



**“Help for the Homesick:
Homesick But Headed Heavenward”**
1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
Dr. Jeff Reynolds
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Sermon Link: <https://bit.ly/38KGnXK>

When I was a kid, I became fascinated with people who had near-death experiences. If there was a special program on television about someone who had come near to crossing over that great barrier we all will face—but returned to tell about it—I was absolutely transfixed. I wanted to know what they saw, how they felt, and what they experienced. I was riveted by the details of their stories. I even remember asking my 7th grade Sunday School teacher about the topic, and I still have a book he loaned me (nearly three decades ago... oops) in which those who had been through some sort of near-death experience shared their accounts.

When I got to college and was involved in ministry leadership in my school, we invited a gentleman who had been through a near-death experience and written a book about it to speak to our ministry gathering. His account was pretty amazing, and as with seemingly all of these sorts of stories, it involved a long, dark tunnel, a bright white light, and some sense of the reality of God’s presence. He told of the awareness of impending judgement, the overwhelming sense of peace that came in light of the mercy of God through Christ, and brilliant angelic creatures that filled the expanse around him. His account was captivating.

I have a hunch that near-death experiences pique your interest to some degree, too. Why? Because death remains shrouded in mystery. Death is the universal human experience, but no one seems to be able to tell us definitely exactly what happens when it happens. What happens when we die? I learned a long time ago that we have a whole lot of beliefs about how we ought to answer that question, and I also learned a long time ago that people’s theology is better on display at the funeral home than in the Sunday School classroom. The answer to this question is really where the rubber meets the road for everybody’s beliefs about God (or lack thereof). What happens when we die?

Thankfully, we don’t have to rely on myths, fables, fairy tales, and best guesses to answer this question. God tells us what’s going to happen in His Word. He gives us a compelling glimpse of the great future awaiting all who are in Christ, and He gives us a terrifying preview of what awaits those who pay the price for their own sin instead of receiving God’s grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Most of all, He communicates in His Word that His arms are open to receive anyone who comes to Him in repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, and He tells us that, in Christ, we are headed Heavenward!

Big Idea – *I’m Homesick, but in Christ, I’m headed Heavenward.*

1. In Christ, I know what's going to happen when I die (4:13-14).

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 (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

One of the biggest struggles the Thessalonian Christians were having was trying to reconcile what had happened and would happen to their brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives on earth had come to an end. They wondered if these dear departed saints would simply miss out on the return of Christ, and they wondered what was to become of their loved ones. Paul is writing to assure the Thessalonian Christians that their loved ones are safe with the Lord and that they will see them again.

Paul writes that he does not want the Thessalonian Christians to be uninformed about those who have died, and he doesn't want them to grieve as those who have no hope. Christians always have reason for hope, and while the reality of death and separation is unequivocally cause for grief even for those who are in Christ, we nevertheless grieve differently from the rest of the world. We see death, not as "goodbye," but as "see you in a little while." There's a big difference there.

Our hope that causes us to grieve differently in the face of death is rooted in the finished work of Christ. "Through Jesus," Paul writes, "God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Through Jesus, those whose lives on earth come to an end go to the presence of God, where they are safe with their Savior from this time forward and ever after. So how does this play out?

If you are a follower of Christ, at the moment of your death, your spirit will go immediately to the presence of God. The Bible teaches us that Christians experience an immediate, conscious existence after death that is a blessed estate in the presence of God. Do you remember the thief on the cross next to Jesus, the one who repented and expressed his faith in Christ? What did Jesus say to him? "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Can you imagine how the rest of that forgiven thief's day looked? Can you imagine him entering paradise, wondering how someone like him could be there? He was there because of the grace of God extended to him through Jesus Christ. That had to be an amazing day. He went from torture to delight, and in an instant, he was at peace.

In other New Testament letters, Paul communicates our hope of immediate, conscious awareness in the presence of God. He writes to the church at Corinth that "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). He writes to the church at Philippi that his desire "is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:23). In fact, Paul says that for him—a follower of Christ—"to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Paul longs to be in the presence of God, and he knows that is exactly what awaits him when his life on earth comes to an end. He knows he will join what the writer of Hebrews calls "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23). He, like all Christians, will become part of "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) whose lives still speak, even though we cannot be with them at the moment. In Christ, we will see them again.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How does the hope of Heaven encourage you? Who are you looking forward to seeing? What are you looking forward to doing? Can you imagine the joy you will experience on that day when you arrive in the presence of your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? How does that hope encourage you today?

2. In Christ, I know what's going to happen when Christ returns (4:15-18).

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, 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 (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).

I can remember deciding to read the Book of Revelation when I was a teenager, and I did so with great fear and trembling. I was scared to death of what I might read in that book. The prospect of Jesus' return and the end of the world was so frightening to me. After all, the Bible says that "it is a fearful thing to fall in to the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). I had heard about that, and I believed it. As I grew, though, I came to realize that, for those of us who trust and follow Jesus, the return of Christ is the most welcome event we could ever anticipate. I began to understand why the Apostle John ended the Book of Revelation with the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20). When Jesus returns, the consummation of all things will come, and we will finally be at ultimate rest. We should welcome Christ's return and join the Apostle John in his prayer inviting Jesus to return.

What happens to Christians at the return of Christ? When Christ returns, the spirits of those who have died in Christ will be joined with their bodies, which will be raised from the grave and made into resurrection bodies like that of Christ. God gives us glimpses of this truth both here in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:50-57 - ⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christ returns, the dead in Christ will be raised, and those who remain will join those who have returned in the air with Christ. We won't just see the Second Coming; we will be part of the Second Coming with Christ.

Perhaps the most important truth we can capture from this exceedingly important passage is the last part of verse 17: "...so we will always be with the Lord." Even if we don't know many details, we know the most important detail. We will always be with the Lord. The One who said that He would be with us always, even unto the end of the age (see Matthew 28:20) will keep His promise right up to, throughout, and ever after the end. There will never be a time when we who are in Christ will be alienated or separated from Christ. Whether we have died before He returns, or whether we remain alive at His return, we will be with Him. "Therefore," Paul writes, "encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). What greater encouragement could there be? We will be safe with Christ.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How do you view the Second Coming of Christ? Are you afraid, or are you excited? Why?

3. In Christ, I want all people to be ready for Christ's return (5:1-3).

¹ Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, 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 (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

There's another side to all of this, though, and it is a sobering side. For those who trust and follow Jesus, the prospect of Christ's return gives joyful hope. But for those who are not in Christ, the prospect of Christ's return ought to be terrifying. Remember, the Bible teaches that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). Those hands that extend grace in Christ also extend justice to all who have not been forgiven of their sin, and that justice is accomplished by God's righteous wrath. God warns us throughout Scripture that judgment is coming, and it will take the world by surprise.

Paul uses the analogy of a woman whose labor pains suddenly come upon her. There is no escaping the inevitability of what is coming next once the contractions start in earnest. Jesus reminds us of what happened in the days of Noah when He teaches about His return:

Matthew 24:36-44 - ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

In 1972, Mark IV Pictures released a movie entitled *A Thief in the Night* that sought to portray the fulfilling of end-time prophecies in the modern era in an effort to awaken audiences to the need for all people to be ready for Christ's return. The movie opens with a youth pastor reading this passage from Matthew 24, and then he leads a praise team in singing Larry Norman's chilling song, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," which picks up on these themes in a chilling manner:

Life was filled with guns and war / And everyone got trampled on the floor / I wish we'd all been ready
Children died, the days grew cold / A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold / I wish we'd all been ready
There's no time to change your mind / The Son has come and you've been left behind

[You can listen to the song here: https://youtu.be/_AzNILEEZGs]

The notion of Christ's return for judgment is chilling for those who are not in Christ, and our desire must be to see all people come to Christ and thereby be ready for Christ's return. His arms are open now to receive all who would come to Him, but anyone who fails to come to Him now faces a frightening future.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

Are you ready for the return of Christ? There's only one way: you must turn away from your sin and place your faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. If you are trusting and following Jesus, you are ready for Christ's return. If you are not yet trusting and following Jesus, come to Him today!

4. In Christ, I am not afraid of Christ's return, for I am not destined for wrath (5:4-11).

⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children 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 (1 Thessalonians 5:4-11).

When the word “but” is used as a conjunction, Oxford Languages says that it is “used to introduce a phrase or clause contrasting with what has already been mentioned.” I could not be more thankful for Paul’s Spirit-inspired use of that little word at the beginning of this passage. He’s been talking about the fearful judgment of God that will come like a thief in the night and bring swift destruction to those who do not trust and follow Jesus. But that is not us. We are the people who trust and follow Jesus. We are headed Heavenward thanks to the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. We are not children of the dark; rather, we are children of the light. We do not fear falling into the hands of the living God, for by His grace, we are held tightly and securely in His loving grip (see John 10:28-29).

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). What does that mean for us? It means that after the Second Coming, and after the final judgment, followers of Christ will enter into the full enjoyment of life in the presence of God forever in new heavens and a new earth. The Apostle Peter speaks to the juxtaposition of wrath and grace—and how our hope should compel us to live now—in light of the Second Coming of Christ:

2 Peter 3:10-13 - ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. ¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

According to Peter and Paul, we who trust and follow Jesus ought to be the kind of people who illustrate our hope in Christ by walking in faith and love, hope and holiness, “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Peter 3:12). We look forward to the return of Christ and the consummation of the Kingdom of God, when no sin shall ever beset us again and no suffering shall ever befall us again. That is our hope.

Again in this passage, Paul instructs the Thessalonian Christians to “encourage one another” with these truths. Those who are in Christ are safe in Christ—whether they live or whether they die. Although we grieve so many realities of life and death in a fallen world, we grieve with eternal hope in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How does the hope of Heaven affect your life now? Do you live as one who is held firmly in the grip of God’s grace in Jesus Christ your Lord? Do you live as one anticipating the consummation of the Kingdom of God? How might you more fully embrace this reality in your everyday life?

Final Thought

One of my favorite passages of Scripture comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome—a church that was deeply familiar with suffering in a sin-fallen world. Paul gave them the following encouragement:

Romans 8:18-25 - ¹⁸For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

“The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). For someone who hasn't suffered much, that line probably doesn't mean much. But for those of us who have walked life's long and winding road of joys and sorrows, happiness and hurts, that little line means so much. We have come to realize that life in a sin-fallen world is hard, and we have found that we cannot imagine anyone trying to navigate this life without a deep and abiding faith in Almighty God through Jesus Christ our Lord. In Christ, we have hope. Through Christ, we live in hope. Because of Christ, we will always dwell in hope, because we are headed Heavenward in Him!