READY FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
Key Verse: 5:9

“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the last passage, St. Paul encouraged the Thessalonian Christians to stand firm in their faith by growing in love and purity. The Thessalonian believers were already very good. They had stood up under fierce persecution from their fellow countrymen. But Paul knew that they would face even more difficult trials in the future. They could not overcome them by standing still. They had to learn to take adverse circumstances and turn them into golden opportunities to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God. We learned that God gives us trials so that we may grow in faith and love by overcoming them. Praise God who helps us to be strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In today’s passage, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the glorious second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Reverend Billy Graham once said, “man can live without sex, but he cannot live without hope.” Without hope, all men can only grieve over their few and difficult years of toiling for each day’s bread. But we Christians have a glorious hope to meet the Lord Jesus in the air when he comes again and be with him forever. Paul also instructs the Thessalonians how to be ready when the Lord Jesus comes. May God bless you to know the glorious hope that we as God’s children have in Jesus.

First, those who fall asleep in Christ (4:13-14). Benjamin Franklin once said that the only things which are certain in life are death and taxes. From the Bible’s point of view, they are both necessary evils in the existence of man, because of one man Adam’s sin. The Thessalonian Christians were new believers. They had a fresh, glowing look on their faces as they looked forward to growing in love and in purity through a life of obedience to the word of God. They made plans for their fellowship and their ministry; they had ambitions to take the gospel of God throughout Macedonia and maybe, even, to the barbarians of northern Europe. But then, something shocking happened. One of their key members fell ill, and in spite of their prayers and tears, he fell asleep. They grieved for him, and doubt came into their hearts as they too fell under the spell and power of death.

Look at 4:13. “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” In this verse, Paul expresses well the tragedy of men who have no hope. Man strives to achieve something and accomplish something in the world. He works hard to make money and provide for his family, and to make his name great. But he knows that no matter how hard he works, and how carefully he protects what he has earned, the power of death will steal it all away from him. Generals and heroes conquered nation after nation, but all alike bowed down low before the power of death, together with those they defeated and destroyed. Genesis 3:19 expresses this life of curse well. “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” There was an American hero. He was a sailor who lied about his age to enter into the Navy at the age of 16. He worked hard, and through his loyal service, he rose to the ranks of Admiral. He was known among the rank and file as their friend, and he was recognized by the other Admirals for his brilliant leadership and strategy. Finally, he was appointed to be Secretary of the entire American Navy. But two newsmen found that he was wearing several medals from the Vietnam conflict which he had not earned. When Admiral Boorda learned of their discovery, his pride of life-long achievement was turned into bitter shame. His hope to be recognized as a great man in
the world was frustrated. The devil quickly channeled into his heart through his wounded pride, and he committed suicide rather than face questions regarding his service to his country. God created man in his own image, to rule over God’s creation as the steward. But when Adam sinned against God in the garden by taking the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, man became like the dust of the ground. He fell under curse, and could only grieve at his tragic fate.

Look again at verse 13. “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep.” Paul uses the expression “fall asleep” to describe physical death. What does it mean? When Jesus’ friend, Lazarus fell ill, and lay dying at his home, his sisters Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus for him to come quickly. Jesus loved Lazarus. But he remained where he was two more days. Then he told his disciples, “Lazarus is asleep. We are going there to wake him up.” His disciples were confused. “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better. Why do we want to wake him up?” Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead...But let us go to him” (Jn 11:1-15). To the people of the world, death is a prison from which there is no escape. But Jesus taught his disciples that death is sleeping. Death is nothing more than a cat nap in preparation for a new and eternal world beyond the grave. In their ignorance, men employ all their skill and cunning to cheat death and to enjoy worldly pleasures for even a few minutes more. But their efforts are in vain. So they grieve for themselves and their loved ones. What is worse, death is not the end, as they had imagined. Hebrews 9:27 says, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,...” After death, there is judgment. Paul did not want the Thessalonians to be ignorant about death. Death is sleeping, in preparation for the judgment to come.

Look at verse 14. “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” In this verse, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of basic Christian faith. Because of this faith that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures, no Christian needs to grieve like the rest of men, nor to ignorantly pursue worldly rewards or recognition which only perish, spoil or fade away. The death and resurrection of Jesus clears the way for sinful man living under the curse to have a living hope in the kingdom of God. Because Jesus died in obedience to his Father’s command, and shed his blood as the Lamb of God to pay the ransom price for our sins, we who are wretched and hopeless in our sins can become the beloved children of God. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, proving that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the world, we believe that he is willing and able to raise all of his children to be together with Jesus forever. In verse 14, Paul uses the expression, “fallen asleep in him.” Here Paul emphasizes that how we die is very important. “In him” refers to the vine and branch relationship that exists between Jesus and each of his disciples. It means that when those who have made a commitment to Jesus as their Lord and Savior pass away, that commitment and relationship is not broken. Rather, with the passing away of our physical body, Jesus is able to draw us more closely to him, so that we will never be separated from him again. Jesus taught his disciples in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Those who remain in Jesus to the end will bear much fruit in their lives. Then, when they fall asleep, they will go to be with their Lord and Savior forever. The one who rejects a love relationship with Jesus is a man under curse. His life in the end will become tragic, and he will be judged as a fruitless and wretched man.

Second, We will meet him in the air (4:15-18). Look at verses 16-17. “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of
God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” In these verses, Paul plants a glorious vision of our hope in God in the Thessalonian believers’ hearts. While living in this cursed world, visions of violence, hatred and death come into our hearts. These things plant fear and ultimately fatalism in us, so that we become helpless and powerless to do what is right by serving God and fulfilling his world salvation purpose through us. But the second coming of Jesus Christ will be more glorious and more triumphant than any worldly victory parade. Jesus will come again directly from heaven. He will not be a worldly preacher or false prophet. He will arrive in divine form, and with a loud command, he will call out to all who have ever lived on the earth. Indeed, the dead will hear him first, and they will rise to meet him. Next, those who are living will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 24:30,31, “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” May God give you a glorious vision of Jesus’ second coming in your hearts. From these verses we can learn several things.

Firstly, Jesus comes again as the King of kings and Lord of lords. When Jesus died on the cross, God’s enemies thought they would never see him again. They thought that they had defeated him forever. But God did not abandon Jesus to the grave. God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to the highest place in heaven and made him King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus came first as a humble shepherd, and the friend to tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus comes again with divine authority and power to rule the world. By the power of his voice, he will call out all men to meet him. Not even the dead in their graves can escape his command. All must appear before him to be judged (2 Co. 5:10). Secondly, he gathers his elect. To most people, life seems to be a matter of being at the right place at the right time. Surely, the robber on the cross next to Jesus was at the right place at the right time. But what if we are at the wrong place when Jesus comes again? According to the Lord’s own word, we needn’t be afraid. Jesus knows his people. Jesus, when he comes again, will send out his angels to gather all those who belong to him. There is nothing we can do when Jesus comes. Either we have a ticket up to meet him in the sky, or we don’t. Those who have been waiting for him will be caught up into the air, and we will have a glorious eternity together with Jesus.

Third, Sons of the light (5:1-8). Sinful mankind really wants to know the date when Jesus comes again. It is because they want to keep on sinning until the night before, and then repent just before he comes, in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of God. Such people will be disappointed. Look at verses 1-3. “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Such people are in darkness. They are like the driver of a car who turns on the cruise control and then falls asleep. They will come to a tragic end.

Paul urges the Thessalonians not to live in darkness, but to live as the sons of light. Look at verses 4 and 5a. “But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day.” Many students are so restless at night. They cannot sleep, but are driven by their sinful nature to engage in all kinds of evil activities, even against their will. Then, in their despair, they sleep until 2 or 3 in the afternoon, to repeat the cycle again. They are blinded by their
sins and passions. They are men and women of no hope. They are piling up the wrath of God. Look at verse 8, “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” To many, self-control is like abstinence – a nice idea, but impossible. How can we be self-controlled in such a godless environment? How can we, except by violent means, suppress our natural desires and live a holy life in anticipation of Jesus’ second coming? Look again at verse 8. “…putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”

A breastplate guards the chest area, especially the heart. When a believer gives his heart to Jesus by faith, the Holy Spirit comes in to the man to purify him of all sin and to establish his heart as a temple to Jesus. By giving our heart fully to Jesus, we protect our heart from every evil thought and desire. Just as a wife makes a love commitment to her husband, and offers herself only to him, so we as followers of Jesus have made a commitment, and offer our worship and praise only to him. Then never can we be led astray by our passions and desires which arise to tempt us to walk in darkness and not light. Our hope is our direction. When we hold on to our hope, we know where we are going, and we can “keep our head in all situations” (2 Timothy 4:3). When we remember our hope in the second coming of Christ, we can remember why we struggle to love unlovely people and endure hardship in order to obey the world mission command. Then, although the darkness surrounds us, yet our hearts and our eyes can be full of light. Then, we will not be surprised or distraught when the Lord Jesus comes, but will only rejoice to be able to live fully in the light of his love. May God bless you to be self-controlled and alert in this dark generation, that Jesus may find you waiting and burning bright to greet his return.

Fourth, God called us to receive salvation (5:9-11). Who were the Thessalonians before Paul came to preach to them? We don’t know. But we can guess that they were much like the Corinthians, Greeks who lived according to Greek ideals and who worshiped Greek idols. In short, they were nothing but idolaters who were destined for the wrath of God. But what did God do for these miserable people? According to his promises, God sent his own Son into the world as the Savior of the World. Jesus Christ healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God to the poor. But the worldly religious leaders arrested Jesus and had him killed out of their jealousy. God sent his Son to his chosen people, the Jews, but they rejected him and killed him. It was the greatest crime ever committed by humanity. Yet it happened by God’s sovereign will and purpose. Jesus died on the cross, shedding his holy blood. But it was not because of his sins or mistake. It was to fulfill God’s world salvation purpose, so that all who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, could be washed clean of sin and set aside as a child of God. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved that world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” God sent his own Son to die for sinners. It was because he does not want even one soul to perish, but wants everyone to have eternal life in Jesus. God called us to follow Jesus through the gospel, not to make us suffer through much training in vain, but to make us ready as a people so that his world salvation purpose might be fulfilled. Then, when Jesus comes again to completely subjugate this rebellious world, we will go to celebrate and live with him forever. Let’s read verses 9 and 10 together. “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” A life lived for worldly hopes and gain is in vain. But a life lived in the light is for eternity.

In this passage, we learned that when we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we become the children of light. We no longer grieve in ignorance and darkness. We must put on faith and love as a breastplate, and hope in salvation as a helmet, and be self-controlled and alert until Jesus comes again. May God bless you to believe that Jesus died for you, so that you may live in him.