

Over the centuries, there have been numerous predictions about the second coming of Jesus Christ, especially by the Jehovah's Witnesses. They first predicted that Jesus would return in 1874, then revised this to 1914. When these events did not occur as expected, they adapted their beliefs to claim that Jesus returned invisibly in 1914. According to their teachings, this marked the beginning of Christ's reign and the "last days," which they believe will eventually bring about the fall of world governments, the gathering of saints to heaven, and ultimately, Armageddon.

The subject of the second coming of Jesus continues to be discussed among scholars and theologians. The Epistle to the Thessalonians, composed by Paul along with Silas and Timothy, provides insight regarding anticipated events associated with the return of Jesus. I'll just refer to Paul as the writer.

I've noted in previous messages that the apostle Paul spent time ministering in Thessalonica but was ultimately compelled to leave due to ongoing opposition and harassment by leaders of the Jewish faith who objected to his inclusion of individuals outside their tradition in his ministry. [There were rules about who could worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and Gentiles could not go further than the Court of the Gentiles.]

Paul eventually ended up in Athens. He was so concerned about the new Christians in Thessalonica that he sent his trusted companion Timothy to pay a visit, who came back and reported that the Thessalonian Christians were continuing to grow in the faith - and in fact that their faith was ringing out like a bell across Asia Minor. In our Bible reading today we find that Timothy apparently brought some other news to Paul. These new believers had questions about the second coming of Jesus Christ. It seems Paul had been teaching at some point that Jesus said he would return and take believers with him into heaven. The Thessalonian Christians were expecting the imminent return of Jesus and naturally had questions about that teaching. In 5:14 Paul tells the Thessalonian church to encourage the disheartened - and in our passage today he sends encouragement to them. Since Jesus had been crucified, died and was buried, defeated death and then ascended into heaven, some of the believers had themselves died. So, one of the main questions they had was *"What would happen to those who died believing before Jesus' returned to take his followers into his presence in heaven?"* Paul answers that question, look at verse 13 of Ch. 4.

4¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

In ancient manuscripts we read the words of a Greek poet from Sicily, His name was Theocritus, and he wrote *"While there's life there's hope, and only the dead have none."*¹

Having taken many funerals over my years of ministry, in the African jungle villages, in the homeless community and in general society, I know there is a stark contrast between the funeral of a person who has committed his/her life to Jesus and relishing and being nurtured in the fellowship in a Christian community and the person who does not have that experience. I recently attended the funeral of a cousin whose children got up and spoke about how great he was, but their anecdotes continually pointed to a man who was an alcoholic who had failed them as a father. The service was conducted by a celebrant in a bowling club, and the wake afterwards was well catered for. But to get to the wake we had to make our way through the packed bar of family mourners and mates who just couldn't wait for the **free** drinks that were to flow a bit

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dum_spiro_spero#:~:text=The%20sense%20of%20dum%20spiro,case%20of%20a%20sick%20man accessed 20 January 2026.

later. It was such a sad occasion, with no sense of hope, and the very thing criticized about my dead cousin by his family was obviously a problem in their own lives – and they didn't realise or accept it.

In contrast, last year a friend knew she was dying, and so the Christian family organised a time where her Christian life and ministry was honoured in front of all her church friends and family. What a contrast. Hope shone through the whole occasion, that she would soon be in the arms of her Saviour. Such a contrast to the only hope offered in my cousin's funeral, that he had just 'gone fishin' with an Esky full of beer.

A few years ago, I conducted the funeral for a homeless woman who had died of a drug overdose. At the end of the gathering, her friends had chosen a song – it was Highway to Hell by AC/DC. Some of the lyrics are: *Livin' easy / Lovin' free / Season ticket on a one way ride / Askin' nothin' / Leave me be / Takin' everythin' in my stride / Don't need reason / Don't need rhyme / Ain't nothin' that I'd rather do / Goin' down Party time ... Nobody's gonna mess me around / Hey satan / Payin' my dues / My friends are gonna be there too / I'm on the highway to hell.*

Paul emphasises that as Christians we have hope of life beyond death. His words are something like what we find in the Apostles' or Nicene creeds where we say what we believe.

¹⁴ For 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.

Jesus promised he would return: *"I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3).* Paul tells us that this is all according to Jesus himself, for in verse 15 he says:

¹⁵ According to the Lord's word,

So we have the teachings of Jesus to his disciples here, and Paul wanted to pass on the words of Jesus to these new believers in Christ, to assure them that those who had died would certainly be raised to life by Jesus. He continues in verse 15

we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until 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 one another with these words.

In the gospels Jesus gave encouragement and warnings for those who are alive and await his second coming:

Jesus tells us there would be signs to watch for: *... wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes, distress of nations, and signs in the sun, moon, and stars (Matthew 24:6-8, 29).*

Jesus tells us not to be deceived: *"If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it... For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will provide great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:23-24).*

In our passage today, Paul goes on to instruct/encourage the Thessalonian believers about what will happen at the end of time as we know it – when the Lord Jesus will come again.

⁵ Now, brothers and sisters, 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 labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

We've already considered that the second coming of Jesus will be unexpected – but when it does happen all the people of our world will see Him and know the truth of what Scripture and Jesus foretold. His return will not be hidden.

Jesus tells us his return will be visible and glorious: *"Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).*

Paul tells us in verse 4: *But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.*

Jesus also tells us his return will be sudden: *His coming will be sudden, like lightning from the east to the west (Matthew 24:27).*

Paul emphasises we should be living each day prepared for when Jesus does return.

⁵ You are all children of the light and children 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 awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

Jesus also tells us to be ready: *"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:40).* In Matthew 25 there is the parable told by Jesus of the ten girls who were keeping watch for the bridegroom. There is a similar parable in Luke 12:35 *"Be ready for whatever comes, dressed for action and with your lamps lit, 36 like servants who are waiting for their master to come back from a wedding feast. When he comes and knocks, they will open the door for him at once. 37 How happy are those servants whose master finds them awake and ready when he returns! I tell you, he will take off his coat, have them sit down, and will wait on them. 38 How happy they are if he finds them ready, even if he should come at midnight or even later! 39 And you can be sure that if the owner of a house knew the time when the thief would come, he would not let the thief break into his house. 40 And you, too, must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him."* 'Be ready' is the message as we await Jesus to take us to be with himself.

Jesus does not know when he will return: *"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).*

Paul tells what the Thessalonian believers should do as they consider the second coming of Jesus.

*⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on **faith** and **love** as a breastplate, and the **hope** of salvation as a helmet.*

Faith, hope and love – Paul mentioned these words in 1:³ *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by **faith**, your labour prompted by **love**, and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

We have hope – the hope of salvation from sin now, and having hope in knowing that Jesus will return so that we will spend eternity with him.

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.

You will remember that it was expected that the Messiah would be an all-conquering hero, and Jesus did not meet those expectations when he lived among men and woman. However, to those who believed and are eagerly waiting for Him to judge and judge this world and its peoples, at his return he will appear as a conquering King, unlike His first humble arrival when he came as a suffering servant. *Mark 10:⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"

In 1 Corinthians 1:7 Paul tells us more about what will happen in the last days: *1 Corinthians 15⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.* So we find Paul, throughout his letters, telling us as believers to encourage each other and strengthen each other in the faith, as he states in verse 11:

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

This is what Paul prays for the young believers Philippi and no doubt in Thessaloniki: *1:⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.* A few verses later in Philippians 1:23 he says *I desire to depart and be with Christ.* And he states in Philippians 3:10 *¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. And in Philippians 3:²⁰ We ... are citizens of heaven, and we eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven.²¹ He will change our weak mortal bodies and make them like his own glorious body, using that power by which he is able to bring all things under his rule.*

This is the Christian hope – our hope – as we continue to look for the return of Jesus – the culmination of our hope – for, as Hebrews 11:1 tells us, *Now faith is being sure we will get what we hope for. It is being sure of what we cannot see.* [New Life Version].

I trust that you too, are looking forward to being with Jesus Christ in eternity, where the book of life will be opened to reveal our names, when Jesus, seated on the heavenly throne will say ⁵ ... *"I am making everything new!"* [Rev 21]. Nicholas [N. T.] Wright, a British theologian, puts it this way: *So there is a new body, a new creation, and that of course is anchored absolutely in the resurrection of Jesus. ... So ultimately, the figure of Jesus as the embodiment of the creator's love as the one who's already gone through death and out the other side ahead of us that is absolutely vital.* ²

Rev 7:⁹ ... and so we will rise with the Thessalonian Christians Paul wrote to – for we will see *a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

What a great and glorious day that will be! I hope that you are filled with expectation as you wait for Jesus to return.

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. [Revelation 22]

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuaohw1wzsk> accessed 22/01/2026