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Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.

July 4<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of the birth of our nation. On our nation's fiftieth anniversary, July 4, 1826, two of the founding fathers, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, second and third presidents, were still alive, although very frail. Adams was 90 and Jefferson, 83. Both men wanted to reach this anniversary because of this quote from Leviticus: "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you" (25:10). Adams wrote,

"This day should be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty."<sup>1</sup>

Doctors predicted neither man would make it to this day but both lived to see it. After saying his goodbyes to family and servants, Jefferson's opened his Bible at his home in Virginia and read from Luke's Gospel, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." He died that afternoon.

John Adams watched the celebrations from his window on that rainy day saying, "It is a great and good day." Retiring to bed, his breathing became labored. As he died around 7p.m., witnesses say a burst of light from the setting sun spilled into the bedroom.

Many tributes proclaimed God's hand in these deaths on America's day of Jubilee: "Heaven itself mingled visibly in the jubilee celebration of American liberty." Five years later, James Monroe, the fifth president, died on July 4. With three of the first four presidents dying on that date, people praised God's intimate involvement. They were signs to them of God's reality.

In Thessalonica, the deaths of the first generation of Christians inspired the church to ask questions. What happens when someone dies before Jesus returns? How do we have confidence in Christ's return? We, too, wonder. My loved one died. What happens now?

I opened my Bible and began reading from Thessalonians:

*"We do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters, about those who fall asleep, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thes 4:13).*

Paul's letter is not just 2,000 year old words to a distant church in another world, but a very personal reality for us, too. So this morning I want you to take this word personally and see the incredible hope.

Most of us in this room have lost someone near and dear to us, and that loss hurts. They have "passed away" we say. In biblical words they have "fallen asleep." You may see on tombstones the words "asleep in Jesus."

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Medved, *The American Miracle: Divine Providence In the Rise of the Republic* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2016), pages referenced include 6-18.

The euphemism “passed away” or “passed on” signifies journey to another place; passed from here to there, from earth to heaven. “Fallen asleep” implies “to wake up.” “Fallen asleep in Jesus is to wake up to the resurrection just like Jesus.

*“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also God will bring (back) with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus,”* says Paul. (v. 14)

Paul’s language here clearly says he got these words from Jesus. We don’t know when. He didn’t say he spoke on Jesus’ authority rather, “by the word of the Lord.” Perhaps he heard this when he himself had a near death experience—perhaps when he was stoned at Lystra, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. Maybe Paul had a dream or a vision and Jesus spoke to him.

He testifies that Jesus told him that your loved ones who have died in Him will be resurrected just as Jesus was. You have probably heard that. Here’s what you may not have heard: they will be raised up to meet Jesus before you (should you still be alive when Jesus returns).

Isn’t that the most interesting detail?

Paul wrote this letter less than twenty years after Jesus was resurrected. Many people who had seen Jesus rise were still living. They did not know when he would return, but thought Jesus would come back soon. But then, some of their loved ones began to die. We know of some of them—Stephen, and James, the brother of John. What would happen to them? Not an unreasonable question, in fact it is a perfectly legitimate question.

Paul says *take comfort about those who have died. When the day of the Lord comes, they will rise first.*

Let’s imagine that. Let’s imagine we are all here. We are the ones who are left until the coming of the Lord. In case you don’t know what will happen, he tells us:

- ✓ The Lord himself will descend to earth with a cry of command.
- ✓ You will hear the voice of the archangels. There are seven of them. Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel, and Remiel (or Jeremiel)
- ✓ You will hear the trumpet call of God.
- ✓ The dead in Christ will rise first.

Then, everyone else rises with them into the air to meet Jesus.

Mark puts it like this: “He will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens” (13:27).

Now I don’t know how it is going to happen but imagining if you were here still alive, you will experience this.

So, imagining again, the ones raised are going to be really happy! Incredible joy reflects on their faces. They are going to experience a very real resurrection. And when they do, not one past negative experience or difficult illness or painful or dreadful memory will matter at all. They will be joy filled, and so will you!

As Christians, we believe the dead will rise at the end time. But this passage tells us that it's going to be a huge celebration because they will rise first. So, when you think of your loved one who has died already, think of their joy at rising first! They will have the joy of being resurrected to see Jesus. We will see them.

Then, following their raising, still imagining, along with them, those who are alive will be "snatched up" with them to meet our king in the air.

The language used is one of power, a power that is greater than any airplane you have flown. It has the power to pull us out of death.

We will meet Jesus in the air and usher him to the earth when he will make all things new because the devil is done.

In ancient times, city leaders would go out to meet the honored guest and escort him along the final part of his journey into the city. The Lord's people will escort him to the earth—both those newly raised from the dead and those who have remained alive.

Imagine the hundreds of thousands of believers all over the earth being raised. Imagine all of us being with Jesus continually from now on.

Words will not be able to express your joy.

But Paul goes on. READ 1 Thes. 5:1-11

While we do not know the day, we will not be surprised. The reason we will not be caught off guard is that we live in the day. We do not dwell in the darkness, like those who have no hope. To do that, we must believe. We must continue to walk in faith no matter what your circumstances. That's what it means to not be blind to Christ.

Although you may be sad over the loss of your loved one, do not stay in the grief of death. Although you might wish you had said this or done that to show them your love, or you might have other regrets, let it go. Confess it to the Lord. Put it away forever, for the coming of the Lord is sudden, and you want to be ready.

We want to live in the daylight. We have learned from 1st Thessalonians that living in the daylight means:

To keep our bodies pure because you house two spirits, yours and the Holy Spirit;  
To stand strong under pressure;  
Remember that God has chosen you,  
So ask for the Holy Spirit;  
Remember that God is powerful,  
So have a habit of praying;  
Remember that we are in this together,  
So have a habit of giving;  
Build up one another because we cannot make it without community.

Look at the person on the left and right of you and say, “I am thankful for you,” and, “I am going to pray for you.”

Let the peace of Christ rule over all your hopes and concerns. Because of your peace, you will become known everywhere as the church who loves Jesus Christ. In doing this, you will live in the daylight, and thus in the confidence of His return.

Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

AMEN