

## Ready or Not ...

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

A guy goes to the house where he grew up and knocks on the door. The current owners are sensitive to his sentimentality and let him poke around. He goes to the attic, where he finds his old coat. He finds a stub in the pocket, a receipt from a shoe shop. He took a pair of shoes there twenty years ago and forgot all about them. On a whim he goes to see if the shop is still there. It is. To be funny, he gives the receipt to the proprietor, saying, "Are my shoes ready?" The man goes to the back for a minute. Upon his return he says, "Come back a week from Thursday."

It should be our desire to be a bit more on top of our own games than that shoe repair guy when Jesus returns. In last week's text, Paul comforted the Thessalonians in their distress caused by their confusion about the Second Coming of Jesus. They feared that deceased friends and loved ones might miss out on something glorious. In this week's text, Paul goes into detail about how Jesus should find His people awaiting His return. We have to learn to truly expect it any moment without sinking into despair over not knowing precisely when it will be. We have to live in readiness. In this morning's text, Paul describes what this state of perpetual readiness looks like.

### I. Dodging Spiritual Distractions (1-3)

<sup>1</sup>Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, <sup>2</sup>for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

#### A. Distracted by Chronology

Man is an easily distracted creature. Someone said, "These days I spend a lot of time thinking about the hereafter ... I go to get something and then wonder what am I hereafter?" Paul had already told the Thessalonians all there was to know about the "times and dates" for Jesus' return, which was not much. Jesus Himself had told His followers that even He did not know those details. He so emptied Himself of the perks of deity that only the Father knew such things.

Still, it would have been unfathomable if questions of "when" had not quickly surfaced in Thessalonica, but they did not need Paul's ideas on "times and dates." That is not what any of us really need. We, just like those believers, need to live as a transformed people in perpetual faithfulness and holiness, so that we will be ready to greet Jesus whenever He comes back.

In our pursuit of holiness, the fewer distractions thrown at us, the better. Wild-eyed obsession over what we can never know only pulls us away from our normal day-to-day albeit divinely ordained business of tending to life's responsibilities and ministering to one another according to the gifts God has given to us. In Thessalonica, anticipation over an immediate return of Jesus was compelling some to quit working so as to give their lives fully over to waiting for Jesus to come back. Who was left to feed these folks and their dependents? The church was not wired to let them starve. But, as day passed into day, charity was surely becoming less charitable.

I saw a TV preacher peddling his brand of End Time hysteria. He said that while we cannot know a precise time, we can know a general time based on “signs of the times.” In our text, “times” means long expanses while “dates” means precise moments. I said, “Stop it!” but he did not stop ... He couldn’t hear me. He was on TV. Nothing lends itself to “theological camps” like the End Time. I ran across a new position this week. Ever hear of a “Frisbeeterian”? He believes that when you die, your soul goes up on the roof, and you can’t get it back down.

Being dogmatic over when, how and in what order God will resolve all things only divides God’s people and gives the skeptics a hardy laugh. Our preoccupation with the Second Coming should manifest itself in our being very careful how we live and not in our inflexibility over the specific positions we hold. I have a view. I can be stubborn about it, but it has no place in this pulpit. Jesus is coming back. God wins. “Signs of the times” affirm my trust that God is advancing human history to His conclusion, but it is the certain hope of Christ’s return, and not the details surrounding it, that can truly compel believers to live lives of perpetual readiness.

## **B. Distracted by Comfort**

The unbelieving world will be saying, “Peace and safety”. “Peace” refers to inward calm, “safety” to a sense of external security. Maybe this means that Jesus will *NOT* come when the stock market is down 8000 points or when the trepidation caused by global terrorists is at a heightened state. Perhaps, it means that He will come only at a point when most people believe all is well with the world. In fuller terms than Paul has already used, Peter also describes an identical state of spiritual indifference in the world when Jesus comes again:

<sup>3</sup>First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. <sup>4</sup>They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation ...

<sup>8</sup>But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. <sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

<sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

<sup>11</sup>Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup>as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

– 2 Peter 3:3, 4; 8-12

Peter had no more idea of when this would happen than did Paul, but his emphasis on lives of holy readiness is identical. The Creator of linear time abides outside of time, so our assessment of whether God is taking too long is meaningless. We must learn to live with a sense that Jesus will come back at any moment. In fact, when we do not embrace life in the electrically charged atmosphere of His imminent return, we tend to become very lethargic in our pursuit of holiness.

## **C. Living in Undistracted Readiness**

The pictures of suddenness Paul uses are simple but vivid. A thief breaks in at night. That works for him. The household is asleep. It’s easier for him to walk off with your TV if your family is not sitting in front of it watching Deal or No Deal. Labor kicks in when it kicks in. We have all seen the sit-coms with the father-to-be who runs around like a chicken with his head cut off at the sound of the words, “Dear, it’s time.”

Even if you were inclined to try, you could never pinpoint the precise moment of Christ's return, and yet, Paul requires that we not be taken by surprise when He does come. How is that even possible? The only answer is to walk with Him. That means giving our undivided attention not to date-determination or sky-watching or sign-interpretation, but to holiness, service and love.

## **II. Denouncing Spiritual Darkness (4-7)**

<sup>4</sup>But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup>You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. <sup>6</sup>So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. <sup>7</sup>For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

### **A. Christians Are of the Light, Not of the Darkness**

Throughout the Bible, light is identified with the presence and the truth of God. At creation, darkness hovered over the earth until He spoke the words, "Let there be light." John introduces Jesus as the "Word" that was God, the Father's most complete self-expression to us. We know the truth of God to the extent that Jesus makes Him known. In that context John added: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Speaking of our salvation, Paul wrote:

... For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. – 2 Corinthians 4:6

Darkness is the sphere of life without God. In the dark, there is only ignorance of the salvation secured by Christ's death. There is no awareness that a man can be indwelt by God through His Holy Spirit. Darkness describes the moral depravity of a sinner who does not know he is a sinner because all he has ever known are the ways of sin. Darkness is a place where all the things a man pursues as prizes – freedom, independence, pleasure, beauty, virtue – are distorted. Only in the light of God are the perils and blemishes of the counterfeits apparent. Only in the light are true freedom, true independence, true pleasure, true beauty and true virtue attainable.

### **B. Hence, Readiness Demands that We Walk in the Light, Not in the Darkness**

A doctor asked a teenager if he was sleeping well. He said, "I sleep good at night, okay in the morning, but afternoons I just toss and turn." We are not to be "like those who are asleep."

Paul identifies the darkness with "the night." The night has two purposes. It is a time to sleep and a place to misbehave. "For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night." But, Paul reminds us that we are "sons of the light and sons of the day". We should never sleep in matters pertaining to godliness, and there is nothing that enchants us about misbehaving in the dark. We are to be alert and self-controlled, recognizing that the light ...

“... shows things in their true colours. Sin is hateful, loathsome; you see its utter hideousness when the light shines upon it. Holiness is fair and bright; you see its attractive beauty when the heavenly light shines on it in its glory. The light shines into our hearts; it shows us our guilt, our misery, our danger. But, blessed be God, it does more than that. It hath a purifying power; it cleanses what was unclean; it brightens what was dark.” - B.C. Caffin, *Pulpit Commentary*

If we walk with Christ, in the light that is Christ, His coming will not take us by surprise.

### III. Deflecting Spiritual Doubts (8-10)

#### A. A Metaphor for Faith, Hope and Love verse 8

... <sup>8</sup>But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

The idea of alertness brings to mind a sentry on guard. Paul provides a rather bare-bones description of the armor we need. His description of "the armor of God" in Ephesians is more fully-developed. He had a few years to refine it by the time he wrote that letter. 1 Thessalonians was his earliest epistle. His most primitive instruction regarding how to face life as we wait for Jesus to return revolves around the core Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

"Faith and love" are a "breastplate" to guard the heart. The "hope of salvation" is a "helmet" for the head. These are defensive pieces only. The emphasis is not on doing battle against spiritual forces as in Ephesians. The emphasis here is simply not to be taken by surprise at Jesus return.

"Faith" imparts courage in difficult times. We can cave in when a path God requires is harder than the one we prefer. Standing firm is often just a matter of the courage to obey God rather than to cling to our own comfort. Faith empowers us to stand. Hebrews 11 is one anecdote after the next of the power of faith to help people to endure. That chapter is a body of evidence that proves John's words: "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

When an enemy, our doubts or life's enticements vie with Jesus for our attention, "love" keeps us from falling away, because love is what binds people together in community. Love protects us in our battles against selfishness, selfish ambition, self-will, self-promotion, self-obsession, self-interest and self-preservation. Love recognizes that "self" is the supreme inlet to all kinds of evil.

The "hope of salvation" protects our minds with the promise of a better life in a better place. If I know that whatever confronts me is temporal, then that knowledge, that hope, steels me to face danger, to bear hardship and to even process my grief in times of personal tragedy. "Hope" was the star virtue in last week's text. Death was occasioned by grief. That is understandable, but factor in this: All God's people will be with the Lord forever. Recall how Paul prefaced that discussion:

<sup>13</sup>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. – 1 Thessalonians 4:13

#### B. The Reality behind the Metaphor verses 9, 10

... <sup>9</sup>For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup>He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Faith, hope and love are among the most nebulous terms in the English language. They can each be used in ways that are profound. Each can be used in sentences that are utterly nonsensical. For faith, love and hope to function as the dependable protection of God against doubt, fear, disunity and lethargy, they must each be rooted in something significant. "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." That is one fine promise. And, if it's true, then we can have complete confidence that faith, hope and love are substantive virtues. Otherwise, we're just whistling in the dark. Paul explains the substance:

"He died for us..." There is an historical basis for our confidence in faith, hope and love. Jesus, the Son of God, God Incarnate, entered our world and died in the place of sinners. We are not saved by obeying His teachings or by following in His steps. We are called to do these things, but the substance of our salvation is the death of Jesus for us. He bore our sins. He endured God's wrath on those sins. His death, followed by His Resurrection to new life, is the single, once-for-all-time sacrifice that can cover the sins of every man, woman or child that has ever lived or ever will.

Of course, this makes sharing the message of the cross an urgent endeavor on our parts, especially in our age of religious pluralism. If I really believe that all religious and philosophical paths lead to the same place, that the Gospel is just one in a million different avenues to truth, then, what is my incentive to proclaim it? No, once-for-all-time means that Christ's death is significant. There is no alternative. We hold in our hand the one "Pearl of Great Price." He said so Himself:

... "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

- John 14:6

## **Conclusion (11)**

... <sup>11</sup>Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

This is the second time that we have heard Paul tell believers to encourage one another with words from God. Last week, he was referring to the promises of the resurrection of the dead. Here, he refers to the promise of our coming salvation. But, this time Paul also instructs them to "build up each other," not that they are not doing so, but that they can never do so enough.

To "build up each other" means not only are there are promises in Christ to be believed, but that there are also precepts from Christ to be obeyed. It means holding each other accountable for our obedience to God, our witness to the world and our love for each other. Paul spoke of "building up" many times, meaning the use of gifts from God to strengthen the weak, to touch the world for Christ and to pursue the health and wholeness of the church, which is Christ's Body.

The kind of waiting for Jesus that He will find pleasing when He comes will never be about some wild-eyed excitement generated by obsessions with "times and date" or hysteria over "signs of the times." Somebody, maybe nobody, will be proven absolutely right as to their specific theories on tribulations, millenniums and judgments. But, what we are called to is much simpler than any of that. Live quiet lives. Pay your bills. Love your spouse. Care for your own. Guard your witness. Build up God's people. Find courage in the promises of God. You'll be fine.

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