

## 'Forever'– Maintaining an eternal perspective

### Sermon 1: Faith, Love and Hope

Passages: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Matthew 24:1–8

Today we start a new series of sermons entitled “Forever”.

Now, the thesis that undergirds these 5 sermons (one sermon for each chapter of 1 Thessalonians) is that our post-modern world is losing its eternal perspective on life. We are so focused on the present...on the ‘now’...on the material world of pleasures, possessions, and parties...that we have unknowingly lowered ourselves to the level of mere animal.

You see, animals only think of today– –what they will eat, how they will survive, with whom they will mate. It’s all about the now.

But human beings were created to be different than this.

**Ecclesiastes 3:11** says that God “**has set eternity in the hearts of men.**” In other words, God created us to think beyond our present situation and our immediate desires, and to see our lives within the framework of ‘forever’. He made us to be like Him; to stand back from the world and see the big picture!

By fixating on the present (on what we will eat, what we will drink and what we will wear) we actually become less than human!

Of course, I’m not saying that it’s wrong to think about today. There’s nothing wrong with providing a roof over your head and putting food on the table. There’s nothing wrong with paying your bills and getting your kids through school. It’s just that, from time to time, we need a corrective...something that will lift our heads above it all. We need to be reminded of eternity, just to bring a balance back to our perspective, so that we can be all that God created us to be!

You know, there was a time (not so many years ago) when Christians were criticized for being “so heavenly-minded that

they were no earthly good”. The funny thing is, we rarely hear that criticism anymore! Instead, today’s Christians are being criticized for their lack of spirituality. We are being told that we offer far too little of a heavenly alternative. People say that we are so focused on the ‘now’ that we look just like everyone else in our neighbourhood—building the same big houses, amassing the same amount of junk, spending all our time and money on the same pursuit of individual pleasure, and worried (just like them) about the present problems of life. People wonder whether or not we are any different...whether or not we have a different perspective on life. People want to see **eternity** in us!

It’s interesting, when we turn to today’s text from 1 Thessalonians, that the people of the little church in Thessalonica were known, far and wide, as “spiritual people”. I say that because, in today’s passage, the Apostle Paul commends the church in Thessalonica for two things, both of which come out of an eternal perspective.

First, he commends them for having an amazing **faith**. Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 1, verse 8.

**“The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”**

This little church had a reputation for having a strong faith in God!

Why? What was the source of this strong faith? As we keep reading the text, we can see that these Christians were motivated by ‘**forever**’. That is, they were steeped in the knowledge that life is far more than simply today. These Christians were acutely aware of the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, would one day return from heaven.

Look at verses 9 and 10. It says that the all people of the region (in Macedonia, Achaia and beyond) “...**tell how you turned from idols to serve the living and true God...**”

One of the main reasons why people have idols is to gain security (financial, material and spiritual) in this present life. It may be through having a small temple (Buddhism) or statue (Virgin Mary) in your home. It may be through a rabbit's foot or a lucky charm. It may be through reading the horoscopes. These are all idols because they all try to promise us some sense of security in this present life. But interestingly, these new believers in Thessalonica no longer needed these things. Why? Because now, in Jesus Christ, they had an eternal perspective on life. They were able to see that He is in control in the present and that he is coming back in the future!

And so, verse 10 goes on to say... “**and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.**”

Now, before you freak out over those last two words, “**coming wrath**”, try to get this picture in your mind. Here are a group of Christians who are focusing their corporate attention on Jesus' return. They were waiting for this event to happen. They were confident that it would happen. And, they desperately wanted this to happen. Why? Not so they could escape from life. But, rather, so they could see this broken and sin-sick world fixed...healed in Jesus Christ! These Christians longed to see Jesus return because they longed for Him to restore all things, in heaven and on earth, to their original beauty and perfection. These Christians, you see, were waiting for Jesus to come back and eliminate every trace of evil from this world.

That's why verse 10 talks about God's **wrath**. God's wrath is not something to be afraid of! God's wrath is something to rejoice in! His wrath is our guarantee that, one day in the future, God will finally put an end to all the injustice and corruption and pain and

suffering! In His wrath/anger, God will finally declare that time is up – and, through His Son, He will physically purge this world of everything that has destroyed us and made us less than human. In wrath, He will finally break the stranglehold of evil that has kept humanity from truly living. It's a day to look forward to!

In fact, this vision of 'forever' is what made the Christians in Thessalonica so different. Since they knew that Jesus was coming back to fix this world and restore it to the Garden of Eden that it once was, these Christians could be totally free with their possessions; they could be generous, hospitable, open-handed. They didn't have to store up wealth or treasures on earth because they knew that had true riches waiting for them in heaven.

This way of life is what set them apart—it made them different. While everyone else was storing, and scheming, and collecting and conniving, they were giving their money away to help the poor, to set up orphanages, to take care of widows and the elderly! This is the way they showed their spirituality! This is the way they waited for Jesus to come back, by doing good deeds to help fix the world...in anticipation of what Jesus would one day do when He returned!

It's no wonder why the message of the Gospel rang out from them throughout the entire region and beyond! They were living with their eyes on 'forever'.

Indeed, I think the one word that describes this little church in Thessalonica is "**Contented**"—they were contented. They knew they had no reason to fear; no reason to worry; no reason to become self-centred hoarders.

Of course, the same should be true of us, today! Contentment should flow out of us...out of our eternal perspective. After all...

- We no longer need to manipulate the people around us to fulfil us (spouse, friends, family). We know that Jesus will return to fulfil us. That should make us content.

- We no longer need to gather our own resources around us to protect us or take care of us. We know that Jesus will return and that He will protect and care for us. That should make us content.
- We no longer need status or possessions to tell us who we are. Instead, we confidently look to Jesus' return to tell us who we are. That should make us content.

I recently heard a specialist in mental health being asked why so many more people today are depressed and even suicidal. Do you know what he said? "We ask too much of the present and it doesn't deliver!" Or, to put it another way, we haven't **learned** how to be content! We've been given so many substitutes for life that few people really know what it means to live. All these gadgets focus our minds on the present...on what we have and don't have... and we lose the bigger picture!

By allowing the light of 'Forever' to break into our minds, it will certainly help us to put life back into its proper perspective. This present world is not all that there is! **Jesus is coming back! A whole new creation awaits us!**

Earlier, I said there were **two things** that changed in the Christians of Thessalonica once they gained a glimpse of 'forever'. The first thing to change was that they became more **content**...more satisfied with life. But the second thing that happened is just as powerful. You see, their eternal perspective also made them **courageous...bold!**

I don't know about you, but I sometimes think that the people of today are becoming incredibly weak; I mean, they don't seem to stand up for anything. They don't take risks; they don't step out and try to make a difference. I know I'm generalising, and I realise that there are a bunch of people who are not like this...but generally speaking, I think it's true. We have lost our moral courage! That, I believe, is because we are so focused on **today** that we gain no vision of our links to the **future**. Because Jesus is

coming back, and because His return will be about restoring this unjust world to true justice and peace, that's what we should be on about in the present. Our eyes fixed on heaven helps us to be more engaged in fixing this world now.

So often, however, our eyes are taken off heaven and we focus solely on the present. Think about it:

- Why do we resist the Carbon Tax? Because we are so worried about today that we refuse to really consider the future of our planet.
- Why do people resist paying taxes? Because we are worried about the money in our pocket today, rather than the future of our nation.
- Why do we allow Coal Seam Gas exploration? Because we are keen to get the profits of today that we think little about the future of our water supplies.
- Why don't we reach out to the refugees? Are we worried that they'll come and take over our jobs?

We have little moral courage because we are consumed by the present. It's all about the 'now'—what we can get, what we can eat, what we can wear, what satisfies our appetite in the present.

That's why having our eyes fixed on Jesus' return is a healthy thing. No, I'm not talking about abdicating our moral duties on earth as some Christians have done, but reinvigorating them in the knowledge that Jesus has a purpose for this planet. We are here as His stewards, and He will hold us accountable for that task. This vision makes us bold and courageous.

The early Christians were bold and courageous. They freed slaves, stood up to the Emperor, opposed the pagan ritual of child sacrifices and the unjust treatment of foreigners. They welcomed strangers into their homes and used their resources to help the poor, widows and orphans. They were so focused on heaven and Jesus' return that it motivated to make a difference in this life.

And you know what? They got persecuted for their radically different vision of life!

- Verse 3—Paul speaks about their ‘endurance’ inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus.
- Verse 6– Paul mentions ‘severe suffering’.
- Ch 2:14—“You suffered from your own countrymen...”

And yet, despite this, these Christians didn’t give up doing the things they believed in! They were **courageous**! Why? Because they knew that Jesus was coming back one day.

Our post-modern world is losing its eternal perspective on life. We are so focused on the present...on the ‘now’...on the material world of pleasures, possessions, and parties. Sadly, the church is following the same path! There is little that sets us apart from the world around us...to such an extent that people wonder what the church stands for!

Let us open our eyes to the heavens and contemplate Jesus’ return. It will make us more spiritual...Contented and courageous.

Amen.