



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Getting Ready for Company

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 9
Tim Badal | March 6, 2016 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11



In this series we've been learning from Paul's letters to the first-century church in Thessalonica in northern Greece—a city which still exists today. Paul wrote them after spending time there, leading them to the cause of Jesus Christ and bringing them to an understanding that He could be their Savior and Lord.

After being driven out of the city by haters of the gospel, Paul heads down to the city of Athens in southern Greece. He wants to know what's going on in the lives of these people he's come to love and care for deeply. So he sends his young disciple Timothy to see how things are going. Are they still walking in the ways of God? Are they still in fellowship with one another? Are they living out the commands of Jesus Christ to serve, care for and love one another, as well as to be lights in a dark world?

Timothy comes back and reports, "Yes, they're doing great work. They're loving one another and doing all the things you, Paul, told them they needed to do as followers of Christ." So Paul sits down and writes this letter—a letter of affection and concern for his friends, a letter in which he answers questions regarding the issues of life and—as we're going to learn today—even the issues of death and the future.

Paul has spent a lot of time telling the people in Thessalonica that they need to be ready to honor God and serve Him, living each day to the glory of God. Over the next couple weeks, we're going to be finishing this first letter and moving to the second letter Paul wrote to this church. He wants to prepare them for the day—a day in which we all will find ourselves—the day of our death. What's going to happen when we come to the end of our lives? Whether we're young and don't expect to die, or as we grow older and see the end coming, how are we to be ready for meeting our Lord?

But Paul also speaks to a second group of people, those who are living in expectation of the coming of the Lord, because Jesus Christ has promised He will come back for His people. Paul says, "I want you to be ready for these two events, because everybody will fall into one of these two categories. Either you need to be ready to know what your spiritual condition will be when you die, or you need to be ready for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

In the 15 years since the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and because He had said, "I'm coming soon"—it would seem that these Thessalonians, who were young in their faith and new to Christianity, had somehow gotten in their minds that He was going to come back before they would die. Here's the problem: As time continued to move on, some of them started to die. And their question was, "What happens to our dearly beloved, these saints who love Jesus with all their hearts? What happens to them in death? If Jesus comes back after they die, what's going to happen with them?" These were important questions, because they involved people they loved.

The Thessalonians absolutely loved Jesus. We learned earlier that they had left their gods to serve the one true and living God. In first-century Greece, the culture was inundated with the ideas of Greek mythology. They had all kinds of gods, and their whole lives were centered on trying to please these gods who were a capricious group. If the people did what was right, the gods would show benevolence. If not, they would show great wrath. The gods were intertwined with human life and no one wanted to be on their wrong side.

One of the favorite vacation spots of first-century Thessalonians was Mt. Olympus, some 70 miles away, which was the residence of these gods. The people would go on pilgrimages to pay homage to them, pleading with the gods to show them favor. But these believers had turned away from all that to the true God, a God Who says, "Though I could pour out My wrath and judgment upon you, because of the work of Jesus Christ that you've received, you are no longer aliens and strangers to Me, but you are My friends, My sons and daughters."

So they were impacted by this impressive ministry of Paul and the gospel. But it doesn't alleviate the questions they have. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you know your mind and heart are filled with questions. It doesn't mean you don't have faith. You just don't fully understand it yet. So this text has questions. What are we to make of these things in life? What does God have to say regarding these truths?

In today's passage we find Paul's answers—really, God's answers—to the questions at hand. Let's read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

^{5:1} Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 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. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Imagine yourself in this situation: Your heart is pounding at a high rate of speed. Your multi-tasking ability is in high gear. You have all the kids working around the house at warp speed. Time is short and there is so much to be done. You try to take every shortcut you can. During all of it you're trying to hide every mess that's been around your house for the last week. You're doing all you can to get things cleaned up. And then at a moment when you're still not prepared, you hear one of the kids yell, "They're here!" You grab anything around you that's left on the ground or on the counter and you throw it into that one closet we all have—the one we can barely shut—and pray it's not going to swing open and hurt somebody because it's jam-packed with junk. Then you go to the front door and greet your guests, sweating bullets, and calmly say, "It's good to have you here."

At one point or another, all of us have found ourselves unprepared for company, unprepared for the visit of someone important. There are several reasons for this. The Badals have had this happen far more times than we want to admit. One of the reasons this happens is we're just busy doing other things. We know people are coming over, but at the end of the day we've got busy lives. The calendar is full of things. We're going here and there. We're busy people and we're ill-prepared for that moment when people are going to come to the house.

Second, what we envision we can fix in an hour would actually take a construction crew three weeks to accomplish. The house was never in good enough shape for company, yet we thought we could take care of it in an hour. We were ill-prepared because we hadn't done the needed maintenance to prepare the house for our guests.

Finally—and this always seems to get me in trouble—we always think we have more time than we really do. We think there'll be time for this and time for that, so we spend our time on other things. Then we look at the clock and it becomes our enemy. We're not ready for the visit. We're not ready for company.

The Thessalonians were ill-prepared for the visit of two guests: the guest of death that all people face, and the coming of the greatest Guest of all time and history, Jesus Christ. Paul says, "I want you to be ready for company, because if you're not, this

isn't just going to make a group of people at your front door feel a little awkward when you ask them to wash the dishes still in the sink." I've been there, done that. They'll understand.

Whether you're Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—whatever denomination you are—all Christians agree on these truths. First, at the point of death we all face judgment. Every man, woman and child will face judgment, standing before an almighty God to give an account for how they lived their lives. Second, we all agree that Jesus Christ is coming back. We can differ about the time and the method, and some of the nuances around it, but we all agree that He's going to come a second time. This time, however, He's not coming as a cooing baby in a manger. He's going to come as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to exact judgment on evil and sin.

Are we prepared for that? We learn today that the Thessalonians were ill-prepared for that moment, and the text speaks to all Christians—whether in the 1st century or the 21st century—who find themselves not ready. The same reasons you're not ready for company are the same reasons many of us aren't prepared for the coming of our Lord, or even the coming of our own death, when we will stand before God. We're busy doing other things. We know deep down inside that someone is showing up, that Jesus is coming back. But we find ourselves filling our calendars with all sorts of temporal things. Our lives are in chaos.

Here's what we think. I used to think this as a younger adult. "I can live how I want for a certain period of time, and as I get older I'll start cleaning things up. As mortality gets more likely, I'll clean up my life—before it's too late." But as we learn in the text, we don't know the hour of our death or the time of the coming of the Lord. So we gamble our eternal state.

Finally, we think we'll have more time. There will be people at their death who will have all kinds of regret, thinking, "I wish I would have had more time." There will be those at the coming of the Lord who will say, "But wait a minute. I wasn't ready." Jesus tells a parable of ten women who are waiting for the groom to come and some of them are ill-prepared. They run out of oil for their lamps and aren't ready for the coming of the groom. Jesus says we must all be watchful and prayerful for the coming of the Son of Man.

1. The problems we face as human beings.

Before Paul gives the answer concerning how to prepare, he addresses two problems we face as human beings. We need to understand the problems before we can understand the solution. Throughout this letter he has presented a single truth, which is that the gospel is our answer. Whatever the problem, whatever our struggle, no matter what our background or nationality, no matter what's in our bank account—the gospel of Jesus Christ is our answer. It tells us that God came to earth, lived a holy and perfect life, died the ransom death for us on the cross and became our Substitute. By accepting His salvation, we can have eternal life in Him.

But the gospel has many different facets. It isn't just a simple insurance card if something goes wrong. It affects all of who we are. Just as the Thessalonians sought help from Paul and from God, we do too. That's why we pick up this book—the Bible—every week and ask God to answer our questions. To help us understand how we are to see life and death and the things of the future and the past. Paul says when we look to the gospel we will see things about ourselves. Like a mirror, it shows us our imperfections and areas that need to be fixed.

So he places the mirror before the people and says, "The first thing I want you to see about human beings is that we have an enemy." That enemy is found in what I like to call the hopelessness of death. We live by a motto that's important for two reasons today. First, we know there are two givens in life: death and taxes. Taxes are due in a little over a month. Don't forget that! I figure you're all good citizens and will pay your taxes, so I'm going to leave that alone.

But let's deal with death. Paul wants to answer some questions the people had regarding the issue of death. There were people dying around them and they wanted to know what happens to Christians who die. In light of Christ's death, burial and resurrection, what will happen to followers of this Lord Who has died, Who went into a grave and Who came out? This same Jesus walked in front of His friend Lazarus' grave and pronounced, "Lazarus, come forth!" And after being in the grave four days, Lazarus came out of the tomb. What's going to happen to followers of Jesus Christ when they die?

Paul's answer is this: "I don't want you to be uninformed. I don't want you to be ignorant of these facts. Let me tell you some things about death." Quite frankly, death is the most horrible thing we face as humans, right? There are a lot of bad things in our lives, a lot of things that can drive us crazy. But death has no competition with regard to sorrow and pain. Death goes against everything we know about life. It shakes the very foundation of those who are gripped by it.

My life has been shaped by a single moment when I was 14 years old: the death of my older brother—16-year-old Chris—who died in a car accident. I remember that day vividly—unlike any other day I've ever lived in my 39 years on this planet. My brother had gone to a youth group event through this church. It was a Sunday night, and he was supposed to be home around 11:00. But it was the first night my mother had ever fallen asleep while any of us were out. She woke up the next morning and still Chris wasn't home.

Of course, anything could have taken place. Chris was a popular kid who had always had friends. He was probably at a friend's house. It was in September, so I was heading off to school as a freshman at Hinckley-Big Rock. My parents told me to get on the bus and head to school, and said, "If you see your brother, tell him he's a dead man." Right? That's what we say. He's in trouble. You don't not show up at home. It was uncharacteristic.

So my parents were calling around, trying to figure out where Chris was. I headed to school thinking, "Boy, my brother's in a lot of trouble." [It's always great when your brother is in trouble, right? It's always fun when you get to see that.] So I went to school, and unknown to me, some of my classmates' parents had taken my brother's body out of the car wreck, so word had already gone around school and I saw people talking and I was hearing his name. I thought, "Boy, Chris must really be in some trouble."

Then one of the teachers came into my math class, third hour, and said, "Hey, Tim, they need you in the office." I came out of class and looked down the hallway. I saw my dad and thought, "Okay, Chris is really in trouble. Dad's at school." You know your dad doesn't usually show up at school. Then I saw the principal and the guidance counselor. Both of them were crying. Again, my thought was, "Boy, my brother really did a bad thing if he made the principal cry. My goodness, this will be an epic story."

I walked the long hallway to get to my dad and he said, "We need to go home." I said, "Well, where's Chris? Is he in trouble?" He said, "We need to get home." My dad tried not to tell me in front of all the kids now passing between periods that I'd lost my brother. We walked out. At the front of the school building that I still drive by every day, Dad looked at me and said, "Son, I've got to tell you some very hard news. Chris is dead."

If you've experienced the death of a close loved one, especially in that kind of violent way, you understand the absolute pit of darkness you fall into in that moment. I remember thinking it was the most gorgeous September day—one of those days when the weather is just beautiful—and I remember feeling this utter contrast of what was taking place. I remember the five-minute trip home, as well as all the things that went through my mind. I watched my younger brother who was in the car with us just bawling his eyes out because it was starting to really sink in to him. He had heard the news much sooner than I had.

We got home and heard the most horrific noise I've ever heard in my life. I saw my mom in the foyer of our house, on the ground, pleading at the feet of two Kane County Sheriff's officers. She was saying, "Quit lying. Bring me my son!" I thought, "What has happened? What has just taken place?" We were a happy family. Everything was going fine. We had our problems and issues and concerns, but we weren't ready for this.

Death is a horrific thing. I've only begun to understand the loss of a son, now that I have three of my own. Oh, my goodness—the pain and sorrow my parents must have felt. The agony. To lose a brother is one thing; to lose your firstborn son is quite another. Death is an absolutely horrific thing. And the Thessalonians are saying, "Wait a minute. We have loved ones who've died. What do we do with this? Where does our faith come into play with this?"

Counselor Jay Adams puts it this way:

Grief may be called a life-shaking sorrow over loss. Grief tears life to shreds; it shakes one from top to bottom. It pulls us loose. We come apart at the seams. Grief is nothing less than a life-shattering loss. The English word "bereaved" literally is to be broken up. During grief, other emotions like anger, guilt and fear are often involved, and they get tangled together with deep penetrating soul sorrow.

So, Paul, how are you going to answer this? How are you going to look at the mom who lost her son? How are you going to look at the husband who lost his wife? How are you going to look at the kids who no longer have a mom and dad? Where does the gospel have an answer for this?

Paul says this: "We grieve, but we do not grieve as those who do not have hope." He separates the two. He says there are those who grieve who have hope, and there are those who grieve who do not have hope. I find it quite amazing that Paul separates the Christian from the unbeliever, not in triumph but in tragedy. That means we have an opportunity, not in our triumphs—

everybody is happy in triumphs. Human experience says we all do well in triumphs. But how will the Christian who's been changed by the gospel live out tragedy? That's a completely different thing.

I want you to notice a couple things Paul says in this text. Number one, he does not say that Christians—even though they have hope—shouldn't grieve. Our family grieved. We struggled. I'll tell you, it was brutal. The last part of Jay Adams's quote conjures up all the emotions again. For at least a year after the accident, we never knew where any of us were, whether we were having a good day or a bad day. So we just walked on egg shells, because our emotions were all over the place. We struggled.

Here's the thing. Paul doesn't say, "All right. Because you have the gospel, because you're people of faith, you're not going to grieve. So just smile. So-and-so died. Smile. Hey, Jesus is Lord." I once heard a pastor say—and he obviously hasn't lost anybody close—"Faith-filled people don't grieve." I disagree with him wholeheartedly. That's just not true.

King David grieved for days at the loss of his infant son who was born to him from Bathsheba. Jesus looked at the tomb of his friend Lazarus and saw all that was going on. The shortest verse in the Bible points to the humanity of Jesus, Who though He was God, wept (John 11:38). He was filled with grief. In Philippians, the Apostle Paul says his friend Epaphroditus was dying and he wanted to go back home. But Epaphroditus recovered from his deathbed and Paul says, "What a relief it is to know my friend isn't dying anymore. It was more than I could bear."

Grief is something that is true for the believer in Christ and the unbeliever alike. But even though grief is not prohibited, Paul asks, "How do we practice it?" You see, our world is helpless on this issue of grief. It's amazing that as non-believers look at death, they have no answer. Oh, they fill the moments in the visitation line with pleasant platitudes and little niceties. But there's no hope. There's no anchor. They're just throwing out these ideas, and they're doing so—please hear me—all from good intentions. But there's no bedrock upon which they can build a theology of grief without the Person and work of Jesus Christ in their lives.

So the world tries to remove the stench of death with niceties and good thoughts. "I'm thinking good thoughts for you today." And just like funeral flowers, after a few days they wilt and die. What is the hope? Where is the hope that Christians have when it comes to death? We know the world doesn't have the answer.

Notice a second problem the world has: the hedonism of life. Hedonism is the pursuit of self-indulgence and self-gratification. It's built into our culture. "It's all about me." There's an all-inclusive resort in Jamaica that I used to see commercials for where they promised, "Your way, right away, anyway you want it." It's all about you. And people in our world today are living that way—some in more benign ways than others. Even though we know Christ, we constantly are dealing with this attack of the old way of life that says, "Yeah, it is about me. It's about my wants, my desires, my preferences."

Here's the problem. The reason death is an issue for the world is that they do not have hope. We talked about this last week. If life is a circle—a merry-go-round that we jump on for 70 or 80 years and then jump off and are done—then life has no meaning to it. But if life is a line, as the Bible tells us, it has a beginning and an end. I want to remind you that God was with us in the beginning—He made us in the secret place in our mother's womb, knitting us together (Psalm 139:13). He was there at our conception. He was there during our gestation period. He walks with us our entire lives—and then He is there in our death.

If God is with us from the beginning to the end, and He is our Creator and He's our Judge, then life isn't a circle of meaninglessness. But we've got to understand what our meaning is, what our purpose is. If it's God Who created us, if it's God Who planned our lives and has walked us through this life, then we'd better figure out what God wants for us. But the world says, "We don't need God. We don't need Him in our lives. I don't need anybody telling me what to do. I know what I'm feeling. I know what I'm wanting. So let me do what I want to do. I'm the captain of my ship." So as a result, we live lives in this world of temporal ups and downs.

As I was driving home from a meeting on Friday, I was listening to a radio station and the deejay was just giddy. "It's Friday! Whoo-hoo!" "Hey, tell me what you're doing this weekend. This is going to be great. This is going to be wonderful." People were saying, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to go do that. I'm so happy. It's so great and wonderful." There was a party going on. I can assure you, I could go to the same radio station Monday morning and they won't be so excited. "All right, everybody. Another week. Drink your five gallons of coffee. Wipe the sleep from your eyes. Get over the hangover from the weekend activities. Here we go again." We work for the weekend. The weekend comes. We expend all of our money, time and energy in making ourselves happy—just to get back into the circle, if you will, of doing the same thing over and over and over again. And what's the result? Nothing. At the end of the day, we die and it's all over. We fool ourselves, thinking, "If I just get enough, I'll be happy." What hopelessness in death!

C.S. Lewis, the great British theologian, put it this way: “A hedonistic idea of life is like trying to get a thirst quenched by drinking salt water.” You drink, you drink, you drink—but the problem is, salt water has certain characteristics that make you only want to drink more. You will literally kill yourself by drinking salt water, because your body will not be able to address the issue of your need for water. It will never quench your thirst and it will never give you the ability to say, “I’m fulfilled.”

So without God, apart from God, the world goes about seeking to quench its proverbial thirst—and it’s unable to do so. The world has two problems. Some of you have two problems as well. The hopelessness—what happens when I die?—and the hedonism of my life, my pursuit of things that are all about me. “I become my own god and in the end I learn there’s no fulfillment in life.” Those are our problems.

2. The prescription God gives His people.

What do we do with these problems? What does the gospel say about them? Paul says, “I don’t want you to be unaware. I’ve got some answers. God has shared with me some answers. I want you to see that there are those who have hope and there are those who don’t have hope. There are people of the day and there are people of the night. There are people who are sober and there are people who are drunk. There are people who are alive and there are people who are asleep.”

So Paul lays out all these distinctions in our passage. He says, “Listen to me. The gospel has the answer. Jesus is the answer.” He then methodically breaks down the problems. First he says, “Let’s address the issue of death and let’s talk about the Christian’s rest.” What is the rest? Paul says in verse 13 that we do not need to grieve because Christians who have died “*have fallen asleep*” (verse 14). That word “asleep” is important.

Today many of you are going to leave this church and go home. You’re going to eat a great lunch. And you’re going to turn on the TV. You say you’re going to do yard work, but you’re not. You’re going to go sit in front of the TV. You’re going to start out sitting upright, but at some point inevitably you’re going to fall over into some crazy position on the couch and you’re going to fall asleep. You’re going to take a nap.

Now, has your wife or husband or kids ever walked in when you’re taking a nap and yelled, “Oh, my! Someone call for help! He’s asleep! What are we going to do?” Why don’t we do that? Because we know sleep is temporary. We know sleep is inevitably something that you—and even our teenagers—will wake out of. Rip Van Winkle woke up. Sleeping Beauty woke up. We always wake up, okay? It’s a temporary condition. The reason we don’t freak out when someone is sleeping is that we recognize, as human beings, that sleep brings rest, recuperation, a reprieve from the tensions of life. I know that every once in a while we have some nightmares along the way, but for the most part when we sleep, our body is at rest. It’s a good thing. We wake up with a sense of refreshment.

What Paul says is, “Listen, those who have died in Christ are asleep.” Now, I want to make something very clear here. When we talk about being asleep, it does not mean those who die in Christ are unconscious to the things of the world. What it’s talking about is that at the point of death there is a great separation that takes place. Our bodies go into a coffin and into a grave. Our spirits go to be with the Lord.

That’s why when Jesus was being crucified, one thief mocked Him but the other thief said, “Remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.” Jesus replied, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise. Oh, your body is going to a grave, but you’re going to be with Me.” Paul addresses this issue in the book of 1 Corinthians, and in Philippians as well, where he says, “I’m not sure what’s better—to be on the earth in my body, or to be present with my Lord without a body.” He kind of battles back and forth, then comes to this conclusion: “It is better to be without my body and be in the presence of the Lord with my spirit at my death, than it is to be on the earth completely embodied.”

Now, this is an important truth for a guy who lost a great role model in my life—my brother Chris. What’s happening with him right now? The Bible says that being absent from the body means we’re present with the Lord. So I can have assurance that my brother is in the presence of the Lord. Your loved ones who have followed Jesus Christ are with the Lord in unbelievable and unspeakable bliss. It’s not fully heaven yet. What I mean by that is their glorification hasn’t taken place yet. They have not yet had their resurrection. We’ll talk about that in a moment. But they are in a good place.

Then what is going to happen? Paul reminds them, “At some point in the future, Jesus Christ is going to come back.” Paul is now merging these things together. “The dead in Christ will be the ones united to Christ first.” Remember, all Christians believe

Christ is coming back. Paul says those who are dead in Christ will come with Him in their spirits, and before He comes to the earth, the dead will have their bodies resurrected just as His body was resurrected. This resurrection will take place “in the air.”

Notice what Paul says in verses 15–16:

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.

The reason you and I can have hope when people die around us is that we recognize that it is not goodbye, but simply, “I will see you soon.” That was seen in my parents’ life. They were sad. That same day we had to go and identify the body of my brother. We went to Mercy Center Hospital, the four of us in the Badal family and some friends from the church who came with us. They said, “Go in, and you can say your goodbyes.” We went into the hospital basement, into the morgue area, and there in a very sterile, cold room lay our lifeless loved one. And the hope that at 14 years of age I didn’t know or understand, I’ve come to understand because of my parents’ example. With great tears in his eyes, my father huddled his broken little family and said, “This is why we believe in Jesus. It’s for moments like this.”

Many of you know this story. My father has the worst singing voice. I mean, it’s terrible. But he led our little Badal family choir in hymns to the Lord—praising God. Why? Because we have a Savior Who lives! And if Christ lives, then we will live. At 14 years old, I thought, “Where is this hope coming from? If I was my parents, I would shake my fist at God. No one has served Him like my parents have.” But my parents said, “Here is a reminder of why we serve the living and true God. There will be a day when Christ will be reunited with us, because we will be meeting him in the air.”

The Christians rest. Paul then says, “You’ve got to be ready for death.” Are you ready for death? The Bible says no one knows the hour or day of our passing. We don’t. We don’t know what today might bring. You may leave this place today, and you don’t know what will happen. You don’t know what tomorrow will bring.

Our mortality is so fragile. We’ve seen loved ones in this church who have died. Some deaths we have expected. They’ve gotten older and more frail, and we understand that. But not too long ago we lost Thomas Fatorma at 43 years of age. Where did that come from? Why did that happen? Do we have hope? Paul says we can because of the gospel.

Now, what about Christ’s return? He says, “If you don’t die, Christ may return at any moment—are you ready for that?” And because of it, God gives some continual reminders. Paul says in verses 16–17:

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.

Going on to chapter five:

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.

Paul tells them, “Be ready for death, but then once you’re ready for death and you know without a shadow of a doubt you are living for Christ—living for His glory, living out the gospel, having bowed the knee to Him and trusted Him as your Savior—then you need to look with expectancy for His return. He’s coming back and it could be at any moment.”

He then reminds them that Christ might come as a thief comes. Here’s the problem with thieves: they never send a warning postcard. “Hey, Tim, I am going to break into your house tonight. I just wanted to let you know. I’m going after these things, I’m going to take them, and I just wanted to say thank you very much. Have a wonderful day.” You never get that, right? I mean, there are some dumb criminals, but I don’t know any criminal that has ever done that.

What Paul is indicating with this metaphor is that Christ’s return will be sudden and unexpected. There will be no warning before it happens. You won’t be able to pinpoint a time, or say, “Aha! The thief is coming today!” You’ll never be the McCallister kid in *Home Alone* who knew when the guys were coming. No, Jesus says, “I’m coming like a thief in the night. You’re not going to know ahead of time.”

But then Paul goes on to compare these times to labor pains. Like labor, destruction is going to come on suddenly as well. But unlike the thief, labor—while sudden in one sense—is expected. For nine months you are expecting at some point to have labor.

You're not expecting a thief. So the idea is that the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be sudden, but you need to be prepared at all times because it will be unavoidable.

I don't know of a woman in all of human history who could say, "I was pregnant and went through gestation, but I never experienced labor. The baby just came out." That doesn't happen. You're expecting it. Some of you are dreading it, and rightly so. You know what's going to happen. It's unavoidable. At the end of that pregnancy, there's going to be some pain, some struggle. And you're ready for that, knowing you can't get around it. The coming of our Lord will be sudden and it will be unavoidable. So if that's the case, we had better be ready.

How do we get ready? There are two ways. You can say, "Well, the Lord's coming, so I'm going to go on a campaign and tell everybody He's coming. I'm going to identify a date." In 2011 Harold Camping, a Bible teacher from Family Radio, said, "I've figured it out. Jesus Christ is coming on May 21, 2011." So people sold everything they had, bought RVs and painted on them, "The end of the world is at hand and you'd better be ready." Here's the problem. They've interviewed these people and they're brokenhearted. They gave up everything, because they thought it was the hour and the day.

Paul says, "You don't need to know these things. Just be ready." So that's not what we're supposed to do. What are we supposed to do? We need to be ready for Christ's return. We know it's going to be sudden and unavoidable, and in the moment of His choosing, Jesus Christ is going to come. He's going to descend from heaven, the text says. His coming will not be quiet, but will be noisy and majestic. There are going to be three sounds. J.B. Phillips puts it this way: *"One word of command, one shout from the archangel, one blast from the trumpet of God and the Lord himself will come down from Heaven!"* So there's going to be a lot of clamor. A lot will be taking place.

And His coming will culminate in His announcement that the dead in Christ are to rise. Then their bodies will rise from wherever they are. The winds will draw them up from the four corners of the earth and they will meet Him in the clouds. And we who are still alive will be caught up. This is the word we get "rapture" from. We're going to meet Him in the clouds. There will be a reunion.

First, the bodies of the dead will join their spirits, and they will once again be complete in their glorified bodies. Then we who are left will have our bodies glorified in that twinkling of an eye, where Paul says the mortal will put on immortality, the perishable will put on the imperishable. We will be reunited not only with Christ, but also with all those dead loved ones—the saints of old. As verse 17 says, we will be with Christ forever. What an amazing event! But how do we get ready for it? It says we're going to meet Him in the clouds.

I bad-mouthed *The Lion King* in my sermon last week, so let me speak well of Disney now. In the movie *Aladdin*, Prince Ali comes into town. All the followers of that king headed out to the city gates and paraded him inside. All the singers, all the dancers, all the fanfare and procession declared, "Here's our king. Here's our god." In the same way, the idea of "meeting Him in the clouds" is the picture Paul would understand from the first century of a dignitary or king—someone important—coming into a town.

The Bible says we're going to meet Him in the air. But most scholars don't think that's outer space. What it means is we're going to leave the ground. Jesus Christ Himself will show up somewhere on the earth; many believe that to be the city of Jerusalem. So that means we've got to move from Chicagoland to the city of Jerusalem. We will do that in the twinkling of an eye. We will meet Him there. Why? So that a watching world will see: this is our King. This is our God.

Are you ready for the coming of our Lord? Are you ready for His return?

Let me close with this: the church's responsibility. What do we do? In light of these commands, in light of these truths—whether in death or the return of Christ—Paul gives us some things we can do. I call them "the two-word commands." In 1 Thessalonians 5:6, he tells us to "Keep awake." In verses seven and eight, he says, "Be sober." In verses eight and nine he says, "Get dressed." And in 4:17 and 5:11, he says, "Encourage one another."

How you understand your departure—whether in death or at Christ's return—will determine how you live your life. Some of you are saying, "I know Jesus. I like Jesus. He's great to have as a Sunday morning date. It's good to be part of a church. They do good things for my kids. This is wonderful." Let me tell you something: If the church is not moving you and me to a place where our departure will determine our life, then we're going to blow it. We're going to miss it.

Luke 18:8 asks, *"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* So let me ask you: if Christ comes back this afternoon, are you ready to meet Him? Or are you drunk on the things of this world? Are you living in darkness, or are you living in the light

with sober thinking? Are you asleep in some sort of stupor, so you don't know what's going on around you? Or are you awake and alert and ready for the coming of the Lord—whether meeting Him in death or at His return?

Whether in death or life, are we living for Jesus? That is the most important question we can ask, and it is the question that will answer the problems we face in this world. So evaluate your life today. “Am I ready for His company? Am I ready for His visit?” Some of us have got some cleaning up to do. Some of us have got some work to do. And if we're really honest with ourselves, all of us have some work to do with God to evaluate where we are and to be ready in death or at His return. If we are ready, then with joy in our hearts we can say, “Yes, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.”

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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