

SERENDIPITY #6
THE PRESENCE OF THE FUTURE
I Thessalonians

I. Back to the Future.

A. Where are we headed?

Most would agree that life will never be understood nor have any real significance until four fundamental questions can be answered:

1. Who am I? (The question of **identity**).
2. Why am I here? (The question of **purpose**).
3. Where did I come from? (The question of **origins**).
4. Where am I headed? (The question of **destiny**).

B. Jesus – illustrates the significance of these four questions.

³ *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;* ⁴ *so he got up from the meal... and wrapped a towel around his waist...and began to wash his disciples' feet... (John 13:3-5).*

1. His identity - A child of God.
God was his *Father* (v. 3).
2. His purpose – To have dominion over the earth.
The Father *had put all things under his power* (v. 3).
3. His origin – God.
He had come from God (v. 3).
4. His destiny – God.
He was returning to God (v. 3).

Jesus was able to **effectively minister** to others only because he knew the answers to the four questions!

C. Our study today is on the future – our destiny.

1. The scope of this topic in theology.

In Systematic Theology this subject is usually labeled **Eschatology** (“The Last Things”) and it encompasses the following subjects.

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|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| * Death. | * The Tribulation |
| * The Intermediate State. | * The Millennium. |
| * The Resurrection of the Dead. | * The Final Judgment. |
| * Antichrist. | * Heaven. |
| * The Second Coming of Christ. | * Hell. |

2. The implications of this topic personally.

Psychologists imply that our present circumstances are determined by **our past**. The Gospel would imply that our present circumstances are determined rather by our future! The thing that most determines who we are today is not where we've been, but where we are going!

II. I Thessalonians.

A. Introduction.

- 1) In no other book does Paul give more attention to our future hope. The second letter to the Thessalonians continues this emphasis. The future hope that we have in Christ is a major theme of these two letters.
 - *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to **wait for his Son** from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1:9-10).*
 - *¹⁹For what is our **hope**, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus **when he comes**? Is it not you?²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy. (2:19-20).*
 - *May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father **when our Lord Jesus comes** with all his holy ones. (3:13).*
 - *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the **coming of the Lord**, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (4:15).*
 - *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**. (5:23).*
- 2) A large portion of the book (4:13-5:11) is devoted exclusively to the subject of the Lord's return.
- 3) Paul uses a technical term (PAROUSIA) to refer to this future "coming" of Jesus Christ. The term denotes both an arrival and a presence with us that is the result (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23).
- 4) Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians treats the subject again... with an equal emphasis. According to one count 18 out of 47 verses in II Thessalonians (38%) are devoted to future events.

B. Outline of the Book.

Our Blessed Hope (Ready or Not, Here I Come!)			
The Hope that <u>Saves</u>	The Hope that <u>Sanctifies</u>	The Hope that <u>Encourages</u>	The Hope that <u>Motivates</u>
Faith, hope and love have made you a model church	Yet something is lacking in your faith	Jesus is coming again... for the living and the dead	Various exhortations relating to relationships and attitudes
1:1 - 3:5	3:6 - 4:12	4:13 - 5:11	5:11-28

C. The Presence of the Future.

It's easy to grasp the truth that how we live today will have an impact on what will happen tomorrow. But Paul made the serendipitous discovery that the promise of Christ's return has profound implications for today. The **future** changes the **now**!

1) The Hope that Saves (1:1-3:5).

Acts 17:1-10 tells the story of how the Gospel came to Thessalonica. A church was born in the midst of fierce persecution. Looking back on those early days, Paul describes what happened.

¹³ *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.* ¹⁴ *For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews,* ¹⁵ *who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out... (2:13-15).*

The believers in Thessalonica stood strong in the face of fierce persecution and formed one of the finest churches in all the New Testament.

a. A **model** church.

Weathering persecution, turning from idols, and spreading the Gospel, TCC set the standard for what "church" should be in the first century Roman Empire.

You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. (1:7).

b. A **missionary** church.

TCC was an evangelistic force that was salt and light for the entire region.

The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. (1:8).

c. A **steadfast** church.

In the midst of fierce persecution, this church persevered, stood strong, and never wavered.

² We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. ⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love... (3:2-6).

d. A **hopeful** church.

TCC had its eye on the eastern sky. The fear of coming wrath helped to bring them to faith, and the promise of Christ's return helped them to stay strong.

...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1:9-10).

It would be hard to imagine a more ideal church. And yet Paul writes this letter because he knows that something is missing!

*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is **lacking in your faith**. (3:10).*

What could be lacking in a church like this?

2) The Hope that Sanctifies (3:6-4:12).

a. Entire sanctification.

We begin to get an idea of what Paul believed was missing when we read the following verses.

- *You are witnesses, and so is God, of how **holy**, righteous and **blameless** we were among you who believed. (2:10).*
- *May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be **blameless** and **holy** in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (3:13).*
- *It is God's will that you should be **sanctified**... (4:3).*
- *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a **holy** life. (4:7).*
- *May God himself, the God of peace, **sanctify** you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept **blameless** at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (5:23).*

Two words stand out:

1. Blameless (2:10; 3:13; 5:23).
AMEMPTOS – adjective and adverb.
2. Holy, sanctified (2:10; 3:13; 4:3, 4, 7; 5:23).
HAGIAZO (verb) – to make holy, to sanctify (5:23).
HAGIASMOS (noun) – sanctification, holiness (4:3, 4, 7).
HAGIOSUNE (noun) – the quality of holiness (3:13).
HAGIOS (adjective) – holy (1:5, 6; 3:13; 4:8; 5:26, 27).

What is missing? **Entire** sanctification, being **holy**, heart **purity**.

b. What does holiness look like?

Holiness is primarily a condition of **the heart** not a matter of behavior. It is inner purity, perfect love. When the emphasis is placed on outward standards and performance (spiritual disciplines, moral behavior, litmus test issues, etc.) the result is always **legalism** and **pharisaism**.

However, when the heart is made holy, our behaviors will change... often in dramatic ways. In this passage (3:6-4:12) Paul gives a picture of what holiness looks like by mentioning five areas that will be affected when the heart is made pure.

1) **Sexual purity.**

³ *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body^a in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. (4:3-8).*

2) **Loving one another.**

⁹ *Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. (4:9-10).*

3) **Ethics in business.**

¹¹ *Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (4:11-12).*

4) **Human relationships.**

¹² *Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. (5:12-15).*

^a Or learn to live with his own wife; or learn to acquire a wife

5) Attitudes.

¹⁶ *Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil. (5:16-22).*

TABLE TALK

1. Discuss what Paul is saying when he describes Christians who in so many ways are living exemplary lives and yet there is something lacking in their faith?
 - Discuss the theology of this.
 - Discuss the practical reality of this.
2. Look again at the five areas Paul mentions (pp. 6-7). Which area is the most challenging to you?
3. How "entire" can sanctification be? How are we to understand the on-going reality of sin in the believer?
4. Discuss your own experience. Is something missing? Why? What can be done about it?

3) The Hope that Encourages (4:13-5:11).

¹³ *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore **encourage each other** with these words.*

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

*⁴ But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore **encourage one another** and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (4:13-5:11).*

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be:

- a) **Glorious** (Mark 13:26; Jude 14-15; Rev. 19:11-16).

When Christ came the first time, he came in meekness and humility (a baby, a man, riding on a donkey, nailed to a cross, etc.). But when he comes again, he will come with power and great glory! (riding a white horse, with a sword, with an army, as King of kings, as judge, etc.).

- b) **Visible** (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7).

Every eye will see him! His coming will be a global event bringing joy to those who are ready and terror to everyone else.

- c) **Bodily** (Acts 1:11; Heb. 9:28; Rev. 1:7).

Some have pretended that the return of Christ would be a spiritual event, not related to time and space. The New Testament, however, states clearly that Jesus will return in glory in bodily form.

- d) To **raise the dead** and **rapture** the church.

This is the only passage in the Bible that speaks specifically about the "rapture" (4:17). The passage gives little help in determining whether the rapture will be before or after the tribulation.

- e) **Sudden** (Matt. 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40).

Like a thief in the night... like labor pains for a pregnant woman... suddenly, he will come. Therefore, be ready. Keep watch.

The primary purpose for Paul's discussion of the return of Christ is not to give a chronology of the end times. But to urge mutual encouragement so believers can **stand strong** in persecution and live **holy lives**.

How can I prepare? This passage (5:6-11) gives us four commands to help us be ready:

- a) **Wake up.**

So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert... (5:6).

- b) **Clean up.**

So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be... self-controlled (sober) (5:6).

- c) **Dress up.**

But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ... (5:8-9).

- d) **Build up.**

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (5:11).

4) The Hope that Motivates (5:12-28).

- a. To help us put our holiness into practice, Paul gives a long list of 16 exhortations to guide our thinking in what a blameless life looks like.

- 1) Respect and esteem those who are over you in the Lord (vv. 12-13).
- 2) Live in peace with each other (v. 13).

- 3) Warn those who are idle (v. 14).
- 4) Encourage the timid (v. 14).
- 5) Help the weak (v. 14).
- 6) Be patient with everyone (v. 14).
- 7) Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong. (v. 15).
- 8) Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone (v. 15).
- 9) Be joyful always (v. 16).
- 10) Pray continually (v. 17).
- 11) Give thanks in all circumstances (v. 18).
- 12) Do not put out the Spirit's fire (v. 19).
- 13) Do not treat prophecies with contempt (v. 20).
- 14) Test everything (v. 21).
- 15) Hold on to the good (v. 21).
- 16) Avoid every kind of evil (v. 22).

- b. As we reflect and meditate on the call to be holy and blameless, we may find ourselves recoiling in despair. "This is **impossible**," we think. "Who is able to live in such a manner?"

Without divine help, we can't. Without a work of sanctifying grace that transforms the heart, all efforts at holiness will degenerate into performance-based codes of behavior. But God can do what man cannot!

*²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and **he will do it.** (5:23-24).*

III. HOW IN THE WORLD CAN I BE HOLY?

Holiness is not the work of man... but of God. The Spirit of God is named the Holy Spirit, not just because he (the Spirit) is holy, but because he is the only one who can make us holy. The adjective "holy" describes not only who he is... but **what he does**. He is sanctifying Spirit (II Thess. 2:13; I Peter 1:2).

A. Three non-negotiables.

There are three things we can do to connect us with the One who can sanctify our hearts. Without these three virtues of grace, our efforts may produce religious actions and pious deeds, but they will never purify the heart. That is why Paul mentioned these three virtues at the opening of his letter.

*We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by **faith**, your labor prompted by **love**, and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1:3).*

1. **Faith.**

Faith is not wishing something were so. Faith is seizing the promise of God and believing that **he can do** what he has promised.

2. **Love.**

Loving God with all my being and being loved by him in return, creates the atmosphere in which heart transformation is possible. I'm not trying to earn the Father's favor. Rather, because I'm loved with unconditional love, I long to be **more than I am**.

3. **Hope.**

Christ is coming again. For those who not prepared, this creates terror and dread. But for those who long for his return, this means:

- Encouragement and comfort in trials.
- Constant vigilance. "Be prepared." It may be today!

B. Simple steps to a deeper experience with God.

1. Recognize and affirm the **promises of God**.

He will do it (5:24). Heart purity will be forever an impossible dream for the man who does not believe God has promised it to be possible.

2. Believe that **God can do** what He has promised.

The cleansing **blood** of Christ and the purifying **fire** of the Spirit are daily available to those who believe. *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. (1 John 5:4).*

3. **Confess** all known sin.

No one can expect purity of heart when he is consciously, willfully harboring unconfessed sin. Faith for cleansing becomes possible as we name those areas of our lives where sin continues to master us and seek forgiveness and power.

4. Come to a place of **full surrender**.

For God to fill the heart with his sanctifying Spirit, he must have access to all the heart. The rich young ruler went away sad because there were areas of his life he was unwilling to surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

5. **Ask.**

Some believe we are justified by grace but sanctified by works. Never! A pure heart is never the result of human effort. It is **a gift**. Therefore, it can only be received by faith. This means we must ask. This explains why **humility** will always be the dominant characteristic of those who are holy. They have nothing to boast about. It is all of grace.

¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13).

6. **Crisis** and **process.**

There will likely be a crisis moment when one becomes aware of these realities and takes a conscious step of faith. In a decisive act of humble faith, the Spirit of holiness comes and works in sanctifying grace in the prepared heart.

However, crisis is always accompanied by process (both before and after). To be holy means to **walk** daily in the Spirit: confessing, repenting, committing, surrendering, and trusting in the promises as we grow in our knowledge of the One who saved us.

TABLE TALK

1. Describe how all this talk of "holiness" makes you feel.
2. Discuss with one another how this teaching has impacted you. Did you like it? Agree with it? Disagree? Was it a comfort? Was it threatening? Does it encourage you? Or perhaps discourage you?
3. Talk about your own experience in terms of "crisis" and "process."
4. Are you ready for Christ's return? Does this thought fill you with joy and anticipation? Or fear and dread?
5. Pray together.