

**Glimpses of Heaven  
1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11  
Don Lincoln**

First Thessalonians is believed to be Paul's earliest letter of those that have been preserved in the NT. Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. It was a thriving northern Aegean sea port about 200 miles north of Athens, and at that time was the chief city of Macedonia.

It's likely Paul and colleagues were church planting in Thessalonica for the better part of a year. Paul had good success preaching the Gospel there, but his success during that time also aroused enormous opposition. His host was arrested and charged with high treason. Friends ended up having to usher Paul out of the city by dark of night, his stay cut shorter than he expected it to be. And now the believers there were left on their own.

The Christians in Thessalonica believed Jesus' return was imminent. It appears early on Paul may have thought so as well. But the longer that return was delayed, the more concerned the young church became. When members of their community died before seeing the return of Christ, they realized it might not be as soon as they all hoped. Paul himself tried to return to Thessalonica, but that visit was blocked. He sends Timothy as an encouragement, and after Timothy's return, Paul sends his letters.

Pastor Eugene Peterson, says, "The way to understand Paul's intent in the letters to the Thessalonians is to recognize that "the way we conceive the future sculpts the present – gives contour and tone to every action and thought throughout our day. If our sense of the future is weak, we tend to live listlessly.

The Christian faith has always been characterized by a strong and focused sense of future, believing the Kingdom of Christ will ultimately come to its fullness. The practical effect of this belief is to charge each moment of the present with hope."

What a powerful word: "The practical effect of this belief in the coming of the Kingdom is to charge each moment of the present with hope, giving contour and tone to every action and thought through the day."

Some of us probably grew up with a Christianity that was focused on heaven. Some of us may have responded to a pointed message about Jesus and salvation, with an emphasis on getting to heaven, and probably maybe even avoiding hell!

There's an old Jim Reeves tune that goes:

This world is not my home I'm just a passing through,  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue,  
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

And there are days I suspect when we all have felt that way. Maybe the Thessalonians were right there when Paul is writing to them.

But I thought about the meaning of that song, and its implications about this life God has given us. If I'm just passing through, then does it mean none of this counts? Heck – start at the very beginning. Does that mean my childhood didn't matter? Those earliest years, and all the things I learned about life and about love and about right and wrong and friendship and sadness and grief and wonder and joy? Are those all side roads?

Lutheran pastor Libby Howe writes: The Christians in my life who focused on the pearly gates and the sweet by-and-by often refused to be concerned about or take any real responsibility for this messy world. They were looking up when they should be looking down. They were looking for God to provide and be generous to them instead of looking at where they could provide for others in the more equitable sharing of wealth. They were comfortably waiting for death, enduring life's inconveniences, clucking their tongues at the immoral or improper, and halfheartedly uttering, "Well isn't that a shame," before getting back to their easy, insulated existences.<sup>1</sup>

When the Thessalonians believed Jesus was to return soon, their enthusiasm and faith was evident, and they were probably building up one another but they'd been doing that when focused on a future they thought was about to come. Energized! But now it appears that's NOT going to be happening right away, and they're tempted to become too comfortable in the present age.

This is the reason for Paul's disparaging allusion in verse 3 to those who speak of "peace and security." That phrase, **I learned** while studying the text this week, was a well-known Roman propaganda slogan – "peace and security." Don't worry; be happy. All is well; Rome has everything under control. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that, as "children of the light" their hope and the world's hope lies not in Rome's political might, but rather in God's saving power that will triumph over all.<sup>2</sup>

Paul assures the Thessalonians that while no one knows the day or the hour of the Lord's coming, **AND** that it will come like a thief in the night – that shouldn't bother **THEM**. Because they are children of the light – children of the day. Meaning they are awake! Not children of the night; lulled to sleep by those who say "There is peace and security."

20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Karl Barth speaks of Christians as those who are "awake." Barth says conversion to the call of Christ means believers are those who have been woken up. In Paul's words, "children of the day."

To use the current vernacular associated with a growing awareness of racial injustice in our time and season, Paul is telling the Thessalonians, “You are woke!!” And Paul’s words speak to you and me. We are, Paul says, awakened to and equipped **with faith, hope and love** – powers that allow you and me to cross the threshold of our private existence and move out into the open. In the open light of day, where we accept a public responsibility to expose the powers and principalities of night and darkness and unmask the lie that all is peaceful and serene.<sup>3</sup>

As he closes this letter, Paul is instructing the Thessalonians not to worry so much about what they should believe about the future, but about how they should act in the present.

This is an encouragement to stay the course; to keep building up. Of course you will be prepared. Because you’re awake; you live in the light. For you, the day of the Lord has already come, and will continue to come in and through you. There is no need to wait for the coming of Jesus to live lives of faith, hope and love. Lives of mercy, justice, care and peace. That’s how heaven shows up on earth.

Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells the story of visiting a suburban Birmingham church in his charge, and ending up in a conversation at coffee hour with a distinguished trial lawyer he recognized from the newspaper. Willimon introduced himself and the man said he was a life-long member of the church. Willimon said “I can see why; it was a lovely service today.”

To his surprise, the man responded, “I don’t really get THAT much out of the service.” “Really?” Willimon asked. (He is a preacher after all.) “Why are you here?” He said, “I’m engaged here for other reasons.

The man said the center of his faith was a program the church had started many years ago. On Friday nights, a small group from the church drives into inner-city Birmingham. They set up shop on a street corner handing out food, making sure people are cared for, sleeping warm. A nurse in the group does on the spot medical evaluations right there at the street corner.

“When we first started going down there, we would pull over on the side of the street and a crowd of folks would come out of the alleys, off the streets and would gather. We would hand out our stuff, wish them well, and then we would head back home. But as the weeks passed, we began to linger; engage people in conversation. And now, years later, some of them have become friends I see every Friday. More often than most of my friends. We talk about families. We talk about current events. We talk about whatever we feel like talking about together.”

They don’t know that I am a successful attorney; they don’t know I live in a big fancy house and frankly, they don’t care. They just know me as a guy they look forward to having coffee with on a Friday night on the corner. And despite our differences, we recognize we are just all in this together.

“I look upon that gathering down on the sidewalk on Friday night as a kind of preview of the promises of God. It’s like I am standing on the corner of heaven. God says that one day there won’t be any crying, sorrow, or hunger anymore. Someday there won’t be these despicable social, racial and economic divisions. One day we will all be together. Just for a couple of hours on a Friday night it’s like I get a glimpse of the way it’s going to be one day forever. This church started that. That’s why I’m here.”<sup>4</sup>

Pastor and author Rob Bell writes this: The Bible isn’t a book about how to get into heaven. It’s a library of poems and letters and stories about bringing heaven to earth now, about this world becoming more and more the place it should be. There is very, very little in the Bible about what happens when you die. That’s not what the writers were focused on. Their interest, again and again, is on how this world is arranged. Does everyone have enough? Are the power structures tilted in the favor of the vulnerable? Has violence been renounced, or is it being kept in circulation?”<sup>5</sup>

Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “Put on faith, hope and love. Breastplate; helmet. NT professor Beverly Gaventa says the Greek implies we don’t have to put them on; we already have them. Indeed, she says, because they are at the very heart of who we are.

Faith hope and love are not randomly chosen Christian virtues, and still less, mere emotions. They are the gifts God has given us. Faith is **confidence in the Gospel itself**, the confidence that leads these Thessalonians and you and me to serve God. **Love embodies that faith in concrete actions** both within the Christian community and outside of it. And **hope is the firm expectation** of the coming day of the Lord. A day that comes in and through us even now.<sup>6</sup>

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Libby Howe, *Christian Century*, Living the Word, November 4, 2020.
2. Sandy Irby, *Outlook*, Uniform Lesson Study, June 14, 2010
3. Jennifer M. McBride, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, Proper 28.
4. Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, November 13, 2011.
5. Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual: Who We Are and What We’re Doing Here*
6. Beverly Gaventa, *Interpretation Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*.