

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.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It was only a few weeks ago that our Wednesday services included a look at St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, including our text for today. In his letter, Paul writes to encourage the Thessalonians after persecution forced Paul to leave that area. But he also addresses some questions that are as prevalent today as they were in those early days of the church. In Paul's day, as now, people want to know the time that God has planned for His day of judgement. So, before we look at what Paul says let me ask you about your EQ—your Eschatology Quotient.

Now, I may have already lost you, because you are wondering, "what is eschatology?" Simply put, eschatology is the study of the "last things". We think of all that Scripture teaches about immortality, resurrection, life after death, the second coming of Christ, final judgment, and end of the world.

So, let's ask a few simple questions to see how your EQ measures up:

1. *The Lord has promised that He will return again at the end of the world.* Yes, that is exactly what the Lord has promised. In the verses after our Gospel lesson today, Jesus told the disciples: ***"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."*** (Matthew 25:31-32, ESV) Even as Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection, two angels appeared to the disciples and assured them: ***"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."*** (Acts 1:11, ESV) And Paul says in our text: ***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.***
2. *Jesus gave us signs that would precede the last day.* That also is true. The disciples asked when He would return, and Jesus gave them a list of signs, such as those we often see now. He spoke of signs in the sun, moon, stars. There would be wars and rumours of wars. There would be signs in nature like famine, flood and earthquakes. Jesus also spoke of false prophets who would seek to lead people astray and the persecution that would be brought upon His church.
3. *The Bible contains a hidden code that allows us to know when the Lord will return.* This is not true. In fact, Jesus emphasizes again and again: ***"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."*** (Matthew 24:36, ESV) We are told that the coming of the Lord will be like a thief in the night. Who knows when the thief will strike? While we are not told when the Lord will come, we are urged again and again to be ready for that day.
4. *The Lord will come before the last day to take his people out of the world.* This also is not true. Paul says in our text: ***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.*** There is no reference in Scripture to a secret / pre-judgement day return of the Lord. If anything, we would refer to this as a major media event. Trumpets will precede His appearing. The whole host of heaven will join Him. Tombs will be opened and the bodies of the faithful will rise to be united with their souls in the glory of eternal life. Rather than being secret, it will be impossible to miss all that is happening. Paul also adds: ***that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.*** Paul is talking to believers. The *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord* are the Christians still in the world, looking to the coming of the Lord

5. *Christ will judge both the living and the dead.* Yes, this is true. He will separate believers and unbelievers. For us, it is the day that the Lord vindicates His people, declaring that we are His forgiven and redeemed people because we have believed in Christ. For unbelievers and all who rejected His grace and mercy, it will be the saddest of all days, when their eternal fate is sealed in hell

Now these are the easy questions to ask and to answer. Hopefully you did well on the quick quiz. If you know these things, you really know what you really need to remember. Yes, there are many areas that we could discuss. There are many places where people are concerned, confused and uncertain. There is so much misinformation that comes as people obsess over the end times. That was one of the things that Paul tried to address in 1 Thessalonians, but that led to more questions which he addressed in his second letter to this church.

Today, as in Paul's day, people are wondering if we are living in the last days. Is this the end of the world? When the Bible speaks of the last days, it always refers to the time between Jesus' ascension and His coming again in glory. Scripture also makes it clear that sin's evil influence in the world and in each and every heart and life lead to the tribulation, struggles and fears that our world will experience. Yet there is a key phrase in our text today, and I hope and pray that you don't miss it. Even as Paul speaks of the day of resurrection and the coming of the Lord, he reminds God's people to ***encourage one another with these words.***

We know that we are living in very stressful and uncertain days. We finally know who the president of the US is, but is that the end of their struggles? We set a new record for COVID cases here in Alberta with a high yesterday over 900. That list that Jesus gives of the signs of the end? We see so many of them being fulfilled in our day and age. Is this the end? Are we in the days of tribulation?

I think those with a high EQ see things differently. The theme that unites our readings today is that the end is coming; the day of judgement cannot be avoided; that the Lord will return in glory. But there is also the idea that we are to be watchful and ready for the day of His appearing. Like the five wise virgins looking for the coming of the bridegroom, we are to watch and be ready. Yet what seems to be more prevalent in the hearts and minds of people is the fear that they have towards the end. There is an obsession with the end that is not healthy or helpful to us. That was a problem in Thessalonica, too. The Christians were facing very difficult and uncertain days. In the midst of all this, they wondered was going to happen. They were also concerned about those who had died before the Lord's return. Will they be included in the resurrection?

Paul tells the Thessalonians that they don't need to worry about that. We know from Scripture that those who die in faith are with the Lord. At death there is a separation, a division of the oneness that God created in us—the oneness or unity of body and soul. Those two parts that make you who you are separated at death. The soul goes to be with the Lord, and the body waits for the day that Paul describes in our text. Let God worry about how all that works. Believe Him when He says it is true.

More importantly, Paul wanted them to look forward in hope. Rather than being distracted by all the things we don't know, we can focus on what God has declared so clearly: the day is coming when the Lord will bring His final deliverance to His people. We have done nothing that is worthy of His appearing. If we are honest with ourselves, we are much more like the foolish virgins of the Gospel lesson than the wise ones. We have lived recklessly, following the sinful inclinations of our hearts and distracted by the things of an unbelieving world. We aren't watchful for the coming day.

Being watchful doesn't mean obsessing—that was much of the problem in Thessalonica. What it means is knowing what God has already done for us. We have a wonderful Saviour, the God who came to us in our human flesh and blood so that He could offer His own sinless life as a ransom for us. We know the gift of the cross, and we know the victory of the Risen Lord. Paul says: ***For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*** There is nothing so sad, nothing so hopeless, nothing so dark that heaven's glory cannot cure it. We say with the psalmist: ***The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*** (Psalm 118:6 - ESV).

A very devout Christian man was once asked what his favourite bible verse was. He said that he really liked the verse that said: ***And it came to pass*** (Luke 2:1 - KJV) He then explained: "I know that this was a way of saying that things happened as God had planned. But when I hear that things came to pass, I look at the troubles of my life, and the uncertainty of things in this world, and I am glad that they came to pass, and not to stay. God has something better in mind for us."

Our hope, our confidence in these days, is the very confidence God's people have always had: the Lord is coming again. He

is coming in power and might. He is coming to deliver His people out of this world of sin and death and into the everlasting kingdom of God. If we know this, we have an excellent EQ - Eschatology Quotient. And what a glorious day it will be for those who, like the wise virgins in the Gospel lesson today, are ready and eager for His appearing. Amen.