

Facing the Future

Psalm 73:12–24, 1 Thessalonians 5:1–5

None of us knows the future. This is one of the basic facts of life. We make major decisions in light of imperfect knowledge: we get an education, get married, purchase property, start a family, buy life insurance, make retirement plans—all with imperfect knowledge. We look for trends—and many are worrisome. Society is in decline, but Christians have hope! Our trust is in a loving God who alone knows the future.

During the short time that Paul was in Thessalonica, planting a new church, he had taught his converts about the second coming. The Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who had come to save his people, had clearly stated, “If I go, *I will come again.*” The coming of the Lord will bring comfort to the godly: at Christ’s coming, the godly will be caught up to meet him in the air, never to be separated from their Savior again! Paul had instructed the Thessalonian Christians about the second coming. He also taught them that no one knows when the second coming will take place. I have four points this morning, first:

1. Two classes of men

In order to interpret 1 Thessalonians properly, we have to remember the addressees. Who is being addressed? The church. Notice the contrast between the words “But you, brethren” in verse 4 and the word “they” in the previous verse: “when *they* say, ‘Peace and safety!’” Paul contrasts the saints with unbelievers—men and women who have God’s moral law written in their hearts, who know intuitively that there is a God, that we are duty-bound to obey him, that we fall short of his perfect standard, and that he is coming back to this earth at the end of time to judge the world.

And so it is today. There are two classes of men: those who by the Spirit’s power are born again; and those who are lost and dead in their sins. Those who are born again have spiritual understanding. The unconverted cannot “see” the kingdom of God, let alone believe the gospel, unless God opens their heart.¹ The contrast is between those who are spiritually dead and those who are spiritually alive in Christ.

A lot of people have the mistaken idea that we can persuade lost men and women if we use apologetic techniques and deliver the gospel message forcefully and impressively. What people need is a gifted evangelist who can emotionally manipulate his hearers and convince them to become Christians. He will give an “altar call,” inviting them to come forward and indicate that they have chosen Christ. Many modern evangelists use such techniques, and people are impressed by the results, when they see large numbers of people coming to the front of the

¹ John 3:3

auditorium to dedicate their lives to Christ. But many “converts” fizzle out afterward and do not continue with Christ. The fact is that people are not converted by emotional manipulation. Only the Holy Spirit of God can convert a person. Only the Holy Spirit of God can change a heart. Only the Holy Spirit of God can regenerate a dead, lifeless soul. Only the Holy Spirit of God can make dead people come alive. But that’s the wonder of the gospel! The God who gave us life in the first place has the power to raise spiritually dead men and women and give them the knowledge of Christ. The unconverted are not drowning, floundering in the water, fighting for their life on their way to the bottom. They are already at the bottom! They are dead, lifeless, and without hope.

The reason your lost friend or family member doesn’t understand the gospel and turn to Christ, despite your prayers and pleading and best efforts at trying to explain the way of salvation, is because he or she is spiritually *dead*. This can be very frustrating. Think of our own covenant children. We love them, we dedicate them to God in baptism, we have devotions with them, we endeavor to live the gospel before them, we plead with them, and yet with some there is no apparent response. If a person is born again by the Holy Spirit, he understands the gospel, he knows that he is a sinner on his way to hell, he understands that his only hope is to flee to Christ, repent of his sins, and seek the Lord. The Holy Spirit of God has given life to his dead heart. He willingly becomes Christ’s disciple.

There are two classes of men: those who are saved, and those who are lost. In our passage this morning, those who are born again, who profess their faith, who are added to the church, who are under the oversight of the elders, are called “brethren”—*brothers*. The others are spiritually clueless. They say, “Peace and safety!” They believe that everything will turn out fine all on its own. They do not realize that there is *no* peace, *no* safety in this world apart from Christ. Christ saves his people from their sins by his own precious blood. He tells them, “Peace I leave with you.” He is the one of whom Peter testified, “Neither is their salvation in any other.” Our only hope is Christ! That is the gospel. That is what God’s people need to hear—every Lord’s day. If you are hearing my voice today and have never put your hope and trust in Christ, then what you need to do, more than anything else, is to flee to him for mercy. Christ is a loving, merciful Savior. He will not turn away anyone who comes to him in true faith. You need to confess your faith before the church; you need to be baptized. You need to be received into the communicant membership of Christ’s church. You need to become Christ’s worshiper and confess him with his people every Lord’s day. You need to identify as a Christian. In the end there are only two classes of people: those who are *in Christ*, and confess Christ with his church, and those who are *outside*. There are the insiders and the outsiders. There are the *brethren* and the *heathen*. There is no middle ground. There are two classes of men. Secondly, there are

2. Two attitudes

Paul observes, “For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.” This is a somber warning, but the worldling will disregard it. The second coming of Christ will mean “sudden destruction” for the wicked, and there will be no escape.

Notice the phrase “Peace and safety!” Sadly, “peace” here does not mean an acceptance of the gift promised by Christ when he said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.”² This is *not* the “peace that passes understanding,” the fruit of God’s blessed Holy Spirit who enables his obedient children to continue to trust him, even in the midst of incredible suffering. The “peace” in the unbelievers’ cry, “Peace and safety!” refers rather to the absence of trouble. Here is man, smug and satisfied, having made a good life for himself, rejecting God’s claim upon him. “Safety” implies security from enemies and dangers.³ Think of the well-off, living in their high-rise apartments and gated communities. But those of lesser means likewise can live smugly, feeling that we have taken all reasonable steps to protect ourselves, and that nothing can break through the cocoon we have built for ourselves; nothing can harm us.

“Peace and safety!” indicates an attitude of careless indifference. Here are people who are totally clueless regarding spiritual realities. The Bible warns, “Flee from the wrath to come.” God’s wrath is real! Sudden destruction is going to happen. We do not know exactly when, but it *will* happen.

The words “Flee from the wrath to come” conjure up images of a crazed, bearded man walking around in a disheveled robe, carrying a walking stick and wearing sandals—very earnest, but not in possession of his full mental capacities. He doesn’t seem to understand that modern man does not live in the Dark Ages anymore. He is making an unstoppable advance on the road to progress. The golden age is upon us. We do not need religion anymore! We do not need a God above us. The human race is constantly improving. We don’t need silly, old-fashioned notions of God and religion.

But who was it who said, “Flee from the wrath to come”?⁴ It was not some poor benighted simpleton. It was Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, the wisest, most insightful, inspired teacher that has ever lived—the one who came not for his own personal advancement, but out of love for a hopeless, broken world.

What is your attitude toward the warnings of God’s word? “What? Me worry?” or “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth”? The wise person will listen and flee to Christ for mercy.

² John 14:27

³ Strong, ἀσφάλεια (Logos Bible Software)

⁴ Matt. 3:7, Luke 3:7

There are two classes of men: the righteous and the wicked; two attitudes: careless indifference or scrupulous obedience; third, consider

3. Two outcomes

There are two outcomes in our text today: “sudden destruction” and “escape.” First, “destruction.” The lexicon defines it as *destruction, ruin, death*.⁵ Think of the bombing of a building in war. There’s not much left to repair. The whole building needs to be torn down, the rubble cleared away and new construction built from the ground up. It is insightful to consider the two uses of this word in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. There’s the use in our text this morning: “sudden” destruction—unexpected, sudden, unforeseen. Then there is the terrifying warning in 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9, “. . . in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with *everlasting destruction* from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” The word for “everlasting” is the same as in the phrase “everlasting life” in John 3:16: “. . . that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have *everlasting* life.” If you have not committed your life to Jesus Christ, then consider this: the everlasting destruction that awaits you is equivalent to the everlasting life promised to all who put their trust in Christ. Everlasting life is the greatest blessing one could ever receive. Everlasting destruction is the greatest curse one could ever endure. Here, then, are two contrasting outcomes. Which one do you want?

The day of the Lord is coming. It will be a day of judgment. It is coming! There is no stopping it. It will come suddenly, unexpectedly, like a robber who breaks into a vacant home in the middle of the night. And if you reject Christ, there is no escaping it. “For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them.” The word “say” is in the present tense, implying that the speakers “will still be saying these words at the very moment when the ‘sudden destruction’ comes.”⁶ There will be no warning other than this one. There will be no air-raid siren, no civil-defense alert, no public-service announcement interrupting regular programming. Sudden destruction will come seemingly out of nowhere. This is why it is so important to heed the warnings of the Bible. God has given man fair warning. He has spoken, and there is no need for him to repeat himself. God cannot lie; his word is truth, and he expects us to receive it. God is not a doting parent. He doesn’t say, “You better listen this time. I’m going to count to three. I’m telling you, come here right now!” God is a wise parent. He speaks in measured tones, and he expects us to obey. A wise parent will follow God’s example. The best discipline is consistency and follow-through—no empty threats!

⁵ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, ὄλεθρος (Logos Bible Software)

⁶ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 153

Lately there have been reports of thieves targeting high-end homes, looking specifically for jewelry, cash, artwork, expensive items. They are breaking in when no one is home.

The day of the Lord comes “as a thief in the night.” Thieves do not publish a schedule or warn people when they are going to commit their crimes.

When Christ returns in glory, there are going to be two very different outcomes. The wicked will be taken by surprise, but those who love the Lord will welcome their Savior. We will be caught up into the personal presence of the Lord of glory as he sits to judge the nations. We will reign with him.

There are two classes of men, two attitudes, and two very different outcomes, but there is

4. One Savior

Who is it who is coming back to this earth? It is the Lord! (v. 2). This is the Lord of glory, the Lord of all, the eternal Son who came to earth to save us.

Remember when, after the resurrection, the disciples were fishing on the sea of Galilee? Peter, who had operated a thriving fishing business before Christ called him, said, “I am going fishing.” Six of his fellow-disciples got into the boat with him. Scripture reports that they fished all night and caught nothing. At daybreak, Jesus stood on the shore. He called out, “Children, do you have any fish?” The word that Jesus used means *a very young child*—even *an infant*. That word might have caught the disciples by surprise. When the question came, “Do you have any fish?” the disciples answered, “No.” So Jesus told them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” The Bible says they cast the net, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the great quantity of fish. It was truly a miracle. So the disciple whom Jesus loved—apparently John—called out, “It is the Lord!” No one else beside Jesus—who was *not* a professional fisherman—could have given such surprising advice with such amazing results.

Who stood on the shore and said, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat”? “It is the Lord!” Who returns at the Second Coming? “It is the Lord!” The word “Lord” means *master* or *boss*—the one to be obeyed. Who is the Christian’s Lord and master? It is Jesus of Nazareth, the Savior. Why is he called Savior? The answer was given by the angel to the virgin Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, before her divine Son was born: “Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus means *Jehovah is Savior*. The baby would be called “Jehovah is Savior” because he would be the Savior of the world—the Savior of all who put their trust in him. As we have seen, there are two classes of men, two attitudes, two outcomes, but only one Savior, the one who saves his people from their sins.

How does Jesus save his people? By dying in our place. We, like all sons and daughters of Adam, are sinners. We have missed the mark. We have fallen short of

God's standard of absolute perfection. We were like sheep going astray, failing to follow the Shepherd. We had gone our own way—the way that seems right to men, but that leads to eternal ruin. There is no way we could save ourselves, for all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in the sight of a holy God. “The wages of sin is death”—the just penalty for disobeying him who gave us life, and health, and opportunity, and all things. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” We who sinned were spiritually dead, oblivious to our mortal danger. But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ did what no other person could ever do. He, the sinless one, became sin for us. He who had no sin of his own, went to the cross and suffered death in the sinner's place. He who alone measures up to God's standard of absolute perfection gives us his perfect righteousness, even as Abraham, who “believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”⁷ And the good news of the gospel is that the person who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. He (or she) will receive eternal life as a free gift. Born again by the Holy Spirit, the one who formerly hated God will become a lover of Christ, a worshipper, delighting to sing the songs of Zion with the saints.

There are two classes of men, two attitudes, and two very different outcomes, but there is *one* Savior, Jesus Christ.

There are a lot of uncertainties in this present life. As we see our culture moving further and further away from a Christian worldview and seeking to overthrow biblical morality, it concerns us. People worry about what may happen if the grid goes down, or if the supply chain fails. How will we eat, how will we survive? Education will not save us. Technology will not save us. Government will not save us. Military might will not save us. Religion will not save us. The only thing that will save us is the Lord Jesus, the Lord of glory.

None of us knows the future. Yet we know one thing for certain: Jesus Christ is coming back! The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. It will happen, even as labor pains come upon a woman with child. Some will be ready, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we shall always be with the Lord. This truth is a comfort to the godly, but it will be a terror to the wicked, who will go to everlasting punishment with the devil and his demons.

Yet the Christian knows that God is on the throne, and that he loves us and has given us many precious promises. There is a lot in this world that we cannot change, but we who trust in Christ worship the unchanging God who has perfect

⁷ Gen. 15:6

knowledge of every event, past, present and future. We don't know the future—but we know the Savior! The Christian can say with the hymnwriter, “Be still, my soul: your God will undertake to guide the future as he has the past. Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last.”⁸ Yes, all that is mysterious now will one day make perfect sense in the light of heaven. The Christian can face the future with confidence that God is on the throne, and that he does all things well.

We who trust in Christ are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Our trust is in him who is the light of the world, our glorious Savior. Amen.

⁸ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, hymn 532, “Be Still, My Soul”