

Keep awake!

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[0 : 00] Father, your word is good. As we read through it, as we examine it, as we learn about it, as we hear, as we process, your word is good for us.

And we hope, we pray that by your spirit, we would be teachable people and that our hearts will be good ground. And I pray even throughout the week as we think about 1 Thessalonians 5, that in spirit you will be dropping nuggets of gold in our hearts as we reflect on your good word.

So Father, help me as I speak. I'm a weak man, but you are a great God. So work through me, I pray. Amen. Amen. So as a church, you've been going through the book of 1 Thessalonians for the past few weeks.

And just last week, you looked at how Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4, reassures the Thessalonians that with Christ in our lives, even in the face of death, we can have hope.

And it doesn't matter, he said, whether you're dead or alive when Christ returns, the hope of Christ transcends death. So Paul says, even when we see death take people in its grip here and now, we don't grieve like the rest of the world.

[1 : 24] We know that for Christians, death is not the end of the story. And I imagine that must have hit home for a lot of us, even if you don't know personally, someone who's passed away.

But it's very easy, right, in this time of COVID, to look at headlines, to look at numbers. And often they are just numbers on a screen or on a page. But for many people, death is a reality.

They are personal people who have passed on. And so that's what Paul says. As Christians, you don't grieve. We don't grieve like the rest of the world. But now we reach 1 Thessalonians 5.

And I have to admit that while I was preparing, I did wonder if maybe Paul was encouraging me to sell my bed and never buy another one. Because it's almost like Paul hates the night.

And he hates sleeping, which is, yeah, no worries. Okay. Okay. Okay, thanks so much. Yeah. Yeah, and it's almost like he hates sleeping, right?

[2 : 24] He has an issue with the night. You know, why are you sleeping? Which is really unfortunate because when I started working, I realized just how precious sleep is. And maybe those of you with really young kids or babies, you somewhat relate.

But not to worry, Paul is not asking us to lose any sleep, literally. Okay. In chapter 4, Paul uses the language of falling asleep to refer to physical death.

But here in chapter 5, he talks about being asleep versus staying awake as different postures. Or put it another way, these are two different ways of living life.

Falling asleep or staying awake. Paul is saying that there are those who go through life and live through life's different struggles and yet remain totally oblivious to what has happened in history and what is going to happen at the end of history.

If you look at me in verse 10, Paul refers back to the event of Jesus' death. And in verse 2, he refers to the day of the Lord, which is a term used in many places through the Old Testament especially.

[3 : 38] and it's used to refer to the judgment day at the end of time. So, Paul refers to what has happened and what will happen.

Now, this should provoke some questions in us. What is the end of history? When is the end of history? And what does falling asleep spiritually look like?

Or for that matter, what does being spiritually awake look like? Or maybe you might be asking, how do I know that I will be with Christ at the end?

And these are the questions we examine today because Paul has two main aims in this section of Scripture, these 11 verses. Firstly, he wants to instruct the Thessalonians on how to live between Christ's death and resurrection and Christ's coming return.

And we can learn from this because just like the Thessalonians, we too are living between Christ's death and resurrection and Christ's coming return. So, Paul is not intent on just staying at the intellectual level.

[4 : 50] He just doesn't want to feed you information. He wants us to know how to live. And secondly, Paul wants to give the Thessalonians hope and assurance to persevere till the last day.

I don't know what that hope, we're going to find out what that hope is going to be, but that hope has got to be powerful indeed if it's going to last us to the last day. In chapter 4, Paul has already said, don't worry whether you're dead or alive.

When Christ returns, what matters is whether you're in Christ or not. He's already cast a vision for the end and now he wants to give the Thessalonians a hope that's so powerful it will get them to the finish line.

So, Paul is interested in how we live and in giving us hope. So, we're going to look at today's text in three parts. Firstly, the reality of the end.

Number two, responding to the end. And finally, certainty till the end. The reality of the end. Responding to the end.

[5 : 52] And certainty till the end. So first, the reality of the end. In verse 1, Paul begins by saying that about the specific timing or specific date of Christ's return, he doesn't need to explain anything more to the Thessalonians.

Now, that might be puzzling, but maybe Paul did manage to teach about Jesus' return in the short time that he was in Thessalonica, right? And we read about this in Acts 17, but we can't be sure. But at the very least, we know that the Thessalonian church has a right understanding of Jesus' return. So, what did the Thessalonians understand about the second coming?

Or verse 2, Paul says, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. There's two parts to that, the day of the Lord and the thief in the night. Let's start with the phrase day of the Lord.

Like I mentioned earlier, this phrase is used in a few places, especially in the Old Testament. But if we pick up one, especially in Amos 5, the day of the Lord is described as a day of judgment, especially on those who are ungodly.

[7 : 05] Now, on one hand, by using this term, Paul is comforting the Thessalonians who are going through persecution. He's reminding them that a day will come when unrighteousness will be accounted for and punished.

Those persecuting the church will not go unpunished because God is not indifferent to justice. God is against injustice.

So if you're here and you're going through some persecution on account of being a Christian, take high. It might be as major as having your livelihood threatened because you're open about your faith as a Christian, or it might be seemingly as minor as being the butt of jokes maybe in your family, maybe among your colleagues, maybe people look down on you and they think you're foolish.

Do you believe in a man in the sky? Do you believe that God became man? And yet God is not indifferent to persecution, all of it. And on the last day, your faith will be shown to have counted. And it's beautiful when Paul says in 1 Corinthians, he says, you know, the gospel is foolishness to the Greeks. It doesn't seem to make sense and yet for those who believe, it's amazing, it's beautiful.

[8 : 35] But it can be very easy to turn the focus on those outside the church and say, that's right, you know, just you wait, just you wait for that day, right? And what happens is we end up never looking at ourselves.

But judgment, this is the reality, judgment is not only for unbelievers because Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5.10 that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Every one will be judged at the end of time. So perhaps we can take this opportunity to ask ourselves and to reflect, how will we stand before the judgment seat of Christ?

I think that's worth pondering for a moment, pondering throughout the week. So the day of the Lord is coming and all of mankind will be judged, but when will the day come?

Like a thief in the night, Paul says. Now, I don't know if anyone here has ever been robbed, I'm so sorry if you have, but let me tell you something, okay? No one ever goes to bed thinking, you know, let me set my alarm for 3 a.m.

[9 : 57] because that's when Jimmy is going to try and break in. Yeah, I'm so sorry if someone here is called Jimmy, I just picked the name, okay? Now, rather than giving a specific date and time, it

seems that all we know is that Jesus' return will be unexpected.

Now, I just want to give a quick note here. You often hear people, you know, giving lots of words or they're saying, oh, look at what, you know, what has happened in history, what has happened in the past few months, and therefore, Christ is coming in a month, in a year.

Just a quick note, like, if you look at that, like, that's not right. We don't know exactly when Christ will come, and that's why Paul is not trying to give a date and time.

He says he doesn't know, and it's not something that you need to try and guess, right? But what is more important? Let's find out later in verse 3, Paul uses a different picture to convey the same message.

He says that the day of the Lord is coming, everyone will be judged, and destruction will come upon unbelievers like labor pains on a pregnant woman.

[11:03] And every mother here relates. Pregnant women never know exactly when their labor is going to start. And when it starts, it doesn't stop, right? I've watched my sister go through that process twice.

But that's not all. Paul is bringing up the suddenness of Christ's return as a warning. Look at what he says at the start of verse 3.

While people are saying, saying what? Peace and safety. Destruction will come on them suddenly. The point here is that the rest of the world is ignorant about the coming judgment.

And therefore, they will be surprised when it comes. One commentator uses the term, I love this, imagine peace. I think that's absolutely right. The reality is that God does not peacefully coexist with sin and he will judge all sin and to reject that reality intellectually, right?

That's to say, no, no, no, there's no such thing as judgment. Or, to live as though judgment isn't coming, right? To live however you want, doing whatever you like. that is to live in an imagined peace.

[12:21] You'd be living in an imaginary reality. That is not reality. The reality is that there is judgment. And this ignorance has not gone away.

The truth is, it wasn't only the people in Thessalonica back then who were ignorant of the coming judgment, but the world around us and the culture around us today is still ignorant of this reality. The message is still the same. Peace and safety, right? So, what are some ways our culture today tries to tell us peace and safety?

Well, I think one of the most obvious ways is people saying, good news, there's no God, right? There's no one to be ultimately accountable to, no judgment, no wrath, none of that unpleasant stuff, right?

Do whatever you want, do whatever you like. Great news, there's no God. Sorry, there is a God, okay? Or maybe it's something else, maybe it's hearing the world say, listen, ultimately, your life is whatever you want to make it to be, right?

[13:28] Chase your dreams, that's the most important thing. Don't let anyone stop you. Or, as one Disney character put it, let it go, let it go, can't hold it back anymore, let it go, let it go, turn away and slam the door, I don't care what they're going to say, let the storm rage on the cold never bothered me anyway, right?

If you didn't understand that reference, that's a reference to Frozen and Elsa. And the message is, all around us, all that matters is me. Or maybe it's hearing people say, why do you Christians have to talk about all this stuff in the Bible, about sin, about wrath, about judgment, is so discouraging, why can't we just talk about grace and mercy, and why can't we just talk about love, love, love, love, love, right?

That's what we love, that's what we like to hear. So, all these messages of peace and safety are to try and get you to ignore the reality of who God is, how sinful we are, and that judgment is coming. So, don't be caught off guard, don't be unaware, don't buy into the world's message of peace and safety, live in reality.

Judgment is coming, and Paul says, they will not escape, reality is inevitable. So, if you're here today, I just want to say, if you're not a Christian, would you face the reality?

[15:13] Repentance, which is what I think would be the most appropriate response, repentance is recognizing that the path you're walking on is wrong.

It is turning away and walking the other way, away from sin, away from unrighteousness, and it is submitting yourself to live under the lordship of God.

repentance, it is never a bad idea to repent, and it is certainly never too early to repent, because we do not know when judgment will come.

And yet, there is grace and mercy at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it is enough for you, if only you would turn to him and trust him.

judgment is coming, and no one will escape. But here's the question, right?

[16:15] How do we, as God's people, live in light of the end? So let's look at responding to the end. How do we respond to the end? In verses 1-3, Paul was focusing on people's knowledge, or the lack of knowledge, about the end.

But here, in verses 1-9, Paul is describing two postures, sorry, in verses 3-8, Paul is describing two postures, two ways of living, like we said earlier, that people will adopt.

Those who are not aware of the coming judgment, he says, will be sleepy and drunk, living in the darkness of night, while those who are aware of judgment are awake and sober, living in the light of the day.

Why? Because knowing that one day, every word you've ever said, every thought you've ever had, and every action you've ever done will be judged with consequences, knowing that will change how you live.

Belief leads to action. What you believe, and in this case, what you believe about the end, will change how you live now. And so Paul says to the Thessalonian Christians, you're in darkness, so you're not in darkness, so you won't be surprised.

[17:36] You're in the light, you're children of the day, so let's be awake and sober, let's have a different posture, a different way of living. Now, before we think about what being awake and sober looks like, I think it's worth pausing briefly to think about what being spiritually sleepy might look like.

One of the ways that spiritual sleepiness can manifest is through apathy or indifference. A good question to ask is, to evaluate this, is how does your faith change how you live?

I'll put it another way, does your faith cost you anything? Are you coming here week in and week out, hearing the gospel preached to you, and then going out there and living week in and week out unchanged?

Has the gospel changed how you spend your time? Has the gospel changed how you spend your money? Has the gospel changed your relationship with your family and your church members? Are you serving them, encouraging them? Do you feel any urge at all to reach your friends or your colleagues or your non-believing family with the gospel? Because if what you believe in doesn't seem to change how you live at all, then it might be a good idea to think about what you really believe in.

[19:05] In Matthew 16 verses 24 to 25, Jesus says to his disciples, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Christianity is a faith that is centered on self-giving and that is radically different from our natural self-centeredness and we shouldn't be surprised at this because Jesus gave up everything for our sake and if you follow that Jesus, not an imaginary Jesus, if that's the Jesus you follow, you will not live an unchanged life.

Or have you been changed by the gospel? Perhaps another way that we might actually be sleepy is what I call presumption of faith. And I think we see this in the Malaysian church a fair bit.

So, I say that not as a third person. Actually, I've experienced this, right? So let me share a bit of my story. When my parents got married, they weren't Christians, but eventually my mom went to church and became a Christian and eventually my dad too sometime later.

And we kids, we followed along to church. So I grew up in Sunday school. I heard all the object lessons and eventually I went to my youth group every week.

[20:37] I understood. I knew that living a moral life was better than doing anything immoral, people, right? And if people asked me, I knew what to say. I'm a Christian. And I genuinely believed that I was a Christian.

Because, after all, my family was Christian, right? That's who we were as a family. That's who we are as a family, a Christian family. But when I got to college, I realized I didn't actually know the content or the basis for my faith at all.

And I eventually learned that being a Christian was about faith in Jesus Christ and what he did to save me. You can't only have a label. There's got to be something you believe, a basis under the

label.

And I just realized that I didn't have that. I didn't understand what I believe. Perhaps some of you here might relate. What is the basis? What is your basis of faith?

Are you saying that you're a Christian because your family is Christian? Let me say this as gently as I can. Okay? You are a Christian on the basis of your personal faith in Jesus Christ alone.

[21 : 52] You may be disciplined by your parents or family members, but following Jesus and trusting him is an individual decision.

Somebody else cannot make that decision for you. you can't inherit that faith from your parents. They can pass it down and teach you what it means, but making the decision, the costly decision to follow Jesus is a decision that you have to make.

So are you sleepy? Is your faith manifesting in action? Or are you presuming your faith? Now let's think about being awake and sober, right? The opposite of that.

What does Paul equate with being awake and sober? He starts to talk about faith, love, and hope as armor, right? A breastplate and a helmet.

For Paul, being awake and sober is about putting on armor. It's about being at war. And war is a serious business.

[23 : 00] This is the opposite of the sleepiness that we talked about. I don't know if any wars have been won by any soldiers who were caught off guard asleep.

I think the rate is 100%. All soldiers were caught off guard in a war asleep, lost the battle. So this is the opposite of sleepiness. This is Paul telling us to take our faith seriously.

I know you can hear that a lot. Anyone can say take your faith seriously, but look at what Paul is saying. What does taking your faith seriously look like? Well, this language of faith, love, and hope in verse 8 isn't new in 1 Thessalonians, right?

Because in chapter 1, verse 3, Paul says, we remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

life. The Thessalonians had a faith that worked. It was alive, not dead. And as they worked, as they labored, they did so in love.

[24 : 15] They didn't keep score of what they had done for whom and then ask for a favor in return. They served other people for those people's sakes, not for their own gain.

And the reason they could live lives poured out in service like this, even in limits of persecution, by the way, the reason they could live like that is because their endurance was anchored in their hope in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And yet here in chapter 5, Paul is saying as you do these things, they become armor that you wear. wear. Now, how on earth do you wear something that you do?

Well, what Paul is saying here is that as you live out your faith and love in service and works, they will become a breastplate to protect your heart.

So the breastplate covers. And as you endure by constantly and consciously hoping in Jesus, that hope will become a helmet to protect your head or your mind.

[25 : 23] So let's start with the heart. Why is Paul telling us to protect our hearts? Notice how there's a reminder of self-control in Paul's instruction.

He says, because to be sober, which is what he says, is to remain from excess drink. Now, what has being sober got to do with our hearts? Well, come with me to Romans chapter 13, verses 12 to 14.

I'll read it for us. The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. That sounds a bit similar to our text today.

But you see, what Paul is saying here is that the behavior in Romans 13 is not sober. And you see, the desires of the flesh, he's saying, your heart is where your desires are.

[26 : 43] And left on our own, our hearts default to chase what Paul calls in Romans 13, the desires of the flesh.

Living the way, well, and desire of the flesh, it basically lack of self-control, right? You're just doing whatever you want, whatever you like. That's immorality. And living that way, the way that Paul

describes in Romans 13, shows nothing of faith in God and nothing of his love poured out for us. It has nothing to do with God. Evil has nothing to do with the holiness of God. God's saying, that's destructive behavior, don't live like that. And that's the default of our hearts, right?

We are sinful, we are broken, our desires are misplaced. But when we live the way God calls us to live in faith and love, what we're doing is we are insisting on trusting God, that's faith, and taking him at his word.

We are insisting that desiring the things that God desires and living the way God instructs is the way to joy and satisfaction that lasts.

[28 : 05] It's an insistence. And it's a beautiful cycle. The more we live in obedience to God's word and instruction, the more we trust him, the more we live according to the way he wants us to live, the more we experience the reality of deep joy and satisfaction that lasts.

Like the psalmist says, taste and see that the Lord is good. Desire what God desires. align your heart with what God desires.

Now what about the head? Why protect the head? Well remember like we said earlier, out of what you believe will come action, how you live. And the understanding of what you believe is up here. And in Romans 12 verse 2, Paul says, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of what? By the renewal of your mind. Character transformation starts from the renewal of the mind.

And therefore, if you turn that the other way around, character degeneration starts from the unraveling of your mind. I'm not talking about dementia or mental illness.

[29 : 24] What I mean is the moment you lose confidence in the promises of God in Christ, you will begin to live for yourself rather than in service of those around you.

Fall back into the desires of the flesh that we talked about. So what are the promises of God in Christ? Well, I think we can summarize it like this.

Everything. The Bible's promise is that those who put their trust in Jesus will have the communion of God for eternity and inherit a perfect new creation where there is no suffering, where there is no pain, there are no tears.

And when you have that glorious future as your eternity, suddenly what happens in the 70 or 80, and for those of us who are maybe slightly more fortunate, 90 years, what happens in these years, are going to seem to matter a whole lot less because you have a beautiful and glorious eternity ahead of you.

So how can you keep your mind and your head anchored in the hope of Christ? Because Paul says that's the way to endure.

[30 : 48] How do you make sure that you don't forget something? Well, you read it. You read it and you hear it and you discuss it again and again and again.

The promises of God are in the Word of God. Read them in the Word. The promises of God are proclaimed in the Church of God.

Hear them in the Church. The promises of God are spoken among the people of God. Discuss them in community. So we desire what God desires and we live how God instructs to remind our hearts that we can trust in God.

And we remember the promises of God in Christ to give us confidence as we endure. people. But Paul won't let us finish here.

Paul has brought us on a journey. He's told us how Jesus is coming again in judgment. He's talked about how it will be sudden. He's told us how we shouldn't be surprised because we are children of the day and the light.

[32 : 06] And he told us how we ought to live in light of the coming day of judgment practically and how we need to endure with hope. But you see, if you think about it, there's just a little problem.

Don't we fail at staying awake sometimes? Don't we fall back into sin and old habits? Right? Don't you think sometimes, oh, I thought I wasn't such an angry person anymore.

And then you blow up and you're like, well, looks like I haven't come very far, right? And suddenly you're very discouraged, right? Do we fail at serving others selflessly in faith and love?

Well, I'll be first to admit, I fail plenty of times, right? Many times I do things for my own sake, right?

To make myself look good or sound good. Aren't we sometimes discouraged about our present rather than being confident with the end in mind, trusting in God?

Don't we sometimes live more like people in darkness rather than children of light, people who are asleep rather than awake, people who are drunk rather than sober?

[33 : 22] Now, if that's the case, how can we be sure in the day of judgment? And we're coming back to square one. The day of the Lord.

How do you know if you'll be facing on the day of wrath, on the day of judgment, on the day of the Lord, how do you know whether you'll be facing God's wrath or mercy?

How do you know? Well, Paul wants to give the Thessalonians certainty that lasts till the end. Let me read verses 9 and 10.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

The good news, the great news, the awesome news is that the verdict on that day of the Lord is not based on your performance.

[34 : 34] The fact that you will not suffer wrath and that you will receive salvation in verse 9 has nothing to do with how well you live out verses 4 to 8.

I'm not saying that verses 4 to 8 don't matter, but I'm saying that verses 4 to 8 flow out of verse 9 because verse 9 starts with for God.

Everything that was before is because of what is coming in verse 9 onwards. You live out verses 4 to 8 because of what Christ has done.

In verse 3, Paul says that the ignorant will be what? Will be destroyed. They will be separated from God for all eternity. The price of ignorance is destruction and separation.

And Paul says, in Ephesians 2, we previously lived according to the ways of the world. Paul's saying we used to be among them.

[35 : 44] You used to be headed for destruction. You used to be headed for separation from God. And yet, he says, in verse 9, we will not be destroyed. We will not be separated from God.

And Paul says, we will not suffer wrath. In fact, he says in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. How? Because when you look at the cross of Christ, you hear the voice of Jesus crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus was forsaken so that we will never be forsaken. sin. On that day, we will not be destroyed because one day, more than 2,000 years ago, Jesus was utterly destroyed for our sin.

And because of him, the verdict is not based on your performance. And that's why our hope is not abstract.

We didn't pluck it out of thin air. We don't base it on whatever we want. It is certain. One preacher described it like this, it's like watching a replay of a football match where your favourite team wins.

[37 : 09] You know the result from the beginning. Every time you watch it, every time you watch the replay, you know the end from the beginning. Even if your team goes 4-0, 5-0, 6-0 down, you know exactly what's going to happen.

We win. We win. And when we rehearse the gospel, when we remind ourselves of the gospel, we remind ourselves of the end, that is exactly what we are doing. We are rehearsing, reminding ourselves of the gospel, and we're reminding ourselves, no matter what it looks like now, at the end, we win.

We win. We will not experience wrath, not because we are great, but because of what Christ has done. And Paul's reassurance in verse 9, is that though our destiny is already fixed now, on that day we will receive salvation.

In that sense, we receive salvation fully and will be free even from the desire to sin. And he echoes what he said in chapter 4, no matter what state you're in, when Christ returns, the end is the same. We will be with Christ forever. And isn't it beautiful how verse 11 ends the section? Paul recaps everything he said in the other verses by saying, therefore, encourage one another and build each other up.

[38 : 40] Just in fact, just as in fact you are doing. He's saying, carry on, you're already doing it, carry on. Right? This is Christian community. Be involved in each other's lives so you can encourage each other, build each other up.

You cannot encourage people about issues and problems that you don't know are going on and you can't build up people that you don't know. Do that by what you say and what you do.

Give up things for each other, your time, your money, your effort, because you already know what you're going to receive when Christ returns. You know, after all that, you thought Paul might end

with something more bombastic.

But he says, here's the gospel, that's your hope. Carry on. It's enough, it's powerful enough. And it sounds so ordinary because it is ordinary.

The Christian walk is about long obedience and perseverance. And this ordinary walk of encouraging each other and building each other up.

[39 : 52] This ordinary walk done by ordinary people like you and me works because our God is extraordinary and our hope is in him and not ourselves.

I just think of the song Amazing Grace, the stanza which says, grace that brought me here thus far and grace will lead me home.

It's not about how great you are, it's not about your effort, it's not about being an A-star Christian, it's about Jesus and what he's done. God is great, that's why our hope is certain, not because we are great.

So put your hope in Christ, that will get you to the end. Let's pray. Jesus, I thank you that in you, because of what you've done for us, our hope is certain and we don't have to think about our performance, we don't have to think about how well we score and that our verdict is going to depend on that, because our verdict is founded on the basis of your sacrifice for us and your perfect life lived for us.

And when we put our hope in that, we will persevere to the end together by your spirit. So help us, God, to love each other, to put on armour, faith and love and hope for our hearts and our heads.

[41 : 35] we love you, Lord. Thank you for what you've done that you first loved us. Amen. Amen.