

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2009

In Christ Alone

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Christ Gives Us Eternal Life

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:25

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The last time I stood up here I was still slackjawed from being surprised by you for my 20th anniversary of Bible study. I'm not sure I fully recovered even the second time I gave the lecture in the evening. I have enjoyed all the wonderful cards that you wrote and I deliberately spun them out over these four weeks, reading just a few at a time, so that I could really savor them and think of you individually. Thank you for what you wrote. You have fulfilled Paul's words at the end of our passage today: **"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."** I'm not in any formal position of spiritual authority, but you have helped me continue the hard work of teaching by your great encouragement.

You also gave me a generous gift of money, which I promptly ran out and spent on getting my bicycle tuned up. This was a good investment because the derailleur had broken and I can tell you, it's darned hard to bike up my hill if you only have one gear. And I took the remaining amount and purchased a new bike helmet, another good investment for someone who has taken some spectacular falls over the years. So thank you! You've given me the means to put myself into danger by continuing to road bike, while simultaneously giving me the means to protect myself from my own pastimes!

In addition, you gave me so much to think about that I want to spend some of our time today on reflections of the past twenty years, within the context of the passage, of course. So let's start by looking at 1st Thessalonians 4:13, where we're presented with a question:

I. Will we be Ignorant or Expectant? (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

"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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Therefore, encourage each other with these words." (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

I look at this passage and I realize that
We have hope

Last week I was reading email. The first one I read was so funny that I had tears of laughter rolling down my face. The next email was very different. It told me of the unexpected death of a family friend in California. Steve died of a heart attack at age 48. He was one of the principal trombonists of the LA Philharmonic...a runner, mountain biker, incredibly active and full of life and joy. And now he was dead. So there I was, from humor to shock in about 20 seconds.

Now Steve and his wife had no particular religious beliefs and so there is not a lot of consolation which can be given of the type that Paul gives us in these verses. His memorial service took place on Monday at the Disney Concert hall in Los Angeles. It was filled with beautiful music, with eulogies, with heartfelt words...but with no biblical answers to the question: Why did he die? Will we see him again? The world has very little hope for a future relationship after death. But that is not the case for Christians. Paul tells us emphatically **“And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:18).** And we won't just be with the Lord. We will be with **each other** – those who have died will rise to life, and those who are still living at the time of the Lord's return will join them.

In fact you could say that we have a choice. Will we be ignorant of our future, or expectant? We don't have to flounder about with wishful thinking. We have hope! Biblical hope is not just a vague wish but a profound certainty. It rests on the fact that Jesus has gone before us, into death and out again, proclaiming his victory over it.

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14-15) So we have hope.

Next,

- We will be together

The Thessalonians were sad, thinking that those who had died before the Lord's return would miss out. Because this is the earliest New Testament letter there was no well developed theology of death. So Paul tells them the good news that because Jesus died and rose again, so will we. And so will those we love who also love Christ.

So what happens when we die? Pastor Bill Price preached on this passage recently; he outlined the three main options: soul sleep, annihilation, or the traditional Christian view, which is reflected in what Jesus told the dying thief on the cross:

“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’” (Luke 23:39-43)

Soul sleep is the idea that both the soul and the body sleep until the resurrection. But the Bible tells us that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Annihilation is the idea that it all ends at death. Not only the Bible but our common sense tells us that this is unlikely; the soul and spirit bear an indestructibility that persist beyond the mere physical body. The Bible tells us that our soul continues to face judgment and heaven or hell after death.

But what happens to those who believe that Christ has conquered death and that he is their savior? Our souls go to be with him when we die. And during the second coming of Christ those destroyed and crumbling physical shells of ourselves that we have left in the grave are transformed and remade.

Now why does this matter?

When life is going well and we are young and strong, there doesn't seem to be a lot of comfort in talking about death. It's just not something we need to dwell on.

But life goes on, and someone we love dies. Unexpectedly. And we look in the mirror and think, that could be me. Or my brother. Or my friend. And how will I cope with a life that doesn't contain this person who is so loved by me, and now he's gone forever? The Christian faith comforts us in a way that nothing else can. It tells us the truth that our hearts long to be certain of – that Christ, having conquered death, has conquered it FOR US. We die, but we live beyond that physical death in an eternal life which is far more glorious and uncomplicated than this one – a life that meets the longings for perfection that we have looked for in the best of this world's relationships. That's why we can grieve not ignorantly, but expectantly. Those we love have “fallen asleep” – a metaphor that Paul uses to denote how fleeting, how temporary is the state of death. You fall asleep, you wake up. The Christian dies, and he wakes up to true life.

II. Will We Be Children of Darkness or Children of Light? (1 Thess. 5:1-11)

“Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 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.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

These words tell us that

- **We are ready** for Jesus' return

No one expected North Star Foods to burn to the ground in a matter of hours, leaving dozens of people without their livelihood and affecting the life of an entire community. No one quite anticipated the severity of the economic downturn. We understand that we cannot predict events outside of our control. But we can be ready for them. We can prepare.

We have house insurance. We diversify our investments. We try to plan ahead, but the best plan is simply to be ready for the unexpected to happen. But the most unpredictable event is Jesus' return. We can't control the timing but we sure can be prepared.

Jesus' return matters for two reasons. It matters when we are grappling with death, either ourselves or that of someone we love. And it matters that we're ready to meet Christ.

I can't leave this passage without remarking on Paul, a single man, using an analogy of the birth pangs of a pregnant woman. How many of you got caught somewhere really inconvenient by your baby's birth? I do know someone in Los Angeles who gave birth on the front seat of a police car...she was trying to get to the hospital and got caught short. The patrolman was prepared and delivered her healthy baby. I guess it's all in the line of duty! I nearly gave birth to our first child in the choir loft when my water broke prematurely, so I know very well that babies come when they come, and not on our timetable. But a pregnant woman is always looking with anticipation for the signs that delivery is near, even though we don't know exactly when. And Christians should be looking with anticipation for signs that their Deliverer is near.

So we are ready.

And to help us be ready,

- We are self controlled

This text is a curious piece of advice...be ready, by being self-controlled.

“You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For 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 self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” (1 Thess. 5:5-8)

We can make ourselves more ready by being alert (that one seems obvious) but we can also prepare ourselves by being self-controlled – not simply indulging ourselves in the pleasures of life, but instead, putting on faith, love and hope to help us through our days. Self control helps us teach our unruly bodies and spirits that there is more to life than pleasure – that great gains come through discipline.

I’m hoarse today because last night I was yelling my lungs out at a track meet which began at 3:00 and ended at 10:15, with two lengthy breaks for rain. The entire team stands at the curves of the track, and all the parents cluster together on the bleachers, all of us yelling crazily as the Schaeffer runners approach the finish line. Now it’s possible that someone with natural talent would run just as well with no screaming fans, but I think that having a group of people exhorting you every few seconds on the track, is like Hebrews 11 – where we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and their encouragement is what keeps us in the race. It is possible to live like sons of light partly because we help each other to be self controlled, to live nobly, clothed with the armor of faith, love and hope.

This passage also shows us that

- We are sure of our destiny

“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” (1 Thess. 5:9-11)

This is a promise that we will be saved, no matter how dire things might look right now. It joins together the purpose of Jesus’ death (so that we might live with him now) with the idea that we will live with him beyond death as well. Of course this is something to be encouraged about! We are to remind each other that there is something at stake which goes beyond our concerns for the day – which takes us into eternity.

One final question:

III. Are We Living in God’s will or Are We Living for Ourselves? (1 Thess. 5:12-28)

This is the second time in this series that I’ve had the privilege of teaching through a section like this one. Remember Colossians 3, which has a similar set of bullet point suggestions about how to live? I could approach this by saying, do these things and you’ll have a great life! But most of us

don't have the discipline to make these choices consistently. So in Colossians 3 we talked about how choices towards God help restore our true humanity with which God created us – how right choices help us become more like Christ, and that pattern gradually helps us tear off the smelly outer clothes of sin and reveal the true humanity of man made in God's image.

As evangelicals we make a big deal about grace. It's grace, the free unmerited favor of God, that caused him to love us and to choose us and to save us. But after salvation, we sometimes get the inaccurate message that there's no more grace involved in sanctification, the process of becoming more Christlike. It seems like becoming holy is all up to our own hard work. And if we don't want to work hard, or we're not very good at being disciplined, we can't be sanctified. That's not true. Rather, *with the Spirit's power and leading* we commit to be obedient in a way that brings us closer to God. Life tends to be less complicated when we do that. However, the most godly person in the world will not be protected from the effects of sin all around us; we won't be spared from cancer and rebellious kids and bad investments and natural disasters. Those things will happen to us regardless of how faithful we are towards God. But, and here's the important point: those events will have MUCH LESS POWER to derail us if we have put in the time making choices that lead us towards God. Because when we're on the journey of sanctification we can better accept all that befalls us, and we can learn to give thanks in all circumstances, as Paul says in v. 18.

Today I want to approach this passage a bit differently. I want you to see how the truths of this passage have filtered into my life in hopes that they will filter into yours. Faith really does work. Community really does help. So let's look at 1 Thess. 5:13:

“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Be joyful always; pray continually; given thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

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. ” (1 Thess. 5:13-23)

How do we put all these commands into practice? Especially when we are put to the test by the circumstances of our changing lives? We dropped off our son Nick at Arizona State University in August, 2005. He was going from a graduating class of 5 to a school of 67,000 students. It was tough sending the kids off to kindergarten for the first time, but I had not ever experienced anything quite like that first college drop off. In order to be positive we smiled, we laughed, we joked; I tried to hide my dismay at the abysmal state of his dorm, which had been built in the 1950's and looked like something you'd find in the county jail, with scarred metal bunkbed and battered metal lockers. His new roommate, Dave, had hair down to the middle of his back. It was all new and different. I was voluntarily releasing my child, whom I had protected from the moment of birth, into a strange new world where he would be on his own. The moment came for our last goodbye – a smile, a hug, brave words and we were gone.

In the next hour I began having chest pains. Now I have a perfectly healthy heart but I know that on occasions of extreme emotion, that's what happens to me. I believe it is the physical symptom of a broken heart. These chest pains were accompanied by nausea. At one point John looked at me and said, "Are you all right? You look awful." In all this I never shed a tear. But it was like having your heart ripped out of your chest. You see, Nick and I had always been unusually close. His particular struggles had drawn us closer at a time when most teenage boys would be moving apart.

So fast forward four years. Next Wednesday John and I will return to ASU. It is the first time I have been back since we dropped him off. We will watch him receive his diploma, and later in the summer, we will drop him off at Duke for another 5 to 6 years to begin a PhD program. In those years he's become a man. He is financially self sufficient. He's done well academically but he has continued to struggle with depression. His longhaired roommate Dave turned out to be a stalwart, wonderful friend who is still his roommate four years later. And my heart is still tied to Nick despite the fact that he's a grownup. Parenting commits us to yearn after our children's wellbeing forever, except that with adult children, you have the same amount of concern and less control.

Now multiply that by two more children. Emily, away at college in Pennsylvania, who deals with migraines and, the social dilemmas of being an introvert in an extroverted world. Like every parent of a college student I've fielded long distance calls about her heartaches and joys. And still my heart is tied to her in all her days.

Hannah, the youngest, will leave home in about 15 months. Like the rest, she's looking at colleges a long way from home. Each of them, in their own polite way, have used the physical distance of college to help them escape the sometimes overwhelming responsibility of growing up as the pastor's children in a large church, continually on view to people and more or less forced to stand up in front of you all every Christmas Eve – a practice which will no doubt land all of them in counseling one of these days!

Yet I have discovered that our faith, which takes us through the early days of parenting, which gives us the stamina to keep up day and night with sick, fretful or naughty toddlers, also prepares us to face this stage... which keeps us up at night praying. And I understand the cycle begins all over again with grandchildren.

How does our faith in Jesus Christ give us the ability to weather these different seasons? It does, when we understand that we have no more control over the external events of our lives, or the choices of adult children, than we ever really did. But what we do have is a measure of control over our reaction to these events. Here is where a lifetime of faithfulness and a good understanding of God comes into play. Listen to Paul's advice. He tells us that we will be sanctified – that is, slowly made more and more like Christ -

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. And earlier in 1st Thessalonians we learned **"It is God's will that you should be sanctified."** (1 Thess. 4:3)

But how do we GET sanctified? I'm not able to become holy under my own steam – no way. I am far too headstrong for that. So I take comfort when Paul tells us that sanctification is a result of three continual, daily actions on our part, which could be collectively thought of as following God's will. Look at verse 16:

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess. 5:16)

Every single day, I have the choice of being joyful or not. Mostly it's easy; some days it's impossible. But, like a diet, you just have to pick yourself up after a bad one and try it again the next day. I have found that joy becomes a habit, much like being negative. If we are always in the habit of being critical – if nothing is ever quite right – we'll not be joyful. In one sense joy is something that we choose, and it's also something that God in his mercy surprises us with, as CS Lewis put it. You just have to be looking for it. Every day.

It's the same with prayer. Every single day I have to make the choice of whether I will run the same tired tapes in my head which worry or frighten or irritate or anger me, depending on their content, or whether I make the conscious effort (aided by the Holy Spirit) to shut them off and to pray instead.

Hannah has become a runner in this past season. And she confessed to me that she and some of her friends on the team often pray out loud as they are running. Running is so all encompassing – it takes everything they have to give in one short race – that she cannot help but look to God to help her do her best. I've noticed that some of her teammates point to the sky when crossing the finish line. They are giving the glory to God for that win or that effort. We are not in a sprint, but we are in a marathon, day by day. And marathons are won with endurance and pacing. So why not fuel our days with prayer rather than what we can dredge up from inside ourselves? I don't naturally have the resources to cope with my life. But with prayer, and joy, somehow I do.

Some of you only know me from this vantage point. You see me behind the lectern, with my hair combed and nice clothes on. At least one of you caught me in quite different circumstances last September. I was returning on a redeye flight from Los Angeles after a week of backpacking. I don't sleep well on planes, and so when I had two hours to wait for my shuttle to Rochester, I took out my mangy pillow (which had just spent a week in the bottom of my backpack) laid flat on the airport floor, and slept like the dead. When I arose, bleary eyed, and put on my glasses to look around, who should I see but Pat, from the morning Bible study. She came and greeted me, and thanked me for introducing her to Magic Underwear for traveling purposes! Talk about casting your bread on the waters... Ex Officio underwear ought to make me their spokesman. It just goes to show – no story from Bible study ever is wasted. For those of you who missed the magic underwear story last year, I'm sorry. But what meant a great deal to me was the card that Pat wrote last month, when she mentioned that airport incident and talked about what it was like to see me, looking like I'd just crawled through a hedge backwards, sleeping on the floor of the Minneapolis airport. I hope you realize that we're all in the struggle of life together. That is why Paul talks so much about how to get along... he says:

“Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.”

Good advice, isn't it?

I have spent four weeks reading the cards that you graciously gave me when you surprised me for my 20th anniversary at Bible study. And I was truly stunned, as you could probably tell. Not only stunned, but overwhelmed. But I'm really grateful that I had the privacy to read your cards, a few

each day, over a long period of time, when I could laugh or cry or smile over the memories they triggered. How did you ever put up with me in those early years?

I was 31 years old when we came to this church. Last Sunday marked not only 20 years to the day that I stepped off the plane with a 6 month old and a 22 month old, but it also was 23 years to the day that our daughter Kirstie died. And I have to say that the joys of the 20 year anniversary have overlaid and to a large degree cancelled out the grief of the 23 year anniversary.

In the past six months I went back and read my journal from that first year. It was wonderful, and awful. Here are a few snippets:

“I’ve been feeling really blue lately and very worried about next week – there’s Bible study, then I’m cooking for 35 Golden agers and singing on Thursday. Thursday night we’re going out with the Dahlstroms, and I have to find a babysitter! And Friday night the Smith, Greens and McQuains are coming for dinner. Saturday is Nicky’s birthday party. What a week, but I expect I’ll live through it.”

During those early years our house was continually filled with people. And my kids were continually sick. The first January I was homebound for 3 weeks during a stretch of kid illness. Here’s what I wrote:

“Today was pretty awful with the kids, who were reaching the end of their boredom rope and feeling good enough to be naughty. We finally went to the library. Nicky ran back and forth the whole time and I had to return 4 overdue books, one of which was 2 months overdue and had also been dropped in the bathtub. It was extremely embarrassing as the kids ran wild, the people stacked up in line behind me 15 deep and the librarian muttered under her breath. To make it worse, Jill Werre was the girl behind the desk! At times like that I feel totally ineffectual. No wonder I’m stuck at home. That’s all I’m fit for.”

But the strange thing is that my memories of my first year here are very happy. I made friendships that persist to this day. Until I read that journal I had completely forgotten the awful part of moving to a winter climate with two children under age 2.

So to you young ones I can say, I was there. And I lived through it. And children do grow up and become wonderful adult friends, not little tyrants that you have to chase 24-7. Look at them now!

And to you thirty somethings I can say that life changes a lot in your thirties. It’s a stage where we all have to deal with ambition, with pride, with discovering what we are really meant to do in this life. It’s a time when we either get serious about our faith or we begin to give it lip service, and it fails to protect us and prepare us when we really need it.

And to you forty somethings who are starting to deal with frustration and boredom and a sense of, is this all life has to offer?, I can tell you that your relationship with Christ, like a great friendship or a good marriage, can grow much deeper after twenty or thirty years than it ever seemed like after one or two. But that depth of a relationship with Christ requires commitment and time. Are we willing to put aside ourselves and pursue him? Or are we pleasing ourselves?

And to you hormonal middle aged women like me who fall in the next decade I have to say, being 50 has a lot to offer! We’re old enough to have some of our autonomy back and some of our time, and now it’s matter of disciplining ourselves to be the kind of woman we want to live with for the

rest of our lives. It's time to get serious. And Christ is there to guide us because, I hope, we've learned to trust him.

And to those of you who ten, twenty, thirty and more years older than me, I have to say thanks. Thanks for being women who were patient with me when I was a brash 31 year old pastor's wife. Thanks for being godly examples. Thanks for sharing your wisdom and your encouragement and your love and your prayers. I want to be like you when I grow up. And to all of us I want to say what Paul says at the end of 1st Thessalonians:

“The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

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