

THE WALK 7

Some practical questions ...

If I knew for certain that Jesus would return in exactly 24 hours from now, what would I spend this last day doing? ... so why don't I do that anyway?

How do I approach the thought of my death?

Do I look at my death in the light of the Second Coming of Jesus?

Can I agree with Paul in saying that 'to die is gain' (Phil 1:21)?

Do I grieve as someone who has no hope, or as someone who has hope?

Do I ever give time to seriously think about Jesus' Second Coming?

Would that make me a better Christian, or a less useful Christian?

Can I echo anything of Lord Shaftesbury's opinion that 'I have not lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return'?

Why does the thought of the Lords' return not influence my life like that?

'The Bible's teaching is always *moral*' (Bruce Milne: Know the Truth). How is the doctrine of the Second Coming doctrine 'moral', calling me to obedience? In what ways am I different from 'the people of Noah's day' (Matt 24:37-39)? In my striving to be 'blameless', what motivates me? honestly, is the return of Jesus one of the motivators?

Do I encourage other Christians regularly by reminding them 'he's coming'? When could I say it more (eg by putting it in every e-mail, etc ...)?

*O Son of God and Son of Man,
thy Word, promises, sacraments show thy death until thou come again.
That day is no horror to me, for thy death has redeemed me, thy Spirit fills me, thy
love animates me, and thy word governs me.
I have trusted thee and thou hast not betrayed my trust; waited for thee and not
waited in vain.*

*I triumph now in thy promises:
beyond the grave is resurrection, judgment, acquittal, dominion.*

*Every event and circumstance of my life will be dealt with – the sins of my youth, my
secret sins, the sins of abusing thee, of disobeying thy word, the sins of neglecting
ministers' admonitions, the sins of violating my conscience – all will be judged.*

*And after judgement, peace and rest, life and service, employment and enjoyment, for
thine elect.*

O God, keep me in this faith, ever looking for Christ's return.

Abbreviated from The Valley of Vision: a collection of Puritan Prayers

'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:20)

THE WALK 7

Looking to the future 1 Thes 4:13-5:11

The theme of this study

Traditionally, books of systematic theology have as their final chapter something like 'The Last Things'. This makes sense chronologically. But a recent book made this subject its first chapter in order to 'capture the biblical sense of purpose in God ... In seeing what God is planning, we gain perspective on who he is and what he is doing to fulfil his ends' (Peter Jensen: At the heart of the universe). Indeed it makes all the difference to know what something is for, the end point to which everything is headed: history has a predestined conclusion for 'the final solution to all the problems of this world is in the hands of the King of kings who will someday make the kingdoms of this world his very own'.

This study is not so much concerned with describing what will happen then (eg the doctrines of judgement, hell, or the new heaven and earth), but about the difference it makes now to look to this future and live for it as a certainty. This is the 'hope' in which we were saved (Romans 8:24-25). We do not yet experience (or 'see') the vast majority of what the cross has won for us, and so we 'wait for it with patience'. What does it mean to 'wait'?!

Lord Shaftesbury, the great English social reformer of the C19th, said near the end of his life: 'I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return'. That kind of perspective on the here-and-now is exactly what we should be praying will be the product of this study ...

Paul's letter(s) to the Thessalonians

When this group of ordinary first-century pagans in Thessalonica believed in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:1-9), they changed dramatically, as they turned 'from idols to serve the living and true God' (1:9-10). This transformation would change lives, cultures and destinies far beyond first century Macedonia. Indeed, the apostle Paul is thrilled to see their already-vibrant Christian lives – their faith, hope and love ... and the Christian service this leads them to do (1:3). He records his delight in this lovely warm letter, and holds them up as 'an example' (1:7) to the many other Christians across the Roman world. The letter is packed with advice and encouragement to **keep going** (3:8, 11-13; 5:23-24; and especially 4:1ff).

It is this kind of life to which ordinary Christians like us, centuries later, are called, along with them. So that, in our world of suffering, hostility and trials we too will be blameless and holy on the day when our Lord Jesus comes ... living every day now 'preparing for the coming King'.

Group study outline

Launching Question

A young Christian tells you that heaven seems so airy-fairy to them that they never really think about it. Actually simply living the day-to-day Christian life is taking all their energy and attention. Do you think you should say anything? What would you say?

READ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Both paragraphs end with 'encourage one another' (4:18; 5:11).

In 4:13-17 what seems to be the worry that the Thessalonian Christians had?
What is Paul's 'encouragement' in 14-15?
How will Christians who've died not miss out?
What is the sequence of events in 16-17?
What others things do we wish we knew that this passage doesn't tell us?
What difference would it make to us if we did know those things?

What difference should it make to us given that we do know these things?
How is Christian grief different from non-Christian grief?
Often Christians going to a funeral ask for prayer 'that they'd be strong and not cry'. What do you make of that request in the light of this passage?

What 'words' (18) are we to speak to each other to bring encouragement?
When should we 'encourage one another with these words'?
When do we 'encourage one another with these words'?
What is it that makes us hesitate to 'encourage one another with these words'?

Re-READ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

See that this paragraph also ends with 'encourage one another' (5:11).

What did the Thessalonians already know about Jesus' Second Coming?
What do the two similes (like a thief, like labour pains) emphasise about it?
So what is the point in v4? will Jesus' return be a surprise, or not?

According to v5, who does Paul think Christians are? why is he saying this?
In v6-9, Paul tells those destined for salvation (ie Christians) how to live: is he simply saying that 'children of light' should not get drunk?!
What does it mean to 'keep awake and be sober' (6)?
What difference will the coming of the Lord make to how we live today?

What is there in this paragraph that will 'encourage' other Christians?
When should we 'encourage one another'? when do we 'encourage one another'?
What will be the result of encouraging one another, or not?
What is it that makes us hesitate to 'encourage one another'?

Re-visit the *Launching Question*. Having read this passage ... do you now think you should say anything to that young Christian? what would you say?

Theme Sentence

The (future) coming of Jesus will change how we look at both death and life.

Look at death in the light of the coming 4:13-18

We don't know exactly what was troubling these Christians (eg, did they think that Jesus would have returned before any of them had died?), but it certainly seems that they feared that Christian friends who had died had missed out. Although there may be much we don't know about death, Christians know enough (13a) to make our grief radically different: death is still an enemy, even for the Christian (1 Cor 15:25-26), and grief is still appropriate (cf John 11:35) but 'the coming' (NB not called 'the Second Coming!') changes everything.

- the Lord will come (16a);
- the dead in Christ will rise first (16b);
- we who are still alive will be caught up with him (17a). 'The clouds' (17) are only the meeting place (- not a picture of heaven!): just as a visiting celebrity would be met outside city walls and led back in, so we will meet up with Jesus and escort him back to his new heaven and earth in triumph.
- and so we will be with the Lord for ever (17b) .

It's always *au revoir* for Christians ... 'until we meet again'!

Look at life in the light of the coming 5:1-11

Like us, these Christians already know about Jesus' return that it will be **sudden and unexpected**: like a thief's visit, it can't be written ahead of time on a specific date in our diaries (2). Also, it will be **sudden and unavoidable**, as labour pains must inevitably come at the end of a pregnancy (3). It has always been the way that people mock this Christian hope and say 'oh, I'll be alright' (3a cf 2 Peter 3:1f; Matt 24:36-44; Amos 5:18-20). This is the point of verse 4, not to contradict v2, but simply to say that despite that mocking we remain certain: although we don't know when, we do know that it will come.

How are these truths that we know going to affect me now?

- **remember who you are** (5). The future is ours (not 'Orange!'). The day of the Lord is our day of triumph too.
- **live who you are** (6). 'Sleep' here is not the same as in 4:15, but means something like 'spiritually or morally dead'. We are different from them because we know that everything is going to be looked at 'in the cold light of day'. When the Lord comes, he will turn his spotlight on all we do ... so let us not be like v7, but like v8. Again, the same shorthand for signs of a genuine Christian ('faith, hope and love), the very things that Paul has noted in them (1:3), are to be in evidence ... the people who will obtain salvation through Jesus will be people who are blameless (cf 3:13; 5:23).

The conclusion 4:18; 5:11

The two paragraphs have the same conclusion: we are to **encourage one another** because the truth of the coming of Jesus will 'build me up' to keep going until then. Good Christian friends will remind me of good Christian theology.