

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
April 21, 2013

Living with Hope

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Key verse: “God didn’t intend for us to suffer his wrath but rather to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

“Hope is hearing the melody of the future,” wrote Ruben Alves. “Faith is to dance to it.”

The Apostle Paul wrote this portion of 1 Thessalonians to offer encouragement—encouragement to have hope and faith, and encouragement to live godly lives in anticipation of Christ’s return.

“Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Some of the Thessalonian believers seem to have misunderstood Paul’s earlier teaching about Christ’s return. They seem to have believed that all Christians would live until Christ’s second coming. So, when some of their loved ones died, these Thessalonian believers wondered, “Will our deceased loved ones have a part in Christ’s appearing?”

In 4:14-17, Paul dealt with their concerns. First, he assured them that because “Jesus died and rose again” *all* believers will share in His resurrection (4:14). When Christ returns, “those who are dead in Christ will rise” first (4:16). “Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air. That way we will always be with the Lord” (4:17).

Paul’s clear purpose here was to give encouragement and hope to those who had lost loved ones, “so that you don’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope” (4:13). He ends this section with, “So encourage each other with these words” (4:18).

Chapter 5 continues to offer information about Christ’s return, but Paul’s purpose here is slightly different. Whereas 4:13-18 offered encouragement to those whose loved ones had died, 5:1-11 offers encouragement for all believers to live godly lives in anticipation of Christ’s return.

This second section starts with the disclaimer: “We don’t need to write to you about the timing and dates” of Christ’s second coming (5:1). I am reminded of a Bible teacher who I once heard, who was teaching on Christ’s

words in Matthew 24:36: “No one knows the day or the hour” when the Son of Man will return.

“Do you know what those words ‘no one knows’ mean in the original language of the Greek New Testament?” asked the teacher. His audience waited expectantly for him to give a new, powerful insight based on his knowledge of New Testament Greek.

Then came the teacher’s answer: “In the original language, those words mean ‘no one knows!’”

His point echoes that of the Apostle Paul’s in 5:1. Christians should not try to predict the date of Christ’s return! Instead, we should live godly, faithful lives, knowing that at any time—either through death or through Christ’s Second Coming—we could be standing in the presence of the Lord.

Christ’s return will come unexpectedly, “like a thief in the night” (5:2). Those who “belong to night or darkness” (5:5b) will be unprepared for Christ’s coming. But Christians, “children of light” (5:5a), should be ready for Christ’s return. We should prepare for meeting Christ by living godly, faithful lives, knowing that whether we die before the return of Christ or are alive at His coming, we will forever be with the Lord!

Paul’s teaching on the Second Coming is meant to provide encouragement to believers and incentive for faithful living: “So continue encouraging each other and building each other up, just like you are doing already” (5:11).

I remember how the advent of VCRs first made it possible for me to videotape my favorite team’s football game when I was unable to watch the live action. As soon as my workday was done, I would rush home, put in the videotape, and sit back in my easy chair. But instead of viewing the game from its beginning I would fast forward to the end of the game.

If I learned that my team had won, I would rewind and watch the game from kickoff to closing whistle. If I learned that my team had lost, I would turn off the VCR and read a good book!

When it comes to our lives, believers ought to live with a VCR mentality. No matter how bad things may look, we don’t lose hope. We know how the story ends. If we live for Christ and trust Him as our Savior, we are headed not into an eternal sunset but into an everlasting sunrise!

Thanks be to God.

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