

Being Always With The Lord

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Steve Zeisler

The Scriptures have many things to say to believers who face grief and confusion at the unexpected death of Christian friends and family and we are going to look at some of these things from the fourth chapter of the book of I Thessalonians this morning. (This is a timely study following a week which saw the worst air disaster in U.S. aviation history and the death of Pope John Paul I after only 5 weeks in office.) We are also going to talk about the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus. In recent days the eyes of all the world have been focused on Israel which may be at one of the most important crossroads in its recent history. And the events that take place there bear directly on the timing of the return of Christ.

In our last study we discovered that in this letter Paul is most likely answering questions posed to him by the Thessalonian believers and apparently the question that he has come to at this point is "What will happen to those who have died knowing Christ?" This is a young and vigorous Thessalonian church. They were well taught and deeply concerned about the issues surrounding Jesus' return for them. In the months since Paul had left them apparently one or more of their number had died and some of them at least were concerned that those who had died would not participate in the rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Jesus. So Paul is asking that question at this point and he then proceeds to talk to them about evaluating themselves in the light of the return of Christ. Verse 13:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

There are two sections to this passage. In the first one verses 13 through 18 of chapter 4 Paul is directly answering the question that was asked of him. In the next section, verses 1 through 11 of chapter 5 he goes on to deal with the issue of self-control and alertness in the Thessalonian church. Sorrow at the death of loved ones in Christ is the theme of the first section, therefore self-control and alertness is the theme of the second section. And they follow a similar outline- they both begin with an introductory word. In verse 13 Paul says, "We do not want you to be uninformed..." about this issue, i.e. he understands that many of them did not know the things he was about to tell them. They were ignorant of those truths, and so he proceeds to lay

these truths out. Then in verse 1 of chapter 5 he raises an issue that they do know about "Now as to the times and the epochs brethren you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well..." So both of these sections have an introductory comment; and both of them then proceed to teach their themes; and finally both focus in on two phrases that are really the heart of both passages.

In the first section the final phrase is at the end of verse 17, "...thus we shall always be with the Lord " and the second section focuses on the final phrase of verse 10 "...that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him." Paul's emphasis throughout is to impart information about the Second Coming of Jesus. Learning about those events and how they apply really only make sense and only has bearing on the lives of people who are already in a living relationship with Christ. Being "always with the Lord" clearly implies that you are with the Lord right now_ that you extend what is true of you now to include the face-to-face day that we go before him. The important thing to realize is that none of this is useful to people who are not in a living and intimate relationship with Jesus right now. Finally each of these sections ends with a command: verse 18 "Therefore comfort one another with these words"; and verse 11 of chapter 5 "Therefore encourage one another and build up one another just as you also are doing."

Paul begins this first section by saying, "Do not grieve as do the rest who have no hope." The thing we are not to do, that we are free from doing is to grieve as the hopeless grieve. We do not need to give in to the kind of grim anguish that recognizes that those who have died are forever lost are forever cut off from us. As Christians we may feel sorrow (Jesus cried at the death of Lazarus); we may feel loss in knowing that there will be a time in our life where we will not be able to share, talk counsel laugh and travel with the ones we love but that is only temporary. There will come a day when we are reunited with them and we can catch up on all the things that have gone on in the meantime.

We may feel sorrow and loss but we need not feel hopelessness that the relationship is forever cut off from us. The word Paul uses to describe those who have died is "...those who have fallen asleep." I think that is an accurate description of what happens to Christians who have died. When someone is asleep you cannot communicate with him you cannot associate with him. But even the deepest sleepers wake up eventually and a relationship can begin a second time.

I was talking to a couple in our church who are in the Navy. The husband is scheduled to be sent alone to Adak, Alaska, for a six months tour of duty. I am sure they will suffer sorrow and loss and long to be together but that six months will end some day and they will be reunited again. And as we will see in a minute when "agape" love is at the center, reunions can be very exciting times indeed. So that is Paul's first point: we do not have to grieve as the hopeless; we will be reunited with those who have fallen asleep in Christ.

Now there may be some among us who are "uninformed," as Paul says, about some of these things. His clear statement to those who do not know is that those who have died in Christ, those whom you love, those who belong to Jesus, who have gone to be with him, will be present at the rapture of the Church. Paul is very clear about that (verses 16-17): "...the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air . . . '

I suspect that most of us were not in the condition of the "uninformed" in this area. But there is another uncertainty, there is another question that Paul raises on this issue, and that is in verse 14: "...if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." The "if" leaves this question open. Some believe, but some may not. Since what we believe concerns a living Person whom we can know and communicate with and trust, believing in him is more than just nodding our heads, more than just agreeing to some theological formula, it implies a kind of love relationship, a certainty, a walk with the Lord. That is what Paul has in view here. I think this concern is the one that ought to be applied to us more readily. Most of us knew the former information. It may be the case that there are some here who do not believe in an intimate way resulting in a living walk with Christ, that he both died and was raised, and you will see that emphasis all the way through. That is what Paul means in verse 17, "...thus we shall always be with the Lord." The kind of walk with Christ that is true now is the kind of walk that should be true then when we go to be with him. Verse 16 says, "...the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout..." We need to know him, because it is he himself, that same Person, who will return for us.

You have a lot of options today for dealing with doubts concerning eternity and death. Many people are pinning their hopes on the advance of science-- that some kind of suspended animation, or cloning or something will bring immortality to them. Others are hoping for "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius," or a "Close Encounter of the Third Kind," or some other answer for the question in their hearts concerning their own deaths and the deaths of the people they know. And if we hold the truth about the return of Jesus for us with the same degree of belief as those philosophies are held we are not much better off. If we only know about the return of Christ as a philosophical issue we are not in the place described here in this letter. It is the Lord himself, that Person who holds together the whole universe, who walked and talked and healed and loved people when he was here on earth who is the. One who is coming back, and we need to know him in an intimate way.

One other thing I would like to point out about this section is the vivid drama, the excitement that will surround the Second Coming of Jesus. I do not think that Paul in this passage is trying to lay out in detail the consecutive order of events that will occur before the return of Christ, but what he does do is give us a picture of the magnificence of that day: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air..." It is going to be a powerful scene. The Lord himself in all his magnificence will descend from the clouds. There will be a massive shout, heard around the world undoubtedly, the voice of an archangel, this blast of a trumpet, and then clouds of people, hundreds of thousands, millions of people going to be with him in a place of glory in the heavens.

I do not know if you like parties or not. I do, and as I was trying to picture this event it occurred to me that of all the "where it's at" gatherings of people that ever occurred in history, of all the "in" things to be in on, this is going to be the one you would not want to miss. There will be fellowship, joy, interesting people- Abraham, Ruth. Daniel, Andrew, Augustine, and Martin Luther your Sunday School teacher who prayed for you when you were a child- all of us will be there. Your grandmother will be there. All kinds of terrific people will be there.

In Isaiah 25 we read:

And the Lord of Hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."

As an aside I would like to mention that what Paul was talking about here is the problem of Christians who have died, but many of us face another problem-- that of those people we have loved who, for all we know, died not knowing Christ. I would like to suggest that even then it is the return of Jesus that is our hope concerning them, because Isaiah, and John in the Book of Revelation, says that when he comes again he will wipe the tears from the eyes of the hurting. He himself, the Master of the Universe, will bend over and wipe the tears from the eyes of those who sorrow. And the answer to our sorrow about anyone's death is that we will be with Jesus when he comes back again.

And there is something else we should remember that Jesus taught in a parable recorded in the 20th chapter of Matthew. We are told that we ought to expect eleventh hour conversions. People will come to know the Savior at the last possible moment. Many of us will be surprised at who is there, people we had no idea would be there may, at the last possible moment, have chosen to know the Savior. So our hope, especially our hope for those we know died in Christ- but even those who may not have- is that Jesus is coming back. Paul says, "...comfort one another with these words. "

Now having answered their question, Paul in his insightful way recognizes that when people think about the

end of history and about the death of their friends and loved ones, they are in a position to evaluate themselves more clearly than at other times. So Paul goes on to teach the Thessalonians something about how they ought to live in light of the fact that Jesus is coming back. He says in verse 2, "...you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

Paul draws two pictures there to highlight what they know about the return of Christ. The first thing they know is that destruction will come unexpectedly. All through history people have had their property and their possessions taken away by taxes, by war, and by other things that can be seen coming ahead of time. But when a thief takes these things it is totally unexpected. If you had known he was coming you could have barred the door. Thieves attack at times when we are most confident that we are secure. When the world is patting itself on the back crying, "peace and safety!" at that moment Jesus will break into history again to take over and exercise his rule. At the very moment that the offer of Satan to this world of fulfillment and security, and his answers to the age-old questions that have baffled the human race are accepted, at that moment the thief will come in the night, the Lord Jesus will return.

The second picture Paul draws is that of a woman in labor, and the point he is making here is that once these events begin they are unstoppable; once the drama begins to unfold it will move relentlessly to a conclusion. That is his point. In talking to my wife about the birth of our children I know that there comes a time after hours and hours of labor when a woman would give her life savings for eight hours off to just rest- "If only I could sleep and gather my strength again, I could continue." But there is no reprieve; there is no time out; there is no escape; it is relentless. Paul is making the point here that once these events have begun, there is no chance to drop back and gather your wits and reorient yourself.

We live in a world, as Paul sees it, where night and day exist at the same time. Even though that is, presumably, physically impossible, spiritually it is possible. Most of the world has no access to illumination. People in the world do not know or believe the promises of God. They do not know the actions he has taken in history; they do not know what is coming in the future. They are in the dark. But there exists in the same world believers in Christ who have access to illumination, who live in the day. We know the promises of God; we know the heart of God; we know the actions he has taken in history; we know where we are headed. We can see the landscape around us so we can avoid the pitfalls that are in front of us.

The picture that came to my mind when I was trying to imagine this was the sixth chapter of 2 Kings. Elisha and his servant were in a city surrounded by an army that was bent on destroying them, but Elisha was relaxed, he was observing the scenery, smiling a little bit to himself, while his servant was dithering around, losing his grip and wondering what in the world they were going to do because they were outnumbered by such impossible odds. Then Elisha prayed that God would open the eyes of his servant. When he did, the servant saw that there were chariots of fire manned by angels surrounding the army so that he and Elisha were in no danger whatsoever. Elisha said: "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

Paul is saying here that as Christians we can see the landscape; we can see what is on the hills; we live with an opportunity to know reality that the rest of the world is blind to. And yet the darkness is seductive; it is reaching out to enfold us. We know there is a war going on because we are told to put on our armor in verse 8, "...having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation." We will very likely be sucked into the life of the "night" people if we do not arm ourselves, if we do not protect ourselves. We are very likely to live like them, to lose our vision of what is going on around us and where history is headed, unless we protect ourselves and unless we are very serious about the life we live in Christ. We will find ourselves drifting toward the "darkness" and living in the "night" and not seeing what is illumined before us.

People sleep at night, Paul says, and they get drunk at night. Both of those are helpful pictures describing insensitivity, lack of alertness, and unawareness. When you are asleep you do not know what is going on. When you are drunk you are insensitive. You cannot respond. People in the "dark" sleep and get drunk, and we are apt to find ourselves drawn toward that unless we are protected by the armor, as Paul suggests here, of "faith, hope and love."

I would like to suggest some ways that you might observe growing drowsiness in your life, how you might see yourself accepting the offer of a drink from a smiling and gladhanded servant of hell. Drowsiness begins, or may have already begun, when you see yourself never quite having time to pray, when there is always something more important than the time you spend with Christ. Days and weeks and months go by and there is no life, there is no interest in a love relationship with Jesus any more. It never quite seems to fit into your schedule.

Another way that you might observe a growing "darkness," a growing sleepiness, a growing lack of alertness in your life, is to see months and years, even decades go by without sharing the good news of Jesus with your family, your friends, or your neighbors. It never quite seems to be the right time: "Well, I'm waiting for the right time; I'm waiting for the door to be opened." But it never gets opened, and pretty soon decades have gone by and the right time to bring the subject up never arrives. Perhaps that is evidence that you are sleepier than you thought, that you are drunker than you thought.

Another evidence of this seduction could be the envy of the unrighteous. Perhaps you work with someone who is dishonest, yet he is awfully successful, wealthy, respected, and powerful. Somehow you find it hard not to envy that person, not to wish to be like him. Although you might never say so out loud, deep down you think, "Boy, I'd love to be like that person; I'd love to have what he has. Jet-set living may be based at heart on rebellion against God, but those people sure have a good time. I wish I could do like that; I wish I didn't have the limitations of scripture to slow me down." Slowly but surely we start to envy and admire and wish to be like the unrighteous. We grow sleepier and drunker, and the "darkness" becomes more characteristic of us; we lose the illumination of the "day." Paul's point here is that "...you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober..." "But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him."

We are back again to that central point: Jesus died for us. Our destiny is wrapped up with what happened when Jesus went to the cross for us. Paul says that it is those people who walk closely with Jesus now, who love him, follow him, obey him, care for him and proclaim him, those people for whom Jesus is alive right now, who are going to be with him-- and that will only be an extension of what is true already. That ought to be our condition. It only makes eternal what is true already of us "...that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. "

Finally, I want to call attention to the commandments we are given following Paul's description of these things. The commandment in 4:18: "Therefore comfort one another with these words"; the commandment in 5:11 is a repeat of verse 18 (by the way, it does not look like that in the New American Standard Version, but it is exactly the same phrase): "Therefore encourage [comfort] one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing."

We have great news. Our destiny is certain. Our opportunity is to walk with a living Lord who will return for us some day, and not just return for us but return for us in power in the most exciting reunion imaginable. We do not need to fear death. We have consolation for the hurt and the end of all things, "therefore comfort one another" with those. Realize that it is your responsibility to go to those who are hurting, to those who are sliding, to those who are confused, and bear witness of this truth to them; comfort them, hold them up, console them. And recall and know that facing the end of things is a time for evaluation, a time for questions, a time to see yourself the way you really are

Build one another up, strengthen one another, face one another with difficulty if you have to, and hurt for the moment if it is necessary, but see that your brothers and sisters are built up. Do not let them be seduced by the darkness. Do not let them become drowsy. Do not let them fall asleep and not be alert and have them slide away from an intimacy with Christ that prepares them for his return.

Prayer

Lord, we ask that you will create in us responsive hearts to do what you have said, that you will make of us the kind of people who believe and walk near to your heart, who will reach out to those around and promote their spiritual life and encourage them in their walk and console them when they are hurting. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Steve Zeisler

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