

DOWN-TO-EARTH LIVING

1 Thessalonians 4

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This is our fourth time together in this book and we'll continue to make our way through first and second Thessalonians this month.

“Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself

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will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:1–18, NIV).

How do you get ready for the Lord to return?

The letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is talking about this subject. There’s been a tendency, evidently, within the congregation to be somewhat unsettled, to be panicked at the thought of the Lord’s return. What an initial temptation this is! Once you’ve accepted it, not simply as a theory but as a deep abiding fact, that Jesus is coming again, what a sense of impending crisis this communicates to us who believe. Yet it is not God’s will that Christians live in a panic-struck atmosphere in relation to expecting the Lord to come again.

So Paul, in his admonition to the Thessalonians here in chapter 4, talks about down to earth living for an up-in-the-air people.

I. Verses 1–12 talk about this theme of down to earth living.

That is preparatory to being up in the air, to be with Jesus (verses 13–18). In the down to earth living which Paul is calling for in regard to Christians, he’s essentially telling us three things in verses 1–12.

A. He’s telling each of us to be “sanctified.” That’s a theological word that’s used much in Scripture and not used too much in common, everyday speech. But it simply means to live for God. I suppose that would be the closest definition I could come to—to be His kind of a person. His kind of a person in such a way that your beliefs are different from the world or the pagans you live with or work with. And not only that your beliefs are different, but that your walk, your

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conduct, your actions are different. That's what being holy is. It simply means "being like God" in comparison to being like men without God. To be set apart for Him.

Paul, in this letter, says we should be more and more about the task of pleasing God. Paul likes to use the superlatives. He says in chapter 3 that we should abound more and more in love. I indicated last week that that's the apostle's way of saying there's one thing we can never get enough of—that's love. You just can't drain the cup of love to exhaustion. We always need love and to walk in continued love.

B. But love is not the only thing we should abound more and more in. Holiness—being like God, really catching His lifestyle, is also something that Paul says we should do more and more. He tells this to the believers—"Never get tired of pleasing God."

How does this process of sanctification come to you? One of the critical areas in which the enemy seeks to gain advantage over us and make us unlike God is particularly our morality. The Lord has a faithful relationship with His people, a relationship which He does not betray, which He does not adulterate. Yet one of the strongest pulls in our experience as human beings is that we should adulterate relationships. Particularly, this occurs in the realm of sex. So Paul says to these Thessalonians, "This is the will of God: your sanctification. That you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). The word which he uses for "immorality" here is the word from which we get the modern word "pornography." Pornography is simply a combination of two words, which mean "fornication" and "writing." Paul is saying that for believers a mark of moving toward God is moving away, abstaining from, and cutting off ties from, immorality.

We live in the sex-oriented world of the twentieth century, where even the televisions tells us to take it off, take it all off. We forget that first-century believers, and indeed believers of any age, have wrestled through the same problems of temptation as we do. The Thessalonians lived in an

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immoral society. It was common practice in the Greek world for a man, if he had sufficient means, to have a mistress. It was common practice in the pagan temples in the city of Thessalonica and Corinth and other places in Greece, as part of their worship, to have sexual relationship with other individuals. These Thessalonians had turned to God from idols. They had also turned to God in the midst of a lifestyle which allowed indiscretion in sexual relationships. Paul is saying to believers, “Once you come to Christ, Christ imparts to you a new consciousness.” He puts a new lifestyle within you which asks for, seeks, demands—for His approval and your welfare—that you walk pure. Therefore the injunction: abstain from immorality.

A timely word for our day, when the rule of the day is “do what you feel like doing” in any given context. “Don’t do what the preachers or the Sunday School teachers or the church tell you to do, or the Bible—they’re simply trying to repress healthy emotions. The worst thing that can happen to you is repression. Release yourself. Express yourself.”

Yet the Scriptures are full of admonitions in regard to the subject of sex, that the only true release is the release that occurs within the context of discipline and morality. Why be moral? That’s a fair question to ask. It is the question that is exceedingly asked of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ this day. Paul himself, in this letter to the Thessalonians, provides some reasons why we should be moral in our sexual life. One reason is that it is the will of God. Notice what Paul says, in verse 3, “For this is the will of God—your sanctification that you abstain from immorality.” The will of God is ultimately what we turn to, because if indeed as we believe that God created the heavens and the earth and He also created man—He knows what He has designed in human experience in order for a person to enjoy the fullest of health and emotional satisfaction in His will. In the garden, Adam and Eve quickly learned what happens

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when the will of God is violated. They faced the temptation that we face. That is, something else comes along which throws down the Word. Satan says to Eve, “Has God said...?” That’s the first question which throws doubt upon the authentic Word of God. Satan’s task is to question the very Word of God concerning the will of God. Yet those who do not become submissive to the will of God, in turn, are broken by God.

You cannot violate the will of God and expect to be joyful. It’s utterly impossible if you violate that will. Is the will of God something stringent, something heavy, which depresses you and makes you live and look like a person who is living in the thirteenth century? Is it repressive on you at all? Not so. The expression and the doing of the will of God is the highest act of emotional health, the highest point of psychological release and well-being that we can have.

Why be moral? It is the will of God.

Paul also indicates that morality is the distinctive mark of the Christian. He says that we are “...to take a wife for ourselves in holiness and honor not in passion of lust like the heathen.” By the way, in the phrase “take a wife for oneself in holiness and honor” (1 Thessalonians 4:4–5) the word which is translated “wife” is the word “vessel.” In 1 Peter 3, “vessel” refers to a woman, a wife. And in 2 Corinthians, the word “vessel,” when it’s used, refers to the body—“we have this treasure in earthly vessels.” There are two possible translations here in this verse. One is “every man should know how to possess his wife in holiness and honor,” and the other “everyone ought to know how to take care of his own body, his own vessel, in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust, like the heathen.” A particular descriptive word is used for “heathen.” “Passion of lust” is merging two things together—“passion” and “lust.” In the merging of these two words, in a phrase, Paul is referring to the heathen, and in this case, he’s referring to the heathen in Thessalonica.

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And by the way, might I say that not every non-Christian is dominated by sexual desire? But it's certainly a trait of a person who's without Christ, who is mastered by this desire, who shows that his lord is his overmastering emotion of sex. So Paul says "passions of lust." It's an emotion which has dominated a person so much that he no longer has control of it, but it has control of him. For the Christian, in the ultimate analysis, there can only be one lord—the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the third reason for our morality that Paul gives? It is the reason that sexual impurity ultimately defrauds others. Verse 6 says, "Let no man transgress and wrong his brother or wrong his fellow human being in this matter." In other words, the Scripture is saying that sexual sin is not something which just occurs in the person who commits the sin alone. But ultimately, it defrauds others. It defrauds someone else from the health and the peace of emotion that can be had in the true act of giving and relating to another individual.

A fourth reason for being moral, as Paul gives it, is that ultimately, in God's eyes, there are consequences for this sin, as with all sins. The text reads, "The Lord is avenger of all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you" (verse 6). What does the Scripture mean when it speaks of God as the avenger? I think sometimes we're way off in the future, at the Great White Throne of judgment, where God is going to total up all the sins. But God has a way, even in the process of human affairs, in which He has the structure—human personality which He has structured—of allowing the consequences of sins to be realized through the natural sequence of events.

"Whoever disregards this," Paul says, "is not just disregarding word of man but is disregarding the Spirit of God himself" (1 Thessalonians 4:8).

The second command for God's will for living pertains to brotherly love. Paul says, in verse 9, "Concerning love of the brethren." The word which he uses here is a word, interestingly enough,

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in the New Testament which refers only to the love which exists among Christians. He says, “Do this more and more” (verse 10).

This teaching on love, in verses 9 and 10, is fascinating because it comes immediately after Paul’s discussion of God’s Law regarding sexual morality. How does one abstain from sexual immorality? By withdrawing himself to a private place and gritting his or her teeth and saying, “I’m going to be moral! I’m going to be moral!” No. The Christian moral life is lived in the context of understanding what real love is all about. And to be moral in the Christian sense is not to be some sort of ascetic, locked up in some kind of cubical somewhere. But it’s in the context of the real love of fellow believers.

How interesting it is to see in this letter to the Thessalonians the twin themes of love and holiness linked together. In chapter 3, last week, we noted this. That God may have you increase and abound in love one toward another, so that you maybe blameless in holiness. Love produces holiness, holiness produces love. They fit together.

The antidote to immorality is not withdrawal, but it is experiencing the depth of the meaning of God’s will for human relationships.

C. A third thing Paul is saying about down-to-earth living to believers is, “You have to excel in the ordinary.” Christian adults have extraordinary things happen to them, as they are extraordinary people living in common circumstances. Paul says three things about living extraordinarily in ordinary affairs.

He says we are to “be ambitious to be quiet” (verse 11). We are to “mind our own affairs.” And we are to “work with our own hands.” Very practical things the Thessalonian believers had a danger of letting go, because they thought that the coming of the Lord was so soon upon them that it was time to leave the normal routines of life and go on and do something dramatic or

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hysterical—maybe something like gathering in a place and waiting for the Lord to return. Paul in this teaching provides a happy attitude that we are to have in the midst of a crisis. The Lord is coming! What are we to do? Lose our minds with the fear or dread of expectation? Or lose our stability because we're overcome with a sense of joy?

Not at all. Rather, he says, "Be ambitious to be quiet." The word for "quiet" is the opposite of "restlessness." Instead of being restless or being consumed with energy that has you running in all directions, study; make it your ambition to be at peace in yourself. At home with yourself—not torn by personality disorders, which are self-inflicted. He says "mind your own affairs." That is a contrast with the person who is called a busybody. That isn't to say that you shouldn't become involved when Christians have a need. But basically, the attitude is not to be a community gossip or interfere with people's relationship. That's even in-law (or "outlaw"!) relationships. It has to do with brother-sister relationships. There are many ways in which this can be applied.

Also, "work with your own hands." This is really an interesting one. Some of you know how sometimes your job gets to you. Where were the majority of Christians from in Thessalonica? Most of them were probably just ordinary, working individuals. Many of them were probably slaves. They had a lot of menial tasks. Paul says, "Work with your own hands." Why? He says, essentially, "Give a good representation of the faith." A Christian's loyalty to Christ comes out in his work. Christians are to be good workers, disregarding the vices of the heathen, like sloth. And also the reason for work: It meets your own needs, so you may be dependent on no one. Now that he's got us down to earth, he's going to take us up in the air.

II. "Do not grieve," Paul says, "as others who do not have hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

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What a powerful, cutting phrase this is for those of us who trust in Jesus Christ. What is it like for a person who has no hope? There are indications of what it was like from writings that come out of the ancient world. Socrates said, “No one knows whether death is the greatest blessing a man can have, but they fear it is the greatest curse. Now it is time to go—I to die and you to live. But which of us go to a better thing is unknown to all but God.”

I want to point out that that is the best the pagan mind can say. And that is the absolute best that modern philosophy can say, to those who don't know Jesus Christ. Whether dying or living is the best, is unknown to all but God. The Christian gospel totally disagrees with that assumption all together! Death, “...against such things one can do nothing.” What a comfort! “Against such things one can do nothing.” That's no comfort at all.

Contrast that with the victorious affirmation of the believers who died in the first and second century and were buried in the catacombs of Rome. There were inscriptions in their day, in Greek and Latin, like “Alexander's not dead, but lives among the stars...mayest thou live in the Holy Spirit...in peace and Christ...rest in peace...” Why do Christians feel that way about death? The believer is told why he believes that way by the apostle Paul, in verses 13–18. The one reason why we feel the way we do about death is that, for the believer, death is to be perceived as sleep. Verse 13 says, “Concerning those who are asleep...” and in verses 14 and 15, he again uses the word “asleep.” “Asleep” in reference to the death of believers. It's fascinating to go through the New Testament and to find that, in respect to the death of believers, “asleep” can be used. But never in respect to an unbeliever. That is because Christ has removed the sting of death. The word “sleep” does not mean a period of time until the Lord returns in which the believer ceases to exist. Because Paul himself tells us that when he's away from the body he's present with the Lord. He says, “My desire is to depart and to be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23).

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Christ is going to bring the saints with Him. It's a word that's used in place of the hard word "death." So that we can look at the coffin of the believer and say, "He's asleep." To the believer, there's no such thing as death.

Therefore, the believer is in the position that he does not mourn as do the heathen. That doesn't mean the believer doesn't mourn. Christians cry at funerals. There are real tears because there are real hurts. But Christians do not weep and mourn as do the heathen, who are without hope. There is something which has happened in the person of Jesus Christ which forever translates death into life.

The pagan says, in regard to morality, "Do anything you please." The Christian says, "That is not the truth." The non-Christian says, in regard to immortality, "One cannot be sure." The Christian says, "Yes, we are sure."

Verse 14 says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again. Even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." Another way that that verse can be translated is "God will bring with him—Jesus—those who have fallen asleep through Christ Jesus." In other words, for the believer in the spiritual and symbolic sense, death may be received as having Jesus lull the believer to sleep, as a mother hushes her child to slumber.

What gives us hope? In reference to the dead, we do not mourn as do the heathen without God. We don't act like them in reference to morality. And we don't mourn like them in reference to immortality.

Another thing that gives us the confidence of hope is that Jesus Christ died and rose again. Verse 14, "Since we believed that Jesus died and rose," and everything that relates to the future is conditioned upon the fact that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Paul confesses, in 1 Corinthians 15, if Jesus has not raised, then it's all a fairy tale we're giving you. It's all in vain.

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Notice that the death of Jesus is not described by the term “asleep.” Jesus’ death is never described in reference to the word “asleep.” Only the believer’s death is related with the word “asleep.” Why? Jesus died in order that we might sleep. He has transformed death for those who follow Him into sleep. He has softened its blow. He took its sting. That’s the hope we have. Jesus rose again.

The third hope we have, in reference to the future, is that Jesus is coming again. That’s the great affirmation here, by the apostle Paul, as he comes to the conclusion of chapter 4. Jesus is coming again. He’s coming with those who have fallen asleep. He will bring those with Him. We’ll comment on those in just a moment. The question is sometimes raised, “Will we know our loved ones in heaven?” If we don’t—if we won’t—I don’t know why in the world Paul is going to all the trouble to talk to the Thessalonians about meeting their loved ones. Yes, I believe we’ll recognize one another just like we recognize Jesus. Christ is not only coming with those who have fallen asleep, He is coming with an audible call. The three ways His call is described: It’s a call of command. It’s the voice of the archangel. And it’s the trumpet of God.

“Call of command” is the same word Paul uses to describe an order a general would give to his troops, or the kind of order the charioteer would give to his horses (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Or an order that a shipmaster would give. It is not a question—it is a command. A cry, a loud cry of command. And what a cry that is. When Jesus stands at the grave of Lazarus, He gives a cry of command, “Lazarus, come forth!” (John 11). As someone commented, it’s a good thing He attached the name of Lazarus to “come forth,” or everyone would have come out. But He defined it. Jesus says, in John 5:28, “For the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth.” You’re talking about power when you come to the word of Jesus. It’ll be with the call of the archangel and the trumpet of God.

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I don't know if there's any way we can even visualize what the audible picture is going to be—summoning all the believers in Christ to be with Jesus. A stereophonic call which comes with a threefold emphasis—the cry of command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. I know that trumpets were used in the Old Testament on occasion to summon the people to the fact that God had made an appearance. Before the Law was given at Sinai, a great trumpet blew and called the people's attention in Exodus 19, which represented the fact that God was descending to meet with the people. I know that a trumpet and a shout were used in the taking of Jericho and in Gideon's victory over the Midianites. I know also that in Leviticus 25, when the Year of Jubilee would take place, once every fifty years, social and civil justice would be exercised in all the land, which began with a long blast of the trumpet. And it was to be heard throughout the land.

Jesus, when He comes again, is going to come as a field marshal who gathers his troops to battle by sounding the trumpet. Christ is going to summon all the dead with a voice that rings throughout the whole world. Some talk about a secret coming of Jesus. I suppose that for those that were left behind, it will indeed have been like a thief in the night. But I believe that the whole world is going to sit up and there's going to be an audible voice heard, that Christ has come for His own. He's coming with the saints. He is coming for those who have died in Christ and for those who live in Christ.

So if the Lord is coming with those who have fallen asleep, how then is He going to raise them from the dead? If they are with Him, how can He raise them? Have you wondered about that? If they are already with Him in death, why bring them with Him and then resurrect their body? What is going to happen in chemistry with a person who is coming back with Jesus? Is he going to have himself join his resurrected body? We know the certainty of it based upon the

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resurrection of Jesus Christ himself. But I might say that the one reason that I can see, from the Scripture, for God's concern with the human body is that that body is a part of the essential me and you. It is a work, which God himself created. A body is a product of the activity of God himself. Whenever God has created it, He is determined that nothing will destroy it.

Satan has acted within human history to destroy our bodies—the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). When we commit a person to the ground, when we burn the person and scatter their ashes, they in effect have witnessed the triumph of Satan upon the human body. The Lord is determined that, when the final record of human history is written, that not one triumph of Satan will ever stand or be sustained. Jesus has come to destroy some things. Hebrews 2, “He himself partook of our nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death.”

1 John 3:8 says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” 1 Corinthians 15:25–26, “For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” The defeat of death. The defeat of death, which is so final that even what has happened in centuries of decomposition of the physical body, whose remains could no longer be put together, are in a moment going to be reversed by the high command of Jesus Christ. Every believer who's ever been buried, gone to a funeral and shed tears and mourned over the loss of a loved one, in that moment, Christ is going to say, “Here's the victory repealed. Repealed of all the sorrow. Repealed of all the pain. Repealed of all the joy. It is a temporary victory for Satan. The victory and the permanence is mine.” Revelation says, “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Revelation 19:6). In one moment, Jesus is going to triumph over all the centuries of experience that Satan has brought on man and transform every Christian funeral into a great high celebration of joy. He will triumph over death, and He will do this through the resurrection of the body.

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Jesus will not only come for those who have fallen asleep, but He will come also for the living.

We who are alive, who wait. Notice that Paul says, “We who are alive”—Paul wants to be in that number (1 Thessalonians 4:17). He doesn’t have any view of prophecy, which says twenty-four more things have to happen before Christ can return. He doesn’t say, “They who are alive.” He says, “We who are alive.” He wants to be there. Paul, in his writings, reflects that he desires to live until the Lord returns. He expects it. He never asserted that he would live until the Lord returned, but he wanted to be there. “We will be caught up together with him in the clouds.” That is, with those who are raised from the dead, we’ll be caught up together with Him in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.

How high can man get off the earth? Under our own power, simply by jumping the highest any man has jumped off the earth is about 7 feet 2 inches. Not very high. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 15:52, what’s going to happen. “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” I’ve discovered something fascinating this week. I should have known it before, but I didn’t. The word for “in a moment” is the Greek word from which we get the modern word “atom.” The verb form of atom is a word which means “not to cut.” When the word “atom” was used by the Greek, it meant “at that point which is indivisible.” “That smallest particle of existence, which in no way can be divided.” It’s an atom. It cannot be split. At least it couldn’t be until the twentieth century.

You can divide years into months and you can divide months into weeks and you can divide weeks into days and you can divide days into hours and hours into minutes and minutes into seconds and seconds into tenths and hundredths of seconds. But you cannot divide an atom into a smaller unit. How fast will Jesus come when He’s ready? In the twinkling of an eye. That’s how quickly He’ll take us to be from here to there. Faster than I can snap my fingers.

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The Lord, when He returns, is going to do an act of sovereignty, which will pin the world to its ears. And manifest to all men that He is the creator and the Lord of everything.

Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, had a slave to whom he gave a standing order. The man was to come into the king every morning of the king's life, no matter what the king was doing or how he was feeling, and he was to say to Phillip in a loud voice, "Phillip, remember that thou must die." That's a good word for everyone to keep in mind. But there is a word which Scripture brings to our consciousness—we ought to have someone come into the room every morning and say to us, "And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:17–18).

Closing Prayer

We recognize again, O Lord, how the power of human speech is such that it leaves describing what Your great acts are all about. But through the words of Scripture and exposition of Your Word, we catch a glimpse into the future to see that, when we are in You, there is no death. In You there is life. We praise You for that today. We thank You in advance for every triumph that You are going to win in the resurrection of the dead. In our minds, we think of those who we have known and loved and we have said good-bye to and cried over. We see, through the power of Your presence, every tear wiped away at Your command. Death shall be no more. We trust in You too to bring those who are departed in Christ in a resurrected form, which will be the fullest expression of their existence. You are the merciful God and the God of perfection, who will not resurrect us in an old and decrepit form or an unfulfilled form. But You will bring our bodies to a point of resurrection, into the greatest expression possible of their maturity and beauty. What hope we have today, our Lord! What a great promise we have! We thank You that You have given us certain grounds upon which to stand, that we have this hope within us that makes us a

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people ready for Your coming, ready to live, ready to die, ready to meet You in the air. In

Christ's name, amen.