

LESSONS IN BASIC CHRISTIANITY:

(5) CHRISTIAN HOPE

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Worship Moment Message

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PROLOGUE

William Christopher Handy, the composer and musician known widely as the "Father of the Blues," once said, "Life is like a trumpet - if you don't put anything into it, you don't get anything out of it." The Bible uses the trumpet as an image for what we get out of life, especially in the ultimate sense. Paul talks about the trumpet of God in his letter to the Thessalonians.

SCRIPTURE

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so 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 died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as

indeed you are doing (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

What happens to people after they die? People have been wondering about that ever since the first person died. Some turn to sentimentality and say things like, “I will never die as long as my loved ones remember me.” Personally, I do not take much comfort in that. I don’t want to be remembered by the living – I want to *be* one of the living! I can relate to comedian who said, “I’m not afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

Some look to nature to find analogies for the meaning of human death. Every spring things come to life and every autumn they die. Human beings are just part of the endless cycle of nature. Again, I do not find much comfort in this analogy. Every spring dandelions show up on my lawn. Is this supposed to teach me that I am nothing more than a bright colored weed?

Some turn to the occult or some type of pseudo science. And still others are altogether cynical about death. Humanity came from germs and when we die we are food for the worms. Everything in between is a “useless passion.”¹

Christians are unique in that we do not look to speculation, rely on sentimentality, follow the occult or give in to cynicism to talk about what happens after death. Rather we look to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his promised return in glory.

The Bible tells us that the coming of Christ will be accompanied by the trumpet call of God. We do not know exactly what that will sound like. But we can use some whimsical speculation to explore the meaning behind the event and its importance for the hope we have in Christ.

1. NOT THE SOUND OF RETREAT

A trumpet can sound “retreat.” In modern times, this bugle call is part of the lowering of the flag ceremony. But in the days of the U.S. Cavalry on horseback it indicated an immediate withdrawal in order to avoid an imminent defeat. But whatever it is, I don’t think that will be the sound we hear when Christ returns.

I say this even though a strategic retreat was part of the storyline behind the church in Thessalonica. Paul and his companions planted a church in this Macedonian city in the summer of A.D. 50 but were forced out by the civil authorities before they could provide the Thessalonian Christians the basic teaching they needed.

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

A while after Paul left, some of the new Christians died, and this caused confusion and turmoil in the church. There were those who misunderstood Paul and thought that he said Christians never die. Others thought that those who died would miss out on Christ's return. Paul wrote a letter to them, which we refer to as *1 Thessalonians*, to comfort them and clarify the hope that we have in Christ.

He assures them that those who have died are not left out and those who are alive will not be given preferential treatment. He uses familiar 1st Century imagery to convey the truth that all believers will be with the Lord. He says:

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever (4:17 NRSV).

The phrase "caught up" is interesting, if for no other reason than for its Latin counterpart, *rapere* (rah PE ray), that comes into the English language as "rapture." In the middle of the 19th Century, some believers from England and Scotland came up with the idea that Christ was going to return secretly and quietly to remove the church from the world before an intensely tumultuous time. The term they used to describe this escape was "rapture." More recently, the idea has become popular among many American Christians through the writings of such people as Hal Lindsey ("The Late Great Planet Earth") and Tim LaHaye ("Left Behind").

Many sincere Christians hold to this theory, but I must point out that there are at least a couple of significant problems with it. First of all, you have to explain why for 18 ½ centuries no other Christian had thought of a secret rapture. But the second problem is, that in the only place in the Bible where there is an explicit reference to "rapture", here in 1 Thessalonians, the return of Christ is neither quiet nor a secret. So whatever the trumpet call of God is, it is not a secret "retreat" from the world.

We do not have to wait for Christ's return before we can receive the benefits of his resurrection. If we place our trust in Jesus Christ we can know friendship with God, purpose in life and the promise of a new and eternal life in the world to come. And the joyous adventure of following Christ can start anytime. Today if you wish.

2. NOT THE SOUND OF REVEILLE

A trumpet can sound "reveille." This is a bugle call to wake people up. There are no official words to "reveille" but one unofficial version says, in part:

You've got to get up
You've got to get up

You've got to get up this morning!”

My mother used to sing those words every time she came into my bedroom on a school day morning. If I had a therapist, he would probably say this is the reason I am not a morning person. Some of you know that one of my favorite posters says, “If God had wanted us to see the sunrise, it would have been scheduled later!” And, for many of you it also means, “There is no life before coffee!” Alas, I have had no coffee in over four and a half years.

Waking up from sleep can be a metaphor for the resurrection of the dead. Even so, I do not think the trumpet call of God will be “reveille.” For that would imply that souls literally sleep until Christ returns.

“Sleep” was a euphemism for death used by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is one of the reasons for having cemeteries. The word “cemetery” comes from the Greek word for a place to sleep.

But for non-Christians the reality behind the sleep of death was one of despair. Catullus wrote, "When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep." Some ancient Greeks believed in life after death but this was shadowy and ill-defined. F. F. Bruce quotes Theocritus as writing, “Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.”

The Romans also felt hopeless in the face of death. Archaeologists have uncovered correspondence from families of the era. Whenever death is mentioned there is a gloom that follows and covers everything. When a loved one died they did not know what to say. They felt utterly unable to provide comfort because death was the last word.

But for the early Christians, sleep was used to describe the reality of death because death was only temporary; a transition to a better life. Christ's resurrection guarantees the resurrection of believers. His second coming will bring it about.

There is much mystery here, but the New Testament does give us some idea of what this will mean (1 Cor 15:35ff). Our resurrected bodies will be different from our present physical bodies but will have continuity with our present bodies. We will have individual identities and we will be able to recognize each other. And because, as Christians, we will be resurrected with new bodies, we need not have any fears in connection with our earthly remains. The remains of a Christian who has died can be buried, cremated or donated to medical science and such a believer will be resurrected with a new body that is complete, imperishable, glorified, powerful and so lovely that if we were to see a person today with such a body we would be tempted to fall down and worship this person!

3. BUT THE SOUND OF VICTORY

A trumpet can sound victory. Surely this is what the trumpet call of God is all about. Someday Christ will return to raise us up.

We do not know *when* this will be but we do know *that* it will be. Paul indicates that for those who have rejected Christ, it will be like a burglar breaking into a home at night – an event both unpleasant and unexpected. But Christians belong to the light. We need not have any anxiety over Christ’s return.

Christians recognize with all of humanity the inevitability of death. But even in the face of death we can witness to our faith that God in Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life. This is a victory worth celebrating.

Biblical writers, like Paul, often used well-known situations in order to explain spiritual truths. Thessalonica was a thoroughly Roman city. Paul was a Roman citizen and proud of it. He and the Thessalonians would have been quite familiar with the concept of a “triumph.”

A triumph was initiated when a victorious Roman general and his army returned to Rome and camped outside the city. A messenger was sent to tell the Senate of their return. The city would prepare to receive the army by setting up arches of triumph and decorating the streets with garlands. When the city was prepared to receive the army, trumpets would be blown, and the army would begin its march. Before the march began the citizens were invited to go out and join the general and his marching army that had fought and conquered in their name.

It seems to me this is what the Bible is saying about the return of Christ. It is like a victory march and Christ’s people get to share in the victory. Not a fearful retreat. Not a reluctant duty. But a glorious triumph!

CONCLUSION

The late James Montgomery Boice told the story of the people of nineteenth-century England, who were anxiously awaiting news of the outcome of the strategic battle between the British forces under Wellington and the French forces under Napoleon at a place called Waterloo. A signalman was placed on top of Winchester Cathedral and told to keep looking out towards the sea. When he received a message, he was to pass it on to another signalman on a hill, who, in turn, would pass it on to another, and so on. In this way, the news of the outcome of the battle was to be relayed to London and all of Britain.

At last a ship was sighted through the fog. The signalman on board the ship sent the first word — “Wellington.” The next word was “defeated.” Then the fog closed in, and the ship could no longer be seen. “Wellington defeated!” The tragic message was sent across

England, and a great gloom fell over the land. After a few hours the fog lifted, and the signal came again — “Wellington defeated the enemy!” Now the full message was quickly relayed across countryside, but this time the nation rejoiced!

Boice saw a striking parallel between this story and when Jesus died his cruel death on the cross. A great gloom fell over the followers of Jesus. They thought the message was, “Jesus defeated!” But after three days the fog lifted, and the full message came through — “Jesus defeated the enemy!” Jesus is risen from the grave and he has defeated death. Jesus Christ is victorious over sin and death. And those who trust in him will share in his victory march that will usher in a whole new world.