

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL
COME, LORD JESUS
THE GOD WHO MAKES ALL THINGS NEW
The Church that Forgot Its Hope

Often you wonder why tears come into your eyes
And burdens seem to be much more than you can stand
But God is standing near, He sees your falling tears
Tears are a language God understands.

David said in *Psalm 56:8 (ESV)* ⁸ *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?* Jesus knows all about our troubles. We have hope in Him. No matter the circumstances let's never forget the hope we are given in Christ. Paul reminds us of that hope when he wrote in *Titus 2:13 (ESV)* ¹³ *waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Thessalonica was a city in the region of Macedonia that Paul had visited during his second missionary journey. First century Christians did not have the privilege that Christians today possess – that is the complete Word of God – Genesis to Revelation. At this time they were receiving letters that would eventually be included in the New Testament we have today. Paul and the other apostles helped them as they wrestled with spiritual questions.

One question that concerned believers then remains open-ended even now concerns the timing of Christ's return to earth. This is not a lesson on the calendar of end-time events. It is a lesson meant to bolster our hope in Jesus' return and what that hope means for us as we live out our days. Jesus positively taught His disciples that He would return. Before His death and resurrection, Jesus said in *John 14:1-3 (ESV)* ¹ *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”* ² *In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?* ³ *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*

After Jesus conquered death and returned from the grave, His followers naturally expected that His kingdom would be set up then. In fact, the disciples questioned Jesus about that in *Acts 1:6 (ESV)* ⁶ *So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

Jesus answered that question this way in *Acts 1:7-8 (ESV)* ⁷ *... “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.”* ⁸ *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* From Jesus' answer we realize that more important than knowing the exact time of Christ's return is being about our Father's business of witnessing for Jesus while we wait for that Blessed Hope.

It is not surprising that some in Thessalonica expected Christ's return to be in their lifetimes. I can't fault them for that. I expect Christ to return in my lifetime! That is the hope of every generation. This is for certain: *salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. (Romans 13:11)* However, I also know that whether we meet Jesus at the time of our physical death or we meet Him in the air, the end result will be the same. All who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior will be with the Lord! The young church in Thessalonica had not learned that truth yet. When death began coming to individuals in the church family, they became confused and disheartened. This is why they needed a Word from the Lord written to them in a letter from Paul. And the Word that came to them echoes down through the ages to us today as we face the pain and sorrows of life.

Grief is a natural, healthy process that enables us to recover from terrible emotional wounds. William Cowper, the English hymn writer, said, "Grief is itself medicine." People may say, "Don't cry; your loved one is in heaven." That may be true, but it's important to deal with the very real pain of loss. We should not feel guilty for grieving because it is a necessary part of God's healing. The grief process has been described as like sailing across a stormy sea. When we first experience a great loss, we are launched into a tempest of emotions. We feel surrounded by darkness and heavy waves of anguish. Comforting words are drowned out by howling winds of sorrow. We feel lonely and out of control as we are swept toward a new destination in life. And yet, we have hope! **Christian hope looks forward to the resurrection.**

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 (ESV) 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.*

When Timothy returned from his trip to Thessalonica, he told Paul about the questions and anxiety some were having with regard to their loved ones who had died. They had been expecting the any minute return of the Lord, but what about those loved ones who had died since trusting Christ? What would it mean for them? Would Christ's return be too late to have any effect on those people? It was a natural question.

Paul began his answer by applying the word *sleep* to those believers who died. Jesus did the same with His friend, Lazarus, who had been dead for four days before Jesus raised him back to life. Paul was careful to state that Jesus *died* making it plain that Jesus was literally dead on the cross – no question about it. It is because He died and rose again that we need not fear death. **Romans 5:8 (ESV)** ⁸ *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Paul reveals how to keep life and death in perspective when he said: *about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* Notice Paul did not say, 'don't grieve.' He said we should not grieve as those who have no hope. Biblically speaking, hope is trustful expectation, particularly with reference to the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus gave this promise in **John 3:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

Philosophers through the ages have wrestled with the question of immortality. The pagan world in Paul's day had no hope of life after death. Even though pagans in Paul's day had no hope of heaven, not everyone was so misinformed. Recall how in the Old Testament, David said concerning the loss of his son: **2 Samuel 12:23**

(ESV) ²³ *But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.*” David’s hope was in his Lord God! Think of what is written of Abraham in **Hebrews 11:17-19** (ESV) ¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.* Abraham had hope for the resurrection of the dead long before the Son of God literally rose from the dead. Paul through the power of the Holy Spirit revealed more of God’s story than David or Abraham knew.

As people then and now search for the answers to the mystery of death, Paul says, *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*

Christian hope looks forward to Christ’s return.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 (ESV) 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.*

Notice that Paul said this was according to *a word from the Lord*. It was not Paul’s opinion - it is the Lord’s own word. We see that Paul (like us still today) expected to be alive when Christ returned. However, keep in mind that Paul never committed himself to setting a specific date to the Blessed Hope. He would not because of the words of Jesus in **Matthew 24:36** (ESV) ³⁶ *“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.* Nevertheless, Paul was given a special revelation concerning Christ’s return. Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 15:51** (ESV) ⁵¹ *Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.*

A mystery in the Bible is the hidden, eternal plan of God that is being revealed to God's people in accordance with His plan. Daniel of the Old Testament prophesied concerning end-time events. You can read for yourself in **Daniel 12**. Much of what Daniel wrote concerning end-time events remained a mystery. Then, in the New Testament, the mystery of God’s plan became more of an ‘open secret’ as more details have been revealed. We may not know all the details of Bible prophecy, but of this we can be certain: *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.* (King James Translation)

We don’t have to know every detail. The description of how Jesus will return for His children is sufficient. It encourages me and I trust that it encourages you. If you are not prepared to meet the Lord in the air or at the moment of your death, now is the time to make ready – now is the hour of salvation. **Christian hope looks forward to final judgment.**

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4 (ESV) 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. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.*

Jesus both unites and divides. Faith in Jesus Christ unites us to Him and to other believers. Our faith also separates us spiritually from the rest of the world. The term ‘need to know basis’ is often used in covert undercover operations. We see it used frequently in movies and TV shows. Paul is basically saying that he has already told the Thessalonians what they need to know concerning Christ’s return and the times and seasons yet to come are not things they (or we) need to know. But we do need to know that His coming will be sudden and unexpected.

Jesus said in **Revelation 16:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”)

In the Bible, the word *day* can refer to a 24-hour period, or to a longer time during which God accomplishes some special purpose. The Day of the Lord is the period in history when the Great Tribulation period begins. It will be a time of judgment. Verse 3 is always the verse that I think of when I hear world leaders promising peace: *While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction...*

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:5-11 (ESV) 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.*

Doctors tell us that some people are ‘morning people’ while others are ‘evening people.’ That is, some people are wide awake before the alarm clock rings. They hit the floor running. Others wake up slowly and gradually move into the day. When it comes to the return of our Lord, we must all be ‘morning people’—awake, alert, sober, and ready for the dawning of that wonderful new day. But, for those who have not chosen to put their faith and hope in Christ, the coming of our Lord will mean the end of light and the beginning of eternal darkness.

As for the language of tears that I mentioned in the beginning of the lesson, keep your hope in this promise from the Word of God: **Revelation 21:4 (ESV)** ⁴ *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. To God be the Glory!