

# The Christian hope

1 Thessalonians 4:<sup>13</sup> – 5:<sup>11</sup>

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4 December 2011

I suppose if you listened in to the Chancellor of the Exchequer this week you would get the distinct impression that the future is not that rosy at all, the whole thing looks rather bleak. There is not much that can be said to lighten that gloom, to lighten that darkness if we listen in. That is the perspective that we have.

Thankfully it's not the perspective that Scripture has – and what the Scriptures invite and encourage us to do is to have a perspective upon the future that enables us to be a good deal more positive and indeed to be genuinely and warmly expectant. It bids us look beyond the horizon of any economic forecast or any political perspective we might have and to look above and beyond that and to see what lies beyond the horizon in God's ongoing purposes.

That is what the passage we read this morning is about. It is about the future, it is about what we may look forward to with a genuine confidence.

We all need that. We can't do anything about the past – and whatever may be our present circumstances, that which often keeps us going is the hope that somehow there may be something round the corner that is perhaps better.

That is what Paul is on about here. Perhaps appropriately because we are moving towards the end of the E100 challenge, which many of you have been undertaking, working your way through a general overview of the Bible through 100 essential readings. Next week is the second last week and we are building to something of a climax and it is right that our perspective this morning is governed to some extent by that sense of moving towards a climax. And it is a great climax.

Paul begins here by stating this very emphatic conviction that he has: "*we do not want you to be ignorant.*"

He means by that quite a number of things. It is really shorthand for his saying at least these three things.

He is keen that folk to whom he is writing should be **clear** in their thinking about what it is that they expect. And I imagine that for many of us there is not that clarity. We are just a little bit confused about what the future is going to hold, a little bit confused about what we may expect, and our thinking is informed as much by folk lore and by wishful thinking as it is by anything. So there is a need for real clarity in our thinking and part of the apostle's concern is to ensure that there is that clarity in our thinking.

When he says we do not want you to be ignorant, he is wanting more than simply that clarity. His great burden is that people should be not only clear about these things, but also **sure** about them as well. It is in some ways quite remarkable how regularly, in the New Testament particularly, this emphasis is present - the desire on the part of the writers that those to whom they are writing should be certain, should be the more sure about these things.

Those of you who are familiar with Luke's gospel may remember that that is how he begins his gospel record. Luke is writing in order that the guy to whom he is writing should be *the more certain* about these things. It should not be a vague general sense that maybe this is the way things are: but with a great clarity and with a great certainty there should be an embracing of these glorious truths.

And so he wants us to be clear, he wants us to be sure, and he wants us also to be **glad**: to be able to rejoice, and to be thrilled by what it is that as Christians we do look forward to.

And so he begins here: *“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.”*

He cannot do anything about the grief we experience. That’s the way that we are wired by God, in such a manner that the relationships we form with people, the bonds of friendship and love that we have with people, mean that when a person dies we do grieve. There is simply no way round that.

But it is how we grieve, whether we grieve with hope or without hope. And whether the hope with which we grieve is indeed a solid and substantial thing or merely some airy-fairy, wishful thinking, fanciful sort of thing. And his desire is that those that know and love the Lord Jesus Christ should indeed be able to face even that experience, painful as it is, with a hope that gives an entirely different perspective to them, and affords them real enabling.

So he moves on from that opening statement in verse 13 to underline in verses 14 and 15 just **how it is we can be sure**; because most of us - and increasingly in these days - most of us think we can’t really be sure about anything, we can’t be sure about next week, far less anything beyond next week. How can we be sure about anything?

What Paul is pointing to here straight off is the reason why we can actually be quite, quite sure about these things, about the fact that there will be that resurrection from the dead.

What Paul points to here are these two basic reasons why we are able to be quite sure about this.

First of all because of what God has done. *We believe that Jesus died and rose again from the dead.* That physical frame that was nailed to the cross and died there upon the cross and then was taken down and buried in that tomb, observed by a range of different people – that physical frame was raised back to life. Jesus was raised, that is the absolute core conviction of Christians. It is not an optional extra that some real enthusiasts believe; that is what the Christian gospel is all about.

Indeed Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 underlines that if that is not true his preaching is useless. And he says your faith is useless; you might as well pack up and go home. You might as well find some other avenue to pour your energies into, because this one will do you no good at all if Jesus is not risen from the dead.

That is absolutely basic and it is rooted in the historical fact of what God has done. We are not being asked to shut our eyes, cross our fingers and hope for the best in this regard. We are asked in the scripture to open our eyes, to examine the evidence that there is, and to recognise that that whole range of evidence – and there is a huge range of evidence that can be examined – all unitedly points, emphatically and unambiguously, to this remarkable, astonishing fact that God raised Jesus from the dead.

That is what Christians believe. That is what God has done. He has already done it. And when therefore he says that it will happen again, that the dead will be raised, we are able, despite the fact that we know how final death is for us, we are able to say with conviction, that that is what will happen. God has already demonstrated his ability to do it in the person of his Son and that is what he will yet do. And so it is partly based on what God has done: and it is partly based on what God has said.

You'll see verse 15: *"According to the Lord's own word."* He draws particular attention to that. This is what God has said will be the case. And I can guarantee to you that what God says is without exception always realised. When God says something will be, you may bank everything on the fact that it *will* be, because God does not lie.

God is true always to his word, and it is very striking through the scriptures to see folk like Moses, to see folk like Joshua, long lives that they have lived, in the face of enormous pressures, confronted by huge problems and obstacles and difficulties. The only thing that has kept them going is the promise that God has made: that he will be with them, that he will rescue them, that he will save, that he will bring them on to where they are meant to be. And at the end of their lives these guys are saying to the people of God *"not a single one of the promises that God has made has failed in its fulfilment."* So when God says that this is what will be, and when God himself has demonstrated his ability to do it, then you and I can be sure that this is not just wishful thinking on our part. This is as guaranteed as anything. This is as certain of fulfilment as anything in all the universe. You may be sure of it.

That is how we can be sure. He moves on to the question: **what can we expect?** What is it that we are looking forward to as Christians?

He points essentially to these three things:

We are looking forward to that day when the Lord will return. Verse 16: *"when the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God."*

The Lord will come. That is what God had been promising all the way through the Old Testament. There would be that day when the Messiah would be born and they looked forward to the coming of the Lord, the coming of the Christ, the coming of the one who would bring to them at last what had been promised all long, who would bring the rule of God into their experience, who would bring the presence of God, who would bring the power of God, who would bring the love of God into their very midst. They were looking forward to it. There had been many people over hundreds and hundreds of years who had said: 'promises, promises .. but where is this Messiah, where is this Christ, where is this King that is coming, we don't see any sign of him?' They waited and waited and waited; they waited a long time indeed.

But he did come, and we are assured that the Lord himself, that the Lord Jesus about whom we read in the gospels, wise, kind, strong, true, able so wonderfully to save, bringing with him the very presence of almighty God, bringing with him the oceans of God's love and bathing the lives of people in the richness of that, the Lord himself will return to this planet. He will come down from heaven. And there will be that

immediacy of relationship with him. That is the next big terminal point in the story of the world in which we live. The Lord will come down from heaven.

The second thing that we can expect is that we will be raised. The dead in Christ will rise, first. Those who have been cremated, those whose ashes have been scattered, those whose bodies have been buried, those whose remains no-one's ever found where they are - they will be raised. Body and soul reunited. That which death has separated God is committed to rejoining. And we will be raised, and that being raised will be the final completion of that work of renewal and restoration that God is committed to effecting in our lives in and through Jesus Christ. So we shall at last be made perfect, at last able to live as in our best moments we have wanted to live, longed to live, and often struggle to live. Raised at last free from any trace of sin; raised at last free from any trace of sickness and illness and infirmity in body or of mind. We will be raised. We are able to look forward to that.

And the third thing that Paul points to here is simply this: that we will be with the Lord for ever. Yes, together with the whole company of God's people, but together *with him*. And we will enjoy his presence. The crowds gathered around Jesus - we read about that in his earthly ministry. They just loved being with him, they loved being in his presence, they loved hearing him speak, he put a smile on their faces, he stretched their minds, he expanded their horizons, he did them good, they were glad to be around him, and folk flocked to be with him, and simply to gather there, to be with him because things happen when Jesus is around. We will be with him. Isn't that wonderful? We will be with the Lord and we will share in all that he is doing and we will enjoy the richness and the adventure and the excitement and the anticipation and the sheer peace and grace of his presence. We will know the richness of his laughter, we will see the warmth of his smile. We will share in all the fullness of the horizons that he has, we will be with the Lord. We are able to look forward to that.

You can see why Paul starts by saying this is why we can be sure about it. You need to be sure about it. You need to be clear about it. There is something that we are able to look forward to, however remarkable it might seem to us. God has said that it will be so and God has demonstrated his commitment to that by raising his son Jesus from the dead. So we may be sure that when the whole Scriptures point to the fact that the Lord will come down from heaven, that we will be raised and that we will be with him, you can bank everything on that, because that is a certainty, that is guaranteed, that is assured to us.

In verses 1 to 3 of chapter 5 he goes on to address the question **when**. People like to know that when is it going to be. We like to know when is it going to be, we want to know things exactly.

Even Jesus, though, says no-one but the Father knows when that day will be. You don't need to know when it will be. So Paul is not in the business of speculating as to when exactly it might be. So any thoughts you have that you can work it out from the Scripture because there are cryptic clues given there that those of you that are good at The Times crossword should be able to fathom out - they are just not there. The Scriptural emphasis, Paul here, Jesus, and the gospel records - they are all the

same. No-one knows. The only two things you know about this are, one, that day *will* come and, secondly, it will come *suddenly*.

He uses two illustrations: that of a thief in the night. A thief does not advertise that 'this week I will be covering these addresses.' A thief does not do that. A thief comes at night when you are sleeping, when you are not conscious of all that is going on, and he does not advertise, but he is intent nonetheless on coming.

If you don't like that illustration then Paul says it is like the labour that comes upon a woman who is pregnant. There comes a point when the baby is so overdue you begin to think is this baby ever going to come? When is the baby going to come? If the due date was two weeks ago and you got yourself ready on the basis that the baby might be two weeks early then for four weeks there has been no sign at all of the baby. Then boomph - baby - because babies rule, they decide when it is time. You don't get to know when exactly it is going to be. It could be any time. You just don't know.

That is all Paul says: It *will* come, that day, and it will be sudden.

He rounds off in the last verses by addressing the final question and that is: **what does it mean for us** that hope that we have?

You'll see he says twice: *encourage one another*. It is meant to be for our encouragement. It is meant to lift our eyes beyond the here and now, and beyond all the problems and all the difficulties, and the darkness, beyond all the gloom and all the pain and sorrow, all of that, and encourage our hearts and acknowledge that there is something altogether better coming.

Those of you who struggle with pain, and some of you do, and it is there every single day of your life: pain that prevents you being able to do what you would like to do, to enjoy life as you like to enjoy life. Well, be encouraged, there is a day coming when you will be free of that pain, when your body will at last be delivered of everything that occasions that pain for you. You will be raised to a new life, raised and at last made perfect and free from all that has been constricting.

Those of you who struggle because of frailty, infirmity, the inability to do half of the things that once you did: those of you who struggle with increasing deafness. It is not the pain, it is just the problems that arise because of it, you can't hear the music that others hear, it is just a tangled mess at best. Those of you who are increasingly going blind, how hard that is, when you are not able to see, when you are not able to discern all that is going on around you, how imprisoned you feel as a result of that blindness.

Well Paul says, be encouraged, you will be delivered from that. You are to lift your eyes and lift your hearts above all of that and recognise that there will be a day when you are to be raised.

Those of you whose minds are beginning to go and who struggle with those in your family with dementia and depression, and those who struggle to cope and to handle all the issues, problems and pressures in the world in which we live. Freed from that. That is what God is committed to doing. That is what God has secured for you in Jesus Christ his Son. That new life that will be brought into our experience on that

day and however wonderful ... you may think it is too good to be true, but that is not the case. God wants you to be clear about it, he wants you to be sure about it, he wants you to be glad about it. That is why he has raised his Son, that is now guaranteed to us. All that needs to be done to bring it into being has been done by him for us.

God knows how you grieve. God knows the ache in your heart, the void in your heart and in your life now that those who were dear to you are no longer there.

I know that; you know that. I still miss my Dad who died almost thirty years ago, massively, some days it is just a big big ache in my heart. And my Mum. I miss her; there are days these few years now, I think that I will just go and tell my Mum .. and then I remember I can't tell my Mum. We have this sorrow, this grief, this pain, in our hearts. We are to be encouraged in the face of that grief as well. There will be that day, that is what God wrought for us in Jesus Christ. That is why we delight in Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says I don't want you to be ignorant about these things. I don't want you to grieve as those who have no hope. I want you to be clear about this, I want you to be sure about this, I want you to be glad about this.

This is why I go on to you about this person Jesus, because I want you to be clear about this, I want you to be sure about this. I want you to be thrilled by this as well. Because you don't find this anywhere else. This person Jesus is the only one in whom this hope is given and assured to us.

Therefore if we are to be encouraged, we are also to be challenged by that. That is why Paul says there is a need for folk to be alert, to be self-controlled and to be living with a view to that day, because this day is not all there is. If it were, then, yes, Paul would be the first to say you might as well eat, drink and be merry. You might as well go out and get as drunk as anything. You might as well just live for the present if that is all there is; but he says that is not all there is.

There is another day coming; there is that day when the Lord will come and that has implications for each and everyone. It is in him, in the Lord Jesus Christ, that that hope is found. And that is why he speaks about those who have fallen asleep in him, in Jesus, in relationship with him. Nothing is more important than that and Paul means, and the Scriptures mean, and God means that we should indeed be clear about this, sure about it and glad about it as well, that which he has wrought for us and given to us in the gift of his Son.

Christmas really has that sort of expansive horizon to it. It is not really just about looking back to the birth of a little baby. It is about us, on the basis of that, being able to look forward to something altogether more glorious that will pale every other experience of joy into insignificance, so wonderful and glorious it will be.

May God bless his word to our hearts' encouragement and to his name be the praise and the glory.