

Gospel Hope

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 November 2025

Preacher: Elliott Lytle

- [0 : 00] Welcome, everybody. If you'll start making your way back to your seats. We'll get started in just a second here. All right. Hey, good morning, everybody. My name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here at City Grace. So good to be with you this morning.
- Yeah, just a beautiful day. Got a little bit of ringing there. We'll figure it out in just a second. So I hope you're doing well. A couple announcements in the life of the church. I encourage you to just go check those out on the app. Big ones coming up. We've got baptisms at the end of this month.
- So if you have made a decision to follow Jesus and you want to follow in baptism, please get up with us. Sign up for that nap. Me and Jesse would love to talk with you about that and what it means.
- Also next week after the second service, we've got our Operation Christmas Child Packing event. So please get in on that. That's just a great way to send Jesus' love around the world.
- But again, all of those details are present on the app. And this morning, again, just so good to be with you together. We're actually in the home stretch of our Thessalonian series.
- [1 : 09] We've got two more sermons left in this. And the passage we're going to look at today, we're going to see something that's really common in Paul's letters. We're going to see Paul speaking to a very specific issue that this church is having.
- Because remember, these texts, when they were written, weren't just religious texts. They were real letters to real churches and real people in the specific time and place in which Paul was ministering.
- And so it shouldn't surprise us that Paul's going to speak to some very specific concerns that they may have or that he may have for them. And it's kind of interesting because in one sense, we're kind of peeking in on a piece of history.
- We're looking at a very specific thing that Paul wanted to address in this church at this time. But also one that God put here in Scripture because it touches on something he wants his entire church for all time to know.
- And the specific thing we are going to look into today is that this church had some concerns and some questions around the details of Jesus' return.
- [2 : 21] And how that was going to go down. So congratulations, you've walked face first into a sermon about the end times today. Good for all of us. But it's really not a topic that's unfamiliar with us.
- Because if you've been around church culture, at least here in the U.S. for the last 200 years, talking about the end times is not something that is unfamiliar. But like all topics, we don't have to fear walking into it because God thankfully has left his word here to illuminate the way.
- So with that, let's just jump into it and we're going to dig in. We're going to be starting in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 beginning with verse 13. Paul speaking to the Thessalonian church says,

Now concerning the times and seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you, for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

When people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief, for you are all children of light, children of the day.

[4 : 31] We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then, let us not sleep as others do. Let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. This is God's word to us. So, what appears to have happened in the church, to the Thessalonian church, is that somewhere along the way, they had been given some bad information, or maybe simply they had come to have a wrong expectation about the physical return of Jesus to earth.

It appears that these believers in this church had become confused because they had expected that Jesus would be returning soon, and he hadn't.

At least as much as they considered what the word soon should mean. And then even more concerning for them, some of the people that they had preached the message of the kingdom to were through the natural course of time just starting to pass away and die, and they were beginning to worry that somehow, are they going to miss out on the return of Jesus because they've died before he came back.

[6 : 09] They didn't have a full picture of what it meant to be in Christ. And so, as a matter of first premises, Paul wants to speak into that and make sure they understand the truth.

And as we dive into that, it's important to note that Thessalonians really had every right to expect Jesus to return soon because he said more than once that he was coming back.

In John 14, Jesus speaking to his disciples says, Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many rooms. And if it were not so, I would have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may be also.

And then in the book of Acts, as Jesus is ascending into heaven, as they're watching him go into heaven, two angels appear to his disciples and they say this, And when he had said these things, meaning Jesus, and they were looking on, he was lifted up in a cloud and took out of their sight.

[7 : 21] And while they were gazing into heaven, as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. So when Paul addresses this church, the first foundational truth, he wants them to know and affirm is centered around this central, simple, main idea, which is Jesus will return and his people will be with him forever.

Paul wants to be crystal clear to them. The grave cannot separate those who belong to Jesus from him. When a believer dies, their spirit immediately enters the presence of the Savior, as we see in many other scriptures.

And Paul wants them to know when Jesus comes back to this world, they will have a bodily resurrection as well. And all of those who have died through all the ages will be with him.

And then to anyone who is left alive during that, they are coming too. He wants to be crystal clear. And he says you should encourage each other with those words.

[8 : 38] Because the end destiny of all of God's people, everyone who belongs to him, is to be with Jesus. And that is a very certain hope.

And we say amen and amen to all of that. But like us, the Thessalonians actually had some more questions. They had another kind of issue going on, which was they really just wanted to know how all of this was going to go down.

They wanted to know the details. They really did believe Jesus was coming back, but as you can see from their concerns, they didn't know all the facts.

And because of that, they wanted to know the details. When is he coming back? This doesn't feel like soon. What will the events be like leading up to his coming?

What can we expect? Can we know in advance? Can we get the inside scoop? And again, they had really some reason to be drawn into that because they were immersed in a knowledge of the prophets and the Old Testament and how they had foretold of events in world history before they had happened.

[9 : 51] And Jesus himself, in Matthew 24, kind of has a long discourse where he talks to his disciples about what kinds of things, like what would you expect at the end of the age?

But what we see here in Thessalonians is Paul is also aware of kind of another less fruitful way that believers can approach this topic. And it arises when followers of Jesus become obsessed or prideful in their belief that they can obtain some secret knowledge that will kind of give them the inside track on Jesus' return.

Some way in which they can connect all the dots between what's happening in their lives and what's happening in world events and what's happening with world leaders. And you can kind of puzzle all that together in a way that gives you the mystery of what Jesus' return is going to look like.

But in point of fact, Paul says, you can't and you shouldn't do that because to Paul, Jesus' return is not a cipher to be cracked but a reality to be rejoiced in.

In the early 1800s, there was a deist turned Baptist minister by the name of William Miller. And as he grew in his faith, he really became enamored with the idea that the precise details of Jesus' return could be ascertained through a really calculated look at Scripture.

[11 : 25] And so, he immersed himself in the text and he immersed himself in the Greek and the Hebrew behind the text and he focused in particularly on the prophecies and visions given in the book of Daniel.

He gave a lot of his life to that and through that, Miller came to the belief that he really had ferreted out that Jesus was going to return sometime around the year 1843.

1843. And in fact, you can even see how he deduced that out because he left us a very detailed diagram for it. Can you show it up here on the screen? That's something, isn't it?

I bet he was a hoot at parties. And you can see very clearly right down there on the left-hand side at the end of all those world events, 1843, God's everlasting kingdom.

Now, interestingly, Miller didn't make a big fuss about this at first but he was convinced of it and as he taught it in various forums that he had, more and more people who heard him talk were drawn in by this.

[12 : 34] They were enamored with both his knowledge of Scripture and kind of this picture of the mystery and the secret knowledge of Scripture revealed, so much so that the people who heard him started to build their lives around it.

Jesus is coming in 1843 so they started to build their lives around the imminent return of Christ and actually became known as a movement called Millerism. And as they went through that, eventually Miller settled on the idea that there was probably a range of dates in there but most certainly Jesus would come by March 21st, 1844.

And so they waited and they prepared and they hoped and then obviously that day came and went without incident. And so Miller and his colleagues did what you always do in a situation like that.

They revised the date. They said, you know, we need an even deeper study. We missed some things in the Hebrew and so they went back and they recalculated their dates and then they revised the date and said, okay, that wasn't right but it's almost assuredly October 22nd, 1844.

And so they gathered together and they awaited Jesus' return. But then when that date came and passed with still no second coming, the sobering reality that they had simply been wrong started to set in and it was a huge disappointment to all of the people involved in that movement of Millerism so much so that it came to be known as the Great Disappointment.

[14 : 22] And as a result, the faith of many who were involved in that was crushed, was damaged beyond repair. Now look, I think it's understandable that we want to know more about lofty things.

As a matter of fact, I would say that's part of what it is to be made in God's image. He made us to be curious and to pursue knowledge, to be faithful, to dive into His Word and to Scripture and try to squeeze out all that Jesus has to tell us.

But one of the things Paul also wants you to know here is in doing that, you have to be humble enough to know that there are things about this and things specifically about Jesus' return that you're not going to know.

And frankly, we should probably expect that because, well, Jesus told us there's things about this you're not going to know. In that long discourse in Matthew 24 in verse 36, he says to his disciples, But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.

Think about that. Just pause for a minute when you're trying to divine out things. Jesus, fully equal with the Father, God, fully man, fully God in some mysterious way we can't understand says, I have limited even my own knowledge of this.

[16 : 00] And then again in Acts chapter 1 before Jesus is taken up to heaven and he's talking to his disciples, he said, So when they'd come together, they, meaning the disciples, asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

And he said to them, and I can almost maybe imagine in my head Jesus saying, alright, let's try this again. It is not for you to know the times and the seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

You know, Miller probably could have saved himself a lot of pain and trouble if it had just taken that verse to heart. And Paul actually even commends the Thessalonians here for not falling in that trap because he writes to them about the times and the seasons.

We don't need to write you because you fully know what Jesus has said, that it's going to come like a thief in the night. But it's not just the temptation to nail down the date that concerns Paul.

I think you also see him encouraging these believers to not lose sight of the things that are clearly revealed in pursuit of some secret knowledge that hasn't been revealed.

[17 : 14] You know, it's interesting to me, when you look at a lot of the creeds of the early church, right? So in the period immediately after the first hundred years of the gospel going out, when followers of Jesus are really trying to write down what are the core things that make you a follower of Jesus, like solidify the foundational truths found in Scripture.

What's interesting is how simple the statements are in those creeds about the end times and end things. They say things like, He will come to judge the living and the dead.

That's what they wanted us to know. Or, He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and His kingdom will have no end. That is the sum total of what they thought was essential.

And what that tells me is, well, I don't think it's wrong to have these various eschatological views, which is just a big word that means the theology of studying last things and end times.

I don't think it's wrong, again, to pursue. God made us curious. But I do think if you're going to have a view, it's important to know, number one, where it came from, how it's been used, and what other views are.

[18 : 36] But even more important from that, if you're going to have a view, I think what Paul shows us here is, you have to hold it with a light grip. And you have to make sure this is not one of those places where you really lose the forest for the trees.

Dayton Hartman says in his book, *Jesus Wins*, I'm saddened by how often eschatological speculation derails the one mission Jesus gave us to make disciples.

In fact, after more than a decade of ministry in the local church and teaching in seminaries and Christian colleges, I've yet to identify a single benefit from speculating about eschatology.

Speculation de-emphasizes Jesus and leads to fear, which often leads to poor decision-making. When we spend our days conjecturing about what may or may not happen before the second coming, we do so at the expense of the overwhelming hope that the second coming ought to give us.

the intensity of your gaze and your desire to know this is not going to be the thing that changes your ability to experience it.

[19 : 53] You know, in Jesus' day, when Jesus was born, it was the people who had looked most intently into the prophecies about the Messiah, missed the baby in the manger.

They couldn't see it when it came because they had already decided what it had to look like. So if it's not a detailed road map we're meant to glean from Scripture and what it tells us about Jesus' return, what is it?

Because the Scripture does have something to say about Jesus' return. And I think what Paul is doing here in this letter to the Thessalonians is showing us that there are really three straightforward things I think we can take away from the reality of Jesus' return.

One of those things is something he wants to hold out for those who aren't followers of Jesus, those who don't believe. And two of those are for those who do follow Jesus.

So to those who don't follow Jesus, who are unbelievers, what Paul says, and this is a really sobering thought, the reality of Jesus' return is a warning to be heeded for those who don't know him.

[21 : 17] I think one of the realities of our contemporary church moment is that we're often somewhat reticent to give the warnings that the Bible does about the fate of those who don't know Jesus.

things. Because we like happy and uplifting things. And on some level that's understandable. I grew up in the era of the shouts of street corner preachers that almost gleefully told people of the hell and the damnation that awaited them and awaited sinners.

And there's a way to do that that can certainly obscure the beautiful good news portion of the good news. I mean at the root the message isn't just you're a great sinner.

The message is Jesus is a great savior. But if we want to give the full counsel of scripture we also have to fully admit Jesus is not shy about telling people to get ready.

To not be caught unaware. In that same passage in Matthew where Jesus tells his disciples that they won't know the day and the time. He goes on to say this.

[22 : 30] For as it was in the days of Noah so it will be in the coming of the son of man. For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage right up until the day that Noah entered the ark.

And they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away. So will be the coming of the son of man. Two men will be in the field. One will be taken and one left.

And two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and one left. Therefore stay awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But know this that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

Therefore you also must be ready for the son of man is coming at an hour. whatever you do not expect. The image of Noah's ark isn't accidental.

[23 : 33] What Jesus is trying to get the people that are listening to him to know and to accept is today. Right now today the door is open. The door to the kingdom of God is wide open and it is open without regard for how messed up your life is.

If you want to come you can come in. There is no money that is needed to buy the ticket. But Jesus also says just like the ark it won't always be open.

One day that door gets shut and no one knows when that day is going to be. He goes on after that passage to tell him two more parables that make that same point.

There are parables you can go read them about people who were not ready for a great event. They weren't taking it seriously. Jesus says you have to decide to get ready for it.

It's a sobering thought. But Paul also wants us to know there is no fear of that day for those who belong to Jesus.

[24 : 46] For a follower of Jesus Paul has two different words. First he says the reality of Jesus' return reminds us to stay sober and be ready. I think the Bible actually shows us some pretty clear temptations that it expects will arise for followers of Jesus who await his return.

And one of them is simply that in the everyday hustle and bustle of our lives we will let all of the many and widespread distractions and intoxicants of this world dull our senses so that we live today as if that day is never coming.

Paul tells the Thessalonians let us not sleep as others do. Let us be awake and sober because those who sleep sleep at night and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

But since we belong to the day let us be sober putting on faith and love and hope of salvation. And I think what Paul is talking about here is not primarily things like drugs or excessive alcohol use like it could be but I think more broadly what he's trying to say is all the things in life that dull your senses, that distract you, that lull you to sleep, that keep you from having the hope in the salvation to come that you should have, don't let the world fool you into not remembering that Jesus is coming.

And I think knowing that is really important in light of a second temptation which is the world is going to be constantly telling you that this hope in Jesus is a fantasy.

[26 : 36] It's going to be reminding you that hey, it's been a long, long time since he said that, nothing's happened. Interestingly, scripture tells us you should probably expect that too.

Peter, writing to another group of churches in 2nd Peter says, this is now the second letter that I'm writing to you beloved and in both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the command of the Lord and Savior through your apostles knowing this first of all that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing.

Scoffers going to scoff. Following their own sinful desires they will say, where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.

Does that sound familiar at all? The world keeps on spinning just like it has for all time and Christians keep clinging to this fairy tale that Jesus isn't coming.

You know what I find really interesting here with us reading this scripture to the Thessalonians today is Paul's message to the Thessalonians right then at that time and by and by extension what God wanted the Thessalonians to know about the return of Jesus was be ready.

[28 : 17] Knowing what all time would be he said to the Thessalonians be ready. That's the message he had for that church and now twenty centuries later God's message to this church and to all the churches on the earth today is be ready.

which I think means if I were to take something away from that I think it means God isn't as concerned about the passage of time until Jesus comes as we are.

Because it says the scoffer will say look at how long it's been. Things keep going as the world keeps on spinning around and you still think he's coming.

You know interestingly in this verse and Peter we're going to read in a minute. God is going to remind them later in Peter he's going to say you guys know that like a thousand days is like a year to me or the day to me right.

A thousand years nothing. Which means God isn't worried about the perception problem we have about telling a church then and two thousand years later be ready.

[29 : 21] Because in telling you to be ready he's telling you what Jesus wants you to do while you wait. He doesn't say hunker down in a bunker because Jesus is coming.

Or sell all you have. Or don't have kids. Don't live your life. Act like the apocalypse is coming tomorrow.

That's not how he wants you to prepare. What does he want you to do to be ready? Well it's the quiet life of faith that Jesse spoke about last week in the verses right before these.

It's the faithful walk of glorifying God each day. Like we say every week. Like walking in his spirit. Shining the light of the gospel.

It's the taking care to love the hurting in front of you and holding out the hope of salvation to those who have none. Let me ask you this in honesty.

[30 : 30] When Jesus comes what would you rather him find you doing? Fussing over a prophecy chart? Or helping someone who's hurting?

Which would you rather have the master find you doing? And I think then that finally gives us this last idea that the reality of Jesus' return reminds us to take heart because we always have hope.

In almost every generation if you look back through history there comes this moment where followers of Jesus think well it can't get any worse than this.

I have never seen the like of this. Jesus must be coming soon. So if you thought that really just started like the last 50 years of world history I got some bad news for you.

People have been saying that since the beginning. When the early church really started to suffer the heavy persecution of Rome their first thought was this is it.

[31 : 39] This is the persecution that Jesus told us to expect. He's coming soon. Or if you lived in Europe and a lot of the world during the 1300s as the black plague swept through and took out somewhere around I don't know 30 to 50 percent of all humans living.

I mean that is like a biblical level plague. They probably had some right to say this is it. This is revelation. This is what's coming. It's lost to our modern consciousness now but when Napoleon was bringing Europe's population to heel they were terrified of it.

It was believed he couldn't be stopped and because of that many thought this is the end times and Napoleon is the antichrist. Christ. And just when we think the world is getting unbearably wicked surely God isn't going to stand for this any longer it goes on another century.

So how do you navigate that? Does that give us should we just give in to the cries of the scoffers? Paul says no.

He tells the Thessalonians God is not destined you for wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

[33 : 16] So encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing. Paul comes back to this main idea. What should you be doing while you are waiting on Jesus whether you live to see him come back or not what should you be doing?

You should be encouraging each other with the hope that your destiny is in him. Whether today or another 20 centuries from now your hope is secure no matter how dark this world gets it does not change the fact that Jesus is coming.

And if you do that then it means the reality of Jesus coming back isn't going to make you arrogant and it's also not going to make you anxious.

It's going to cause you to have hope. And it's going to do one other thing. You know the Bible doesn't actually leave you in the dark as to why it seems like God is taking a long time.

And if you look you can actually even see in all of these unexpected centuries that have rolled on that have rolled off the calendar since Paul penned this letter to the Thessalonians.

[34 : 36] If you look you can actually see the depth of the heart of God. Going back to that verse in 2 Peter right after he talks about the scoffers who will come he says but do not overlook this one fact beloved that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but he is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish but that each should reach repentance.

Why is God taking forever? Why does God continue to put up with this? Why doesn't he just come and make this world right?

Because he is holding the door open for as long as it can be held open. You may want God to come like you think you want the wickedness in this world dealt with nobody wants it more than God but when he comes he's going to deal with it and that means the wickedness in us too.

It'll be complete and final and so he will wait until every last person that wants to say yes says yes.

[36 : 08] It is mercy that compels God to wait. Which means for us one of the things we do while we wait is we join him in holding that door open.

We stay sober and we stay awake so that we can tell people the good news. We hold out life as long as the good patience of God will let us.

And then that informs our prayers that we pray Jesus give us the grace to labor well until you come. As the band comes up today.

If you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus look like the last thing I want to do is manipulate you with fear. I am not trying to pressure you to make a decision because I really want you to make a decision but you do need to hear me because Jesus wants you to know this.

He says there is an urgency to this. It is life or death. Today that door is open but one day just like the ark when no one is expecting it's closed.

[37 : 29] Won't you come in while the door is open? Jesus says you can settle that destiny today. Can't make you do it but Jesus says if you have ears to hear it, hear it.

There will be a prayer on the screen. That's a way you can express that. If you want to talk about it I'll be down front. I'd love to pray with you but don't wait. If you are a follower of Jesus your destiny is tied to Jesus.

Trying to figure out the details about it isn't nearly as important as the hope of the reality that it's going to happen. So if you listen to the scoffers if part of you in your heart is thinking yeah this just keeps going and going take heart.

Jesus is still coming. And if you are frustrated that God keeps letting this get worse. If you are frustrated at the state of your town or your country or the world like why is God doing this remember it's because of mercy.

Or maybe if I could say it this way he waited for you. We can endure it a little bit longer for others. If you are a follower of Jesus after you take that moment with him we have got a moment of communion and the beauty of remembering that is the reason you don't fear that day the reason you don't fear when God comes to judge the world is because the judgment that was for you has been settled.

[39 : 18] Jesus reminds you in this meal that his very body and blood settled forever whether you could rejoice on that day.

And so when you take it and take it back to your seat and take it you take it in remembrance that Jesus has bound you to him. The day of his return is a day of joy.

There is no wrath left for you. It has been swallowed up by Jesus. Father we give you this moment.

We invite your Holy Spirit to come. Jesus we don't know when that day is. It could be today. It could be a thousand years hence.

You know. Those are things for you. What I ask is that your spirit would do what is needed today.

[40 : 18] What is needed for followers of Jesus. What is needed for those you want to draw in. Come and have your way Lord. In Jesus name.