4-11-21

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (2)

Paul is telling the Thessalonian church, and us, some important truths about the return of our Saviour, Jesus. Just this past Sunday, we celebrated Easter, the rising from the dead of Jesus. We know that He spent the next forty days appearing at various times to His disciples and then ascended into heaven to be with the Father. That’s where He is now. But He is coming back to the earth to collect His church to Himself and to set up His earthly kingdom.

These are facts, you can bank on them; in fact, you can put all your hope of salvation in Jesus to whom all these things apply. The Thessalonian church had questions about the return of Christ, just like we do. Paul reminded them of some things he had taught them while he was with them; things we have also been taught by reading God’s word, the Bible.

First off, we don’t get to know when Jesus is coming back. This is information that God, in His wisdom, keeps to Himself. For us to spend time trying to figure out when Jesus is coming back is not only a waste of time, it is acting contrary to God’s will. He doesn’t want us to know; we needn’t be looking into it. Jesus did tell us some signs of the times; things to let us know that the time of His return is close. He gave us that information so that we would know that things are not going along as they always have. He gave us the information so that we would be aware that the time of His arrival is near and we could be ready.

Remember that in Matthew 16:3, Jesus chastised the Pharisees for not being able to read the signs of the times. He was referring to things written in the Old Testament warning them of His first coming that they didn’t pay attention to. We mustn’t make the same mistake the Pharisees made. We need to heed that warning today. The things written in the New Testament that Jesus told us to watch for are here. The signs of the times for the second return of Christ are here. This isn’t a call to panic or for sensationalism. It is a call to be encouraged that Jesus will be here soon to set all things in order and for us to be busy at work when our Master comes.

Paul makes it clear that the coming of our King will be sudden, unexpected for many, and inevitable. Make no mistake, Jesus is coming back; the Bible makes this very clear. Both Old and New Testaments tell us of the return of Messiah. He will come back to gather His people to Himself and to establish His earthly kingdom. He will return as a conqueror and with absolute power and authority. Those who stand against Him will be slain simply by His word.

When He appears, it will be a surprise to all. Even we who expect Him will be taken aback by the trumpet blast, the shout of an archangel, and the appearance of Jesus standing in the clouds. But it will be glorious for us because we will quickly know that our Saviour has arrived and we will greet Him with joy. We lived in the day while on earth and we will continue in the light of Christ when He returns. His sudden appearance will not be so pleasant for those who live in darkness. His coming will shine inescapable light on them and their deeds.

His coming will be unexpected for all in that we don’t know when it will happen. But, for those of us who are children of the day, His coming is ultimately expected and looked forward to. We are sober and alert; we anticipate His second advent. We are watching for our King and look forward to the Parousia so that we may go to meet Him.

Those who are non-believers, those who are children of the night and darkness, will be completely caught off-guard because His coming is totally unexpected for them. They have denied His existence and His Lordship. They will stand before Him unprepared and condemned. Their own words and their own actions will condemn them in the presence of the Holy One.

In verse 8, Paul returns to his often-used metaphor of preparation for battle. It is important for us since we are of the day and we are sober and alert, to know that we are in battle. It is, of course, spiritual battle. Our enemy is satan and his followers. Simply by being Christian, he declares us his enemies and actively attacks us.

Satan is a merciless enemy. He will cut us no slack; he will kick us when we are down. We must be aware that he is there and be prepared. Simply ignoring him and hoping he will go away does not work; we must actively resist him. That is why Paul often speaks of armor and weapons; spiritual armor and weapons.

In this verse he says, “*having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation*.” The first thing to notice is that Paul says “*having put on*”. This armor is something that the Christian needs to be wearing from the beginning; and since satan never stops attacking us, we must always be wearing it. We are expected to have put on our armor and to continue wearing it.

Next, this looks familiar. Most of us are thinking of Ephesians 6 where Paul goes into detail of the spiritual armor and weapon of the Christian. If we do a little comparison, we will see that he has changed things around a little. Here we have “*the breastplate of faith and love*”, while in Ephesians it is the breastplate of righteousness. In Ephesians, it is the helmet of salvation, and here it is the helmet of “*the hope of salvation*”.

Paul feels free to shift his metaphors around a little. From this we know that righteousness isn’t the only thing that protects our heart; faith and love do also. Salvation isn’t the only thing that protects our mind; so does hope. All these spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ protect our eternal bodies and eternal souls.

In this verse, we come back to the three important Christian ideas of faith, hope, and love. Proverbs 4:23 says, “*Watch over your heart with all diligence*”. And in Romans 12:2 we are instructed to “*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*”. These life-long pursuits are accomplished through faith, hope, and love. We feed the Holy Spirit given faith by prayer and immersion in the word of God. We focus on Jesus Christ for all our hope of eternal life. And we reject this world by choosing to love God and other people.

There is an interesting change in focus in verses 9 and 10. So far, in chapter 5, the focus has been more or less on people. What the Christians need to be doing under the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit. What the life-style is of those who have rejected God and what their end will be. Now the focus is on God and what He has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ.

Verse 9 begins, “*For God has not destined us for wrath*”. Now, Paul is applying this directly to Christians here, but we can back up and look at this statement as a general application. When God created Adam and Eve, He created them to live forever in fellowship with Him. He didn’t create them so He would have people to pour out His wrath upon. They were not created destined for wrath.

But God did allow them to make their own choice, and they chose to rebel against Him. That choice is what has made all mankind an object of God’s wrath. We have perpetuated that wrath by our continued rebellion and sin. Sometimes, God is accused of being unloving or cruel if someone would be forever sentenced to hell. But the fact is that each person has brought that on themselves and God is simply allowing them to suffer the consequences of their own decisions. God is not cruel. He is more loving than we can imagine; but He is also just. And that justice demands that sin be punished.

But back to Paul’s application here in verse 9. This verse is used to support several of the views of when the Rapture will take place with respect to the Tribulation. It can be used in support of the pre, mid, and post tribulation views of the Rapture. It’s not my intention to speculate on these views here, but to look at what this verse definitely tells us.

He is talking to the church, the Christians in Thessalonica, and by extension, all who have since become followers of Jesus Christ. Here is very good news for us. These are comforting words for any Christian who is nervous about the return of Jesus. God has not appointed or destined any Christian to spend eternity suffering wrath. The book of Revelation lets us know that when Jesus comes back to establish His Kingdom on earth, there will be plenty of wrath. But the Christian need not fear that wrath. We can be joyous when He comes back; He will not pour out His wrath upon us.

It can be kind of nerve-wracking to consider the coming of Jesus in His power and glory. But the word of God tells us here that we can relax; if we are His, we are safe. The reason this is so comforting is that none of this is based on man, but completely on God. And we know that God is completely trustworthy and will not change.

God Himself has not destined His children for wrath, but He has destined us “*for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*”. And this is Jesus “*who died for us*”. It is God who has worked this all out; it is God who we are depending on for salvation; and God is entirely dependable. What Paul is referring to here is the atonement. He doesn’t really go into detail about the atonement here but he certainly did while he was with the Thessalonians.

The doctrine of the atonement is crucial to Christianity. It is, of course, one of the primary targets of those who profess to be followers of Christ but deny the truth of the Bible. I assure you by what we are told in God’s word, without the atonement we are all lost.

The doctrine of the atonement is basically this: God is absolutely just. By His very nature, by who He is, He cannot let sin go unpunished. If He did, He would cease to be the God He is. When we sin, we sin against an infinite God; an infinitely holy God. That is why hell lasts forever. It would take us forever to pay the price for our sin against our infinite God.

Because God is also merciful and loving, He made a way for us. He made a way for our sins to be punished without us spending eternity in hell. That way is His only begotten Son, Jesus. Jesus paid the price of our sins in full. He atoned for our sins. In this way, God’s justice is satisfied, sin has been punished. If we accept Christ as Saviour, then God will accept what Jesus suffered in our place, and we will be declared “not guilty”. This is atonement. Jesus atoned for our sins. As you can see, without this, we are lost.

With our sins atoned for, we have salvation. Again, God has brought all this about through Jesus Christ. In Romans 6:23 the Bible tells us that “*the wages of sin is death*”. Also, in Hebrews 9:27 “*And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment*”. Here is where it is so important to see that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. In order to atone for us, He had to die and God cannot die, so Jesus had to be a man. At the same time, He had to be perfect as only God is perfect, otherwise, Jesus’ acceptance of judgement on our behalf would not satisfy God the Father.

Because of Christ then, it doesn’t matter if we Christians die before Jesus comes back or if we are still alive. One has no advantage over the other. By the power of God, we will then live with Christ forever. Notice that when Paul says that we will live with Jesus, it is another affirmation that Jesus has risen from the dead and is alive.

Paul completes this section with, “*Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you also are doing*.” This goes along with 4:18, “*Therefore, comfort one another with these words*.” This is an important function of the church. The world is a nasty place. Things go wrong, there is evil, sickness, poverty, and falsehood. Death is here. Because we live in the world, the Christian is not immune to these things. But the church should be a safe haven for the Christian. We are to encourage each other and comfort each other and build each other up.

And we can do this. People of the world really have nothing to offer each other. Perhaps some sympathy, but nothing to bring hope. We have the ultimate truth, the ultimate good news, the ultimate hope. With the words of the Bible, we have beautiful promises to offer each other that are promises from God.

The church is the group of people who are willing to sacrifice for each other. We will sacrifice our time to help or to talk or to just listen. Just like the church in Thessalonica, that is what this church family does. And just like the church in Thessalonica, we can always do more, in the strength of Christ.

Prayer

Merciful Lord God, how can we help but praise You! We Your creation have turned against You and deserve nothing good. You are just and righteous; these attributes bring You glory and You will not compromise them. You are awesome God and Your justice is fearful; we are right to fear You.

But Your love is overwhelming. In Your great compassion You made a tremendous sacrifice on behalf of Your creation. You made a way to satisfy Your justice yet save us from Your wrath. None but You could accomplish this and we who are saved will be grateful to give You praise through eternity.

You are God and how blessed are Your people to have a God such as You; the one true God; the God of the Bible. And how blessed we are to have the Son, Jesus, who in obedience to You and out of love for us was willing to go to the cross. May You be honored and glorified forever and ever.

In Jesus’ name

Amen