**Together with the Lord** 5/11/23dkm

Read: Matthew 25,1Thessalonians 5

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:8-11

Psalms: 147:1-7, 49:12-20, 130, 117

Death is the great leveller. Rich and poor, wise and foolish, all will die (Ps 49:10). Our bodies all end up in the grave. But death is also the great divider. Our bodies end up on the grave but not our soul or spirit. Jesus spoke of a rich man, who lived for himself, ending up in the fires of hell, and poor Lazarus ending up in Abraham’s bosom in heaven: ‘And a great gulf was fixed between them’ (Luke 17:22,23). He spoke of the Son of Man separating the sheep and the goats on the Day of Judgment (Mat 25:33).

After death comes the judgment (Heb 9:27). At death our eternal destiny is sealed. In this life we must choose between spending eternity in heaven or hell. Going to hell is our default condition because we are born in sin, and sin brings us under the wrath of God. On the cross Jesus took the sin of those who repent and believe in Jesus, and felt the wrath of God upon that sin. Have yoy repented of your sin?

This truth about death is clearly declared in the Bible, the word of God, but rarely do you hear it mentioned at funerals these days. Funerals have become a celebration of the past, of the earthly life of the deceased, with no mention of the future. No one offers comfort or hope, apart from imaginations of the departed becoming a star in the sky or being ‘always with us’. The apostle Paul gives words of hope and comfort regarding believers who die in Christ. He makes the same distinction as Jesus in saying, ‘Lest you sorrow as others who have no hope’ (4:13); the ‘others’ are unbelievers.

New believers in the church at Thessalonica became concerned when they buried fellow believers. Was this the end? They believed Jesus was returning soon and they would be with him forever, but what about those in the grave. Paul assures them that when Jesus returns the dead in Christ will be raised first and together they will meet the Lord in the air. Elsewhere the Bible tells us that all will be raised on the last day to face the judgment of Christ, and be assigned to their eternal destiny, either with the rich man in hell or Lazarus in heaven (Rom 14:10, 2Cor:2:10, Rev 20:12).

Having made clear to those in the church of Thessalonica, and to us in this church, exactly what will happen in the *parousia* or return of Jesus, but that no one knows exactly when Jesus will return, Paul tells them how they should be living in the light of the *parousia*. Death casts a long shadow over the life of every individual. We don’t like to think about our death so keep busy doing things and trying to enjoy life, but this does not change the reality. Reality has a bright side in an invitation from Jesus: ‘Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy laden’, ‘I have come that you may have life’, eternal life (Mat 11:28, John 9:10).

Our subheadings are: ‘Armour’, ‘Appointed’, ‘Atonement’ and ‘Encourage one another’.

**1. Armour**

In telling these believers to live in the light of the Lord’s return, Paul tells them to live as ‘sons of the light’. If you are awake and ready, the thief will not surprise you; Jesus will come like a thief so be ready at all times. Being ready means being sober or temperate, being serious and self-controlled in all you do. Live a life of love, love for God and love for one another. Paul commended the believers in Thessalonica for their love, ‘brotherly love’ (4:5), but they could always do more, and so can we. Paul spoke about sanctification and holy living in the previous chapter.

The switch of metaphor to the armour of a soldier in verse 8 is rather sudden. Paul has used this picture elsewhere, most extensively in Ephesians 6, but the representations are not exactly the same. Soldiers were present in cities of the Roman Empire, although the prophet Isaiah also used the picture of a breastplate and helmet (Isa 59:17). Soldiers often had the duty of standing guard, of being ready for any intruders, which is how believers are to live. In the book of Ephesians, Paul talks about ‘full armour’ and being ready for attacks of the evil one (Eph 6:11,16); here he refers only to the breastplate and the helmet, and identifies these differently. The breastplate is of faith and love, and the helmet the hope of salvation (5:8). Faith, love, and hope are essential features of the Christian life. Paul began this letter remembering their work of faith, labour of love and hope in the Lord (1:3). Here towards the end of his letter he urges them to keep on in this way, putting on faith, love and hope as pieces of armour, armour given us by God (Eph 6:13).

Faith is the gift of God, the gift by which our hearts are made alive in Christ. God changes our heart when we hear the gospel, confess our sin, and believe in Jesus. He gives us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee or assurance that we belong to him in a covenant relationship. The Spirit helps us in our weakness and strengthens our faith. A fruit of the Spirit is love, a distinctive mark of believers. We know what love is because Jesus first loved us and gave his life for us (1Jn 3:16). If we are actively loving Jesus and other people we will be ready for his return.

It is interesting how politicians and press people put on hard hats and flak jackets whenever they are in a dangerous place, or a few miles from such a place! Wearing a helmet and bullet-proof vest makes for good TV. It would be good if they had the words ‘faith and love’ emblazoned on their jacket rather than ‘president’ or ‘press’. Are you wearing a breastplate of faith and love? Faith and love offer you more protection and hope than a flak jacket or hard hat.

The helmet given us by God in ‘the hope of salvation’. John Stott writes, “Our ‘hope of salvation’ is well founded. It stands firmly on the solid rock of God’s will and Christ’s death, and not on the shifting sands of our own performance or feeling”. What is your hope? Are you hoping to graduate, hoping to get a job, hoping to have a family, or hoping to have a holiday? Such hopes are not in themselves wrong, but our greatest hope, and our only sure hope, is the hope of salvation. This is a hope that is not seen but is most certain and most glorious (Rom 8:24, 25). Our hope is in the Lord and his coming in glory on the clouds of heaven, bringing salvation to those waiting for him (4:16).

**2. Appointed**

God is sovereign in all things, in creation and in redemption. He is even sovereign in our salvation. He chose us in him, in Christ, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). This reference in Ephesians goes on to speak about predestination and adoption, which is what is meant by the word ‘appoint’ here in verse 9. God appoints people to either wrath or to salvation. In his first mention of the return of Jesus Paul spoke of being delivered from ‘the wrath to come’ (1:10). He refers to wrath again in chapter 2:16. You might wonder why there is little mention of such wrath in popular preaching and songs today. Leon Morris writes, ‘In modern days men are prone to take Christianity lightly because they have emptied wrath of its content’. What he wrote back in 1960 is even more applicable today. We do not want to hear ‘fire and brimstone’ preaching, but nor do we want to hear ‘health, wealth, and happiness’ preaching. The wrath of God is real, and it will be poured out in the Day of Judgment upon everyone who is still in their sin or has died in the sin.

‘For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (5:9). To ‘obtain’ salvation sounds a bit like working for our salvation but this is not what Paul means. Why? Because he is contrasting ‘appointment’ by God to wrath, and to salvation. And this salvation is ‘through our Lord Jesus Christ’. There is no salvation outside of Christ, no salvation by good works apart from Christ. We are saved by grace through faith unto good works. We work out our salvation to the extent that God works in us to do his will (Phil 2:12, 13). Paul is telling the Thessalonians how they are to live by way of being sanctified (4:3).

**3. Atonement**

In just four words Paul explains the doctrine of atonement- ‘Christ, who died for us’ (5:10). God appointed us to ‘obtain salvation’, and this is how he obtained it for us. Paul wrote this letter in response to concerns of the Thessalonians. He is not writing to explain the whole gospel he preached to them. His focus is on the day of the Lord. But he was always ready to remind believers of the heart of the gospel, the doctrine of atonement in the blood of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that he will return from heaven (4:14). But to be saved we must say and believe, ‘Jesus died for me’. This is what we mean by ‘confessing faith in Jesus’ or ‘confessing Jesus Christ as Lord’.

When we are saved by grace, the grace of God in the cross of Christ, and profess faith in Jesus, we are united to Christ. His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16). Paul speaks of being ‘in Christ’, or, as here in this letter, of being ‘together with him’ (5:10). As believers, whether alive or dead at the *parousia* we will be ‘caught up together’ to be with the Lord forever (4:17). In fact, as a new creation in Christ Jesus, we are already in Christ, already ‘living together with Him’, with Christ- or should be (5:10).

The apostle has been talking about being awake or asleep when Jesus returns, extending this contrast to night and day, and darkness and light. Here in verse 10 he contrasts life and death or rather, for believers, draws these two together because, ‘Whether we live or die we are the Lord’s’ (Rom 14:8). Death does not separate us from Christ; as believers we continue ‘in Christ’ or ‘together with the Lord’. Nothing on earth or in heaven, not even death, ‘can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:39).

**4. Encourage one another**

Do you understand what Paul is telling these Thessalonian believers? If you know Jesus died for your sin and rose again for your justification or salvation, you will know your sins are forgiven and you have been given eternal life in Christ Jesus. You will know that Jesus went to heaven and is ready to return. You will know what will happen on this day. You will also know what will happen to unbelievers on this day, and you will be praying for them, warning them and telling them to call on the name of Jesus and be saved. But for yourself, and fellow believers, you will have words of encouragement and comfort given you here in the Bible.

Paul ends his teaching about the second coming of Christ by again urging the Thessalonians to comfort one another with the words and truths he has just shared (4:18, 5:11). He was not sharing these truths to satisfy their curiosity or to simply add to their knowledge. They asked him about brethren who had died, and about the return of Jesus, so as to increase or strengthen their faith.

Since turning to God from idols, the believers in Thessalonica were enduring opposition and persecution. They were new in the faith and Paul was concerned for them. He was relieved and pleased to hear of their perseverance in the faith, and urges them to press on to the end. He encourages them with this letter, and urges them to encourage each other, and build each other up in their faith and love. This is done by meeting together for worship, for prayer, and for fellowship in Christ. If you are ‘living together with Jesus’ you will be joining with, and encouraging fellow believers- ‘all the more as you see the Day approaching’ (Heb 10:25).