

Walking in Light of Christ's Return

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[0 : 0 0] This evening's reading is from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. It can be found on page 1188 of the Church Bibles.

It's 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, beginning at verse 12. Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you.

Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive.

Encourage the disheartened. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the spirit.

[1 : 0 8] Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all. Hold on to what is good. Reject 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. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks so much, Jack.

And let me add my welcome to you. It would be great if you could keep your Bibles open at 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. And let's join together in prayer and ask for God's help.

[2 : 1 3] Father, your word is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword. We thank you that you know us inside out, that you see into the very depths of our souls.

So we pray that you would address each one of us here this evening personally, and all of us together as a church family.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, in the spring of 1996, perhaps it was 1997, with Ordnance Survey maps and compasses with rucksacks full of supplies for the week, four intrepid young adventurers set off from the spittle of Glenshee in the Cairngorms mountain range on an adventure of a lifetime.

Well, perhaps not an adventure of a lifetime, but an adventure, certainly. A five-day expedition in the wilderness. And the specification of our Duke of Edinburgh expedition was that it was to be an arduous journey.

Arduous defined as requiring great effort. It was to be a difficult and tiring trek. Well, sure enough, five days later, we reached our destination.

[3 : 4 0] But the problem, the problem was that unbeknownst to us, way up in the hills above us, a representative from the Duke of Edinburgh awards scheme had been spying on us throughout the entire duration of our expedition, watching our every move.

She'd witnessed us completing practically the entire route on day one of our supposedly arduous journey. She'd witnessed the distinct lack of effort on the last days.

She'd witnessed the tomfoolery as these four twits were mucking around in the river, throwing pebbles at empty cans as target practice. And she very almost didn't award us the prize at the end.

Eventually, she relented. Well, the Christian life is an adventure. It's about following Jesus. We're on a journey together.

And Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica, this authentic model church that we've been hearing about over these past weeks in the summer, to encourage them.

[4 : 46] Paul's been writing to encourage them to keep on going, to keep on keeping on in their walk with Jesus. And he's been exhorting the church to be committed to one another in their walk with the Lord, to be committed to one another, strengthening each other in their pursuit of holiness as they're headed together towards a summit, which we've seen again in our passage this evening, is God himself, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the Christian journey is not a five-day expedition. It's not even a five-year plan. It's the adventure, literally, of a lifetime, a pilgrimage throughout the rest of your life, through good times, through hard times.

And though we're saved by faith in Christ alone, not by our own effort or performance, the walk with Christ can very often seem like an arduous journey.

It's not a walk in the park, the Christian life. And so if you were to plot the trajectory of your life, if you were to plot your life's trajectory over the course of the next two, three, four, five decades, if we're still around, where will you be then?

Where are you going to be in four or five decades? We're not used to be thinking about that kind of longevity, are we? I appreciate that we're not all of us going to be around in half a century, myself included.

[6 : 33] But 40 to 50 years' time, are you going to be more prepared or less prepared for Christ's return? More or less ready to meet him?

More or less fit for eternal life? And maybe you're here this evening and you're giving serious consideration to following Jesus.

You want to know what's involved? You want to count the cost? Well, that's wise. And these verses are great for considering the cost involved in the Christian journey.

Maybe you're already a Christian, but you've been finding recently a growing desire in your heart, perhaps over the summer, to take your faith a little bit more seriously.

And you want to take steps to live out your Christian life a little bit more consistently, a little bit more deliberately, maybe a little bit more progress you hope to make this year.

[7 : 31] Or maybe you've been a long-time follower of Jesus, but you've hit a bit of a plateau of late, maybe lost the way a little bit, spiritually speaking, run out of steam, longing to get back on track, longing to recover some of that passion and energy you once knew in your Christian walk.

Well, whoever you are this evening, these are great verses for resetting our perspective, fixing our eyes on that long horizon towards Christ's return and preparing ourselves to go the distance.

We're in it for the long haul. And so as we set out this evening, we've got two headings. They're in the sheets and the handout if you want to follow along. Firstly, towards the coming of Christ, getting things right with each other.

And secondly, towards the coming of Christ, getting things right with God. So firstly then, towards the coming of Christ, getting things right with each other.

We're on an adventure, but it's not a solo expedition. It's not a solo expedition, the Christian journey. We're in it together as a church family.

[8 : 41] And these verses help us as a church family to function in relationship with one another and with our leaders in our walk with Jesus as we wait for his return.

So if you're on a big adventure, you want to be getting on with everybody else on the expedition. And the expedition leaders play a very important role in the good functioning of the expedition team.

So first up, Paul gives instructions on how we're properly to relate to our leaders in verse 12. So if you want to follow along with me from verse 12. Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you.

Hold them in the highest regard, in love, because of their work. Well, we're told three things about leaders, three characteristics. Six leaders are those, firstly, who work hard, who strenuously labor amongst the flock and minister to you.

And secondly, leaders are those who care for you in the Lord, who love you and care about your spiritual well-being. And so it's motivated by that concern for you, that love in Christ, that thirdly, leaders are those who will, if necessary, admonish you, challenge you lovingly, honestly warn you, if you're going astray.

[10 : 09] And that's not always easy to take, is it? But it is important. And I remember going up the Cobbler, as a group, some years ago.

If you don't know it, it's a brilliant mountain, not too far from here, out in Arica. But the Cobbler's not necessarily, what you call, an arduous climb.

But when you get to the summit, there's a rocky outcrop at the top. And you have to sort of crawl through a hole in the rock to get to a narrow ledge on the other side, a very steep, sheer cliff face on one side.

You're quite exposed before you pull yourself up and round to the top of the rock. This section can be dangerous if you're not careful. I remember admonishing, I guess you'd call it, certainly warning those in the party who hadn't done the walk before that we needed to take this bit, at least, a little bit more seriously to quit goofing around and respect the mountain.

Why did I do that? Because I cared about their safety and didn't want anybody to come to harm. So if your leaders admonish you, they do so motivated, hopefully, out of loving concern for you.

[11 : 31] To give you an example of this in a spiritual context, I'm forever grateful to an elder in a former church who admonished me, kindly but severely.

Maybe mentioned him before. But after years away from church, I'd been back to church for about a year or two before I had a bit of a wobble. And to tell the truth, I was struggling, really.

And this godly man noticed my absence for maybe about two or three weeks, my absence from church. Well, he got in touch with me and gently, lovingly, but severely, in no uncertain terms, firmly warned me that I was in grave danger of falling by the wavesides.

It would have been easier for him not to bother, but I am so glad to this day that he did the difficult, loving thing and gave me the kick, kick up the backside that I needed, really.

So that's the characteristics of the good leader. Well, your leaders are those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, who admonish you.

[12 : 45] So how are we to relate to them? Well, we are to acknowledge and respect them. That's what it says. Hold them in the highest regard, not because of their office or title, but because of their hard work among you.

Acknowledging them. Now that means we're going to need to recognize who they are. So who are the leaders at St. Silas? It's not just Martin, not just myself and Amy, although certainly there's a responsibility under the Lord for your pastoral care.

Not just the staff team or the vestry, the governing body, although they certainly all labor hard, often behind the scenes. who are the leaders?

Well, one definition of leaders is a leader is somebody who has people following them. And to use expedition analogy, your leaders are those who are journeying with you, perhaps a few steps ahead of you, leading the way, showing the way.

And by the way, if you've not got people following you, then you're just going for a walk. But by that definition, a leader is somebody who has people following them. There's all sorts of leaders here at St. Silas.

[14 : 01] If you're in a small group, a roots group, or a growth group, you've got leaders who work hard preparing studies for you, praying for you, keeping you going. If you're on one of the ministry teams and the kids team or the welcome team or something like that, then you've got team leaders.

So do you hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work? Well, that's what your leaders need from you, so that the leaders can function and flourish, so that you can function and flourish.

So that's the leaders. But Paul knows, however, that the success of any expedition depends on good relations among the whole party, all of us together being committed to one another.

And I love how nuanced Paul is here. He writes, verse 14, we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak.

So this takes just a little bit of social awareness, a little bit of emotional sensitivity, doesn't it? Or else we can end up discouraging the disheartened and not being much help to anybody.

[15 : 15] And if you're on some kind of arduous journey, there's always going to be some who are struggling. But they're going to be struggling for different reasons. Some are going to be disheartened.

Waking up with blistered feet and stepping into those soggy wet socks again can be discouraging. Or losing one's sleeping bag.

This actually happened to a good friend of mine lost his sleeping bag on an overnight hike. It can be quite disheartening to lose one's sleeping bag on a camping trip in Scotland.

Well, in any expedition, there's also some who are weaker, struggling to keep up one way or another. And if you're going up a mountain and some of the parties are striding on ahead like mountain goats scrambling uphill like that, it can be quite exhausting if you're at the back and you eventually catch up with these mountain goats sunbathing in their rest like that, only for them to set off again as soon as you finally caught up with them.

I wonder what would be the equivalent in our small groups. Somebody new joins your group, somebody who's new to the Christian faith perhaps. How can we be kind to them as they get up to speed?

[16 : 34] And perhaps you're feeling weak this evening in your Christian journey. Perhaps it's been a struggle, a bit of a struggle this past while. Maybe you're feeling disheartened.

Disappointments in relationships, disappointments in health, disappointments in work. Things not panning out just as you'd have hoped or expected.

You need brothers and sisters around you, don't you, to come alongside you, to help you keep going along the way. Maybe that looks like just catching up with somebody you know who needs a chat this week, catching up for a coffee, opening up the Bible together, praying for them and encouraging them in that way.

Encourage the disheartened. Help the weak. If you're idle or disruptive, you need something different. Again, something a bit more like the godly elder who challenged me to think about the patterns and lifestyle I was keeping.

Now let's note, this isn't just the responsibility of the leaders. We all need to be looking out for one another and it requires discernment and sensitivity. But there's some things that Paul mentions that are universal if we're going to keep going together on this journey.

[17 : 55] So end of verse 14, we're to be patient with everyone because we're all sinners and we all need people's patience. Verse 15, make sure nobody pays back wrong for wrong because two wrongs don't make a right.

Instead, we're always to strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone. That way, we'll have a better chance, won't we, of living in peace with each other. And it says, a mark of living in peace with each other that he instructs them right at the very end of the letter in verse 26, to greet each other with a holy kiss.

That was the culturally appropriate thing to do in the first century AD. So what's the 21st century equivalent in our culture? Well, one staff member, anonymous, made a suggestion that the holy side hug is the 21st century equivalent.

I don't think they were entirely being facetious. But actually, we've already performed our modern equivalent this evening, haven't we, in our time of turn and greet.

And by the way, I was reading something on this week that made me laugh. I think it's tongue-in-cheek, I'm not sure, but a theologian wrote, for me and others like me, one of the least enjoyable parts of our Sunday service is the time of greeting one another.

[19 : 21] Most introverts feel like crawling under the nearest pew during this awkward exchange. Well, perhaps that resonates with you depending on whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, but he goes on.

And yet, as uncomfortable as it often makes me feel, it is necessary for the strengthening of our church, community, and family. In this Christian journey, friends, we need to be committed to one another.

We need to be getting along with each other. We need to be greeting one another and doing this together. So that's the horizontal dimension. But at this point, Paul calls us to stop and look up towards the summit that we're heading towards.

The summit of God himself, of Christ returning, reminds us that we need to be getting things right vertically too. So that leads us on to our second main heading, towards the coming of Christ, getting things right with God.

We're on an adventure, but it's not a solo adventure. It's a journey we do together, navigating the peaks and the valleys in community at church.

[20 : 32] And under the godly leadership and guidance of those entrusted with our care, it is an arduous, challenging journey for sure, but it is not one undertaken in our own strength.

It's not in our own strength. And that's just very important for us to grasp. The whole letter is bookended with this idea of grace.

It's all God's gift for us. So just flick back a page to chapter 1, verse 1. Paul opens his letter. Grace and peace to you.

Flick back to the end of chapter 5, verse 28. Let the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. You see, the one who calls you, verse 24, the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

He is our strength in times of need. He is with us through the valley and it's all ultimately his doing. So we're in relationship not just with each other, we're not just with our leaders, but with God.

[21 : 45] We're in relationship with God. We were made to walk with him. And these verses here at the end of 1 Thessalonians help us in nurturing that relationship with God through Christ Jesus.

In verses 16 to 18, we're given three characteristics of God's will in our lives. Three defining traits in verses 16 to 18.

We're to rejoice always. We're to pray continually and we're to give thanks in every circumstance.

Now, Paul's not asking us to do anything that he's not already doing. So in verse 2 of chapter 1, Paul writes, we always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.

In verse 10 of chapter 3, night and day we pray most earnestly for you. So what would that look like for us at St Silas?

[22 : 59] What would that look like for us as a church? What would that look like in practice? So grounded in the gospel, so thankful for our salvation in Christ Jesus that we're always rejoicing, always thankful.

And it's the kind of thing that can become contagious, can't it? A friend of mine became a Christian when he joined Mercy Ships, the same thing that Ronan McGeoch, one of our young adults, is on at the moment.

And my friend actually thought he was a Christian before he went on Mercy Ships, but then he realized he wasn't halfway through the journey. He realized that he was just self-righteous, trusting in his own performance.

But it was through the singing, through the worship, the times of worship, that he'd look around and he'd see the rest of the crew worshiping like that, filled with thankfulness, full of rejoicing.

He realized that he didn't have whatever it was that these folk around him had. He realized that there was something desperately missing in his life. That's how he got saved, by witnessing the gospel-centered rejoicing and thankfulness of those around him walking in the light of Christ's return.

[24 : 09] And by the way, he's now a pastor laboring among Christ's flock. Thankfulness, rejoicing. We also need to be a prayerful people.

We need to be a people dependent on the Lord's help throughout this journey, a people committed to prayer. prayer. We may be weak, but we have a God who is strong, who's a mighty deliverer, who invites us into relationship with himself through Christ.

So what might it look like for us to be praying continually? Well, let me tell you about a little-known monk from the 16th century.

Brother Lawrence was an uneducated man, by many respects, an unremarkable man who ended up as a cook in a Carmelite monastery in France.

And there he learned to cultivate a prayer life that extended continuously throughout the day, whether he was on his knees in his room at set prayer times or attending to his daily chores in the kitchen, praying.

[25 : 19] More or less continuous conversation with God throughout the day. And his little book, Practicing the Presence of God, has now become a devotional classic.

In it, he writes, I'm doing now what I will do for all eternity. I'm blessing God, praising him, adoring him, and loving him with all my heart.

So how might that translate into your own lives? Well, like Brother Lawrence, you could be praying while you're doing the washing up, praying while you're walking to work, praying at the gym.

Although admittedly, Brother Lawrence probably didn't have a gym membership. You could be speaking to God at any time. And that's not to say that we shouldn't also have set apart times for being in God's word each day and more focused times of prayer like that.

But just imagine the difference it could make to your life. How would it be instead of idly scrolling down through your phone? You simply inclined your heart to God in prayer.

[26 : 30] Wouldn't it be great if this year at St. Silas in our Christian walks we committed to cultivating our prayer lives at St. Silas? What a difference that would make in the light of eternity.

Now we're also equipped for the journey by the Spirit's enabling work in our lives and in our church, ministering God's word to us. This, Paul says, again requires our discernment.

So reading from verse 19, Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all.

Hold on to what is good. Reject every kind of evil. To use Paul's analogy, the Spirit is like a fire and we need to be careful not to quench it, not to pour water on the flames of the Spirit so to speak.

And according to these verses we're putting out the flame of the Spirit when we treat prophecies with contempt. Now I will admit that I'm skeptical if somebody, especially somebody I don't know comes up to me and tells me that they have a direct word from God or something like that.

[27 : 45] I'm skeptical of that. I've seen first hand the misuse and abuse of this gift. However, Paul's response is very realistic.

Paul doesn't correct the abuse of this gift with commanding the disuse of it. Paul doesn't correct the abuse of this gift by commanding its disuse.

He says, yes, that happens, so test everything. But don't despise God's gift. If you're a Christian, you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

You have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. You have the gift of the Holy Spirit. And we're called as Spirit-filled believers to bring God's word to bear on each other's lives, to minister God's living word to each other.

So if somebody comes up to you who knows you and cares for you, perhaps from your roots or growth groups, and shares with you a word that exhorts you or encourages you in some way by applying God's word pertinently into your lives, perhaps even speaking into your situation more profoundly than they could even realize, do not despise it, but test it against Scripture.

[29 : 09] It might not be comfortable always, but hold on to it, receive it if it's good, let go of it if it's not. A few years ago we were scrambling a few friends and myself along the top of the Akir Ridge in Aran, a horseshoe ridge on the Isle of Aran.

We got to a bit called the Bad Step and it wasn't immediately clear what our next step should be. The Bad Step was living up to its reputation. We managed to scramble down to a ledge some five meters below and when we got there on this small ledge you could see down about 30 meters and you could see it was basically a dead end.

So we shouted back up to the rest of the group no, this is not the way don't come down here and then lo and behold to our surprise a few minutes later out of nowhere a voice shouted up from way down below and believe it or not a mountain rescue guide had appeared happened to be in the vicinity when I shouted up and he'd guessed by our shouts what had gone wrong he was able to redirect our steps back to safety well from time to time we are called to be a bit like that mountain rescue guide speaking truth in love from God's word to one another to make sure we're helping each other stay on course and to keep us in safety to keep on pointing each other to the summit you and I brothers and sisters are on a journey literally on the adventure of a lifetime pilgrims on the way where the summit and the climax is when

Christ returns and so however difficult and tiring it is so it may seem like an arduous journey what Paul's prayer at the end reminds us is that all the heavy lifting is already being done for us verse 23 may God himself sanctify you through and through may your whole spirit soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it so it's not so much it's not so much that we're propelling ourselves up from below but that God himself is pulling us up drawing us up from above as it were all the hard work has been done for us by the same God who has chosen you the same God who has chosen you and done that work of salvation through Christ's death is the same God who calls you home is doing that work of sanctification of purification through the spirit in our lives purifying us preparing us for Christ's return preparing us for that glorious vista at the summer when Christ returns and isn't this a great note for us to end on the one who calls you is faithful he will do it this is the only confidence we can have given our human weakness but it's the only confidence we need he is faithful and he will do it let's pray father we thank you for your promise to us that one day

Christ will return we look forward to the day when we will be with him forever sanctified through and through blameless even would you help us therefore to heed Paul's instructions for how we are to live in the meantime in light of that here at St Silas and the church family here as a Christian family journeying together towards that goal dependent not on our own strength Lord but through prayer and the ministering of the Holy Spirit in our lives confident that at the end of the days you are faithful and you will do it in Jesus name Amen we're going to respond now by singing two hymns and Andrew and the band are going to lead us in that statement