

Our Eyes on the Horizon and Our Boots on Our Feet

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everybody. And thank you again for your very warm welcome. It's lovely to be involved in this weekend. And as I begin, perhaps I can especially thank Graham, who's briefed me so well, and many others who were helping to support us yesterday.

The technical crew I always like to thank because they have the power to sabotage my best efforts. And the musicians and those who've hosted us provided wonderful hospitality and these special cakes, which were wonderful, and lunch today.

And I'm definitely going to give you five stars on Expedia. It's been a really, really good weekend. Thank you very much. And as Graham said, we're just finishing off this theme of in time for eternity by looking not now at Jesus' words in Matthew 24 and 25, but to what Paul had to say about exactly the same theme in the passage which we've just had read to us.

So you may like to keep that passage open. And we're going to walk through just three sections of this little passage as we think about living in time for eternity. A few years ago, you might have heard some lectures which were put on BBC.

They were given by a professor of medicine. His name was Tom Kirkwood. He was a professor at Newcastle at the time. And the series was advertised like this. You don't have to die. Aging is neither inevitable or necessary.

[1 : 30] Slight exaggeration, but we're heading in that direction. In fact, the fastest growing segment of the British population is made up of those who are 100 and above.

They're called the robust elderly. And I hope to join them quite soon, actually. So we're all interested in this idea of extending life. Even the quest for immortality has been that kind of obsession for many years.

In fact, I have a book at home which is called How to Live Forever or Die Trying. And it's actually the words of Groucho Marx I subsequently discovered.

I'm going to live forever or die trying. But whether Groucho Marx or you or I try aerobics or slimming or hair coloring or special diets, we cannot reverse the decline, can we?

We all have to face mortality. We all face it eventually. That period of life, as you may have heard, it's called middle age when your broad mind and your narrow waist change places.

[2 : 38] Now, when we come to a passage like this, it throws up all kinds of questions about death and what lies beyond death. We can apparently find websites now where you can calculate the date of your death.

So you type in your health and your age and your family background and it will give you a rough or even fairly accurate prediction of when you might die. But those websites actually are not at all popular.

It's because sociologists tell us that we have a fairly deep set fear of death. The terrifying prospect of dying means that people aren't very interested in discovering the exact date of their death.

And if you're in that situation, fearful of the future, it can affect the way you live. You only need to think about hope because hope shapes so many aspects of our life now.

We look to the future, but our hopes or our fears definitely impact the decisions that we make or our motivations or our priorities. We were talking about that yesterday.

[3 : 47] And that's why when we come to a passage like this in 1 Thessalonians or yesterday in Matthew's chapters, it always has a double focus. It's then, but also now.

If that's going to happen in the future, this is how we should live now. So the passage we're looking at here underlines that. And I'll just give one definition of biblical hope, Christian hope, which I think captures it.

A life-shaping certainty about our future. So it's looking there to that future, but it's shaping, changing our lives now.

Well, 1 Thessalonians speaks exactly to that. Here are the three sections. First of all, Paul, as he writes, talks about some of the big foundations for hope, verses 13 to 15.

It's pretty clear that the Thessalonian Christians have been quite concerned following the death of some of their members of their congregation. They did know something about the Lord's return.

[4 : 50] Paul had taught them on his relatively brief stay there. But now that some people had died, some new questions were beginning to surface in their mind. Would those believers be disqualified or disadvantaged in some way because they've died before Jesus came back?

It's possible that they were expecting Jesus to return during their lifetime. So all kinds of questions were now surfacing, especially as they encountered bereavement in their fellowship and in their families.

And so what they really needed was some careful instruction and some big encouragement from Paul. And that's what he gives. The first thing he mentions is the contrast in verse 13.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope. In the non-Christian world, of course, there is this lack of hope.

I've mentioned it already. This terrifying prospect of death hangs over people. I think it's one of the saddest results, in fact, of living a life outside of a relationship with the God who made us and who redeemed us, is this loss of hope.

[6 : 00] Paul elsewhere talks about people like that who are without God and without hope. They might have some suspicion of an afterlife, but there's no real certainty for so many people.

Well, of course, Christians do feel it very keenly when someone dies. Verse 13 is not meant to imply we do not mourn. Of course we do. In fact, my own view is that sometimes as Christians, our emotions are heightened.

And we might feel the sorrows and the pains of this world and of our lives and of, indeed, death itself. We may feel those more keenly because we are Christian believers.

So Paul's not saying you don't mourn, but he says, you'll notice in the phrase, we do not grieve like those who have no hope. Because we do have hope, and he's going to explain why.

Here's the foundation of it, verse 14. For 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.

[7 : 01] So the foundation of our hope, Paul is saying, is a past event as well as a future event. I've always used this idea of hope a few times in these opening minutes.

When we talk about hope, we're normally thinking of our expectations of the future. We hope the sun's going to keep shining. We hope it's going to be a good lunch. We hope the preacher will finish quite soon.

We have all kinds of expectations when we use that word hope, but there are no guarantees. Whereas what Paul is saying here is that because Jesus died and rose again, so too will we.

Peter says exactly the same in his first letter. Do you remember? He says, hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So Christian hope is based on something which has already happened.

Jesus who died and rose again. Jesus who will come again, but Jesus who died and rose again, that's the foundation for our hope. Jesus has introduced us into that new life of resurrection.

[8 : 07] If we put our trust in him, if we are in Christ, which is the phrase Paul uses in this passage. So because Jesus is risen, we are guaranteed the certainty of our resurrection, our future life.

And indeed, Jesus' resurrection opens up the whole new age, the whole perspective of a new heaven and a new earth. It's guaranteed. And the third reason he underlines this foundation is this is something that God has promised.

There's the assurance there in verse 15. He says, according to the Lord's word. This is what Jesus promised. He said he would rise. He said he's coming back.

We can trust what Jesus says. So these are really strong certainties, foundations for our hope about our own lives and our own world and indeed our universe.

So these are the solid foundations. Jesus' death. Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' return. Jesus' promised word to us. Like the Thessalonians, we can be absolutely certain about our future hope.

[9 : 11] Then he moves into the next section. I've called it the realities of the future because verse 16 then goes on to introduce us to some of the events surrounding Jesus' return.

I'm sure you're familiar with this passage and it's been explored by theologians for a long time, exactly what Jesus is meaning. We only have a few minutes. I'm following what most writers say about it with three events which are mentioned in these verses.

First of all, of course, verse 16, Jesus' return. The Lord himself will come down from heaven. Notice it's very personal. The Lord himself.

In fact, Luke says in Acts 1, this same Jesus. It's Jesus himself who is returning. And it's very dramatic language, isn't it, in verse 16. I'll put on the screen how J.B. Phillips paraphrased it.

One word of command, one shout from the archangel, one blast from the trumpet of God, and God in person will come down from heaven. So the point that Paul is raising here is that you're not going to miss this when it happens.

[10 : 19] And we spoke about that yesterday from Matthew 24 and 25. It's going to be very clear. It's not going to be like his first coming when Jesus arrived, remember, which was obscure, which was quiet, not at all dramatic.

But here, Jesus' return is, as we saw, coming with the clouds and with great power and glory, Matthew records Jesus saying. At the same time as being a very public event, the main thing about this verse to me is it's a personal event.

That when Jesus comes back at the return of history, we will not face somebody who's distant or unknown. It's this same Jesus who is coming back.

The one we read about in the Gospels, the one we know and love. It's the same Jesus, and he's coming back. Second thing Paul mentions is resurrection.

You'll see this at the end of verse 16. And the dead in Christ will rise first. So notice again he's saying in Christ. People who are connected to Jesus because they put their faith in him.

[11 : 22] The dead in Christ will rise first. And as I've just explained, we've just seen in verse 14, because Jesus rose from the dead. If you're in Christ, you will rise from the dead.

That's when it happens. Paul is saying here, the dead in Christ will rise. That's the guarantee. And then the third thing which is mentioned in the next verse, we sometimes call rapture.

That's from a Latin word for being caught up. Because it says, you'll see on the screen, 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. I think everything in these verses is so encouraging to God's people, especially God's people who are under pressure around the world, or God's people who are mourning the loss of someone.

God's people, in all kinds of circumstances, take heart from these really strong encouragements. It's talking about our final destiny. We will be with the Lord forever.

[12 : 28] And the verse reminds us we're going to be, if we're alive at the time, we're going to be gathered up to join all of God's people in this resurrection. Jesus gathering us. Do you remember how John put it?

It's in John's gospel. He has gone to prepare a place for us and will come again to receive us to himself. So the idea of being with the Lord is probably the most frequently used phrase to describe what that day is going to be like.

With Jesus. Not an unknown figure, but with the Jesus who loves us and who died for us. And the great thing is, and we haven't time to elaborate on it, because I said a moment ago, Jesus' resurrection and his return introduces, of course, the whole issue of the new heavens and new earth, everything being restored.

There's a lovely verse in Ephesians 1 which captures this. I often quote it. I love the way Paul expresses it. Here it is. He says that ultimately God's purpose is to sum up everything, to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.

Everything is going to be united and summed up. Everything will be brought to shalom, to completeness, to wholeness in Jesus. Everything. I don't know if you know, but the Greeks, when they added up, they put the total at the top.

[13 : 47] Seems to make sense if you're adding up. When we add up, we put the total at the bottom. Our Excel sheets do that automatically. The total is down there. But the Greeks said, no, everything is going to be summed up, added up to find its unity and its completion and its perfection in Jesus Christ.

All because of that day of resurrection. Well, those are three great things, aren't they? The return of Jesus, resurrection of believers, and then the rapture that is belonging to Jesus.

I'm not going to where we go at that point that we can discuss over lunch if you'd like. But we're going to be with Jesus. The third and the final thing is to tip over into chapter 5, because Paul continues what he's writing.

And we're going to look in these verses at now in the light of then. Do you remember the little definition I gave of hope a moment ago? A life-changing certainty about our future.

So Paul now turns to the life changes that occur because of that certainty, because of the hope he's just been describing. If these future realities lie ahead, what kind of people should we be?

[14 : 58] And he uses all kinds of images here, some of which we saw Jesus using in Matthew yesterday. If these are going to happen, it will lead to changes.

I just put up the bullet points very quickly. First of all, be expectant. We saw that quite a few times yesterday in Jesus' stories and parables in Matthew 24 and 25.

Jesus spoke about his return and the day. He uses that phrase, the day. And here you'll notice that Paul uses the same idea, the day of the Lord.

You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. This idea of the day of the Lord as a little history in the Old Testament is used quite a lot.

And it's an explanation of the moment when God himself will come in judgment, when God will come in salvation, when God will restore all things, the day of the Lord.

[15 : 53] And here Paul is using it specifically to talk about Jesus' return. It's the day we're expecting. It's the day we've been waiting for. Paul's realistic enough to know that that isn't true of everybody.

Not everyone is waiting, expecting Jesus to return. He explains that by using this image in verses 2 and 4 of the thief. We had that yesterday.

You remember Jesus used the illustration. The Lord's coming is unexpected. It's like a thief. It's sudden. We're not prepared, some people. And we saw how in Jesus' parables yesterday, if I may quote them again, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.

We don't know when this is going to happen. That's why he says I'm not bothering about times and dates. He says in verse 1, no, we don't know when. But we must be expectant. Non-Christians on the whole have no expectation of that future day, of course.

Many of our friends don't believe that God is going to intervene in history. As far as they're concerned, it's a closed system. You know, we just carry on and we die. That's that. Now, I'd like the people that Peter spoke about.

[17 : 06] I put it on the screen, 2 Peter 3. They will say, where is this coming? Jesus promised. Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.

God's not going to intervene. So back in our passage in chapter 5, verse 3, they comfort themselves saying peace, safety. Everything is going on as usual, like Noah's day, you know, carry on eating and drinking, making merry, getting married, doing your job.

It all carries on. God's not going to intervene. And then they discover, finally, that judgment comes. And it comes on them suddenly. And you notice in verse 3, Paul not only talks about a thief in verse 2 and verse 4 and verse 3, he says, like a pregnant woman.

In other words, he's communicating the same point. It can sometimes be sudden, can't it? I can't speak from experience. But pregnant women may suddenly, at any time, give birth after a number of months.

Well, Jesus commands his disciples, we saw yesterday, to watch. And that really means keep awake. Be prepared for my return.

[18 : 15] Be on duty at all times. That leads to the next thing that he says in these sections, verses 5 to 8. And I've called it keep awake because he uses that kind of imagery.

He sharpens up the whole thing by using this idea of light and darkness, night and days. In other words, which age are you living in? Do you belong to the day or do you belong to the night?

Verse 5, you're all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness. And what he implies here, of course, is what the New Testament tells us.

That when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, then we undergo a radical change of allegiance. We go out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light, the kingdom of God's son.

And Paul spells out the contrast. The thief, whom we've mentioned, he comes in the night while people are sleeping, while they're drunk. But we Christians, we've opened the curtains.

[19 : 14] We're awake. It's the morning. The sun is shining. Let us not be like others, he says, who are asleep. But let us be alert and self-controlled or sober, our translation sometimes put.

Don't be drunk. Keep sober. Keep self-controlled. Be in charge of your faculties. Live with this sense of alertness. Paul's advice to Titus was just the same.

You notice he includes the idea of Jesus coming here and how we should live. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passion and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the light of that hope, then, keep awake, keep alert, keep working responsibly as we saw yesterday. I don't know if any of you remember or still listen to the music of James Galway.

He was an Irish flautist. Here he is. And he is a remarkable musician. And I read some while ago, quite some while ago, that he was involved in a road traffic accident.

[20 : 30] And it was very serious. He almost lost his life. And that experience of getting close to death forced him to re-evaluate his life. And sometimes these things happen, don't they?

When someone is given a diagnosis that might be serious, it helps people to think again about their lives and how they live. And it did for James Galway. I quote him.

I decided from now on, after this accident, I would play every concert, cut every record, give every TV program as though it were my last.

I've come to understand it's never possible to guess what will happen next. And that the important thing is to make sure that every time I play my flute, my performance will be as near perfection and full of music as God intended.

And that I shall not be remembered for a shoddy performance. It's a nice expression, isn't it? That in the light of the future and my potential imminent death, but we have that longer range horizon of Jesus' return and our future with him.

[21 : 35] In the light of those things, let's live fully in our commitment to Jesus. Paul repeats it in verse 8. 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.

So stay awake. John Stott in his commentary says, Let's not sleep or even yawn our way through life or even live in our pajamas. Let's stay awake, fulfilling what God calls us to do, waiting for that day.

And then he goes on, trust Christ. Just two final things as I close. Trust Christ. Because again, he's bringing all kinds of encouragements to those Thessalonian believers and to us.

Look at what he says in verses 9 and 10. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath. He didn't plan that we should be judged and guilty in that way.

No, he didn't 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.

[22 : 43] So it's another certainty, his underlining. It's not to do with our effort, our religious effort. In fact, we often say, don't we, in terms of Christianity, it is not what we do, but what is done.

That makes a difference. It is what Jesus has done, Paul is saying. It is God's plan. He fulfilled it in Jesus. It's all to do with his initiative and his grace.

We are rescued from God's wrath. We are saved by the Lord Jesus. Verse 10, we are brought home to live together with him. So whether we are a believer still alive or whether we are a believer who's fallen asleep, which is so concerned, these Thessalonian believers, and perhaps us too, our destiny is absolutely secure.

It's exactly the same. Whoever we are, if we put our faith in Jesus, we will be with him. So again, you see he's underlining these rock-solid certainties. This is God's plan.

We're appointed to salvation. And everything has been achieved through Jesus. Final thing, strengthen one another. Therefore, verse 11, encourage one another and build each other up, just as, in fact, you are doing.

[23 : 56] He's picking up what he said at the end of chapter 4. Did you notice? Therefore, encourage one another with these words. And here he says, support one another. Encourage one another.

Keep repeating, reminding each other of these great realities. And that's what's been so refreshing about this weekend, I think. And again, thank you to you all for organizing and being part of it.

It's been a wonderful opportunity to support one another, to encourage one another, to tell each other these great truths which we're in danger of neglecting in our everyday lives.

Hold on. Keep going. Keep watching. Keep working. Keep expecting Jesus to return. It's then, but it impacts now.

And that's really why we chose this little title for this session. It actually comes from a folk song sung by Judy Sill. And it's often been on my mind because it holds this double focus.

[24 : 54] It's about the vigilante. He's got his eyes on the horizon and his boots on his feet. That's a nice way of summing up what Paul is saying.

Keep looking to that future, but keep your boots on. There's work to do. Or to put it as we saw yesterday from Martin Luther. Work as though he will not be coming for a thousand years.

Be ready as if he should come today. If you know Thessalonians, Paul talks about the second coming actually in every chapter. And a final word to those of us who wonder, am I going to be able to keep this up?

You know, will I get to the end? Will I really make it to heaven? If you're asking that question, and perhaps some of us often do that. And sometimes as we grow older, that might happen.

Am I really going to make it to heaven? Well, Paul ends this letter with some words which I'm going to put on screen. And the final words of the letter. And if you can read them, perhaps you'll join me in reading these out.

[25 : 56] Shall we do that together? May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Let's pray together. Thank you, dear Father, for that promise at the end of this letter.

That because you've called us, because we are in the Lord Jesus, you will fulfill your promises. And you are faithful. You will do it.

You will carry us safely to our home with the Lord Jesus. We thank you so much for these encouraging truths we've been reflecting on this weekend. We spend a moment praying for those in Brunsfield who are suffering from bereavement.

We pray for your comfort for them. These solid certainties will also be true in their lives. We pray for all of us that we will live in time for eternity.

[27 : 08] You will help us to have our eyes on the horizon and our boots on our feet. Help us to keep watching and waiting and hopeful and expectant of Jesus' return and to serve him faithfully and fully and wholeheartedly here and now, knowing that we are roped to the safest guide in the universe.

You will bring us safely home. We thank you and we encourage one another with these words. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.