

June 7, 2020

Don't live for the end, but live with the end in mind

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Troy Taylor

I opened my news app on my phone this weekend, and the lead stories were finally NOT about COVID-19. Yay! Maybe this means that we are finally done with the pandemic running our lives!

But then reality begins to sink in. It isn't that the pandemic is somehow, magically over. It is that other, more desperate news has taken priority. So now, on top of hundreds of thousands of people dying from pandemic, and the economy imploding due to necessary distancing and restrictions, now cities all over the US are exploding as people either respond to injustice and systemic racism, or use the national grief and anger as a cover to loot and destroy.

It didn't get better. Somehow, it managed to get worse.

Sometimes we just want the end. Things to be done. Jesus to return. To escape this world. This is a common desire and wish.

We start to grasp at straws. We read in Jeremiah about how Israel, during exile, had prophets saying that it would be a short endurance until the revenge of YHWH and the victorious armies of Israel would again arise ascendant. So just keep your head down, and mutter under your breath at the dirty pagans. God will get us out of here and exact revenge on the pagans for us.

Sounds like us today.

Always a short cut to end discomfort or danger. A magic pill or potion, donate money to receive a wish, a returning Jesus to save us from a corrupt and evil world.

But this isn't what God has in mind for Israel then, or us now! Jeremiah 29 told Israel to thrive during exile. Build a meaningful life in the harshest of circumstances! For us, do it in the middle of pandemic! As my friend puts it, do not waste a good pandemic. We merely survive the present rather than thrive in it.

Often, when we come to passages like 1 Thessalonians 4, we want to read about the great escape. We long for paradise, getting out of the hurt and evil of our existence, and we want Jesus get us out of here. I think, though, that this is not what Paul had in mind as he wrote this letter. I think that rather than writing about the end of all things, Paul was writing a pastoral encouragement to his people.

Did you know that the reach of our church is actually amazing? God is moving! People are able to participate meaningfully that haven't been able to for years! New people are tuning in. God is at work! In exile, we are becoming the outward looking priestly people that God wants us to

be. Pandemic over? Please, Lord, only once we have completed the changes you want us to make!

The key to this passage is not found in rapture. It is found in the phrase, "Encourage one another with these words." I am sure that there are some who would attempt to say that escape from the evil of this world prior to the great tribulation is comfort! After all, who wants to suffer! However, tell me, how is this good news to my uncle, a biker and ex-con, trying to find his way? How is this good news to my friend who as of right now cannot find their way to belief? How can I be encouraged by the idea that in their moment of deepest need, God takes away anyone with the truth and hope to find repentance? That my friends, loved ones, and billions like them, would be abandoned by God in their hour of suffering? This, friends, is not only empty, hollow encouragement. It ignores that Jesus experienced the forsaking of God on the cross so that we would not have to.

J Richard Morrison, a seminary professor, says that the key to understanding this encouragement is to understand what is meant by the term, caught up, and , meet with. He says that the scripture that this has most to do with is not some futuristic reading of Daniel in the Old Testament, but rather the triumphal entry. The point that Paul is making is not to be taken away, but to accompany back!

A couple of weeks ago, Alex went out for his first parent-free bike ride with a buddy. Out on the trails of west Lethbridge, they hit a patch of gravel, and Alex's friend biffed it. Hard. Put a hole in his knee. Now, what should Alex do? He had a few options.

He could stay with his friend, offering his comfort, but not being able to help with the wound. He could be glad that it didn't happen to him, and slowly back away, before finally turning and riding back home
Or, he could go find help.

Alex went to a nearby house, found an adult, and brought her back to clean and bandage his friend's knee. They were then able to make it back home together.

This, friends, is a picture of what is happening in Thessalonians 4.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, people rushed out to meet him on the road to honor him, and to walk back into the city with him. Jesus, the only one who can rescue us from our sin and injuries, and the only one who can heal our disease, is on the way. And he brings with him all those who eagerly await his power and help.

For the believers in the Thessalonian church, they were concerned that those who had already died before the return of Jesus would be missing. They had not yet understood the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, and therefore misunderstood death — believing that those who died before Jesus returned were stuck in death, and would miss out on the triumphal return of the

king, and his kingdom. They did not understand the hope of the resurrection! For them, they were still caught in the pagan belief that death is the end.

Paul says that they have no need to worry, because when Jesus comes back to his creation, his way will be lined first with those who have died, rushing out to meet their lord on his triumphal entry to the fullness of his kingdom. Then those who are still living will also go out to meet their king, and proceed in triumph back to their homes, bringing with them the glory of Jesus, spurned and crucified by humanity, now vindicated, victorious, and surrounded by those who need him, going back to a creation that cannot heal itself, save itself, or escape the slavery of sin and death. They do not escape at the moment of tribulation. Rather they find the power they need to be ultimately victorious over evil and death. This, friends, is encouragement!

In the day where it looks like evil is winning, the end of the book is written. We will be vindicated with the powerful creator messiah whom we worship. We will be reunited with loved ones and fellow family members — read believers.

Paul's words for the Thessalonian church do not end here. They continue into chapter 5. He begins with a warning about distractions and escapist dreams. Just like now, the church of Thessalonica was surrounded by conspiracy theories. Look here, the end is near! Yes! And it has been since Jesus warned his disciples! He warns us, friends, not to pay any heed to hucksters and Uncle Joe's website about the end times predicting the hour of Jesus return. Such pages are false prophecy and distract us from Paul's actual message. The details of end times are never given as a secret code for us to follow, a trail of crumbs to determine information that God does not intend to give us. Details like wars and rumours of wars, who the antichrist is, and natural disasters, are only mentioned in scripture as indications that we still struggle against evil until Jesus returns. They are proof that we, the church, still have work to do. In fact, any time scripture speaks about the end, this is the message:

Be ready.

Stories like the wise servant, the investment of talents, and the ten virgins speak of readiness in the gospels. Isaiah continually speaks of readiness and sounding the call from the watchmen on the walls, and the Old testament is full of waiting for the coming Messiah. Revelation tells the churches that they need to be awake and about the work of God.

Be ready. But what does that mean?

Be found doing what you are supposed to be doing. Not hoarding canned goods and toilet paper. Not piling up wealth. Not exploiting creation for cheap gain.

Be found loving your neighbor. Serving the oppressed and vulnerable.

One of the best ways to understand this is through Jeremiah. Dealing with the crisis of exile, and with people who just wanted to get out of Babylon and return to their comfortable,

previous lives, Jeremiah wrote: This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

In other words, your previous life no longer exists. And we miss it. But to get stuck longing for something else is to miss the gift of the present.

So, now we have two ways of encouraging each other. First, we know that death is not the end, nor will those who die miss out on the Kingdom of God. The resurrection from the dead is a real future, as is the literal, physical return of Jesus to his creation. We look forward to accompanying him on his triumphal entry into creation.

Second is to encourage each other with actions and works worthy of God's church. For as long as we see sickness and death, corruption and untruth, exploitation and worship of wealth, we are reminded that we, the church, have work to be about, bringing life and healing through the name of Jesus, in anticipation of being found doing our master's work until he comes back.

Friends, encourage each other, until Jesus returns.

Here is a bonus for those of you reading this. I ran out of time to include it online. This is a paraphrase of Isaiah 43 written as a prayer for us as a closing blessing.

But now, this is what the Lord says—

Your creator
the keeper of promises

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

2

When chaos and the unknown overtake you,

I will be with you;

when events overrun you

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

8

Lead out those who have eyes but are blind,
who have ears but are deaf.

9

Many people will claim understanding
they yell and write blogs without wisdom.
Let them show their proof, if they have any.
Let them produce witnesses, results.

10

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord,
And my proof.
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.

11

I, even I, am the Lord,
and apart from me there is no savior.

12

I called it — before this even happened,
I put you, my church, here to serve through this.
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God.

13

Yes, and from ancient days I am he.
No one can deliver out of my hand.
When I act, who can reverse it?”
See the new opportunities I give you?
Live fully, even now,
As my proof to the world that I love, and act.
Through you, my people.