



**KING'S
CHURCH**
EDINBURGH

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Gospel Focus

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11,

The Christians of the New Testament era were strongly focused on the future return of Jesus, as promised in *Acts 1:9-11*. Paul and his team had clearly taught the young church in Thessalonica about Jesus's return but they seemed to have some misunderstandings or uncertainties (like many other Christians following them!). Their questions were about what happened to Christians who died before Jesus came back, and when exactly is Jesus coming back.

1. What about Christians who have died? *(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)*

The Thessalonians had been taught to live in anticipation of Christ's return, so when some of them died those who remained were grieved and confused. Did those people's deaths mean that they were going to miss out on what God was going to do?

Paul teaches that the resurrection power of Jesus is going to be at work in every believer, dead or alive (*4:14*), transforming them into new bodies, just as Jesus was at His resurrection. We will be free from the powers of sin and death forever. Our attention will be on Jesus Himself (*4:16-17*) whose arrival will be heralded by clouds and trumpets (both often seen in the Old Testament). These represent God's presence and His victory, which is what the whole world will experience.

We won't be living on clouds, contrary to some popular opinion, because the image Paul has in mind is of citizens of an ancient city going outside the city walls to await and greet their VIP guest, and then enter into the city with them. This ties up with what

the Bible tells us elsewhere, that Heaven isn't a place that followers of Jesus will leave Earth to go to. Instead, Heaven is coming to Earth, to cleanse it of all its evil and remake it for God and His people to dwell in (as Jesus taught us to pray).

Will there actually be clouds and trumpets? It doesn't really matter in apocalyptic writing because the point you're meant to get is that this will be a victorious and extremely obvious return.

"And so we will always be with the Lord," Paul concludes, and there is nothing better than that. All of the blessings of God's presence that we currently experience, however briefly, will be fully happening in ways beyond our current experience and comprehension. Every good thing you've ever experienced will be eclipsed by seeing Jesus face to face, and no bad thing that has happened will be able to diminish the wonder.

Because this is what awaits everyone who has put their trust in Jesus, Paul tells us not to grieve without hope when they die. We mourn our losses, and the temporary tyranny of death.

But we see past it, through it, to this glorious and guaranteed future.

2. When is Jesus coming back?

Christians shouldn't predict when Jesus is coming back because it's impossible (*Matthew 24:36,44*)! Paul uses the same metaphor as Jesus, of a thief in the night, to emphasise this, and adds the image of a pregnant woman who knows that labour pains will come but doesn't know exactly when. He says that we can't know when Jesus is going to return but we can and should be ready for it to happen.

What does that readiness look like? Paul describes those who don't believe in Jesus and His return as being like those who are asleep or drunk – they're oblivious to what is really going on. In contrast, Jesus's followers are awake and sober, fully aware of the reality they are living in. We could summarise this by thinking about how we would react if Jesus returned right now: would we be thrilled, or would we feel caught sadly unawares, not quite ready?

Paul uses the words *"faith... hope... love"* to describe how an awake and sober Christian will live (*5:8*), and tells us to encourage one another in living this way by focusing on this wonderful future God has graciously given us (*4:18, 5:11*).

Faith is a daily decision to follow Jesus, to believe Him and obey Him. We can encourage others in their faith through what we say and what we do, when we make decisions that are investing in our eternal future rather than just the here and now.

Hope is a forward-looking confidence that expects God to do good, maybe now but definitely in the future. We encourage one another to hope by coming alongside when times are tough, when we're tempted to despair and give up. Sometimes just to be present, or give practical encouragement, or remind them of where this story is going.

Love is choosing to do what is good for others, even if it costs us. We encourage others to love by celebrating the love of God and sharing it with them through our actions. All the choices of love, all the effort it takes, and all its joys and thrills, are found in God and we will spend eternity experiencing them like never before.

These acts of faith, of hope, and of love, are all in anticipation of Jesus's return. They show that we are waiting eagerly for that Day. It is the true "happily ever after" of the true story.

It isn't wishful thinking, it's a longing that God put in us which only He can fulfil. The return of Jesus is the most important thing and He is calling every one of us here today to rearrange our life now entirely around Him and the life to come.

Questions:

- How frequently do you think about the return of Jesus or make decisions because of it?
 - What was new to you in what Luke shared?
 - How can what the New Testament says about Jesus's return and Heaven on Earth impact the choices you're currently making in day-to-day life?
 - If you wanted to encourage someone who is a Christian, how would you usually do it? Did Luke's preach give you any new ways in which you could do this?
 - How can you as a small group encourage each other to "stay awake and sober"?
 - Why do you think Paul characterised Christianity with the words faith, hope, and love?
 - If you wanted to explain the return of Jesus to someone who wasn't a Christian, how would you do it?
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