

Do you remember May of this year? Some of you may have been finishing up high school in your hometowns. Others of you were looking forward to summer plans. Well, summer has come and gone and we're getting ready to say bye to fall and hello to winter in about a month.

I mention May because back in the middle of May we celebrated Ascension Day on Thursday the 18th. We read in the book of Acts that an angel said to the disciples, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”** Now, almost exactly six months later, we are getting to a season in the Church Year where we learn that Jesus is coming back.

Back in May, we debunked three myths about Jesus' Ascension. Here are the three facts: first, that Jesus is still present, but in a hidden way, namely, through the Word and the Sacraments. Second, Jesus remains fully man and fully God. He will never cease to be human. Third, Jesus' Ascension is not an end, but a beginning of His ministry as He works through the Church. We are in the time of the Church doing ministry in Jesus' name and by His power.

Today as we consider our lesson from 1 Thessalonians, we will debunk three myths regarding Jesus' return. Our first myth is that living Christians will have it better than the ones who are asleep.

This seems to be the issue at hand in our text today. Paul writes, **“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.”** We don't exactly know the problem that the church in Thessalonica was experiencing. It seems that the Thessalonians were afraid of missing out, they were afraid that those Christians who died before Christ's return would not be raised or somehow be second class citizens.

Many of the converts in Thessalonica were pagans, so they came to the church with some false ideas of the afterlife. Death for pagans was a bleak prospect: languishing in a river, pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down before you got to the top, and so on. They had no concept of resurrection. To add to the disadvantages, Acts 17 tells us that Paul stayed in Thessalonica a short time, one scholar estimates only a couple months. Our new member class meets an hour once a week for ten weeks. Imagine a new member class like that and then the pastor says, goodbye new believers, now you can run the church! Likely that's an extreme example, but you can get the picture of the deficiencies of their teaching.

Thus, the fact of the matter is that Christ is coming for both the living and the dead. Paul continues, **“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.” We dwell on the promises of Christ which assure us that the dead in Christ are no better off than those who are living and vice versa. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let’s use an analogy, as we consider the fact that yesterday was Veteran’s Day, it’s important to understand that Veteran’s Day is different than Memorial Day. Veterans day is for servicemen and women who are living, and Memorial Day is for those died in service. One is not a better holiday than the other, when we get to heaven to talk to those Christian soldiers who died in combat, they would say they did it to protect those Veterans who did make it back, and Veterans live to honor the sacrifices made by the soldiers who died in service to their country.

How much more applicable is this to our situation as Christians as we honor those Christians who have gone before us, especially those who died for the faith, and we seek to live lives worthy of their example even as they lived faithful lives that we might follow faithfully in their footsteps.

Our first myth debunked matters so that we are not to grieve like others who have no hope. Doctrine is life, and we take the teachings of the Bible serious that we can comfort one another with the power of the resurrection when disaster strikes, and we lose a loved one. Just as the first time a marksman ever fires a rifle shouldn’t be on the battlefield, so too, the first time a Christian considers the teaching on the resurrection of the dead shouldn’t be after the tragic passing of a loved one.

Our second myth is that there will be a rapture of Christians. This false teaching is the water we swim in as American Christians. Even just last month a lady from church mentioned she was hearing about the rapture on the Christian radio in the car. It’s featured in bestselling movies and books such as the Left Behind series. Maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker, in the case of rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned.

The rapture is part of an erroneous end times teaching called premillennial dispensationalism which purports that Christians will be taken away into heaven to avoid a seven-year period of hardship on earth called the tribulation. After the seven-year period, Jesus will come again and establish a thousand-year kingdom before He judges the world.

Those who support the teaching of the rapture look at a passage such as 1 Thessalonians 4:17 **“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.”** This, they say, is a reference to the seven years of Christians being taken out of the world while all hell breaks loose during the tribulation.

I don't have time to pick apart every detail of premillennial dispensationalists in this sermon, a lot of it has to do with the book of Revelation, and I invite you to attend our Bible study on Revelation after worship to learn more on how to properly interpret that challenging book of the Bible.

What the Bible does teach on the rapture is that there won't be one as such. Christians will meet the Lord in the air and return to earth. This word meet in Greek is a technical term for those who go out to receive a delegation. You go out to meet a king or other dignitary, then you go back into the city. In fact, it also occurs in our Gospel text as the Virgins go out to meet the bridegroom. The point is not that the Virgins spent the whole evening outside with the Groom, they met the Groom, then went into the wedding feast.

When my kids see me coming home from church, often they will run out to greet me. They'll even sometimes open the door to my car as soon as I park. But we don't spend the rest of the night in the garage. We go into the house for dinner. This is the image Paul is painting for us in our Epistle text today. With glorified bodies, we—both the living and the dead—will meet Christ in the air as He returns then we'll go back to earth to enjoy the new heaven and new earth described in the book of Revelation.

This matters because Christ calls us to keep an eye on the skies, because help is coming soon! Last month I read the book *Unbroken* which follows the life of Louis Zamperini who spends over two and a half years as a Japanese POW in World War II. He was there in Tokyo as one of the first B-29 Superfortresses flew to do aerial photography of Japan's capital city.

“In the barracks, the men peered out the windows. Something was different; the guards were gaping at the sky as if, ... “they were looking for the Messiah.” Louie, like all the POWs, had no idea what kind of plane it was. Then a POW who'd just been captured said that it was a new American bomber called a B-29. A cheer rang out. Men began shouting, “B-29! B-29!” The bomber was the most beautiful thing that Louie had ever seen. Across the bay, masses of civilians stood in the streets, looking at the sky. As the plane passed into the civilians' view, Frank Tinker heard the people shouting, sounds that blended into a roar.... “It was not their Messiah,... but ours” (*Unbroken*, pgs. 249–250).

Paul concludes our text writing, “**Therefore encourage one another with these words.**” The teaching on the end times is a doctrine of comfort. We like prisoners of war, still struggle against sin, death, and the devil look to our liberation coming from the skies. Our Messiah is no mortal man or a machine of war, but Jesus Christ who will come in the same way the disciples saw Him go into heaven.

I want to conclude by debunking one last myth. There will be a thousand-year reign of Christ. For this one, we need to turn our Bibles to Revelation 20.

“and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.” Various Christians divide themselves into various camps on this topic. The thing they have in common is a literal thousand-year reign of Christ here on this Earth.

A proper understanding of this is that The thousand years is symbolic for the time between the Ascension and Second Return. All throughout the book of Revelation, there are symbolic numbers, and the thousand years represents one of completion. Why this matters is that we’re in the end times even now. This reign started at His Ascension and continues until He returns again. The upshot for me and you is always to remain ready for the end which could come at any moment.

Jesus said, **“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”** As we see scary things in the news. As we see wars and rumors of wars, we need not pull out our Bibles to start to decode a complex series of events, rather, we can comfort one another with the Word of Hope that Jesus is reigning over all even now, and help is coming soon, not after a thousand-year reign. Amen!