



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES: THE BIG FINISH

TITLE: A PRESCRIPTION FOR APOCALYPTIC AILMENTS

SCRIPTURE: 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:11

DATE: SEPT 28, 2025

INTRODUCTION

We are in Week 2 of our *Big Finish* series, where we are exploring spiritual truths about the end times.

For some Christians, the second coming of Christ can bring discomfort. Maybe we're anxious about our assurance of salvation. Maybe we grieve over the loss of a loved one because we're uncertain about how and when we'll be reunited. Maybe we're simply confused, burdened by unanswered questions.

However, it's important to note that in our text today, Paul's primary instructions regarding the last things are given for our *encouragement and comfort*. Please note this important possibility: We can look forward to Christ's return. We can be ready for it when it comes. We can long for the day and be filled with tremendous comfort.

In the Scripture we are studying today, there are two distinct sections: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. Each section ends with the same exhortation from Paul: “Encourage one another with these words.” Our aim this morning is just that—that you will be encouraged and comforted.

Text

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

[15] For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord,^[a] 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.

Explanation – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Background

The book of Acts records Paul’s visit to the Thessalonians. As was his custom, Paul first went to the synagogue to reason from the Scriptures. Acts tells us that he persuaded many Jews, some devout Greeks, and several leading women (Acts 17:1-4).

However, Paul’s stay was cut short. Some Jews, out of jealousy, formed a mob and searched for him. Instead, they found a believer named Jason and dragged him before the city officials. They accused him associating with Paul who was “turning the world upside down” by proclaiming Jesus as King. Jason had to post bond, and that same night, the believers sent Paul away for his safety (Acts 17:5-9).

It’s unclear how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica. From *1 Thessalonians*, we know he stayed long enough to model a strong work ethic (2:9) and to develop a deep, family-like relationship with the believers—comparing himself to both

a nursing mother and a father (2:8, 10–12). He says he was torn away from them too soon and longed to return but was hindered by Satan (2:17–18). When he could bear the separation no longer, he sent Timothy to check on them (3:1–5). This letter is Paul's response to Timothy's encouraging report.

Paul commends them in many areas. His encouragement is often to simply keep doing what they're doing—but to do so *more and more* (4:1, 10). He also reminds them of truths he previously taught, even stating that there are things he doesn't need to write to them about (4:2, 9; 5:1).

Immediate Context

One area, however, where the Thessalonians needed clarification was regarding those who had died and Christ's second coming. It's likely Paul had touched on this topic during his original visit, but in his absence, more questions arose, and grief set in. Timothy apparently reported this back to Paul.

Paul begins his response by writing, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep.” We deduce from Paul's statement that he was expanding on a previous teaching.

We Can Grieve with Hope

Paul distinguishes the type of grief Christians experience from that of the world. Believers are able to grieve *with hope*. This doesn't mean our grief isn't deep, long-lasting, or difficult. In fact, Christians may grieve more intensely because we love more deeply, and we understand the true value of life—each person made in the image of God.

So Paul is *not* saying Christians won't grieve. He's saying our grief can be infused with hope. Death is not the end of the story. We know we will be reunited with those who have died in Christ. Our grief will turn into joy. Our tears will be wiped away.

It's likely the Thessalonians understood there would be a reunion. Scholars debate and try to postulate what exactly their concerns were. Most scholars generally agree that the Thessalonians were concerned that the deceased would somehow be disadvantaged at Christ's return. While we can't be certain what led to this concern, Paul's elaboration on the sequence of events suggests they feared their loved ones would miss out in some way. Paul informs them

they whether they are alive at Christ's return or asleep, there is no disadvantage.

The Dead in Christ Will Rise First

Paul comforts them by addressing three key areas: (1) The source and basis of his knowledge (2) The sequence of events and (3) Who will be with the Lord.

Based on Christ's own bodily resurrection, we know that the dead in Christ will also rise. Since by one's faith believers are united to Christ, we will rise also from the dead to be with Jesus (Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 20).

Paul also explains that Jesus himself taught on the subject. He says, "For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord." It is a little unclear what "word of the Lord" references. Paul could be alluding to general teaching that Jesus made concerning his return (possibly Matthew 24:29-33, 40-41). Paul may even be referring to a teaching that had been orally passed down but not recorded in the Gospels (Another example of a teaching of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels is Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."). Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul roots his teaching in a word from Jesus himself.

As for the sequence of events, Paul affirms that those alive at Christ's return will not precede those who have died. To begin, Paul describes a magnificent and unmistakable return of Christ. The Lord will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. When the time comes, the Thessalonians will know.

The dead in Christ will rise first. After that, the living will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air.

If you are like me, there may be questions in your mind about what is Paul describing. Are the dead coming with Jesus as He descends from heaven? Does Christ descend and then the dead are raised? Do those who are alive transport somehow into the air? And once in the air, do those living descend with Jesus, or do we ascend? Admittedly, Paul doesn't get into those specifics and neither does that seem to be his purpose. Rather, his specific desire is to offer comfort to the Thessalonians that the living and the dead will *both always be with the Lord*. No one will be disadvantage, only advantaged because both get to be with the Lord always.

Discussion Questions:

- Have you experienced a time of grief that you feel comfortable sharing?
- Have you noticed a difference in how Christians grieve compared to those without faith? What stands out?
- Paul encourages us to encourage one another with these truths. Have you ever found it difficult to know what to say to someone grieving? Any tips for how to help a person in grief?

Text:

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

[1] Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers,^[b] 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^[c] 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.

Explanation – 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

While the Thessalonians did need instructions about how and when they would be reunited with those who had fallen asleep, Paul is clear that they don’t need elaborate instructions about times and seasons. Paul describes how they don’t need anything written to them. They are fully aware no one knows when the Lord will return.

Paul gave two metaphors to describe the day of the Lord.

1. A thief attempting to steal at night. Of course, a thief coming by night allows a thief to disguise himself with the help of darkness. It also can catch residents by surprise since presumably they will be asleep. This teaches us that the day of the Lord has potential to catch us by surprise
2. The second metaphor is that of pregnant woman in labor pains. Just as a pregnant woman once in labor cannot prevent delivery, so too, we will not be able to prevent the day from coming. The first metaphor teaches us that the day will catch some by *surprise*, the second metaphor teaches us that it is *inevitable*.

As Paul continues he makes the point that there is no reason for the Thessalonians to be caught by surprise nor dread the day coming. To do so, he references back to his first analogy of a thief at night and presses the analogy even further. If thieves come at night to surprise someone, the Thessalonians do not have to spiritually worry because they do not belong to the night. They spiritually exist in the light or day.

Paul's point clearly has nothing to do with actual day or nights, awake or sleeping. Paul is simply pressing his analogy further. In the Bible, darkness is a typical analogy for spiritual blindness or sinfulness. Conversely, light is an analogy for spiritual understanding and righteousness. Believers have transferred from darkness to light. They have done so by placing their faith in Jesus alone for salvation.

Thus, Paul in a way is challenging the Thessalonians to live out their new position in Christ. Since Christ is coming back, they should live in the light. They must put aside the deeds of darkness. By living righteously, one increases their awareness of Christ's return. Furthermore, they will be ready for it. They will be ready to receive their due rewards for faithful living.

Here is a key point and perhaps even a paradox—Just because we don't know when the day of the Lord will come doesn't mean we can't be fully ready. We may not know when, but we know it is coming.

For Christians, the day of the Lord is not a day of wrath. It is indeed a day of salvation. On that day our salvation is made complete. No longer will we suffer, experience pain, temptation, or even sin. On that day death is no more. We will be with God forevermore with new bodies living in a new heaven and earth. We will begin to receive the heavenly rewards for our righteous living. And of course—we will be reunited with those who have died.

Discussion Questions:

- On a scale from 1-10, how ready are you for Christ to return? Why or why not?
- Is there something in particular you want to accomplish before Christ's return? Like what?
- It is always ok to be honest, does the idea of Christ's return frighten you in anyway?
- This might be a strange question but would you rather be alive at Christ's return or having already died at Christ's return? (Perhaps this question highlights the point that Paul is making to the Thessalonians. In essence, Paul says that it makes no difference whether you are awake or asleep because you will always be with the Lord. No one group gets preferred treatment simply because they were alive or dead when Christ comes back.)
- Do you find these verses more encouraging or challenging?
- Anything stand out to you about God from our passages of Scripture today?

Conclusions/ Applications

REUNITING WITH THOSE WHO DIED AND BEING WITH THE LORD

As Christians we have this incredible promise laying before us. Whether we live or die, we get to be in the presence of the Lord and with other believers who have died.

To our brothers and sisters in Christ, death is not the end of our relationship. In many ways, it is a new existence that will be even better than the relationships we experienced on earth. For our new existence will be eternal and we will live in perfect peace.

And greatest of all, we get to be with the Lord *together*. Indeed, heaven is not just about getting to be reunited with those we have lost. It is more so that we get to be with Jesus forever alongside them.

These truths motivate faithful living on earth. And faithful living leads to comfort. When death occurs in this life, we don't have to be afraid or worry. God's promises are sufficient for sustaining us in our grief.