

Bangalore Conference, 1 Thess Exposition

Study 5 – 1 Thess 4:13-5:11

Introduction

In this "final" section of the letter (starting at ch 4), Paul is dealing with some issues in the church that presumably, Tim had told him about. We are listening in on one side of the conversation so have to read between the lines a bit to try and work out what the issue was that Paul is writing to fix. Considering what he says and how he says it, it shouldn't be that hard to work it out.

He has obviously moved on from the first issue (4:1-12) which was about living to please God. Now he wants to speak about the return of Christ and some specifics about that event. Obviously Paul had taught about this when at Thess, but there were holes in their understanding that were causing problems for them. Paul writes to his dear friends, his brothers in Christ to reassure and encourage them. That is the whole tone of this section.

For my points, I want to take my cue from Paul's countering of the problems his friends were having. In each case he says in effect "not that but rather this" and I have 4 points as we go through these verses. Before we delve in, I want you to notice Paul's goal and end in writing – twice he says "encourage each other" and in the second case he adds "build each other up". The teaching of the last things, so called eschatology, can be and often is one of the most divisive and argumentative doctrines in all of Christian theology. It is never meant to be so. It is meant for the encouragement and comfort of God's people. So let's remember that as we go through (illust – like watermark across the background of paper).

Not ignorant

First fix for Paul is to cut right to the heart of the problem. What is the problem? It is a lack of knowledge on something that God has made known to us. The issue is to do with death. In western culture, there aren't many taboo subjects. Almost everything is OK to discuss and doesn't cause too much embarrassment. But death still is one of those subjects. Just try bringing it up in conversation and see what happens! It is the great leveller, and it is for many the great unknown. It holds such fear because it is final and irreversible and we can't know what happens afterwards. Unless someone who does know has told us, of course.

Paul said he is writing so his friends won't be ignorant about those who fall asleep. He means death of course, but he's not just using a polite phrase. There is a very real sense in which for the Christian now, death has been transformed from the great enemy into merely sleep. In English, our word cemetery comes from the Greek which means "sleeping place" which for a Christian is a good description. A couple of examples from the bible:

Jn 11:11-13 "After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep."

Stephen's death is described as sleep:

Ac 7:60 "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."

This has nothing to do with a wrong teaching called soul sleep. This is not that the souls of Christians who have died are somehow asleep, waiting for Christ's return. Paul spoke about being away from the body and present with the Lord, and Jesus told the thief on the cross he would be with him in paradise "today" not asleep until the end. No, Christians' bodies sleep in the grave but their souls go to be with God immediately.

APP: Paul counters ignorance with knowledge. What he is about to teach is not fantasy or fiction or vague hope or a mere wish. It is knowledge from God. In these matters as with everything else, we are not ignorant because we have revelation from God. We have the word of the one who brought everything into being and the one who will bring everything to a conclusion. No-one else knows but God does. Many speculate, but God knows. He is the alpha and omega, beginning and end. So we can trust him. Not ignorant because we have revelation! Let's see what difference that makes for us.

Not grieving like the rest

The Thess Christians were concerned for their friends who had died. They were anxious about what would happen to them when Christ returns. Would they be left out? Would they be somehow second-class? Paul says, don't grieve like the rest. Please notice he doesn't say "we do not want you to grieve AT ALL!" He rather says that for the Christian, grieving over a Christian friend who has died is different from the rest WHO HAVE NO HOPE. There is the key difference – hope.

There is nothing wrong with grief. God does not expect us to be soulless and unemotional in the face of the death of a believer. We are called to "weep with those who weep" etc. and of course what did Jesus do at the tomb of his friend Lazarus? He wept. But there is a difference to our grief. For those without hope, death is so devastatingly final. It separates with absolutely no assurance of ever being reunited. The Christian has hope and therefore our grief is restrained, it is softened by the joy of knowing that those who have gone are now with the Lord forever!

Illust – hope must have some basis, some foundation. When we stepped onboard the 747 that brought us to Bangalore, what was our hope that the trip would be OK? It was trust in BA, trust in the CAA and all their checks, monitoring, rules and regs, it was trust based on knowledge that flying is much safer than driving.

What is basis of Christian hope? It is trust in Jesus, our Saviour who died and rose again. We believe in the literal death of the man, Jesus of Nazareth and his literal, bodily resurrection to life. OUR hope of life is bound up in HIS life.

Jn 14:19 *"Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."*

1 Co 6:14 *"By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also."*

2 Co 4:14 *"because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence."*

Those who have fallen asleep in Christ, will surely come with him when he returns because they are united to him in his death and resurrection. In his long discussion on resurrection in 1 Cor 15, Paul concludes that if Christ has not been raised, then Christians have no hope and are to be pitied. But he says with confidence:

1 Co 15:20 *"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."*

Christ is the firstfruits, we are the fruit that follows.

APP: Not grieving like the rest because we have hope. In fact, Paul brings revelation from the Lord about some of the events of that time. The Thess Christians had no need to be anxious about their Christian friends who had died being left out. According to the Lord's own word, they will be first!! What a glorious time that will be. Just look at the details (4:16-17). Lord will come down, loud command, voice of angel, trumpet call and the dead in Christ will rise.

Does this refer to Lord's own word somewhere else in bible? Probably not although there are some things recorded of what the Lord taught on this:

Matt 24:30ff speaks about the Lord coming in the sky and angels are mentioned.

John 5:25ff talks about the voice of the Son of God will cause the resurrection of his people from the grave.

This may have been something that the Lord revealed directly to Paul or it may be words of Jesus not recorded in the gospels but remembered by the disciples and passed on. Either way, we can trust that Paul didn't make this up but it was revealed to him. Our Christian hope rests not on blind faith but on our trust in the historical Jesus, his death and resurrection and God's word about him.

Death for the Christian has nothing of the sting it has for the unsaved. As we deal with people who have lost loved ones, or even as we face grief ourselves, remember that mingled with our grief is the joy of knowing that God's saved people are now with him forever. And this hope is not wishful thinking, but has strong basis in the word of God, and our faith in Christ.

Not preoccupied with when he will return

This will only be a brief point, because Paul deals with it quite briefly. This is not a matter of knowledge but simply of obedience. We always want to know WHEN something will happen. Like children waiting for Christmas or birthday, like waiting for holiday or something good you are looking forward to, we want to know WHEN. In the case of Christ's return, there might be all sorts of reasons for knowing WHEN it will take place. Is it worth making that 5-year plan? Is it worth putting all that work in to theological study and then pastoral experience? How long do I have before I need to get things ready?

You can perhaps see the divine wisdom in us NOT knowing. But we can still get preoccupied with it.

Illust – like horse with blinkers, so we can get focussed in on our favourite subject (and miss many other things around!).

What does Paul say about the WHEN question? He says, they already know enough (you know very well). Paul had obviously taught them what the Lord himself had taught on the "day of the Lord". This phrase was used throughout the OT to speak about various times of God coming to intervene for his people (sometimes in battle) but also to come and judge his people or the nations. In the NT, this phrase comes to refer to that last time when Christ will return so that sometimes the "day of the Lord" becomes the same as the day of Christ:

1 Co 1:8 *"He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Php 1:6 *"being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

Other examples: in 1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; Phil. 1:6. 10; 2:16.

This day is THE day when God will come to judge the world, to punish those who have not received him and to save those who have received him. So for some, this will be a fearful day, "like a thief in the night". That is an idea that Jesus himself used (Matt 25:43 and see also 2 Pet 3:10). There will be no escape for those who fear this day of the Lord's coming again. Look at v3. It is all negative.

APP: We will come onto v4ff in a moment, but can you see that for the Christian, it has nothing of the same fear. "But you..." means it is different for the Christian. We will see why in a moment. So Christian, you are not to be distracted by WHEN this will all happen. Paul is only saying what the Lord had already taught his disciples:

Mt 24:36 *"No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*

Ac 1:7 *"He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."*

In God's perfect wisdom, he has planned it so that we can't know when he will return. We have some signs etc. but they are not to help us pinpoint the moment, rather to heighten our expectation and so that we will not worry about it. If you belong to Christ, his return has no fear but only joy. Not preoccupied because we know he will come suddenly and gloriously FOR US.

Not surprised

Why doesn't that awesome day, that fearful day hold the same fear for Christians? V4 provides the simple answer – because you are not in darkness so that this day surprises like a thief. Paul often uses the term "darkness" to refer to spiritual ignorance and insensitivity. Look for example at these verses:

Eph 4:18-19 *"They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."*

2 Co 4:4-6 *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

1 Pet 2:9 *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*

The reason Christians are not to be taken by surprise by the return of Christ (like a thief in the night) is that they are "sons of the light and sons of the day". That phrase means to share the characteristics of something. Christians have moved from the realm of darkness, from spiritual ignorance and insensitivity, from not knowing God, not obeying the gospel to being in the light, a condition of knowledge, righteousness, acceptance and light. Put simply, they have been transformed.

APP: Not surprised, but waiting expectantly. Quite the opposite of fearing that day, we look forward to it with anticipation. The dread of the judgement of God upon our sins has been taken by our Saviour so that we await his coming for the final act of our salvation, when he will take us to be with him forever (v17).

[At this point and the next, if preaching to mixed group of Christians and non-Christians, I might labour the point of what it means to be ready, to be trusting in Christ, to have been called out of darkness and into light.]

Not unprepared

The last point I want to make is similar to the previous but has a further application for us. Paul has told us that we don't need to be anxious about the return of Christ because we are not surprised. We don't know when, but we DO know that he WILL return. Part of the reason we are not afraid of that day is because we know it is coming, but the other part is our last point. It doesn't hold fear for us because we are not unprepared, we will be ready. Paul continues to use light and dark, day and night as metaphors for those who are ready (i.e. Christians) and those who aren't (non-Christians). There are a whole bunch of contrasts here – light/dark, day/night, awake/asleep, drunk/self-controlled.

There are several commands here. Paul says "let us be..." several times, v6 (twice), v8. He wants these Christians to be ready for that day because it now belongs to them. It is not only their present condition to be sons of the day, it is also their destiny. They look forward to it and are to stand ready for it by being self-controlled and alert. There is a behaviour that belongs to the day and also to the night. Sleepiness, drunkenness belong to the night. This is a picture of being unaware of what is happening, of indulging sensual appetites.

But in contrast, Christians are to stand ready, like soldiers, hence the reference to armour. Faith, hope and love are mentioned. Faith and love are a breastplate, protection for the vital parts, hope of salvation is a helmet, protecting the head. These are the same three characteristics that Paul commended the Thess Christians for in ch 1. What is our hope? We have talked about that hope resting on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here Paul spells it out clearly.

Our hope is that we have been appointed or chosen to receive salvation, to be saved NOT to suffer God's wrath against the tremendous weight of our sin. And we remember that this is nothing to do with our own goodness, but is all attributed to the work of Christ when he died for us. V10 – this is our hope and assurance. We don't approach death or the return of Christ not knowing whether we have done enough. Our assurance is grounded in the finished work of Christ on the cross so that our hope is in him.

APP: Not unprepared but ready for his coming. If we knew WHEN he would return, wouldn't it be a temptation to sort things out at the end and live carelessly? But we are in the light, sons of the day, not asleep, not drunk, not indulging ourselves. Be ready for that day by living a self-controlled and alert life, watching and waiting for him to return. Like Jesus' parables of the servant or the bridesmaids, you are to be ready by having that hope of salvation now.

What about those who have died? What about Christ's return? What about when this will happen?

Paul says: not ignorant because we have revelation. Not grieving over death of Christians because we have hope. Not preoccupied with when because we know he WILL return. Not surprised because we wait expectantly. And not unprepared because we know how to be ready.

Are you ready for that day? There are only two destinies for every person – wrath or salvation. There is only one way to receive salvation and that is through faith in Christ who died to bring us life. These words are a challenge to all, but they are a special encouragement to Christians, to those who look forward to his coming. Encourage one another and build each other up with these words. May God help us to do this more and more. Amen.