of this world, that he alone is worthy to reign. His fulfillment of many promises given to the prophets, particularly his resurrection from the dead, assure us that he will fulfill his promise to return and to restore all things.

Our passage shows that Christ's return is central to our faith. We may never encounter the particular problem Paul deals with here but can be grateful that the problem occurred because of the teaching Paul now gives. Some Christians have died before Christ has returned and the grief of their loved ones is compounded by the fear that they have missed the great day of salvation. They are not clear about the resurrection or its timing and Paul writes to allay their grief and give them knowledge with which to comfort one another.

After many years of understanding that the Lord's return may be at any time, potentially a long time from now, it is natural that our affections have been grasped by being with the Lord immediately at the point of death (as in 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:23) but it is clear that the major focus of hope in the New Testament is linked to Christ's return. How this works out remains unclear (for example, do we have bodies or not?) but it remains that the whole church cannot rest until Christ has done all he has promised to do (Rev. 6:10).

A second issue for us is that we live in a process oriented society, with all of its attendant benefits. However, the faith we profess will never come to its goal by a process but by a coming. We don't work from a principle to a conclusion but with a logic and practice that arise from an assured future. Without this, we may be in danger of finding that 'everything is meaningless'. Our meaning derives from how things will look on the last day, not how they appear now. It may be worth seeing if our faith 'temperature' is at the level required for good spiritual health, a level maintained by expectation of Christ's return.

So, we will encourage each other with what Paul tells us, first, about the Lord's coming (4:13-18) and about expecting his coming (5:1-11).

First, we grieve with hope. Grief remains because of painful separations and the inglorious business of dying and not seeing (yet) the fruits of our faith. But hope wins out because it is based on God's word and sustained in us by the Spirit—and by the comfort of these verses.

Second, Jesus died and rose again. Here is the tangible evidence of resurrection. Here also is the moral ground of our sharing in this great day. When we receive the truth that Christ died for us—for me, we are launched into the truth that our resurrection is as sure as his because God's

power to raise him is precisely the power that will raise us (Eph. 1:19-20). We have been baptized into the likeness of his death *and* resurrection (Rom. 6:5). We need not fear that we or other believers will miss the great day when faith is turned to sight because Christ will bring with him those who are sleeping—that is, have died.

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom. It couldn't handle the pace! We can be transformed from one degree of glory to another but this happens as we 'behold the Lord' that is, the resurrected Lord (2 Cor. 3:18) and know that on the last day, we will be like him.

Third, Christ's authority will be absolute. The sound of his arrival leaves no doubt as to who is in charge and that he brooks no rivals. Jesus himself summons the dead (cf. John 5:25-28; 11:43). The mention of the voice of an archangel and trumpets may all refer to this cry or be simultaneous but they all evoke prophecies of God's coming to defeat his enemies (cf. Exod. 19:16; Matt. 24:31-32; 1 Cor. 15:52; Rev. 1:10; 4:1). 'Jesus is Lord' will be on everyone's lips (1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). Elsewhere, this coming is linked with judgement but that is not Paul's point here. He is speaking for the encouragement of saints.

Fourth, we will be together. There will be no advantage for people remaining on the earth because the dead will be raised and the living survivors of life's perils will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52). Here is the double joy. Not only will we be with Christ but also with each other. In that day we will know truly that all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17) and communion will be full.

In a second matter, perhaps raised by a question from the believers, he talks about being ready, and in that sense, knowing what 'time' it is (5:1-11). Times and seasons are not for us to know (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7), chronologically speaking. Paul's point is that it is the time and season for us to be awake because, for believers, it is day, not night when thieves may attack. There is foreboding in the destruction that thieves may inflict, and also in the analogy of the sudden onset of birth pains. While the world blithely continues to seek its own pleasure, the day of the Lord will arrive without warning to bring about their destruction. The prophecies announcing God's day of power will be fulfilled as Christ comes to gather his people.

Paul does raise the matter of timing again in his second letter (2 Thes. 2:1-12) but in response to some who said it had come already—the ultimate in 'realized eschatology'—that is, imagining that how things are now is the full measure of what Christ can do! Paul's response is to show how evil must come to its full development. The second coming will not be to preserve us from trouble but the hope of it is meant to sustain us through it. The same principle is at work in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse (e.g. Mark 13:7).

Our being in the light of day should never cease to amaze us. We did not deserve this, or achieve this. 'Enlightenment' is a misnomer if we think to gain this from philosophers. Christ is the light of the world and it is he who has awakened us to his Father, to love, to calling and hope. This is walking in the daylight (as is acknowledging that we sin—1 John 1:7-9). We do not have mere knowledge but power—being transferred to the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Col. 1:13).

It is for this reason that we should never give ourselves over to dissipation but rather seek the light God gives us in Christ, be mindful of him, disciplined by him and expectant of his grace. Again, Paul says we should prefer faith, love and hope to the dangers lurking in the darkness.

Finally, as incentive to our living well, we are destined to salvation rather than destruction (also 2:12). The word suggests 'appointed to' but links with election, predestination and calling. God's setting his love on us is the source or our life, the shape and power of our life and its certainty. All this is *through* our Lord Jesus Christ and *with* him. This is not spelt out here but evokes other passages that point to our union with Christ. As it was for him, so it is for us. He died; we are dead. He rose; we are alive to God. He is coming in resurrection glory; we will be glorified with him. All this is true (reverting to his earlier analogy of sleeping as death) whether we remain until Christ returns or have died before he comes.