

"The Second Coming" 1 Thess. 4:13-18 August 20, 1995

### Text Comment

- v. 13 "fall asleep" we today use euphemisms for death just as that ancient culture did. We say that someone "passed away" or "departed this life." The metaphor of sleep for death serves several purposes explaining why it was retained in the Bible: it suggests rest after work; it suggests that death is only temporary; and it reminds us that our bodies too will participate in Christ's second coming. The word "cemetery" itself comes from a Greek word meaning "sleeping place."
- v. 15 "the Lord's own word" in all likelihood a statement of the Lord unrecorded in the gospels (as e.g. Acts 20:35) "we who are still alive" Did Paul think he would live to see the Lord's return? He may have; he wasn't infallible except when writing Holy Scripture under the Holy Spirit's inspiration. He told the Ephesian elders he wouldn't see them again, but apparently he did. But the Greek here doesn't at all require the conclusion that he expected the Lord's return in his lifetime, only that those Christians who were alive when the Lord returned would be reunited with those who had died. In 5:2-3 he says that the time of the Lord's return is unknown and in 1 Cor. 6:14 he classes himself with those who will be raised.
- v. 16 You find these same features elsewhere in the Gospels, in Paul, and in Rev. in connection with the second coming. They indicate the majesty and authority and glorious pageantry of the event.
- v. 17 "caught up" = the Latin Bible rendered that with the word *rapio*, from which comes the word "rapture" in connection with the second coming. But the phrase used by Paul (lit. "for a meeting" with the Lord) appears to be a technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary by a deputation which went out from the city to greet him and to escort him in. It is used in exactly this sense in Acts 28 of the delegation of church leaders who came out of Rome to welcome the Apostle Paul and to lead him into the city. Hence the suggestion is that the dead in Christ rise, are joined by the believers living in the world at the second coming, all of them together join the Lord in the air, and form, with the angels, the Lord's host as he makes his way onward to earth and to the conquest of his enemies. The idea is not that the Lord comes so far and then goes back to heaven to wait another seven years. If you speak of the rapture, understand that it is simply one in that complex of events that makes up the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

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Paul had had time, those few weeks he had spent in Thessalonica, to teach the new believers there the most basic articles of the Christian faith and the most basic principles of Christian ethics. But, you remember, he had been run out of town suddenly and, no doubt, much of what he would have taught them was left unsaid. They had been taught that Jesus Christ, who died for their sins and rose again from the dead and who then ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God, would some day come again to earth to bring history to its close and to judge the living and the dead and take his followers to heaven. They knew **that**. And they believed that.

Strange as that idea may seem to someone at first glance -- that the Son of God came into the

world as a man, left it, and is coming again to the world someday -- these people, educated and sophisticated as a number of them were, had come to believe it true.

But, since Paul had left them, some of their number had died. And this had caused them to fear that those who had died would lose their place and their share in the approaching advent or coming of Christ. They did not doubt, apparently, that their dead loved ones would rise to life on the day of resurrection, for Paul does not seem to address that point. Their worry rather seemed to be that their friends and loved ones would miss out on the great events associated with the Lord's return. They wondered if only those who were alive in the world when Christ returned would share in the triumph of his return to earth.

It is this concern the Apostle now proceeds to remove. No, he says, they do not lose their share in the triumph of Christ's return. Far from it. In fact, those who have died in faith have the first place when the Lord comes again. They will rise first.

There are many ways into the nature and the meaning and the significance of the Christian faith, and one of them surely is that of its expectation and promise regarding the end of time and the return to earth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The meaning of life in the present is determined by the future. It is so whatever religion or whatever philosophy of life one believes and lives by.

Robert Bellah and others wrote one of the most perceptive critiques of American culture in the 1980s. It was entitled Habits of the Heart and it was a thoughtful interpretation of a great deal of information gathered in surveys and observation of Americans. Their most important conclusion was that "Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice." For this reason "freedom" is ranked in our culture as the highest cultural value; freedom, they concluded, has practically become the definition of good in the American mind. But this freedom lacks much content.

As the authors put it:

Freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. What it is that one might do with that freedom is much more difficult for Americans to define.

[In Jones, Biblical Christian Ethics, p. 34]

Now there are many problems with this view of life and this view of freedom and we are encountering all of them in our culture today. One obvious problem is the discovery that one person's freedom is invariably the loss of another's. No one can be left free to do his own thing without sooner or later requiring that someone else's freedom be curtailed to keep it from getting in his way. But that is not my point.

My point is that this view of life, this view of what is good, this view of freedom -- now so prevalent in our culture -- **absolutely requires a certain view of the future.** In this respect it is a theological idea, it rests on a particular belief system. For obviously there is no other way to know the future except by faith -- but the future determines the meaning of the present.

This is the theme that runs through the art of Woody Allen. In his God (A Play) Allen says "The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards." His point is that without a fixed ending, without a certain conclusion to the human drama, the search for significance and for meaning in human life must always prove futile and hopeless.

The most that can be hoped for if the future remains dark and unknown is some form of manufactured courage in which an attempt is made to make a virtue out of the meaninglessness of life -- and the 20th century has devoted an immense amount of its literary and philosophical energy making that attempt.

Here is Bertolt Brecht, the German writer of several generations back:

Do not be misled!  
 There is no return.  
 Day goes out at the door;  
 You might feel the night wind:  
 There is no tomorrow.

Do not be deceived!  
 Life is very short.  
 Quaff it in quick gulps!  
 It will not suffice for you  
 When you leave it.

Do not be put off!  
 You have not too much time!  
 Leave decay to the redeemed!  
 Life is the greatest thing:  
 Nothing more remains.

Do not be misled  
 To drudgery and wasting disease!  
 What fear can touch you?  
 You die like all the animals  
 And nothing comes after.

It has been of course one of the most powerful arguments of Christian apologists in this century that this honest admission of the meaninglessness of life does not satisfy the human soul and does not prove possible to live with. Human beings who really have come to believe that they are mere animals with no personal future we have discovered to our terrible woe in this century, do not find meaning and freedom in life, but become like the cruelest and most heartless of animals and exact a vengeance on other human beings worse than anything we had imagined. Take away the prospect of a future, of a judgment day, of an ultimate goal for human life, and, we discovered, you take away everything that makes human life meaningful and tolerable. And, **even then**, no human being has ever come close to living out this philosophy of human

meaninglessness. It cannot be done.

Human beings have within them a sense of eternity and of the true significance of their lives and they cannot and they do not adjust to the thought that they are merely animals with no connections before or after, that they are a piece of cosmic scrap thrown up on the shores of time. Made in God's image as human beings are, they know they are more than that -- they may not be able to explain how they know that, but know it they do.

But Christians have no such problems. They know not only that they were created by a personal God in his own image for the purpose of fellowship with him, they also know that life is coming at last to an end, to a goal toward which it has been pointing all this while. They know that there is a judgment awaiting all of mankind, a reckoning with God that makes every day that every human being lives in this world supercharged with significance, because every day will one day have to be accounted for. They know that the universal characteristic of human life in this world is sin and that left to themselves they could not escape the righteous judgment of a holy God. **But** they also know that God, who is merciful as well as holy, has intervened and made a way for sinners such as we all are, to escape his condemnation and to obtain in the eternal future not the woe we deserve but the joy and the fulfillment of eternal life in God's very presence.

That way, of course, is Jesus Christ who came once into the world --as the author of Hebrews has it-- to take away the sins of many people, and who is coming again a second time "not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Now **that prospect of the future** gives a terrible and wonderful meaning to life. What is more, it gives exactly that meaning to life -- that knowledge of right and wrong, that uneasy conscience in the face of the sinfulness of our lives, that conviction that goodness and love are true things and not mere sentiments, that instinct that our lives are important and have a true purpose, all of that and much more -- I say it is the Christian view of the future that gives a basis and a foundation to all of those things that every human being knows to be true deep within himself or herself.

This is why the Christian faith never loses its power in the world -- no matter that so many are offended by its doctrines and its laws, no matter that so many speak and act against it. It alone accounts for the most fundamental convictions that rest in every human soul and that alone give meaning to life.

The people who wish to believe -- and there are many of them today -- that they may do as they please do so on the usually unspoken and unconsidered assumption that the future holds no reason for them to act otherwise. Most people rarely consider the fact that, if that is true and the future is going nowhere in particular, then their lives now are without meaning and purpose and point and that it really matters not whether they live or they die. **But, why do they believe that the future is empty of purpose and conclusion and fulfillment and judgment?**

How do they know this? It is an assumption of terrific consequence. How do they know it is true? Ask a Christian how he knows the future, how he knows that Jesus Christ is, in fact, coming again to bring salvation to his people and to bring judgment to the rest, and he knows

exactly what to say.

He says, as Paul says here in v. 14: we know it because Jesus has already risen from the dead, has already demonstrated his power over death. We know that this future is true because the extraordinary past of the Lord Jesus Christ is true.

What is more, as Paul says here in v. 15, we know it because Jesus taught it -- and we have discovered that, unlike every other human teacher, everything Jesus ever said, all of his teachings, have been proved true and utterly reliable to us.

This is the Christian's "hope" as Paul calls it in v. 13. "Hope" is a word that in our usage often means "wish" or "desire." "I hope it will not rain tomorrow." But in its Christian usage, "hope" does not mean that, it is not merely a feeling that what we want will happen. In Christian, in biblical usage, hope is another word for faith, for confident trust that the future will turn out as God has promised.

It is in this sense that Paul says, in Ephesians 2: that the unbelieving world is without hope and without God in the world. They are without hope because they are without God. They do not know God and his faithfulness, his Word and what it tells them of what is to come, they do not know Christ and have not discovered what guarantees he has given of the future that is promised to those who love him.

This is why, when the Gospel made its way out into the world after Pentecost, it carried with it such tremendous power. It had the answer to the great questions of life and it had the solution to the great problem of life -- what of the future; what of **my** future?

As today, so then, certain philosophies and certain religions promised some vague form of continuing existence after death -- thought it was only that, a promise -- no evidence, no demonstration that it could deliver on that promise. But there was no ringing certainty such as the Christians brought with them.

Listen to this letter, dug up by archaeologists, from the second century, written to a friend who had been bereaved. It is typical of the sentiments of those days and, now again, of ours.

Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermuthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another.

She feels for her friends, but her conclusion is more than slightly pathetic. She has no comfort to give. "Against such things one can do nothing."

The great British scholar J.B. Lightfoot eloquently pointed out the contrasting approaches of the Christians and the pagans in that day. Here he is speaking of the difference between the Christian graves in the catacombs, the underground burial chambers used by Christians in the

Roman empire and the graves of the pagans along the great highway, the Appian Way, above them.

The contrast between the gloomy despair of the heathen and the triumphant hope of the Christian mourner is nowhere more forcibly brought out than by their monumental inscriptions. The contrast of the tombs, for instance, in the Appian Way, above and below ground, has often been dwelt upon. On the one hand, there is the dreary wail of despair, the effect of which is only heightened by the pomp of outward splendour from which it issues. On the other, the exulting psalm of hope, shining the more brightly in all ill-written, ill-spelt records amidst the darkness of subterranean caverns. [In Stott, p. 95]

The Christians weren't hoping against hope. Their Savior had come out of the grave and had been seen by multitudes; had ascended to heaven and had promised to return. They knew he was coming again, they knew he would bring triumph with him, they just didn't know when and, in the case of the Thessalonians, they were still vague on certain details.

But, not so us, brothers and sisters. Take all that Scripture says about the Lord's return, all that it assures us of, and set that prospect before you every day that you live. For, the Scripture says, everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself. And what is that hope...listen to the great southern Presbyterian John Girardeau describe the coming day:

The dead are rising!...Magnificent mausoleums are bursting in which lie inurned the ashes of sceptered monarchs; moss-covered sepulchers are cleaving, beneath which molder the remains of priests and high-priests, nobles and princes, legislators and warriors, philosophers, orators, and poets; while the grass-grown mounds under which the slave and the peasant repose in death are not disobedient to the heavenly call.

From dim cathedral aisles, from every crowded churchyard, from forest burying grounds, from profoundest ocean depths, the long-forgotten dead are starting into new, immortal being amidst the thrilling realities of the judgment day. The solitary traveler rises from the lonely grave which he found in a land far distant from home; while from the narrow beds in which they slept side by side in the populous cemetery whole families rise together...the mother once more clasps in her arms the babe that slumbered with her in the same grave, and mingled its dust with hers.

And there will be the Lord, at last!