

1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

Belonging to the Day

Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Big idea: Destiny powerfully shapes lives: destined for salvation, Christians live wakefully and soberly as judgment comes. Others long to forget.

Big application: Because God has destined you for salvation you can face life with wakeful confidence.

What is the most powerful tool that exists to help you to make good decisions in life?

That is what we are going to discover, together, this morning. The most powerful thing in the universe to help you, and me, make wise decisions in our lives. This is life changing stuff from the word of God. I hope you are excited.

When Steve Jobs died, on 5th October this year, at least one magazine lamented that this was the passing of the last person in America who knew what he was doing. Which seems a bit harsh on the other 312,663,999 people in that great nation, but you can understand the sentiment.

In the days following Jobs' death by far the most widely quoted piece of his wisdom for life came from his address to Stanford University students in 2005. It's been described as "the most powerful entrepreneurial speech ever given." Here's what the co-founder of the world's second biggest company said:

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

I suspect quite a lot of Christians around the world nodded their heads at that. I suspect that quite a lot of Christians think that knowing that you're going to die soon is the right tool to help you make the big choices in life.

Well I want to say to you this morning that, as much as he was a great entrepreneur and inventor, you would be a fool to follow Steve Jobs' advice for life. You would be stupid to accept what he says.

I'm not saying that to you because I am egotistical enough to think that following my advice would be any better; please don't ever follow my advice.

I'm saying it because what Steve Jobs advises is directly the opposite of what God himself, in the pages of sacred Scripture, tells us. And, as much as I find my iPhone very useful, I think we should listen to the words of the inventor of life rather than the inventor of iLife.

If you are a Christian, Steve Jobs' advice is bad advice. He was right that your body will disintegrate soon enough. But that is not really death and your future burial or cremation is really not the most important tool for making good choices in life.

If you are not a Christian, Steve Jobs' advice is bad advice. Because the ultimate reality you are facing in your future is not, as he seems to have understood it, an eternal nothingness or a merging with the cosmos that you can do nothing about. In fact your future is a personal judgment by a living God that it is possible to avoid.

You see the ultimate fate of the human race, the future of the people gathered here this morning, and the billions of others in our world, is not one destiny. It's two. There is not one inevitable end that each of us shares, there are two possible ends.

And the most powerful tool for shaping your life here and now is knowing what those destinies are and responding to them. It is destiny, not death, that can most effectively change the way we live in the world.

So let's learn together this morning from the apostle Paul about two destinies and two responses.

Two destinies: wrath or salvation.

If you've been here over the past couple of weeks you'll remember that the Thessalonian Christians were concerned about the problem of Christians who died. Would those brothers and sisters who went to the grave before Jesus returned somehow miss out on the kingdom of God?

In this letter Paul has been working very hard to reassure these young Christians that they can be confident that those Christians who have died will not lose out on any of the blessings that can through confessing your sin and putting your trust in Jesus Christ.

And in 5:9 Paul reaches the summary of his argument. Here is the crowning reason why Christians can face even the unravelling of our minds and bodies with

quiet confidence: *God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation.*

You see there are two destinies for human beings. Our destiny does not depend on our gender, our race, our social class, or wealth, our talent or even our goodness. It depends on God's appointment. Our destiny depends on our response to Jesus Christ.

The first destiny Paul speaks of is wrath or, as he calls it in v3, destruction.

The reality is that the people of this world are not facing the kind of death that they think they are. The death the world anticipates, the death that people influenced by secular humanism or, like Steve Jobs, by Buddhism, is part of the circle of life. The popular idea in our culture is that coming to the end of your life is as natural as coming to the beginning of it. The suggestion that death, like birth and love and faith, is how things are and how they are meant to be.

But that is not how Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God, writes about what faces people who do not put their trust in Jesus. For Paul people's death, their end, is not the natural culmination of inevitable processes. It is the personal judgment of a God who brings destruction and wrath on those who reject their creator and disregard his laws.

In his next letter to the Thessalonians, Paul makes this destiny of those who reject Jesus even clearer: *they will, he says, be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.*

This judgment, what Jesus himself referred to as being shut out, cast into outer darkness, as hell, is, Paul says, inevitable. There will be, v3, no escape on the last day from the wrath of the living God as he comes in justice.

There are some religious people who seem to take great delight in talking about this judgment. Have you noticed that some religious people talk about hell a lot. And that some of them appear to take a perverse thrill from the imagination that all the people who have done things they don't like will burn forever. Some like to condemn capitalists. Some like to condemn Muslims. Some like to condemn homosexuals. Some like to condemn liberals.

Neither Paul or Jesus were like that. They never used the doctrine of God's judgment merely to delight in the destruction of the wicked. Though godly people have always rejoiced at the prospect of justice coming to the world and at the vindication of God they do not enjoy the prospect of judgment.

Paul sometimes even wished that he could give up his own salvation if it would mean that some of the Jews who persecuted him could be saved. God Jesus said

that, if only they were willing, he longed to gather to safety, like chicks who shelter under their mother's wing, those who would kill him so that they might avoid terrible judgment.

Here at Christ Church Liverpool our desire is to be like Jesus and Paul, not like religious people. In our church we have no interest in condemning Muslims, homosexuals, liberals, abortionists, adulterers or anyone else. But, whoever you are and whatever you have done in your life, this morning you need to know that Jesus was very clear that judgment, that wrath is what the God of justice will bring on *everyone* who has not come to Christ for forgiveness.

Here at Christ Church Liverpool we do not say that you have to be part of our church to be right with God. We do not say you have to perform certain religious duties to be saved. We do not teach that you have to pray so many times or give so much money to be one of God's people. We do not say those things because Jesus did not say those things.

But we do want to declare to you what Jesus did say: that there is no way to know God the Father other than by coming to Jesus.

We do want to proclaim to you clearly what Paul says here in v9: that salvation comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the second destiny that Paul speaks of: salvation.

There are some supposedly Christian teachers who give the impression that the main thing about being a Christian is that it will improve your life now. Some of them, including one of the best selling "Christian" books in the world last year, even suggest that eventually everyone will decide to become a follower of Jesus, so that the only point of being a Christian is that you'll start experiencing God's blessings sooner.

That is not what Jesus taught and so that is not what Paul taught. The God-man and his Apostle knew that human destinies are much more radically different than that. Either we face wrath or we receive salvation. Either we spend eternity under judgment or we spend eternity in God's blessing. Either we will be condemned to hell or we will live with God in his recreated world.

"Salvation" is not a word Paul used to describe having a slightly better life. It's a word he used to mean the complete and utter opposite of judgment. It's a word that means the total transformation of everything that we are into perfection.

Here's how the great Christian thinker C S Lewis describes what it will mean, in the end, to be saved. It is, he says, the process by which God *will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature pulsating all through with such*

energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine. A bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) his own boundless power and delight and goodness.

All of us will be dead soon. But none of us will simply be dead soon. For there are two destinies, not one. Two destinies: wrath or salvation. And each of those destinies, Paul says, brings with it a characteristic response:

Two responses: asleep in denial or awake as sons.

What do sleep and drunkenness have in common? They are both ways of forgetting.

Those of you who struggle yourself with chronically drinking too much, or who deal with other people who do, will know that, very often, drinking starts as a desire to dull the sense of pain we feel. People start drinking when they lose their job, when they have a traumatic experience, when they get divorced, when they are bereaved.

Those of you, like me, who have experienced depression or who encounter it in your family or your work, will know that one of the symptoms is that when you are depressed you want to sleep a lot – because when you are asleep is the one time when you don't feel rubbish.

Sleep and drunkenness are both states of unaware forgetfulness. They are responses of denial. That's why they are both used here as images of how the people of the world respond to the coming judgement of God. Sleep and drunkenness; they give us a picture of what it means to ignore wrath that is to come.

Our city is full of people in denial. They do their work, they gossip about trivia, they obsess about the possession stats and the leaky defences of their football teams, they immerse themselves in the minutiae of their stocks and shares, they go out on a Friday night to, as Jarvis Cocker put it, "dance and drink and screw" because they think there's nothing else to do.

Of course all those people around us are aware that they are going to die. And if we were all going to die in the way Steve Jobs meant then actually it makes just as much sense to eat, drink and be merry; to try to forget it, to obliterate the anticipation of death as much as possible from our minds, as it does to bend your mind and will to building up a multi-billion dollar fortune creating the world's leading hi-tech company. If death is simply the end then, pretty much, every way of life is equally valid because they are all going nowhere.

But that's not what's going to happen to us. We are not simply going to die. We are going to face God's wrath.

The eat, drink and be merry approach is a denial of that reality. The eat, drink and be merry approach makes God out to be a liar by implying that there is nothing that can be done to change things. It makes death sound like a fate to try and forget about rather than a judgment we deserve.

I suspect that most of the people in this room will probably not waste your lives by worldly standards. You are more likely to take a Steve Jobs approach to the world. Life is short; so achieve what you can. Leave a legacy – a great career or an inheritance for your kids.

But the leave-a-legacy approach is just as much a denial of reality as the eat-drink-and-be-merry approach. Because if there is no judgment and everybody just dies then, in the end, all legacies are futile and pointless. Whatever you leave behind you leave to people and a civilisation which is doomed to nothingness.

The characteristic response of the world to its destiny before a God who comes in justice to judge is denial.

What a contrast to the response of those who are saved. The man or woman of the world is, v5, asleep, in denial, drunk at the wheel as life careers towards its terrible end. But the Christian is a son of the day, a child of light.

Light as a symbol of good amongst the darkness of evil is a part of the imagery of the Bible from its very first verses. God is the one who speaks light and day into chaos. God is the one who not only invented physical light, without which life would not exist, but who is moral light.

God, the Bible says, IS light. And his people, Christian people, those appointed to receive salvation in the Lord Jesus, are like the God we belong to.

We're actually quite familiar with the concept behind the phrase Paul uses in these verses. If you watch an American cop movie or TV series it won't be long before you hear someone being insulted with the term "you son of a bitch." Why call someone a son of a bitch? It's a way of saying they are behaving like a dog. The idea is that people are like their parents; if you are a dog it must mean you are the son of a bitch.

That's the same idea that Paul is using here – but much more positively! If God is your Father what are you going to be like? You're going to be like him. If God is light what are you going to be? You're going to be a son of the light.

If our destiny is salvation then our identity is that we are sons and daughters of light, we are children of the day.

If you are a Christian here this morning there isn't anything in the world that can change your destiny – God has appointed his people to receive salvation.

And that means that if you are a Christian here this morning there isn't anything in the world you can do to change your identity either – God has made you a child of the light.

Lots of people, perhaps most people in our society, think that the thing that makes you a Christian is what you do. I was reading an article in the paper just two weeks ago that was arguing just that. That religious identity is founded on action.

Christians fall into exactly that same wrong way of thinking very easily. We so often think that the thing that makes me a Christian is that I do certain things. For many of us coming to church, reading the Bible, praying, helping people in need and all that kind of stuff that is what makes us a Christian.

But that is the opposite of what the New Testament teaches throughout and, specifically, the opposite of what Paul teaches here.

God, he says, has given us a destiny – salvation. Because of that destiny we have an identity – children of light. Because of that identity we will live in particular ways.

This is the very heart of Christian ethics, the heart of how Christians should live day-to-day. Let me illustrate it with a couple of simple examples...

Why shouldn't Christians get drunk on alcohol?
Because it's bad for your health?
Because it might lead you to hurt other people?
Because it's a waste of your money?
Because God says it's a bad idea?
Well all of those are good and true reasons. But none of them are the final and fundamental reason why the Bible teaches that drunkenness is bad for Christians.

Why shouldn't Christians get drunk on alcohol?
Because it's not who we are any more. We don't belong to the night. We don't belong to the world that is passing away and destined for judgment. We belong to a new world. To a new kingdom that is dawning. We belong to the day. So we will behave like people behave in the day, v8, self-controlled.

Why shouldn't Christians blaspheme – curse or abuse God's name?
Is it because we'll be judged if we do? No – because Christians won't be judged – we're destined for salvation remember!
Is it because it might put other people off believing in God? Well it might – but it might not! And even if you could prove that blaspheming didn't put anybody off becoming a Christian it would still be wrong!

Why shouldn't Christians blaspheme? Because we are the children of a perfect Father destined to live harmoniously together with him forever.

Christian ethics, how Christians ought to live, is not at heart to do with obeying rules, even rules of someone we love. It is, at heart, to do with fulfilling our destiny. It is to do with living out the identity that God has given us. The Christian life is all about becoming who we really are.

There are some people, some Christians, who find that quite a disturbing thought. They wonder if maybe Christians going around asking themselves about their identity before deciding what to do is pandering to self-interest. If we just let people seek to fulfil their destiny, they say, won't they just go round doing whatever they want?

No. What Paul teaches here, that your behaviour flows from your identity and your identity is defined by your destiny is not simply an excuse to do what you want. Because as a Christian you don't get to choose your destiny or your identity. That are given to you by God – your destiny is salvation through the Lord Jesus and your identity is that you are a child of the day.

If you are a Christian that is who you are. If you are a Christian you cannot change that. So, this morning, if you are a Christian, you need to embrace living out the identity and the destiny that God has given you.

Christians are all children of the light. So then, let us not be like others. We have a different destiny to the people of the world, so we have a different identity to the people of the world. So we will have different behaviour to the people of the world.

That's challenging isn't it? It is challenging that Paul tells us that that behaving differently to those around us in ways that are visible, clear and obvious is not super-spirituality, not advanced Christianity, but the normal, everyday, inevitable result of being a Christian. It is challenging.

But it's also really, really encouraging. Because as Paul looked at the Christians in the church in Thessalonica he saw that they did behave differently to the people around them.

Unlike people around them they didn't despise hard work and got on with providing for themselves and not sponging off other people or the state. Unlike people around them the norm was marital faithfulness. Unlike people around them the Christians gave generously of their time and money both to Christian missions and the relief of poverty.

Paul saw that they behaved differently. And that was a massive encouragement to him; because it proved that they had a different identity and a different destiny to the people around them.

I have already said in this series that, as I look around Christ Church Liverpool, I see many of the same things

in this church that Paul saw in the church at Thessalonica.

Unlike many people around us, those who are members and regulars here at Christ Church don't despise hard work. You make an effort to provide for yourselves and your families. Unlike so many promiscuous people in our city the norm amongst us is marital faithfulness. The people in our church give significantly more than the national average of both time and money to charitable causes.

I can see that you behave differently. And that should be a massive encouragement to you; because it proves to me that you have a different identity and a different destiny to the people around you.

It is challenging that Paul tells us that that behaving differently to those around us must be the normal, everyday, inevitable result of being a Christian. But if you are living like that it is also really, really encouraging. Because different behaviours, indicate different identities, which show different destinies.

The characteristic response of the world to the coming judgment is denial. The characteristic response of the Christian to the coming salvation is to embrace a new life as children of light.

I'm sure, though, that, this morning there are some people who don't feel like you quite fit into those characteristic responses. So let me close with a few words to you.

Perhaps you are here this morning and you aren't a Christian. If that's you can I just let you know that you are always most welcome at our meetings and that should always feel free to invite anyone else you want to come along. Perhaps you've started going along to, or are considering joining our Christianity Explored course.

And maybe you don't feel asleep any more to this terrible wrath. Perhaps you've started to see that you have indeed sinned against and offended the God your creator. Perhaps you've just begun to realise that the reality of life without God isn't that you will die and that will be it but that you will one day face his judgment. Perhaps you're beginning to feel that you are sobering up. You're not yet a Christian; but you are coming out of denial.

If that's you this morning I want you to know that God is speaking to you. He is calling you, appointing you to receive salvation. If you are waking up to the reality of judgment, even a little bit, that is a sign that God is at work in your life. You need to heed his call. You need to respond to his voice. You need to embrace salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. If God is calling you, you should do that this morning – just sit quietly in your seat and ask Christ to forgive your sin and make you a

child of the day, one of his people who are appointed for salvation.

Or perhaps you are here this morning and you are a Christian. But your life is not characterised by being different to the world around you. Perhaps it is characterised literally, by drunkenness. Perhaps it's just indistinguishable from the lives in denial of the people around you.

You are 'asleep' if books of 1,001 places to visit, films to watch, books to read, songs to hear, natural wonders to see, beers to taste, foods to eat or video games to play before you die (honestly those titles all exist) dominate your bookshelf, or even your thought life.

You are asleep if you feel you must skimp on giving to missions to have great holidays because you only have one life.

If you call yourself a Christian and your life, when you are really honest, looks pretty much like the lives of people around you, then you have to ask yourself whether, in fact, you might not be a Christian at all.

If you look like the people who are spiritually drunk and asleep, you probably are one of those people. If that's you then remember – God has appointed his people to receive salvation. The characteristic response of the Christian to that is behave like a child of light.

So, this morning, you need, we all need, to reflect on what Christ, who, v10, died for us, has won, so that we might delight in our salvation and live as children of the day.

Christians are not going to die soon. We are going to be saved soon. That, truly, is the most important tool you will ever encounter to help you make life's big, and small, choices.

Andrew Evans, 27th November 2011