

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 13 to 5, verse 11 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 labour pangs come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief, for you are all children of light, children of the day.

We are not of the night, or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.

[1 : 34] 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. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

Therefore encourage one another, and build one another up, just as you are doing. In the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, we arrive at some of the main teaching of the letter.

As Gordon Fee observes, there are suggestions that this teaching, or at least aspects of it, is being received by the Thessalonians for the first time. Paul doesn't use the language of reminder, or suggest that they do not need further teaching, as he does in chapter 5 verse 1.

Rather, his concern is that they are not uninformed. The matter in question concerns the resurrection of the dead in Christ. It is possible that the Thessalonians interpreted their present sufferings as the sufferings leading up to Christ's coming.

Indeed, Christ would come in judgment in Jerusalem in AD 70 and establish his kingdom to a new degree. However, the death of some members of the church before this time would clearly be a cause of great distress and uncertainty for the Thessalonians.

[2 : 50] The expectation of the near return of Christ, in some manner, might provoke these concerns on the part of the Thessalonians. Although there doesn't seem to be desperate anticipation, and expectation of the full eschatological reality dawning in that moment in time, they are awaiting something, and they are uncertain of how to relate to the deaths of some of their members before that time comes.

Now, AD 70 clearly did not realize the hope of the future resurrection of the dead in Christ. Anyone who would have placed all of their eschatological hopes on that event would have found themselves sorely disappointed, despite the great significance of the event.

In scripture, there are anticipations of final judgment in the middle of history. In these events, the great and final horizon comes into view, often in a way that relates it directly to events on the nearer horizon.

We could perhaps compare this to the way that, looking out from an elevated vantage point, distinct mountain ranges, many miles divided from each other, can seem to be as one. In like manner, more imminent fulfilments of prophecy confuse on the horizon with more distant ones.

This isn't just a misperception. Earlier deliverances in history actually foreshadow later ones. And if we think that the fulfilment of a prophecy entirely terminates on its most immediate referent, we will often not only be disappointed, but be under-reading the text.

[4 : 13] The Exodus, for instance, foreshadows later and greater exoduses. It foreshadows the return from exile in the time of the prophets. But the force of the prophecies concerning a new Exodus do not exhaust themselves in the return from exile.

They also await the death and resurrection of Christ. And then they also await AD 70, and the final coming. The New Testament often interprets Old Testament prophecies in this way, recognising that several successive mountain ranges of fulfilment can be present in the horizon of a single prophecy.

That single prophecy may refer to a more immediate event, but it refers to it in a way that does not give full resolution of its prophetic force in that coming event, but awaits further events beyond that for its fuller fulfilment.

The fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus in his body is a basis for belief in the resurrection of those who fall asleep in Christ. Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have died.

His resurrection assures us of ours. Our bodies are connected with his by the Spirit, and in the rite of baptism that fact is sealed to us. It is only in the light of the awakening of the resurrection that death can be spoken of as an event of falling asleep.

[5 : 29] It is truly remarkable to think about our death as a falling asleep. But as we know that we will one day be woken up, it is appropriate to do so. For this reason we do not grieve as those without hope.

We still grieve, but we grieve as people who have hope and expectation of a final resurrection. Paul gives them a word of Christ himself. He might have received this teaching from those who had witnessed Jesus during his ministry, or he may be referring to something he received by a special revelation.

The teaching that Paul gives comes directly from Christ himself then. Death does not disadvantage those who die before the coming of Christ. Rather, the resurrection will be a reunion of the dead and those still alive.

Paul describes on the basis of the Lord's own teaching, the coming of the Lord in a way that reminds us of Old Testament events. For instance, Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 to 20.

On the morning of the third day, there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

[6 : 43] Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. This theophany at Sinai provides something of a paradigm for thinking about the coming of Christ.

The Lord descends, and Moses ascends, and they meet in the air at the top of this mountain. We might also think of passages such as Psalm 47 verse 5.

God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Jesus also has talked concerning this event in John chapter 5 verses 25 to 29 for instance.

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

[7 : 53] Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming, when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

In that passage, Jesus connects two sorts of resurrection events, the raising of people from spiritual death with the word, and the final resurrection by the summons of Christ.

And such a passage, I believe, helps us to understand the way that events can become fused on the eschatological horizon. When you read, an hour is coming, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live, you think, this is the final resurrection, but then, as part of that, I've missed out some words, and is now here.

There is something already happening that is bringing this event to pass, and that event is not actually the final resurrection, it's an anticipation of it, and there's a future hour coming that Jesus also speaks about, and so the initial referent of these words is one that anticipates a greater fulfillment at some point in the future.

The trumpet call is associated with the year of jubilee. It is also associated with the return from exile, or with deliverance. See, for instance, Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13, And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria, and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

[9 : 19] And in Zechariah chapter 9 verses 14 to 16, We might also think, the way that the coming of Christ in judgment in AD 70 is described, in Matthew chapter 24 verses 30 to 31, Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Now, if this sounds like the last coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the resurrection of all to us, we could clearly be excused. It certainly does sound like that.

Yet in the context, it can only refer to an event that occurs within the generation that that prophecy is given. And as we look back in the Old Testament, we can see similar language being used of events that were fulfilled in known history.

So it's clearly not the final judgment. But yet it does anticipate the final judgment. It's described in a way that is so powerful, and charged with cosmic import, that it seems to demand something more than just the destruction of AD 70 for its fulfillment.

Now, the initial fulfillment is the destruction of AD 70, but the horizon that we are seeing there expands to include the greater horizon of the end of all things. The coming of Christ in the clouds is also related to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14.

[11 : 16] I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the ancient days, and was presented before him, and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. This is also reminiscent of Jesus' own ascension in Acts chapter 1 verses 9 to 11.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. The final resurrection involves a participation in Christ's own ascended rule.

It doesn't say that we are caught up to heaven. Rather, there is a meeting of ascending earth and descending heaven in the air. Heaven and earth are united. Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 4 speaks of this.

[12 : 25] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. The Thessalonians are charged to encourage each other with these promises, which is exactly what we should be doing on a regular basis.

Paul then addresses them concerning times and seasons, about which they had already been taught. The day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. It's a robbery, it's a disruption of people's false sense of peace and security.

It takes from them all the things that they have invested their life in. It's something that snatches people away. One is taken, the other is left. It is described as a sort of pain that can come upon them, like labour pangs for a pregnant woman.

[13 : 34] There is a new age about to be born, and this new birth will occur through birth pangs, through pain and suffering and tribulation. And people must be prepared for that, so that it does not come upon them suddenly and unexpectedly.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they are the children of the day. The day that is coming is our day. It is the day of the Lord, and we are the people of the Lord.

As a result, we are wakeful people, not sleeping in the insensitivity of sin and dissipation. We are sober people, not people who are drunk, and people who have lost their senses.

We keep our wits about us. In sobriety and alertness, we await our deliverance. We await the coming day, the day that belongs to us, and the day to which we belong.

We are children of the light. As children of the light, we bring something of the light of this coming dawn, this coming day, in the way that we behave. We are as light in a dark place, as we bear the light of Christ within us, and we testify to the coming dawn that he will bring.

[14:36] Seeing us, people should know what to expect. On the basis of our belonging to the day, Paul teaches us that we must be sober. And then he offers a military, and perhaps also a priestly image.

We put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. This might be related to the clothes of the high priest. It's also the military garment that someone would wear going into battle.

God himself dresses in such a way to act on behalf of his people. In Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17, he puts on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head.

He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Just as we are light in the world, reflecting the fact that God himself is light, so we are those who dress for battle, as our Lord dresses for battle, to bring salvation for his people.

We are the army that will be joined with him on that great day, caught up in that summons to meet him in the air. God has destined us to receive salvation on the coming day. We can take great assurance in this fact.

[15 : 41] It is his purpose that we make it through tribulation, that we end up joined with him and the saints raised up, celebrating in joyful military assembly, the return of his son.

The future reality of this day, this dawning that we are waiting for, is something that governs all of our life here and now. It's the orienting reality of the entirety of our existence.

As a result, we must always be building up and encouraging each other, always directing each other to this coming day. This is what we're waiting for. This is what we're about.

We should also observe that the way that we are dressed is one that integrates the three core Christian virtues, faith, hope, and love. These are the things that will prepare us for that day.

These are the things that will help us to stand firm here and now, so that we are both ready for, anticipating, and reflecting the reality of that day that is to come. A question to consider, what are some ways in which we can follow Paul's instruction here and be encouraging each other even more than we do with the light of the coming day of the Lord's return?

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