

TUTORIAL
3.23

Living in Light of our Hope

In this tutorial, Bible presenter Scot Keen discusses 1 Thessalonians chapter four. In it Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers to persevere in their walk with God. He tells them to do so by avoiding sin and by anticipating Christ's return.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we will cover several important topics. One is the threat that the believers faced in their walk with God, in that some of them were involved in sexual immorality. The other is confusion about what happens to believers when they die. We begin, first of all, with Paul's encouragement to walk in a way that pleases God.

Don't get tangled in sin

Paul begins chapter four of 1 Thessalonians with an exhortation, "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more." Notice that when Paul says, "We exhort you in the Lord Jesus," he is bringing to their attention that this is not just his opinion, it comes with the authority of Christ. He is an apostle and so he comes with apostolic authority. His challenge here is for them to excel in what they were taught. Paul recognises that they actually do walk with God, but he does not want them to become complacent. He wants them to excel in it.

Even in just the little that we have covered so far in this chapter, there is a challenge and a lesson for us. God does not want us to become stagnant or complacent in our walk with Him. If we become stagnant or complacent, we are one step closer to losing ground. We are not going anywhere. Paul wants the trajectory of a believer to be that of moving forward, excelling, abounding and advancing in the walk with God. If we are always advancing, then our trajectory is headed in the right direction. The Thessalonian believers were, for the most part, walking with God, but Paul wants them to keep excelling in it.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:2, “You know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus,” so Paul, once again, talks about his apostolic authority. Then he gives us an example in verse three. He says, “This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Paul speaks about a problem that was very common in the first century world, and that is sexual immorality. This is something that took place not only in their everyday culture but also in their pagan worship. There were temple prostitutes and also pagan worship rights that involved sexual immorality.

I'll give you some examples of this. There were 3,000 temple harlots in Corinth, and often there were also priestesses in the temple for the sexual service of the men who came. F.F. Bruce said that in Thessalonica, sexual immorality was sanctioned by the cult of Cabiri. The reason I think this is relevant is that some of the believers in Thessalonica had turned to God from idols. They had come out of these pagan backgrounds, and Paul is evidently aware of a problem with sexual immorality among the believers there. Paul says, “They need to know that as God's will, their sanctification (being set apart for God), that they would abstain from sexual immorality.” Paul is turning them away from this problem.

Paul then tells the believers to possess their own vessels in sanctification and honor. He is telling them to treat their bodies as set apart for God. We know from Scripture God's design for sex is for it to be between a husband and wife. We read in Hebrews chapter thirteen that, “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed is undefiled.” That confines sex to marriage and any sex outside of would be considered immorality and would be met with the disapproval of God.

Then Paul gives a contrast, “Not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” It seems that Paul is referring to the background of some of these believers, for example to the background of those who came out of the cult of Cabiri, as F.F. Bruce mentioned. This would deal with these temple prostitutes that were in Corinth, and most likely in Thessalonica as well. Paul is saying, “Don't act like the Gentiles. You're different.” God has made these believers new in Christ and so they should now live differently.

Paul goes on to say, “No man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.” When Paul says not to defraud a brother, he is probably talking about believers who were having sex outside of marriage, and in doing so, were robbing from what God intended for that person and their spouse when they do get married. Paul is warning against this, and in fact, he says that the Lord is the avenger in all these things. This adds a note of sobriety. God will respond to the believer's sin of sexual immorality because it is a real issue. We do not get the definition of what it means that God is an

Avenger, but we do feel the note of seriousness and sobriety, and so should be turned away from this sin.

God has not called us for impurity but for sanctification. Paul says in verse eight, “He who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” Think about this; whatever the sexual sin might be, whether it is pornography and the sins of the mind, or adultery, or any sort of immorality, Paul says that it is a serious thing. He says that God is the Avenger of these things, and that if we reject this, we are ultimately rejecting God.

I love Paul’s statement at the end of this verse, “God who gives his holy spirit to you.” Why do you think Paul throws that in at the end of this section? I think the reason is because believers are indwelt by the Spirit of God, and believers who are struggling with a sexual sin need to know, first of all, that God wants them to live in purity. They need to know, secondly, that God the Spirit lives in them, and by means of the indwelling Spirit they can live a new life. This is God's provision to walk in purity.

Now, in verse nine, Paul goes on to call believers to walk in love. He says, “As to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.” Obviously, Paul does not mean what he says in a literal sense, because after all he is writing to them and telling them to love each other. I think he is simply saying that love comes naturally for those who are new creatures in Christ and are indwelt by the Spirit. However, Paul adds in verse ten, “You ... practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.” Although love is natural and it is happening here, they are told to keep going, to advance, to excel and to abound in love.

I believe we get hints here of a problem that took place in Thessalonica. Paul says, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.” Evidently there were believers in Thessalonica who were not working, and they were actually becoming a nuisance to other people, probably because they were trying to borrow from them, or to take from them. Paul says, “Walk in love, to lead a quiet life, to work with your own hands.” It's a Biblical thing to work and earn your bread by your own hands. Not only that, but Paul also says that in doing so, they will behave properly towards outsiders and not be in any need.

To give you an example from the little community where I grew up, there was a store owner who would let people come in and take groceries, and if they did not have the money to pay, he would write it down on a notepad, and at the beginning of every month the customers would pay him back. One time when the store owner was invited to come to church, he said, “Why would I want to come to your church? Half of the people in your church owe me money and

they won't come back to my store because they're too embarrassed to be around me.” That is an example of behaving improperly towards outsiders. Paul says to, “Work with your hands,” and I think we could say, to live in such a way that we are a good testimony in front of unbelievers. That is Paul's challenge to these believers.

Don't lose sight of hope

Now Paul moves discusses another aspect of perseverance. He challenges the believers to keep going by saying, “Don't lose sight of your hope.” We saw back in chapter one that perseverance is born out of hope. There needs to be this blessed hope, this eschatology, that encourages us to keep walking with God. We see this in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Some people refer to this passage as the rapture passage, and others will say that there is no such thing as a rapture in the Bible, and they would contend, for good reason, that the world rapture does not appear in Scripture. By way of introduction, I'll make a few comments about this. When Paul talks about being caught up to meet the Lord in the air, the word he used in Greek is *harpadzo*, which was translated as *rapturo* in Latin. That is where we get the word rapture.

Paul never offers us a term to refer to the rapture, and I don't believe that the New Testament as a whole uses a single term to refer to this event. Now, I will present an argument to show that this event is different to the second advent. But you will have to come to your own conclusions on this. To begin with, Jesus said, “I will receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Paul says we will be caught up. In first Corinthians chapter fifteen, Paul says we will be changed, so there are different phrases and words that refer to some event, that some take to be the rapture. As I said, you will have to make your own conclusion about that, but Paul is talking here specifically to people who are sorrowing over loved ones who have died before Jesus comes back.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep (this is a euphemism for death), so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.” There are those who grieve without hope. Paul says we are not those people. It is okay for us to be sorrowful when we lose a loved one, but we are not to grieve as if we have no hope. Here is the reason we have hope, “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14). This concept of falling asleep in Jesus is another way of speaking about those who have died in Christ.

Paul says, “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” Now, he lets us know that this is apostolic authority and so is God's word. He says, “This we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.” They were concerned about those who die before Jesus comes back.

Paul says, actually, those are the ones who get to go first; “We who are alive and remain will not precede those who have fallen asleep.”

He adds in verse sixteen, “The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God.” What we have are three descriptions about this attention-getting event: a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God, and it will be so arresting that the dead in Christ will rise first. It will not be something that anyone will miss. It will be the unmistakable call of God, and he says, “Then we who are alive and remain 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

The rapture and second advent

Notice in verse fourteen, “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus,” and then in verse sixteen, “The dead in Christ will rise first.” So what will happen first; will they rise, or will they come with Jesus? The way most theologians reconcile this is to say that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. When believers die, they go to be with the Lord and they come back with him, but their bodies are in the grave. Evidently, at this event that I am calling the rapture, the dead in Christ will rise first and their bodies will be glorified, which means that they will be reunited with their original bodies, and now have a glorified body.

This is a lot to think through, so feel free to continue pondering this at leisure, but for now we have one way of reconciling that apparent contradiction. Paul says again, “We who are alive and remain will be caught up together with him in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Some people hear this and say, “Man, I hope that I’m alive when this happens. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to experience this?” Please understand that this event is not just for believers who are alive when it happens, it is for every believer as this is when every Christian will receive a glorified body. This is for every believer in the church age; our glorification is connected to this event. In Philippians chapter three, for example, we discover that we are waiting for our Savior, the One who is going to change our bodies. In 1 John chapter three we learn that when we see Him, we will be like Him, so our glorification is connected to this event. So this event is for every believer in this age.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:18, “Therefore, comfort one another with these words.” Paul is assuring the Thessalonians that they do not have to worry about those who have died before Christ returns. They will not miss out. They are, in fact, going to be the first ones to go. Let me just bring a few contrasts here to talk about this event. Granted, this is an event that is very debatable among theologians, and I do not want you to come to a premature conclusion. I believe that the Bible teaches a pre-tribulational rapture, but I do not think you can conclude that from this passage. I think we will have to go further in

the text to find this mentioned. For now, let me show you a few contrasts between this event and the second advent.

There is no reason why the rapture could not happen at any time. In other words, we believe that the rapture is imminent, and we gather that, among other reasons, because Paul says, “We who are alive and remain.” It is not that Paul was wrong about this, it just means that he saw the rapture as a possibility that could happen in his lifetime. It is something that could happen at any time; it is imminent. The second advent, on the other hand, cannot happen unless it is first preceded by certain signs. Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, men fainting from fear and expectation of the things that will come. Then they will see the son of man coming in a cloud.” There have to be specific signs that precede the second advent, which seems to be different than this other event that we are calling the rapture.

I believe that the rapture will take place before the tribulation, which I will explain in more detail in our next tutorial. For now, let me say that based on 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the Thessalonians were waiting for God's Son to deliver them from the coming wrath. If the coming wrath is the tribulation, then this verse would argue for a pre-tribulation rapture. The second advent is after the tribulation. Immediately after the tribulation of those days, then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. With this rapture event, believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, whereas at the second advent, Jesus will come to the Mount of Olives.

For the rapture, the Lord Himself comes for the Church. He will descend from heaven; whereas with the second advent, He will send His angels to gather together His elect. With the rapture, there is a resurrection of the dead in Christ, those fallen asleep in Jesus; whereas with the second advent, believing Israelites would be rescued. With the rapture, we find that wickedness increases; whereas when the second advent takes place, it brings an end to wickedness on the earth as God destroys the wicked.

Paul calls the rapture a mystery. It is something that is not revealed in the Old Testament, whereas the second advent and the day of the Lord are talked about in the Old Testament. These are just a few examples of arguments that are typically given to indicate that these two events are different. Paul speaks about the rapture with joyful anticipation. We will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, so we are to comfort one another with these words of blessed hope; whereas the second advent is great and terrible, and not something to be looked forward to because of the judgement that it will bring.





DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. In 1st Thessalonians 4, Paul deals with issues that could impact the believer's walk with God. What were they? Are these things a threat to your walk and ministry?