***The Edge of Eternity***

The letter to the Thessalonians if of interest because it is our earliest window into the nascent Christ movement. It is probably the earliest book of the New Testament, written long before the gospels and Acts, and it is a window into Paul’s relationship with one of his first congregations and the kind of issues they struggled with as their faith in the Risen Jesus made them so alien to their fellow townspeople (cf Acts 2.1-2 and Acts 17:1-8).

You recall how I have said that Paul’s letters follow a pattern of greeting, local issues and matters of the Spirit, then moral exhortation (parenesis) and conclusion. The verses just ***before*** this passage are the expected exhortation. Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. (4:1ff). He then goes on to say what that conduct is, right up to our verse 13.

The verses following our passage are the conclusion: For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night… So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober (1 Thess 5:2, 6)

**In the Text**

Today we are going to look at the verses in between those verses, vvs 13-18, a message we are calling The Edge of Eternity.

The earliest Christians did not foresee a long period of church history following the resurrection. Certainly Paul and the Thessalonians believed the world would end soon.

Remember in Acts the first thing the disciples asked the risen Christ was Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6-7).

This expectation of the soon-to-be end is part of the letter’s historical context, in spite of all that Jesus said about it not being given to know God’s timetable. In the older documents of the NT there is a clear attenuation of that expectation in the gospels and Acts. They did come to realize that they were mistaken in thinking the end was coming, well… today or tomorrow.

Paul himself had been operating under the assumption that he would still be alive at the *Parousia*, that is, the presence, the coming of Christ at the end history. And if he was thinking that was the case it explains the immense drive and urgency which compelled him around the Mediterranean basin. He felt he very little time to evangelize his way to Rome.

He writes to the Thessalonians: You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven… (1 Thess 1:9-10).

Specifically, in light of this expectation the young church was confused by the death of its members. The question was this, ‘will those who have died before the Lord returns be excluded from the life to come?’

It is such a human, anthropological point, speaking to the insecurities of the church members.

It is interesting because, in addressing this with the young church, Paul uses a rare phrase to emphasize the point, …we declare this to you by the word of the Lord…

Paul’s response is this, and I paraphrase of 4:15: *‘…if you are still alive when the Lord comes you will have no advantage over those who have already died. They will be raised first. Put another way, those who have died will experience no disadvantage to those who are living.’ So don’t grieve as those who have no hope.’*

This leads to a brief but sublime description of the end of history:

***For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.***

This language is extraordinary: …***caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air…*** What an amazing, sublime image (cf 1 Cor 15:51)..

The clouds are the symbol of the transcendence we can by no other means attain, no means other than the resurrection of Jesus. It doesn’t mean bodies are flying around in the air. We don’t pop into the sky. It is a representation in earthly images of the transcendent, of the thinness of the veil between the perishable and the imperishable, the fragility of the fabric between mortality and immortality.

The point being, of course, that it is not about “how” or “when” the end cometh, either through death for the individual, or by the culmination of history, but the inevitability of it all and the preparedness for it by attending to our place in Christ.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:16-18)

**From the Text**

I have three words that are all you ever need to know about the end of the world.

* Imminent
* Immanent
* Eminent

***Imminent***. The end of history, personal or corporate could occur at any moment, impending. If you don’t know when history will end, then it could come soon or late. Christianity has always been held that creation lives on the edge of eternity. Our views on the imminence may well be attenuated by the fact that Paul and his friends are long gone, Christ has not returned at 2000 years and counting. But that doesn’t mean it could not occur at any moment.

What does this mean to our Christianity? Eternity is imminent.

The 24-year-old Dostoevsky had just published his first book, *Poor Folk* to immense critical acclaim (1848). He went from total penniless obscurity to lauded as potentially the greatest Russian writer of his generation in a matter of a few months. But he joined a revolutionary discussion group, the Petrashevsty Circle and was soon arrested by Tsar Nicholas I with a dozen other members of the group, tried and convicted. Without knowing their sentence they were marched to a public square one day and tied to posts in front of a firing squad.

An aide-de-camp from the Tsar rides up at the last moment with a pardon. It was all a mock execution; they were never really going to shoot them. He would spend the next four years in Siberia.

He later wrote about the experience call it his moment on the ‘edge of eternity.’ What were his thoughts in these “last (presumed) moments”? Love of family.

And we have the parable of Jesus for the morning from Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom… The foolish took no oil and the wise took extra, and when the bridegroom was delayed the foolish said, ‘give us some of your oil!’

The teaching aligns so very beautifully with what our Thessalonians passage teaches. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the bridegroom cometh (Matt 25:13). Or, as in the days of Noah, then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left… keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matt 24:40ff)

It is not about “how” or “when” the end cometh, either through death for the individual, or by the culmination of history, but the inevitability of it, the imminence of it, and the preparedness for it by attending to our place in Christ.

So, how do we prepare? There is a sense in which we all, always stand on the edge of eternity. What does readiness look like for you?

This is where it gets personal, for imminence is all around us. We look for the response that touches on that deep place with God for us. Maybe it is an acceptance of God’s love and grace unlike anything you have previously embraced. Maybe it is the need to come back to the present.

Maybe the response is in a relationship or the response to a challenge of life, or death.

I think it certainly teaches us, if I may, to waste not a moment of this precious life. There is not a moment to be lost in getting right with God.

Dostoevsky, reflecting later in life on his own edge of eternity experience, said, “When I look back on my past and think how much time I wasted on nothing, how much time has been lost in futilities, errors, laziness, incapacity to live; how little I appreciate it, how many times I sinned against my heart and soul – then my heart bleeds. Life is a gift, life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness – if youth only knew” (Frank, p. 182, Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time).

***Immanent***. Indwelling the universe and time. The present reality is that God is with us in life as in death.

You can use whatever language works. *Rising to meet the Lord in the air*…*In the twinkling of an eye… two are grinding at a mill and one is left.* For the kingdom of heaven is in you, as Jesus said.

The presence of God I immanent, indwelling every moment of life. In life or death God is present, indwelling the universe and time.

At my mother’s hospital bed in 1992 we stood around together. My Dad and siblings, there are five of us. And my Dad asked what happens to Mom now (I was the young ardent Christian at the time)? What a perfectly natural question! I don’t know what I said but that moment has caused me to reflect ever since on this diaphanous veil, this fragile fabric between us and the eternal God.

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality… thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:54, 57).

And my mom was with the Lord the moment she put off the perishable and put on the imperishability of immortality. That was the Christian answer.

***Eminent***. Lofty; high; prominent.

Notice how the heart of our passage is the resurrection of Jesus Christ? For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died (4:14).

We have been seeing this over and over since Easter! This is always the case when Paul talks about the return of the Lord. It is predicated on Jesus’ resurrection…. You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus… (1 Thess 1:9-10, and throughout Paul, esp 1 Cor 15).

Those first Christians were entering, unbeknownst to them, the longest blind corner in history. And 2000 years later still we wait.

* Imminence
* Immanence
* Eminence

But this truth remains: But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (1 Cor 15:20)

***Therefore encourage one another with these words.*** (1 Thess 4:16-18)

**Benediction**

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thess 3:12-13)