

**People of the Light: 3. Let the Son Shine**  
**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 5:11**  
**August 7, 2022**  
**Pastor Tami Luckhardt**

One of the harsh realities of COVID 19 was that a significant number of patients who were hospitalized with the virus died without a loved one present. It wasn't that family and friends didn't want to be there, but that many hospitals kept visitors away in an attempt to fight the spread of the virus. One doctor called the isolation "the medical version of solitary confinement." In some instances, medical personnel, like our daughter Emily, who is an ICU nurse, kept a vigil with the dying. But that, of course, is not the same as having people present who have been important in the dying person's life.

Sad as that is, we have no way of knowing what the experience of dying alone is like for the one going through it, although some chaplains and hospice workers say being alone at that time may matter less to the one dying than to those left behind. Having walked this journey with several patients, our daughter, Emily believes this to be true. I called her last week to talk about this message and she said she believes, in a sense, we all die alone, even if we are surrounded by people we love. Often, as we die and our bodies are breaking down, our souls are elsewhere. So, the conscious experience of death is, by nature, solitary. Many people are not responsive at the end because their bodies are busy doing something else. So, whether we're present for the passing of our loved ones or not, we may never truly understand the process of dying alone.

I share all this to help us understand today's reading from 1 Thessalonians. This passage from Paul is often read as a blow-by-blow description of how Jesus' return will take place — as if God had given Paul a play book or an advance copy of the schedule of the day's events. But to read it that way misses Paul's main concern, which is: *"We want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope."* (1 Thessalonians 4:13) It appears that someone had conveyed to Paul the Thessalonians' concern about those who died before the Lord's second coming. Most scholars agree that the Thessalonians' concern about the second coming is not so much about the salvation of their loved ones as it is about community, about whether they will be eternally separated from those they have loved, simply on account of bad timing.

Understanding the underlying concern as one of community actually helps to bring this whole passage into focus. The vision of Christ's return that Paul develops here is one in which heaven and earth are suddenly and beautifully united. *This is because the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet. First, those who are dead in Christ will rise. Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air. That way we will always be with the Lord.*" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) The image gathers Paul's deepest beliefs about God's reconciling purpose in Christ.

So, might Paul have secret information about exactly what the second coming will look like? I don't think so. The imagery he uses here is informed by his knowledge of Old Testament scripture. He also embraces the pomp of what a Roman military victory looks like, with words like "shout from the head angel" and "a blast on God's trumpet": these were all fitting for a high-ranking government official or even an emperor. Anyone living under Roman rule would understand the power of this image. But maybe most importantly, this imagery is reflective of Paul's own experiences of God's reconciling power at work among the communities he serves.

He wants to encourage the Thessalonians to trust God entirely with their present and their future.

The Thessalonians were expecting it to be very soon, like “in their lifetime soon.” They fully expected that they would be alive when Jesus returned, and they were worried about those believers who had already died. They were concerned that those who had already died would share the glory of that day. Paul’s answer was that there would be one glory for those who died and one for those who survived. He tells them not to mourn as those who have no hope, the pagans. In the face of death, the pagan world stood in complete despair. They met death with grim resignation and bleak hopelessness. This was evident on the epitaphs on their tombstones like this one that reads: “I was not. I became. I am not. I care not.”

So, Paul has laid out a great truth. The person who has lived and died in Christ is still in Christ and will rise in him. Between Christ and the person who loves him there is a relationship that nothing can break, a bond that surpasses even death. We begin every Celebration of Life service here at Messiah Church with these words of grace. *Jesus said, I am the resurrection, and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I died, and behold I am alive forever more, and I hold the keys of hell and death. Because I live, you shall live also.* Because Christ died and rose again, so will the one who is one with Christ. Paul isn’t saying we shouldn’t grieve. Of course, we’ll still grieve when a loved one dies, and we still feel like we’ve been punched in the gut when a loved one must die alone, but we are not without hope, for them or for ourselves.

I’ve shared with you before that my father passed in June of 2015 after a slow and painful, 3-year decline following a heart valve replacement that went terribly wrong. After this surgery, he couldn’t do much physically and so his love for reading became his main form of entertainment and intellectual stimulation. In my parents’ den, there was this big, leather chair where he spent most of his days. And there was always a big pile of books on the coffee table next to this chair that were just waiting to be read. He read everything from American history to mystery novels, to autobiographies of his favorite sports figures and of course, his Bible. He was a man of deep faith, but it was a quiet faith, he didn’t talk about his faith, yet we knew, because of the way he lived his life, that he believed in eternal life with God. Several months after he died, I was visiting my mom and we were going through some of my dad’s books when I came across a book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor who was arrested, imprisoned, and killed by the Nazis during World War II. As I opened the cover of the book, on the name plate, written in my dad’s handwriting was this, “On death., page 531.” Here is an excerpt from that passage. *“Life only begins when it ends here on earth, ... all that is here is only the prologue before the curtain goes up-this is for young and old alike to think about...Death is only dreadful for those who live in dread and fear of it. Death is not wild and terrible, if only we can be still and hold fast to God’s Word. Death... is the gateway to our homeland, the tabernacle of joy, the everlasting kingdom of peace.”* This message that my dad left for us (from beyond the grave) shined a light on his beliefs regarding death and life eternal. It still gives me with hope and still brings my family great comfort all these years since his passing.

A view like this enables us to count on the kingdom of God eventually coming in all its fullness, and our having a place in it. It says to us, “This is how you will understand it when this life is over and the new one has begun.” This view is important to a life of faith because without it, we have nothing to look forward to beyond whatever we ourselves can make of this life before it

ends. I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to a future with a whole lot more than I can possibly accomplish myself.

It's not possible for us today to know how literally Paul intended the details he gives of Christ's return to be taken. *Shout by the head angel. God's trumpet blast. Taken up together in the clouds.* At a minimum, Paul likely meant the rendezvous in the sky as an image to help his readers conceptualize Jesus' return and bringing the now-resurrected dead in Christ with him. Paul identifies clouds as the place where Jesus' living followers and the dead in Christ come together to meet their Lord. Paul didn't designate clouds as the rendezvous spot simply because of their spectacular presence in the sky, but rather because clouds had long been used in Old Testament scripture to signify the presence of God, like in Exodus 19:9: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud. Or Psalm 97: "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him.... (97:2). In the New Testament, a cloud signified the presence of God at the transfiguration of Jesus, where God speaks out of a "bright cloud" to call Jesus the "My beloved son" and to tell the disciples to listen to him. And in Acts 1:9 we read that at Jesus' ascension, it was a cloud that took Jesus "out of their sight". So, when Paul tells his readers that they will meet Christ in the *clouds*, he is saying that they will be in the presence of God the Father as well.

That said, if Paul were writing to us today about our grief over our dead, I think he'd probably look for some other image besides clouds to denote the presence of God because modern day culture has adopted "clouds" as shorthand for troubles and worries, so much so that we sometimes speak of looking for silver linings behind the darkest clouds — like some kind of badge of honor for having to exist under clouds of trouble.

There's a 18th century hymn that I found in my Grandma Hazel's old hymnal called *God Moves in Mysterious Ways* that offers us a different view on clouds. It begins like this: *Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.* This alternative "up-in-the clouds" image conveys the same assurance of hope that Paul was writing about.

Another sky-related image instead of clouds — is "sunshine," which is a modern metaphor for "release of worries and troubles". And surely an end-of-time meeting with Jesus for those who are *in Christ* would be the ULTIMATE of our release from worries and troubles.

One of the most heartbreaking moments I've experienced in ministry is also, at the same time, one of the most profound examples of faith I've ever witnessed. It happened last July after Jay Boughton was senselessly shot and killed on Hwy 169 in Plymouth while driving home from a baseball game with his 15-year-old son, Harrison. Most of you know, Jay's father-in-law, Rollie Robinson, served as the senior pastor here at Messiah Church for 14 years, retiring in 2000. Two days after Jay's murder, Rollie and I sat in my office and very early in our conversation, in the midst of deep, deep grief and shock himself, Rollie said that their family was determined to "stay in the light," that they would not allow evil, hate or darkness to overcome them. They were going to anchor their faith and their trust in the light and hope of Jesus Christ and the promise of life after death.

A year ago, yesterday, we held the celebration of Jay's Life right here in this sanctuary. And for the past year, this family has continued their fierce determination to stay in the light, but it has not been easy. Jay's wife, Kristin, and I keep in pretty regular contact, and we almost always

end our conversations with a reminder to “stay in the light”. Sometimes it’s just a little yellow heart or a candle emoji at the end of a text. During the recent trial, the family asked everyone to wear yellow as a reminder to one another to “stay in the light”. This was a silent, yet powerful witness of their faith to the world. The media said that this outpouring of support was unlike anything they had seen before. Just last night, in talking with Kristin, she told me that this journey continues to be extremely difficult every single day, but that through all of it, her faith has become stronger because, with God’s help, she is determined to “stay in the light.”

If you’ve been in my office or seen my Facebook page, you know I like sunflowers. I love their big, bright petals, how they stand so tall and proud but what really draws me is the story behind sunflowers. Did you know that sunflowers grow towards the sun? Even on cloudy days sunflowers will find the tiniest ray of sunlight peeking through the clouds and turn towards it. Instead of focusing on all the darkness, the sunflower seeks out that little light and faces it. Sunflowers flourish when they are facing the sun. Isn’t that just like us? When we are facing Jesus’ light, we are able to flourish and grow. Jesus said in John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” That is our calling, to stay in the light and be people of the light.

Let’s pray: Loving God, you love us so much that you gave your Son so that we could have the promise of eternal life with you in your perfect kingdom. And while this is a gift of grace that is challenging for us to completely comprehend, we are deeply grateful for it. Help us to express our love and gratitude to you by living a life of hope, love, and light. Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 7**

### **Prayer for the Week**

Fill me, Lord, here and now, with a deep sense of your presence and a strong sense of your empowering Spirit. Take this time of prayer and study to renew my faith and replenish my heart. Rebirth my spirit so that I may live with hope and confidence this day and every day, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Monday, August 8**

#### **Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; Acts 1:9-11**

Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus. What we are saying is a message from the Lord: we who are alive and still around at the Lord’s coming definitely won’t go ahead of those who have died.

After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, “Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven.”

### **Observation**

From the beginning of the faith, Christians believed that the Jesus who came once in the incarnation was not gone forever but would return to earth. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, Luke had not yet written Acts, but he traveled with Paul. Believers must have

regularly repeated the message he recorded in Acts 1. The Thessalonians' question was not "Will Jesus return?" but rather, "When he does, will those who have died miss out?"

### **Application**

Paul met violent hostility in Thessalonica, and the same enemies may have killed some of that city's Christians. Paul, like Jesus, spoke of them as having "fallen asleep." He saw death as temporary, not permanent. In his commentary, N. T. Wright said Paul was teaching "appropriate Christian grief, instead of the wild and hopeless mourning that typified pagan funerals." What helps you to grieve, yes, but not "like others who don't have any hope"?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, the Psalmist wrote about your presence in "the valley of the shadow of death." Thank you for facing that valley before me, so that I can trust you when it casts its shadow over my life. Amen.

## **Tuesday, August 9**

### **Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18**

This is because the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet. First, those who are dead in Christ will rise. Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air. That way we will always be with the Lord. So encourage each other with these words.

### **Observation**

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem became a sign that God didn't delegate the work of saving the world to some lesser being but came in person. In the shadow of the cross, Jesus promised his followers, "My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me" (John 14:2-3). That was why Paul so confidently wrote, "The Lord himself will come."

### **Application**

Paul meant the phrase about the Lord "coming down" from heaven poetically, not literally. The central point for Paul (as for Jesus in John 14) was that we will always be with the Lord. Is that the eternal reward that you most hope for?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you for the wonderful, comforting promise Paul shared with the Thessalonians. I look forward to being with you, and all those who love you, forever. Amen.

## **Wednesday, August 10**

### **Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4; Matthew 24:36, 42**

We don't need to write to you about the timing and dates, brothers and sisters. You know very well that the day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. When they are saying, "There is peace and security," at that time sudden destruction will attack them, like labor pains start with a pregnant woman, and they definitely won't escape. But you aren't in darkness, brothers and sisters, so the day won't catch you by surprise like a thief.

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows.

Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know what day the Lord is coming.

### **Observation**

Many scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians was the earliest written New Testament document. It clearly reflected Jesus’ teaching as the gospels later recorded it. Matthew 24 said that when Jesus told his disciples the Temple would not stand forever, they asked a very human question: “Tell us, when will these things happen?” (Matthew 24:3) As today’s reading showed, Jesus said, in effect, that was the wrong question. Paul taught the Thessalonians the same thing in verse 1 of chapter 5.

### **Application**

Our “when” questions about Jesus’ coming reflect the idea that if we just knew when, we’d know when to get serious about growing in our spiritual commitment so that we will be ready to meet the Savior. Paul, following Jesus, said readiness is not a short-term, emergency project, but a matter of living continually in the light of God’s grace and love. Do you live today, and every day, as someone who is not “in darkness”?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, you are with me every day in the Holy Spirit’s presence. Open my heart to live with you now the same way I want to live with you when Jesus comes back to this earth. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 11**

#### **Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:5-8; Ephesians 6:11-17**

All of you are children of light and children of the day. We don’t belong to night or darkness. So then, let’s not sleep like the others, but let’s stay awake and stay sober. People who sleep sleep at night, and people who get drunk get drunk at night. Since we belong to the day, let’s stay sober, wearing faithfulness and love as a piece of armor that protects our body and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

Put on God’s armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. We aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.

### **Observation**

1 Thessalonians showed how, even before the gospels took their written form, the apostles taught what Jesus taught. It also previewed key ideas expressed more fully in later letters. Ephesians (which either Paul or one of his close followers wrote) took the 1 Thessalonians image of the spiritual ideals by which Christians live as armor for our hearts and minds and expanded it to a full-blown metaphor based on what Roman soldiers (some of whom guarded Paul during his imprisonments) wore.

### **Application**

Paul began this letter praising the Thessalonians for their faith, hope and love. As he neared the end of his message, he returned to those central spiritual qualities as the armor they could depend on to protect their life as children of light, not darkness. How has this pandemic season strengthened or weakened those qualities in your life?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, keep teaching me that being a person of your light is not mainly about denouncing evil but about living with faith, hope and, above all, love. Fill me with that light. Amen.

### **Friday, August 12**

#### **Scripture: Luke 21:27-28; 2 Peter 3:3-14**

Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Most important, know this: in the last days scoffers will come, jeering, living by their own cravings, and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? After all, nothing has changed—not since the beginning of creation, nor even since the ancestors died.” But they fail to notice that, by God’s word, heaven and earth were formed long ago out of water and by means of water. And it was through these that the world of that time was flooded and destroyed. But by the same word, heaven and earth are now held in reserve for fire, kept for the Judgment Day and destruction of ungodly people. Don’t let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn’t slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that day the heavens will pass away with a dreadful noise, the elements will be consumed by fire, and the earth and all the works done on it will be exposed. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be? You must live holy and godly lives, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God. Because of that day, the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt away in the flames. But according to his promise we are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Preparing for Christ’s coming in judgment. Therefore, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found by him in peace—pure and faultless.

### **Observation**

1 Thessalonians made it plain that the Thessalonian Christians and Paul himself expected Jesus to return to earth very soon. After 2000 years, we can see that their sense of God’s time scale was a bit too short. The “when” question has never been helpful, as both Luke’s and Peter’s teaching recognized. Crucial to thinking about Jesus’ coming is not “when,” but “who” – who is coming? And who will be ready to greet him?

### **Application**

Jesus used Old Testament prophetic language to describe the end. People would feel confusion, dismay, and fear as everything seemed to be falling apart, he said. But not his followers! For them (and us) the end of the world is not cause for fear but for hope: “Your redemption is near.” When you think of Jesus’ coming, can you “raise your head” and rejoice in God’s coming redemption?

**Prayer**

O Lord, of course, Paul and the early Christians wanted you to make the Roman world new! Of course, I want you to make the world I live in new! Help me to keep trusting that you will - but in your time, not mine. Amen.

**Saturday, August 13****Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11**

God didn't intend for us to suffer his wrath but rather to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with him. So continue encouraging each other and building each other up, just like you are doing already.

**Observation**

Remember Paul's statement of core Christian faith in 1 Thessalonians 4:14: "we believe that Jesus died and rose." God's intention for us, he said, has always been "salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." And how did God act to make that possible? We can write massive volumes analyzing all the dimensions of God's action, yet Paul summarized it in the simple phrase "Jesus died for us." Jesus already fought and won the crucial battle against hatred, evil and death. The issue now is not can we defeat evil; Jesus already did that. All that remains is for us to choose whether we wish to be "in Christ" and share in that victory. And we get to do that together, "encouraging each other and building each other up." Then, whenever Jesus comes, "we will live together with him."

**Application**

People were anxious to know when that day would come. Jesus himself bluntly said no one knew when that day or hour would be, that even he did not know and only God knew. That did not stop people speculating, as they still do. The Christian is living already with Christ and is therefore always prepared. How are you living, and helping others to live, prepared to meet Jesus?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you that the Christians in Thessalonica asked Paul about your coming. 2000 years later, his answers speak to my heart, and help me know how to meet you, trusting in your goodness, not my own. Amen.