

Looking Ahead

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In the world of sports, “looking ahead” is a cliché, and not a complimentary one. When an athlete or team plays against an inferior opponent a week before playing a contender, but they play poorly against the first team, sportswriters often say that they were looking ahead to next week’s game. This is usually followed by the “one game at a time” cliché.

However, the same mindset that may cause failure on the gridiron is a necessary ingredient of success in discipleship. As Christians, if we want to get to heaven, we have to be looking ahead to heaven. If looking ahead to heaven means that we don’t get all the pleasure out of this life that we could, who cares? 3000 years from now, nobody in heaven is going to consider their time on earth and say, “Man; I spent too much time looking ahead to heaven!”

As with any spiritual endeavor, the Bible gives us everything we need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on heaven. One passage that addresses the topic is the chunk of Scripture starting with 1 Thessalonians 4 and ranging through the first part of 1 Thessalonians 5. Let’s examine it together this morning to get God’s help in looking ahead.

Righteous Living

The first part of this context concerns righteous living and its relevance to our destination. Paul begins this section by urging the Thessalonians to **EXCEL STILL MORE**. This appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2. One of the themes of our spiritual explorations recently has been the idea of minimum-seeking. This is when we say, “I think that if I give X of my life to God, that will be enough to sneak me into heaven, so X is all God is going to get.” Here, Paul is urging precisely the opposite viewpoint. He’s saying to the Thessalonians, “Everything that you’ve done so far is great, but don’t let that slow you down. Keep growing! Keep becoming more and more like Jesus!”

As Christians today, we need to embrace the same philosophy. In this congregation, we have a diverse collection of disciples. We have different ages, different backgrounds, and different levels of spiritual maturity. However, one thing is true of all of us. None of us are spiritually where God wants us to be. We all have room for growth, and God expects each one of us to keep growing. Maybe He wants to see us working on giving more to His work. Maybe He wants us to be devoting more time to worship and study. Maybe He wants us to be more vocal about our faith with outsiders. Maybe He simply wants us to be less sinful and more righteous. Regardless, He always wants more of what we’re giving.

One of the areas where Paul wants to see this increased excellence is **SELF-CONTROL**. He makes this point in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. In the eyes of most people in the world, self-control is a boring virtue, and self-control in the area of sex is especially boring. I can’t remember ever hearing a song on the radio about having a holy and honorable sex life. Instead, the world’s philosophy is increasingly, “Get what you can while you can.”

However, as Paul’s words make clear, self-restraint in these matters is God’s will for us, and without it, we cannot truly belong to Him. The point is not that sex is bad. Indeed, in a lawful marriage, sex is very good, and when husband and wife share in it together, they are following God’s will and celebrating His goodness. That is the portrait of godly, joyful self-control. However, when we don’t govern the desires of our flesh according to what God asks, that’s when we dethrone God and set our pleasure up as an idol in His place. When we glorify the flesh, we leave no glory for Him.

This is why Paul warns so strongly against **SEXUAL IMMORALITY**. Consider the discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4:6-8. Sometimes, people get the idea that sexual purity is the hobby horse of preachers, maiden aunts, and other prune-mouthed unpleasant people who don’t want anybody to have any fun. In reality, this is God’s emphasis, and His wrath will surely be poured out against the sexually immoral. When the married violate their vows to be with another—and I’m not going to engage in any Clinton-esque line-drawing about what does or does not constitute sex—they have defrauded their spouses. They have deprived them of something that is lawfully theirs, and God will avenge the wrong. When unmarried people sleep with one another, whether man with woman, woman with woman, or man with man, they are defrauding the people they may be married to one day, and God will avenge that too. As Paul did, let me solemnly warn all of you that these things are sinful and evil, and they always come with a price greater than we can afford. We may pay it in this life, but we will certainly pay it in the life to come. God requires His people to be holy.

Instead of such fleshly indulgence, Paul advocates **BROTHERLY LOVE**. We read his thoughts on the matter in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-11. Remember, 1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest of Paul’s letters. He’s writing it from Corinth after Timothy has returned from a visit to Thessalonica. When Paul says that the Thessalonians have been showing love to the brethren throughout Macedonia, he doesn’t mean that they have been abounding in warm fuzzy feelings. He means that Timothy has reported back on all the things he’s seen the Thessalonians doing. That’s one of the primary characteristics of brotherly love. Brotherly love does. If a modern-day Timothy were to come to Joliet, would he be able to report back on his experience of the brotherly love shown by this congregation in our behavior? Perhaps more to the point, would he be able to report on the brotherly love shown by every single one of us? The welfare of our brethren must never be far from our minds. We need to be constantly considering one another, remembering one another, praying for one another, and offering to help. To us, our brethren should be more important than anything else on earth.

In the rest of our lives, we should seek the godly goal of **QUIET LIVING**. Let's look together at 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. These are very civic virtues. Basically, what Paul is saying here is that Christians should be the kind of people everybody else wants as next-door neighbors. We shouldn't be keeping our neighbors up at night with loud parties or loud arguments. We should be holding down steady jobs that we use to support ourselves. We shouldn't go poking our noses into everybody else's business. This is a life of freedom, freedom from financial need, freedom from the freakish reputation that will hinder our ability to do God's work in the community. We should be sound, reliable, responsible, and trustworthy, the kind of people who can be trusted to pick up the neighbor's mail when they're on vacation. We should be good citizens, secondarily of the United States, but primarily of the kingdom of heaven.

The Coming of the Lord

After telling the Thessalonians how they should be living, Paul shifts gears to explain what they, and indeed what we, should be waiting for—the coming of the Lord. This discussion begins with Paul's depiction of what **GODLY GRIEF** should look like. It appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Paul is apparently making this comment in response to a question that Timothy had brought back with him from Thessalonica, a question that seems like a no-brainer to us, but would have been very important to the first-century Thessalonian church. Remember, 1 Thessalonians was written in 50 or 51 AD, only about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is very, very early stuff, and at this time, the Thessalonians weren't only expecting the coming of the Lord. They were expecting the *imminent* coming of the Lord. As 2 Thessalonians reveals, some of the Christians there were so sure that He was returning soon that they stopped working to wait for Him. However, these high expectations created a problem. While they were waiting so expectantly for Jesus, some of the brethren in Thessalonica unexpectedly passed on, which would have alarmed them greatly.

This alarm would only have been heightened by the way the Thessalonians thought about death. Acts 16 tells us that most of the Christians in Thessalonica were Greek, and they would have shared the Greek view of the afterlife. Most of the Greeks believed in life after death, but they considered it to be a pale imitation of the joys of life on earth. You didn't go to heaven; instead, you flitted around miserably in Hades with nothing to do. When the Thessalonian Christians started dying, then, the brethren they left behind worried that they might be stuck in a place like that.

In response, Paul tells the Thessalonians that they shouldn't worry. Unlike the hopeless Greek worldview, the worldview of the Christian should be a hopeful one. It's still perfectly acceptable for Christians to mourn; after all, even Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. However, no Christian, whether 2000 years ago or today, should mourn like those who have no hope. To the atheist, or even to the weak in faith who profess belief in Jesus but don't live for Him, death is a disaster. To us, it's still no picnic, but our grief should be tempered by our ability to look beyond it.

We have this hope because of **GOD'S PROMISE**. Paul lays it out in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-15. I don't think this was at all obvious to the Thessalonians, but from our perspective, it's quite logical. After all, the fact that Jesus died and rose again proves that through God the resurrection from the dead is possible. What Paul adds is that this resurrection is not only possible, but promised. When the Lord returns, He isn't going to take the living Christians home with Him and leave those who have fallen asleep in some spiritual twilight zone. Instead, living and dead will go together.

Paul goes on to explain that all this will occur at **THE COMING OF THE LORD**. Read with me from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. There are Christians today who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Instead, they think that Christ has already come in AD 70, and that when we die, we pass quietly on to our own individual judgment and reward in heaven. Paul begs to differ. When Jesus returns, it's not going to be some subtle, individual event. Instead, He will come with a shout and the sound of a trumpet. Think of it as an alarm-clock buzzer loud enough to wake the dead!

Waking the dead is exactly what it will do. All of those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, whether those the Thessalonians were concerned about 2000 years ago or our own loved ones who have perished in our lifetimes, all of them will rise. Then, the power of Jesus will gather every faithful disciple who is still alive, whether we are still alive or not, and all of us will gather together with Him in the clouds.

In our discussions of authority, we sometimes draw a distinction between the church local and the church universal, and we observe about the church universal that it is an abstraction and doesn't have a concrete existence. Today, that is true. On that day, it will not be. The resurrection morning will mark the first assembling of the universal church. Every Christian will be there, the entire body of the Lord united for the first time with its heavenly Head. We will finally achieve the goal toward which the church has been striving for 2000 years. What is more, that assembly will persist for eternity. We will always be together, with one another and above all, with the Lord Jesus.

The so-what to all of this appears in Paul's closing words of **ENCOURAGEMENT**. Let's look at 1 Thessalonians 4:18. Paul's exhortation here works on a number of levels. First, in the immediate case of the Thessalonians, those original recipients learned why they didn't have to mourn as those without hope. The dead in Christ aren't actually dead. They're only sleeping, and the day will come when Jesus will wake them. This is equally true for the loved ones we have lost. As long as those loved ones were faithful until death, we don't have to worry about never seeing them again. Provided that we remain faithful too, our reunion is certain.

Second, understanding what will happen helps us grapple with our own fear of death. It is possible that the Lord may return in the near future, but if He doesn't, we are all certain to die. That's not a pleasant prospect for even the most dedicated Christian, but death isn't forever. We can trust that the day will come when Jesus will awaken us.

Third, these words are encouraging because they point out the most wonderful aspect of heaven—that we get to spend eternity with Jesus Christ. This is hard for most people in the world to fathom. They don't know Jesus or follow Him, so the thought of living forever with Him is basically meh to them. Why not make heaven about something fun, like eternal football or Black Friday shopping sprees? We see things differently because we know differently. Jesus is the greatest joy of our earthly lives, and we look forward to having Him as the greatest joy of our lives in heaven.

All of this takes us to our reflections immediately before the Lord's Supper. Every week, we take this time to remember everything that Jesus has done for us. This week, though, let's put a slightly different spin on things. When the word tells us about Jesus, it isn't only telling us about our salvation. It's telling us about our reward too. Jesus loved us so much that He laid down His life for us, and in consequence, we can anticipate being forever with the One who loves us like that. We celebrate this feast not only in memorial of His death, but also as a foretaste of the feast of eternal joy that we will share with Him in the kingdom of His Father. We look back, but we look forward too, and no matter what trials we undergo in this life, the promise of Jesus makes our suffering worth it. Let's think about this as we partake.

The Day of the Lord

In the final section of this forward-looking context of Scripture, Paul describes the events of the day of the Lord and what they should mean for us. First, he discusses **THE TIMING** of this event in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3. There are several important lessons we should take from this text. First, Paul makes clear that the return of the Lord will be unexpected. This would be news to vast portions of the denominational world. Interestingly enough, many self-described Christians are every bit as convinced as the Thessalonians were that Jesus is going to come any day now, and they add to the Thessalonian confusion by believing that they can predict the day of His return. One denomination in particular has made half a dozen such predictions. Obviously, they've been wrong every time. I'm sure that others in future will continue to make such predictions, and they will continue to be wrong. No one will ever succeed in predicting the Second Coming for the simple reason that it is not predictable. In the first century, even Christians as untutored as the Thessalonians knew that much. No one will know the day or the hour until the moment it actually happens.

Upon logical consideration, it makes perfect sense that God would keep the day of Christ's return a secret. Revealing the truth beforehand would only encourage the wicked. Think about it like this. Let's say that we've got Brother Orville over here, and he's as committed to the Lord as he can possibly be. Every day of his life, he strives to do right. Now, if Brother Orville somehow knew that Jesus were coming back next Tuesday, he wouldn't change a thing about his life. He might put on a suit or something, but that's about it. On the other hand, if we've got wicked Sister Sue over there, who is a backslider and a hypocrite, and she learns that Jesus is coming back Tuesday morning, how's she going to take it? Human nature tells us that Sister Sue is going to live it up until about 11:30 Monday night, and then she'll get down on her knees and beg God's forgiveness. Advance warning will only abet the practice of unrighteousness.

In reality, though, all of the Sister Sues of the brotherhood are going to get a nasty surprise, along with all the wicked of the world. Jesus will come when they least expect it, and He will reveal their wickedness for what it truly is. There is no hope for safety in unrighteousness, and there is no hope in looking to game the system.

Instead, our best option is to behave like **CHILDREN OF LIGHT**. Paul explains what this means in 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5. Genuine Christians don't concern themselves with the precise timing of the Second Coming because they aren't looking to put one over on God. The way that we look at life needs to be fundamentally different. To us, Christianity can't be a cage, so that we spend our days like a puppy in a pet store, looking mournfully out at all of the things we want to do but can't. That's not being a child of light. Instead, our entire attitude toward life must be different from that of the world. We must regard imitating Jesus not as drudgery, but as joy. Why shouldn't we be overjoyed? In Christ, we have a promise of eternal life that no one else has. If we are excited about that, and constantly looking forward to that, no matter when the Lord comes, whether next week or 500 years from now, we will be ready for Him.

In the next portion of this section, Paul explains what **BELONGING TO THE DAY** looks like. Read with me from 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8. This isn't a question of being favorably inclined to Jesus. It's not a question of saying all the right things about Him. Instead, we belong to the day when we live like it. First, Paul reveals that belonging to the day requires wakefulness and sobriety. This is a way of life that begins with a way of thinking. In one of our Bible classes recently, we discussed the importance of being mindful of one another. This passage too is about mindfulness, but it is about being mindful of the coming of the Lord. Universally, people in the world are not. Some of them are spiritually asleep. It would never cross their minds that they will have to give an account to Jesus of the things they have done in the body. They please Him only by coincidence. Other people in the world would be mindful of Jesus, except that they have become so intoxicated by sin, whether literally or metaphorically, that their minds have become clouded to the point of

insensibility. They know better, but the devil makes sure they don't think about it. We are called not to obliviousness but to awareness, not to self-deception but to clarity of mind and good judgment. That's what it means to be ready.

Because we are awake, when the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night, we will have equipped ourselves to meet it. Even though this text looks a lot like the famous description of the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6, that's not really the metaphor that Paul is developing here. Instead, it's more like Jesus' discussion in Luke 11 of the strong man fully armed guarding his own palace against robbers. Today, a homeowner who suspects a thief is breaking into his home might grab a shotgun. 2000 years ago, a homeowner who had a reason to fear a visit from a thief might don armor to prepare himself for the hand-to-hand combat to follow. Paul tells us that our spiritual protection against disaster on the day of the Lord consists of faith, love, and the hope of salvation. If we believe in God and diligently seek Him, if we love others and live for them, and if our great goal in life is to make it to heaven, we will certainly be secure.

Paul concludes this discussion by revealing what **GOD'S PART** in preparing us for the day of the Lord is. He explains in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11. It is reasonable for us to armor ourselves against sin with the hope of salvation because salvation is precisely what God wants to give us. He doesn't ask us to trust in Jesus and live righteous lives on earth for the joy of yanking the rug out from under us on the Day of Judgment. Instead, what God promises is what God intends to give, as long as we give Him the opportunity to do so. This salvation is possible through Jesus Christ, who died for us and rose again so that all of us can be resurrected from spiritual death, and so that those of us who die physically will enjoy the physical resurrection too. The point is that God has prepared from before the foundation of the world a plan so that His people can live forever in heaven with Him, and He wants all of us to participate in that plan. With His help, all of us can do it, and there can be no more encouraging thought than that!