

Thessalonians

3. The Hope 1 Thessalonians 4.13-5.11 Sleeping and Waking

IMPORTANT INFO: This study involves video clips - please make sure you have access to them and a way to show them to the group before you lead the study. It is also suggested that worship comes at the end of the session as a response. Please be aware that there may be people in your cell for whom the subject of death is difficult or raw at the moment so handle this sensitively!

Aim of Study: To look at our eternal destinies and our safe position in Christ, and how this can help us live holy lives now.

Getting started:

Background Info:

We know from Acts 17 that Paul was forced to leave the new Thessalonian converts earlier than he would have liked. In order to protect them from persecution he fled, but he hadn't taught them everything he wanted to and it's clear that they had questions about the Parousia - the return of Jesus.

1. (In small groups or pairs)

Imagine that you're a new Christian in Thessalonica. You have a brief chance to ask Paul, only three questions about your new faith before he has to leave. What questions would you ask him, and why? Feedback your ideas back to the group (5 Mins)

Engaging with the text:

It's clear from his earliest letters that Paul, and the other apostles, were initially expecting Jesus to return within their lifetime. The culture around the Thessalonians viewed death as a negative thing. The Greek afterlife (Hades) was a place of darkness, sadness, and no hope; and there was no chance of coming back from it unless you were an epic hero, who were far and few between!

Even the Jews were unclear about what happened after death - Sheol - was a shadowy, uncertain concept. Christians therefore were very different in their approach to death.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18.

2.
 - a) Why do you think that the Thessalonians are so concerned with the issue of what happened to those believers who had already died?
 - b) Do you find Paul's words comforting, confusing, or something else?
3. What views do you think people in OUR culture have on what happens after death? What are the implications of that for how people live?
4. Watch the following video, designed to attract people to the Alpha Course:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlyaRLsgzU4> (link also on website)

What did you make of this video, and to what extent do you think it plays on the secular world's fears of what happens after death? To what extent do you feel that you share these fears? Why/ why not?

Now read 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

5. When you think about Jesus coming back, what kinds of emotions or feelings does it bring out in you, and why? (You may want to write down a list of words / mind map of people's ideas). To what extent could keeping it in mind help us to act differently or change our behaviour?
6. Show the following clip of Harold Camping, the man who recently attempted to predict the Second Coming (or 'Appearing') of Jesus :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DfggHLLjDU>
(link also on website)

6. (continued) Occasionally Christians can be tempted to try and second-guess the date of the Appearing, with tragic results. What do you think the pitfalls of placing too much (or indeed too little) emphasis on the Appearing of Jesus can be, given what you've just watched?

7. Given that we're already firm in our eternal destiny and that we know Jesus will come back one day, why do you think it still matters to live holy lives now? How can we encourage each other in this?

Responding:

In smaller groups give people time to pray about the things that have come up for them during this session - you might like to spend some time in thanksgiving and worship as a response, that we have a hope and a future - that God has shown himself faithful across millennia and so we can trust Jesus WILL return - at some point!

(Reading from Revelation 21 and 22 may be useful here; the descriptions of the new heaven and earth)