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1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:11

Series: Real Christians in Challenging Times

[PRAYER] Father, I'm grateful that we can come to you and we can entrust our lives to you. I thank you that you are in charge of everything that's going on, that you oversee, that you're bigger than any health crisis that might be taking place. Lord, we've had a tragedy in a world with the loss of this man under the leadership of a police officer, and it's creating significant unrest, it's raising significant issues about racial reconciliation. Lord, I ask that you'd be part of the solution. We pray for peace. We pray that voices would be heard, that changes would be made. Lord, we know that you've given us a mission and a message of reconciliation. So I ask that you would draw us together as believers of various backgrounds, cultures, and races in unity before you to trust in you. Lord, we ask that you would allow our differences to be heard, to be expressed, but that the unity that we have in you will draw us together in a way that is a testimony to the rest of the world of how you bring people together and how you empower us and you bring peace to our lives and unity. Lord, we need that in our lives today. We're asking that you would teach us. Give us wisdom to know how to respond to our neighbors or on Facebook or how to treat other people. Lord, we ask that you'd give us your grace. Draw us together and draw us to you. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

I'm going to ask you to open your Bibles with me now to 1 Thessalonians 4. If you have the booklet that we're using, I'd encourage you to open it up. It's a place where you can take notes and you can dialogue there for yourself so that in the future when you look back on this time in your life you will see it as an experience that God has done in your life and He's grown your faith. So it becomes a spiritual journal as you study God's word in depth. When you make a decision to move toward a goal in your life, it helps you as you're dealing with the daily ideas. If you make a decision that you have a financial goal, it helps you make decisions about what you're going to do with your finance. If you're making a decision about your health then it's going to help you make decisions about what you eat or how you exercise. Those are going to be real decisions that you make on a regular basis.

When I was a young teenager I made a decision that I wasn't going to rebel against my parents, I was going to serve the Lord, and it helped me during my teen years to say no to evil. Things, temptations that would come about, I said no to them. It also gave me the opportunity to say no to good things. Because it's often the good things that crowd out the best things in our lives. A goal that we have in life puts us on a track so that we know where we're going. When we come to 1 Thessalonians 4-5, Paul is telling us about the rapture, about the church, about the end times. He's telling us about what's going to happen and if we have our eyes fixed on that it helps us know how to live right now in our lives.

In fact I believe there are three practical solutions that God has given to us that come out of our study of the end times. There are some people who go into all kinds of depth here, trying to make charts and timelines and so on. Some of that we can do, some of it we can't based on the information we have in God's word. But in the end it comes down to the practical. How are we going to live now? I'm going to share with you some ideas about that as we move forward.

First I'd like to read our passage that starts in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Let's read this passage and then we'll talk about how God might use it in our lives. *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

This is a passage that teaches us about the rapture. I would like to honor two people as we get started here. The first person I'd like to honor is my nephew, Kevin Moffat. You can find him on Facebook and I would encourage anyone to follow Kevin. He's a godly man whose intent is to serve the Lord with his wife and lovely two children, and to honor God in what he presents on Facebook and so on.

He wrote to me last month and he said these words: "Hi, Scott. I hope you and yours are doing well. My family and I are all healthy and safe. God is providing for us in every way and I am grateful, joyful, and at peace in these uncertain times. The Anglican church that I've attended since I was twenty-one teaches that Jesus returns once. Well I've learned a lot about the rapture of Christ's church either pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib. I know that no one knows the hour or day of the Lord, but I was hoping to get your take in teaching about the rapture. Even though the Anglican church interprets scripture differently than other churches on this subject, by doing my homework and studying the many places the Bible describes this event, I'm believing that the rapture of the church will happen and this belief has given me hope as described in 1 Thessalonians 4. One final question, please. When Jesus ascended to heaven, was this an example of being raptured? Thank you, Scott, for your time, help, and wisdom."

So yes, Kevin, I am so grateful and as I mentioned to you in my response to your email, I was going to teach on this and I said wait till I get to this and then I'll share my answer to your question so that you can understand it. So part of this sermon is for Kevin and the answer to your question in your email.

But secondly I want to acknowledge Natalie Fox, who in a conversation with her mom just two or three weeks ago they were talking about the rapture. I'm not even sure how that came up. But as mom was describing that to Natalie, mom said to Natalie, "Are you going to be going up in the rapture? And how do you know?" Natalie said, "Yes, because I trust in God". And that is the right answer, Natalie. That is what we all need to know.

I want to encourage you today if you've never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior that you follow the example of Natalie and you trust God personally. That you give your life to the Lord. That you recognize that you need a Savior in Jesus Christ. Because when you get to heaven and God says, "On what authority do you come into my kingdom?" your answer cannot be "because I did more good than bad," or "I was a real help to a lot of people," or "I gave a lot of money to the church," or "I did a lot of righteous acts." Your answer is "because I trust in the righteous act of Jesus Christ to die on the cross for me so that I could rely on His blood." That is how we enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Well there is going to be an event that takes place called the rapture of the church and I want to show you what that looks like. So let's go back and take this passage verse by verse.

We start in the first verse and we see that he says to them – *I do not want you to be uninformed*. That means we need to get our information together. We need to know what the Bible has to say about this particular event. Now some people will gather all the information and they'll try to dissect it and they'll develop all kinds of academic dialogue about this. I think that's great. It's important for theologians to look at this subject and understand it and put it together, and even for us who are not theologians to understand what the facts are. But we have to take this and put it down into the practical level.

So notice I also highlighted the end of this passage where it says that there's a practical application here. We use the information that we glean here to encourage each other in the faith. In fact there are three things we are going to do as a result of understand end times and so I want you to understand those ideas.

Now as Paul is writing in this verse, he uses the word *fallen asleep* to describe death. We call that a euphemism. A euphemism is a nice way of describing something that's uncomfortable to talk about, like death. In English we use the word "pass away" or sometimes when we're talking about Christians we use the word "pass on." The idea is here that we're trying to make it easier to talk about because death is a hard thing to describe. Those euphemisms are helpful, but we want to be careful as we use euphemisms with children that because sometimes they think concretely. They're trying to wonder when you say "they went on a long journey" or "God took them home," they're trying to figure out what you're talking about when you're saying that. There's a point when we want to maybe avoid this subject because we're trying to make it easy with children. But I would just encourage you that there are other times when you want to be straight with kids and you want to talk about death with them. It's a part of our experience of life is to recognize that death takes place and children must understand that.

But notice in the passage that we as Christians don't think about death as a finality. We think about it in a different way than other people think about it. Notice he says there that *we don't grieve as other people who have no hope*. You see when a believer dies, you know that you're going to see that believer again someday. We have a hope in the resurrection of the dead and we understand that that's going to take place.

As Paul was writing to these Thessalonians, they had a concern. That concern was we know that Christ is coming back, we're eager for Him, we're excited as new believers to understand this exciting truth that Jesus is coming back for us. Well what about the people that have just died around us? What's going to happen to them? And so Paul is addressing that concern. He wants them to understand that yes we grieve. As Christians we grieve the loss of those we love. But we do so in a way that has a hope. Because we recognize that we will see those believers again someday. That's an exciting truth.

It's so powerful because I just think about some of the people I'm going to see in heaven and I'm eager to see again. I think about my dad whom I love very much. The more I live in life and the more I see the things that my dad did, he was a remarkable man, committed to the Lord, raising his children, passing on the faith to them. That is really powerful. I'm just amazed and I can hardly wait to see my dad again. That will be such an enjoyable experience. I hope that that's going to take place. I'm sure you have hope as well that you're going to see those people that you love, those people who have trusted Christ as their Savior and you're going to see them again in heaven and you're going to enjoy that experience.

But our hope isn't just in hope itself. Our hope is in something significant. In fact as Paul continues in this verse, notice that he says it's not just hope, it's faith. He says *we believe* something. And what do we believe? *We believe that Jesus died and rose again.* The fact that Jesus rose again is a significant theological statement that the power that Jesus had to overcome death is what gives us this hope that we too will overcome death. That's a big statement. We're so grateful on Easter Sunday. We celebrate the resurrection as our primary holiday of the year. Why? Because we're celebrating the fact that Jesus conquered death. That He is bigger than that. And it's the certainty that we too will be raised from the dead and we will see Jesus again and we will live with Him in heaven. That is a beautiful thing that we understand from this passage and we must recognize that it is a theological foundational truth that we believe in that provides us with our hope. We don't just have faith in faith. We don't just have hope in hope. We have hope in a faith that is based in a reality, and that reality is that Jesus Christ died on the cross for us and He rose from the dead.

Now as he continues on in verse 15, notice what he says. He says I have *a word from the Lord* for you. I love words from the Lord. Certainly on Sunday morning when I'm sharing from God's word, I'm sharing a word from the Lord. I'm sharing with you these truths that come from God's word. As I do, they are the word of God and they are being presented. But there is another idea sometimes that this word *a word from the Lord* is used. That sometimes I get a specific message for someone and I can share with them. "I believe I have a word from the Lord for you." And people have done that for me. That "I have an encouraging word or I have message for you that comes from God." I always say, "I believe I have a word from the Lord," because I may be mistaken and I want people to check it out. But there's a way that God passes His grace through individuals and we have words from the Lord that we can share with each other.

Now Paul has a special word from the Lord and he shares with us this word from the Lord. He says this: *that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.* See the Thessalonians are concerned about their brothers and sisters that have died just recently since they've become Christians and they don't know what's going to

happen to them. Paul wants the believers that are alive who are receiving this letter to know don't worry about it, they're going to be the first ones in line. They're going to be the first ones out of the graves. They're going to be up with Jesus before anyone else. We will follow them. So you don't have to worry about them. You can accept the fact and recognize that God has a special plan for them. So he's describing that to them.

Now in the next verse, in verse 16, he's going to lay it out very specifically. Let's go to that verse because in verse 16 he gives us the events. He's going to tell us what this is all about and what's going to take place on this special day. First he says this: *For the Lord himself*. This is not an assignment that Jesus is delegating to someone else. This is an assignment that Jesus is taking on Himself because this is very important. So the word *himself* is added to there. Not just the Lord. *The Lord himself* is enacting this event that we're going to be a part of. Jesus will be there. He's the one directing the traffic. He's doing these things that are mentioned in this passage.

It says – *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven*. He's going to come out of heaven and he's going to come down, he's not going to touch the earth at this point. He's going to come down to the clouds (we'll see in a moment) *with a cry of command*. This is an authoritative statement. This *cry of command* demonstrates Christ's authority. That He's directing the traffic on this day. He's telling what's going to happen and how it's all going to unfold.

When I read these words of the *cry of a command* that he's going to make on this special day, I'm reminded of the time when Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead. Jesus came to the tomb and He cried out and said, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus came out of the tomb and was risen from the dead because of the command of Jesus Christ. There are some who say, "It's a good thing He said 'Lazarus' before He said 'come forth,' because if He would've just said 'come forth' all of the tombs would have opened up and everyone would have come out." That's the authority of Jesus Christ.

He's going to come with this command. He's going to be giving directions. He's going to come with authority and this authority is accompanied *with the voice of an archangel*. Now is this archangel another being that's there also representing Christ? Or is Jesus just having this voice of the archangel? I don't know. But I know that it's a commanding presence that He has there.

And notice it also says – *with the sound of the trumpet of God*. What that means is that there will be that sound of trumpets at this time when we are lifted up at the rapture of the church.

My wife went to college in Corvallis, Oregon and she attended a church nearby. There was a Sunday that the pastor was preaching on these verses and he had prearranged for some trumpeters to be up in the balcony and on cue they launched into their trumpeting. A significant illustration, I'm sure, for those people who were listening. That the trumpets will blast when it's time for this rapture to take place. All a part of this kingly ceremony with all the pomp and circumstance that's involved in that.

Now when I think about trumpets I think about Terrell Stafford. Now Terrell Stafford is a member of our church with his wife and lovely daughter. Terrell is not only the head of the Temple University music program, but he also is a renowned trumpet player. He plays in a club in New

York City. Carrie and I and Ed and Joanne went and visited him and watched him play there. But he also travels around the world, various continents playing his trumpet. If you google him, just google Terell Stafford and you will see that he is a world-renowned trumpeter, one of the best trumpeters of all time. I'm so honored that he would be part of our church. Sometimes he brings his trumpet and he plays at church and it is great. I'm encouraged by that. I'm sure that when Terell sees the word *trumpet* in scripture he thinks about it differently than the rest of us and he'll be eager to hear those notes that will be played and see what's going on at this special event that expresses the majesty of God when He's coming back for His people.

Well he goes on in the passage and he tells us that *the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together.* Let's take those words *caught up together* for a moment. Because those words *caught up together* mean to snatch away. They are used mostly in the Bible in a negative way that a burglar comes in and snatches away something. They're used of the wolf who comes and snatches away the sheep. The idea is they're surprised. You don't prepare for it. You don't know that it's going to happen. It just surprises you and it takes place. There's one use of the term in a positive way that's a treasure verse. It says about God that He has a hand and He says that we are in His hand and *no one can snatch us out of His hand. He holds us securely and close to his heart.* That's a beautiful verse in scripture. Well this word (and I'm sure you've taken notes and jotted this down on the other side of your page), describes how we're going to be snatched away, surprised, and taken away up into the clouds. That's the word here: suddenly snatched away.

We use the term rapture to describe this. Now the term rapture is not found in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word and it means to snatch. We use the term to describe how we're going to be snatched away. So we describe this as the rapture of the church. The rapture of the church is this experience when we are caught up together in the clouds.

There are other times when there are words used to describe a theological truth in God's word, but the word itself isn't found in the Bible. For example the word Trinity is not found in the Bible, but it's a great word to describe the theological idea we understand about the Godhead. That He is one God that has three personalities. Thus we describe that as the Trinity. It's a great word, as is the rapture. So we use the word rapture to describe this idea of being caught up together in the clouds.

What is that going to look like? Well it's going to be amazing. In fact let's go to the question Kevin asked as his second question in the email about Jesus when He ascended into heaven. I want to take you to that verse and I want to show you what it looks like. Because that's a verse that helps us understand more about our rapture. Because it's referred to in that passage.

You see in the beginning of the book of Acts we have the continuing story of Jesus after the resurrection as He's appearing to many different people. As He appears to those different people He's revealing Himself and they're getting to see Him and understand Him. At one point they're on the mount there, they're all gathered together and some of the disciples ask Jesus a question. They say, "Jesus, is now the time when you're going to overthrow the Roman government and you're going to set up the kingdom of Israel on earth?" Jesus answered them by saying these words in Acts 1:7-11. *He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father*

has set by his own authority. We don't know what time it is. We don't know the date exactly. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In other words no, you're not going to set up the kingdom now. You're going to be the kingdom on earth right now and I'm going to empower you to do that.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white (angels) stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." So here they are looking up into the sky, as you might look at a balloon that's going higher and higher until it's enveloped by the clouds. They're looking and watching until these angels say, "What are you looking at? This same Jesus who went up into the heavens is going to come down in the same way." That means there's going to be clouds on that day. So if you get up and it's a cloudy day, you can say, "Today might be the day that Jesus Christ comes back."

See in this experience Jesus Christ is going to come back and He's not going to touch the earth. He's going to come back and He's going to catch us up. We're going to be going up to be a part of what He's doing and He's going to take us to be with Him. Notice (let's go back to 1 Thessalonians 4:17) it says – *caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* What a privilege to always be with the Lord. And that's something we can encourage each other about. That's why the last verse talks about *encouraging one another with these words.* Because when we encourage one another with those words we're saying hey, Christ is coming back.

I was talking to Carrie this week and she said, "What are you preaching on on Sunday?" I said I'm talking about the rapture. She says, "Well that's a good thing to be talking about right now." Because we're looking forward. That's what it does for us. We as Christians are looking forward to the end times and the fact that Jesus Christ is coming back for us. So we can encourage each other with these words (notice verse 18).

Let me take you now into 1 Thessalonians 5 where he continues this discussion about the same issue. He says in verse 1 – *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.* The point is you're not going to know when it is and I don't need to tell you when it is because there's nothing we can do about that. We do not know. It is imminent. It will come at any time. *For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*

Now what Paul is going to do is he's going to help us understand a little bit more of what we experience this today. What does the fact that Jesus Christ is coming back again mean for us now? How are we going to handle that? How are we going to respond? Because we are different than nonbelievers. I'm going to say that over and over again because the Bible says that continually. *We don't grieve like those who have no hope* is what he says in the last chapter. Here he says we live differently than people who are not believers because we know that Jesus Christ is coming back again.

Let's continue and read the passage here and see what he says. He says – *While 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.* In other words this end times event called the rapture is going to take place unexpectedly. We know it's coming; we just don't know exactly when. *But you believers 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. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but 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.* Three things: faith, love, and hope. *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.*

What he's saying is we are not like people who are unbelievers. We are people of the day. We are people of the light. We are different. We live our lives differently. The way we speak is different. The way we handle our money is different. The way we handle our emotions is different. We are different because we have convictions before God. They drive us to make decisions differently than other people would make decisions. And we know the end of the story. That Jesus Christ is coming back. So we live our lives differently than other people would live them because we know that Jesus Christ is coming back again.

He is coming back...we use the word imminently. That means at any time. He could come back today. He could come back any time. We never know when. And that's an important understanding because it causes us to live differently right now. We're not like unbelievers who get drunk or sleeping or are not paying attention, that's the idea. They're either distracted or they're not paying attention. We are paying attention, we are vigilant. We have an intent purpose that we're moving forward. We understand what God is doing in our lives and He's moving us in a direction and we want to know that and we want to follow Him in all the things that we're doing. We're living today knowing that Jesus Christ could come back at any time.

So I would suggest that there are three applications that drive us because we know this understanding of the end times. If you study end times passages you will find that these same ideas are encouraged in other passages.

The first thing I would suggest that we are inclined to do when we know this truth is that we're inclined to live our lives in holiness now. That we're living our lives knowing that Jesus Christ could come back at any time and we are determined to live with Him with all of our heart right now. You want to ask yourself the question in any event, if Jesus were to come back at this moment, would He be pleased to find me doing this particular thing? You see every action that we take is important. Every decision that we make is important. So we're making decisions today based on the reality that Christ could come back at any time. That God is growing us and we're intently focused on that and we want to know that Jesus Christ is doing a work in our lives now that is leading us to see Him face to face. We are motivated to live now as if Christ were coming back today. If you knew that this was the last day of your life, would you live it

differently? If you knew that Christ were going to come on the scene today and call you home, would you live differently? That's the question that we need to ask ourselves. Because in a study of the end times when we grasp this, when we get this truth inside of our hearts it prompts us to live our lives today with all of our hearts.

The second commitment that we make or the second motivation that we have when we study end times is the passion we have to share Jesus Christ with others. People need to hear the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save you from your sins. That you be assured of a place in heaven because of your understanding of Jesus Christ and your accepting Him into your life.

My life was changed when I met my wife. She was highly committed to the Lord and growing in Christ and I appreciated the interaction we had when we started working together in the same business for a bit. I just appreciated her a lot. It became clear that we were going to get married and our relationship grew. But one of the challenging things for us (because we were both very committed Christians) was that her parents didn't know Jesus Christ. That was a burden for us. I remember one time we agreed, Carrie and I came into their house, and we said, "We really want to talk to you guys." We turned off the TV that they were watching and we sat in front of the TV and talked to them and we said, "We are concerned about you and we just want you to know the importance of having Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. We just want to have said that to you. We want you to think about it, if you would, for your own personal life because we want you to be in heaven with us. We are concerned about you." Now in those moments they didn't make a decision to accept Christ. The TV was turned back on and life continued as it was on that day. But before both of them passed away, they each made a commitment to Jesus Christ, to accept Him into their lives. So I will see Dorothy and Bob, Mom and Dad, again in heaven and I'm looking forward to that.

See when we understand that Jesus Christ is the way to get to heaven and that He could come back at any time, we are passionate about sharing the gospel with people. We want other people to know this is important. Because other people live in the dark. They're easily distracted. They're not paying attention. They're just going along in life saying peace and safety and security. We know something different. We know that Jesus Christ is coming back again. It prompts us to live our lives in a different way.

I hope that you, as you read these verses, understand that idea so much that it changes the way you live. There is a third application that comes from this passage about how we live and it's this same one that's at the end of verse 11 that was the same application that Paul shared at the end of chapter 4. He says – *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.* Take these words that you're hearing. Take them and understand them. Understand that Jesus Christ is coming back again and encourage each other with these words because we all need to keep our lives in perspective. Things are difficult for many people. It's really challenging and it will be great when we get a new body. It will be great when we see Christ face-to-face. It will be great when we experience a reuniting with the believers that we have lost touch with or who have died before us. God has something special planned and when we keep that perspective it encourages us and encourages each other.

I encourage you that as you think about the end times that you allow it to change your life. Sure you might be one of those people that wants to go study Daniel and Revelation and pull it all together. That's great. Do it. When you're all done, ask the question so what? How does this apply to me? And you'll come to the same conclusion. Okay, I know Christ is coming back. There's some questions I can't answer. But I know enough about the end times to know this is going to change the way I live. Christ could come back at any time and I want to be serving Him with all of my heart.

Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and the teaching that you've given to us about the last chapters in this story of our lives. Lord, we know that some of us will die and some of us will be around when you come back in the rapture. So we ask, Lord, that you would prepare us for either scenario. That we would live for you fully with our hearts. That we would have the hope, we would have the faith in you and trust you for what you're doing in our lives right now. So Lord, give us an urgency in our lives to serve you in this moment and do what you've called us to do. We want to serve you with everything that we are and everything that we do. In Jesus' name, amen.