

practical applications are worthy of consideration. In the first place, believers should imitate Paul's example of thanksgiving to God for the work of faith, the labour of love, and the patience of hope that characterize fellow Christians. We need little encouragement to thank God for the grace that He lavishes upon us, but Christian thankfulness does not terminate on what God has done for us. It includes what God has done for other Christians. This fact is not always appreciated, for we seem more disposed to complain about the less-pleasing traits of believers than to praise God for His development of Christlikeness in them. This is not to imply that we should ignore the signs of immaturity in fellow Christians or view blatant waywardness as of no consequence. Paul did not downplay the seriousness of the Thessalonians' moral lapses or their display of ignorance, for he addresses these at some length in the epistle. However, he will not permit these weaknesses to overshadow the tremendous grace of God, evidenced by the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope. Similarly, where we observe Christians producing good works inspired by faith, labouring in love, and waiting with eager expectation for the consummation, we ought to declare

with enthusiasm and joy, "to God be the glory; great things He has done!"

Finally, we should never rest content with uttering words of gratitude to God for the virtues of faith, love, and hope that He produces in other Christians. Paul did more. He prayed that the Thessalonians would superabound in love: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you" (1 Thess. 3:12). By the time he addresses his second epistle to this congregation, a delightful nuance distinguishes his thanksgiving for them. He gives thanks on that occasion because what he has entreated God to do has indeed occurred: "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other" (2 Thess. 1:3). Let us pray assiduously and strive earnestly not only that these qualities should superabound and overflow in us, but also in the lives of all God's people. **GW**

Dr. Glendon Thompson is pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist Church and President of Toronto Baptist Seminary.

"Since We Belong To the Day"

Death, Parousia and the Christian Life

Ian Hugh Clary

In the prologue, "with premonitions," to *Hitch-22: A Memoir*, author Christopher Hitchens conducts a thought experiment of envisaging his own death, an exercise eerily instigated by the publication of some event literature that mispronounced him as "the late Christopher Hitchens."¹ Fixations on his mistaken demise led Hitchens to conclude: "The fact is that all attempts to imagine one's own extinction are futile by definition."² Hitchens is the world-famous intellectual and atheist who, in June 2010, was sadly diagnosed with terminal stage four esophageal cancer while on a book tour for his memoir.³ In March

2011, in response to a question about planning for his future asked by Steve Kroft of "60 Minutes," Hitchens offers a slightly nuanced, but similar, perspective: "I hate it when people ask me what the expiry date on my credit card is."⁴ While his response appears trite, Hitchens has been unusually candid and circumspect about the possibility of his imminent ending.⁵ However, at bottom, he maintains no belief in an afterlife. While Hitchens' reflections on death carry a certain melancholic nobility, no real lesson of hope accompanies what are otherwise beautiful words. How different this is from the perspective of the biblical writers.

The experience of Christopher Hitchens is a plain reminder to many that death is a persistent inevitability. As Christians think biblically about death, we are happily reminded that it is not the end as Hitchens would have it. Rather, it is a transition from one form of bodily existence to another. For the one who has put saving faith in Christ, there is the blessed hope of resurrection and eternal life. Our eternity will be spent in unspeakable joy with our Saviour exploring with Him the wonders of a reconstituted and sin-free earth. For the non-Christian, not so happily, endless punishment in hell will be the final reality.

While it is the case that most Christians today have some picture of what the Creed means when it says, “I believe in the life everlasting,” it has not always been so. In Paul’s day, it appears that some were “ignorant” of what would happen to those who were “asleep,” and so he wrote to encourage them that hope

room while mourners drink liberally until the dawn. I once attended the funeral of a Freemason where part of the service involved members of his lodge, adorned in vests with bells, laying pine boughs on his casket in some cryptic rite. Christians can be misguided in their expressions of mourning as well. Although grief is understandable, Christians can sometimes become so distraught at the funeral of a believer that it would appear to a watching world that all hope is lost. Such is not the case, which is why Paul writes as he does at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4. In the course of mourning, Paul’s great concern in vv. 13–18 is that Christians do not lose sight of the hope that all Christians share in the resurrection.

This is likely what happened in Thessalonica. Our text indicates that some believed that there was no hope of seeing a Christian who has gone to be with the Lord. Whether this was part of a larger denial

“I believe in the life everlasting.”

is not lost with the passing of a believing loved one.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 is a resplendent text about the return of Jesus that has unfortunately been cause for unseemly debate amongst Christians of differing eschatological opinions. What is often missed in the debate over whether or not Jesus will secretly rapture His church is the apostle’s intent to encourage Christians struggling with serious questions about death. Like the book of Revelation, this pericope is written to bring consolation to its readers:⁶ it is an encouragement to live out the faith in the hope of Jesus’ second coming. This text can be taken in two parts. First, vv 13–18 of the fourth chapter are an encouragement to Christians in the face of death; Paul reminds them that the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of their resurrection. Second, vv 1–11 of chapter five, are the admonition to a faithful life grounded in this guarantee.⁷

Hopeful Faith (4:13-18)

Different cultures express grief in different ways. The Irish are notorious for their wakes, where the casket of the dearly departed remains open in the living

of the resurrection or a faulty understanding of it, commentators are not sure. What is clear is that the Thessalonians needed teaching on this matter. Paul expressly tells them: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (14). This truth can be easily lost sight of at a funeral. As we peer into an open casket, we may be tempted to believe that we will never see that Christian again, which can be cause for despair. Even when we tell ourselves that we will “see them in heaven,” we really are not consoled by what can become a mere platitude in our thinking. However, according to Paul, “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep” (15). Thus, the living and the dead will together witness the return of the King.

In order to clear up any misunderstanding, Paul provides some detail about what will happen on the day when Jesus returns.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead

in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall 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 (16-17).

The language that Paul uses here is striking, for it depicts the glorious descent of Jesus, the One who ascended to rule at the right hand of His Father (Acts 1:9; cf. Daniel 7:9-14). Paul tells us that Jesus will return as the triumphant King to establish His consummated kingdom. As King, Jesus will have a triumphal procession such as the world has never seen and of which Christians get to be a part! Paul tells

to be like those faithful servants who do not know when their Master will return. Later, He says that He will be like the thief who will come to the house of the unsuspecting homeowner. Paul's words follow on such admonitions by telling us that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (2). Due to this fact we are to "be sober," and "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (8). As in the first section, so too here, Paul concludes with a call to encourage one another with these words, and here he further adds that we are to "build one another up, just as you are doing" (11).

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us that in the resurrection we will follow in Christ's procession as He sets Himself up as the rightful King over the nations.

Those who have questions about their loved ones who have passed on can find tremendous comfort in the assurance that the dead in Christ will rise first to meet Jesus in the air (16b). As if those words did not bear enough comfort, Paul further tells us, "so we shall always be with the Lord" (17b). The word "we" is key in this verse, as it drives home the truth that all of God's people, the living and the dead taken from the whole history of creation, will altogether be with the Lord forever (cf. Matthew 28:20). What can be of greater comfort than this promise? It is the covenant fulfillment of the promises given so long ago in the prophets—Yahweh would be our God and we would be His people (cf. Ezekiel 26:28; Jeremiah 30:22). It is no wonder that Paul concludes this section in v. 18 saying, "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

Hopeful Readiness (5:1-11)

There can be no greater motivation to holy living than the fact that Jesus will return to usher in the eschaton. The New Testament writers were aware of this, as their writings are replete with calls to obedience based on the immanence of Christ's parousia. Think, for instance, of the parable of the watchful servants in Luke 12:35ff where Jesus encourages His hearers

In the midst of his encouragement to hope-based holy readiness, Paul gives us further details about the nature of the Lord's return. As we have noted, it will come quickly and unexpectedly. G. K. Beale rightly observes that the suddenness of Christ's second coming has immediate implications for unbelievers in this text.⁸ It will be accompanied by judgement where "sudden destruction will come quickly and sharply as the pangs of birth seize a woman in labour" (3). However, for Christians, the coming of Christ should not take us by surprise: Paul tells us that we "are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief" (4). Although we may not know the day or the hour, we have been given the necessary tools so that we can be prepared if He does come in our lifetime. We are called to be mentally alert and self-controlled, hence the references to darkness and drunkenness are set as a contrast. Paul calls us "sons of light and sons of the day" in distinction from those who are of the dark and thus not ready (5). It is because we "belong to the day" (8) that we can indeed be prepared for Jesus' return.

Gene Green summarizes this section by telling us that "The purpose of eschatological teaching is not to fuel speculation about dates and times of the final consummation." Rather, "The Christian focus is always on readiness, but a readiness...[based] on living in faith, hope and love."⁹ What does this readiness look like?

Hopeful Action

When we look at other passages in the New Testament that deal with the need for readiness, we can glean a number of ways that Christians can be active in hope. One such text, 1 Pet. 1:13, shares certain characteristics with our 1 Thessalonians passage: “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The image Peter uses here is taken from his Graeco-Roman culture where men wore long robes that would be tied (“girded”) around their belts if they needed to take immediate action. By girding the loins of our minds, we prepare ourselves for any intellectual challenges that come our way. The primary means by which Christians can be ready with their minds is through the preaching and reading of the Word of God. Thus both corporate worship and personal devotions are integral to the life of hope.

God, confessing our sins regularly and striving to live an obedient life. 1 John 1:9 highlights this two-fold pattern of confession and righteousness well: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Conclusion

While eschatological differences are important—a point that should not be downplayed—we must not lose sight of the imperatives of a text like this due to pedantic debate. Christians have every reason to hope, even in the face of the most heinous death as the first Christians experienced at the hands of a hostile state. While atheists like Christopher Hitchens speak of facing death with dignity, there can ultimately be no hope in a materialist worldview that sees the grave merely as a place where the body rots. One

Christians have every reason to hope, even in the face of the most heinous death that the first Christians experienced at the hands of a hostile state.

This image of girding also harkens back to the Old Testament and the Passover narrative in Exodus 12. Here the Israelites were called to be ready to flee Egypt as the Angel of Death took the firstborn of any who had not made preparations by putting blood on their doorposts and windowpanes. The attire of the Israelites was that of girded loins, this time so that their whole person would be ready for flight. Not only the mind, but the entirety of the Christian’s person is to be ready. In this sense, Paul’s words in Romans 12:1–2 are helpful as he links the mind to the whole person and calls it worship:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This full-orbed sense of readiness points to its moral nature, leading us to consider the dire need to mortify the sins in our flesh. We can thus be ready for the return of Christ by keeping short accounts with

day all graves will open, and there will be a resurrection and a judgement. All of the noblesse of atheist punditry cannot change this truth. Anne Steele, the eighteenth-century Baptist poetess captured well the sentiment that every Christian should share when facing death:

Thus heav’nly joys attract my eyes,
My heart the luster warms;
But could I reach those upper skies,
How infinite their charms!
Come, heav’n-born faith, and aid my flight,
And guide my rising thought,
Till earth, still lessening to my sight,
Shall vanish, quite forgot.
But when to reach those blissful plains
Her utmost ardour tries,
And almost hears the charming strains
Of hymning angels rise.¹⁰ **GW**

Ian Hugh Clary recently completed his master of theology at Toronto Baptist Seminary. He and his wife Vicky live in downtown Toronto with their son Jack and they attend New City Baptist Church.

1 Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 2.

2 Hitchens, *Hitch-22*, 2.

3 According to Hitchens, there is a five percent survival rate for this form of cancer.

4 Thankfully, there is some hope with Hitchens' prognosis as he is undergoing experimental forms of gene-therapeutic treatment. We can only pray that the Lord spares him, both body and soul.

5 See his essay "Topic of Cancer" *Vanity Fair* (September 2010), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/09/hitchens-201009> (accessed March 6, 2011).

6 Gene Green calls this section a "letter of consolation." Gene

L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 215-216.

7 G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2003), 39.

8 Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 142-145.

9 Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 246.

10 Anne Steele, "Aspiring Towards Heaven" in *The Complete Works of Mrs. Anne Steele* (Boston: Munroe, Francis and Parker, 1808), 138-139, quoted in Priscilla Chan, "Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision: Seeing God In the Peaks, Valleys and Plateaus of Life" (Paper presented to the Canadian Baptist Historical Society, March 5, 2011), 23.