

READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES! 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

In the 1960's a religious phenomenon swept the American landscape and spread to several countries throughout the world. It was a fascination—indeed, a *preoccupation*—with Bible prophecy. More specifically, it was a newly acquired conviction that it was possible and prudent to discern the precise details of the end times. Prior to this Bible believing Christians certainly affirmed that Jesus was coming again, but there was a widespread consensus that the genre of Scripture referred to as apocalyptic literature was *intentionally* ambiguous, and that attempts to discern the exact meaning of apocalyptic signs and images in such books as Revelation and Daniel were fruitless.

Suddenly, however, a new breed of prophecy expert emerged from a wing of the evangelical church who weren't afraid to tackle those complicated texts and provide detailed analysis and bold interpretations, accompanied with *predictions* of when and where and how the end times would unfold. Words and symbols such as *Rapture*, *Great Tribulation*, *pre-tribulation*, *millennium*, *Antichrist*, *Beast*, and *666* became part of Christian vernacular.

During a period of instability and unrest, these "experts" opened up our imaginations to a new and exciting way of interpreting contemporary events and global personalities—a way that appealed to some who previously had no interest in God or the Bible. And it triggered a consciousness that Jesus could come at any time for His church. Indeed, these prophecy experts argued, the signs indicating His *imminent* arrival had been fulfilled when Israel regained its status as a nation in 1948. The retaking of Jerusalem in the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab enemies only further confirmed that Jesus was on the verge of returning. End times experts declared that sometime within the span of a generation (however long that is) the Rapture would occur, the Antichrist would be revealed, a seven-year period of tribulation would unfold, and finally, Christ would return to establish His kingdom on earth for a thousand years.

But alas, by even the most generous definition, it's been longer than a generation since Israel became a nation. Furthermore, none of the personalities who were identified as the Anti-Christ and the Beast, and none of the predictions about the mark of the beast have been accurate either.

Which raises some question. Were these prophecy experts misguided? Did they take unwarranted liberties in their interpretations of Daniel, Revelation, and other prophetic passages of Scripture? More importantly, what does God think about the efforts of Bible teachers who make specific predictions about the end times?

The Second Coming of Christ is a major emphasis in the New Testament, and the biblical writers clearly portrayed it as the pinnacle of the believer's hope. It is what we are living for, for it marks the beginning of when we start to really live. It marks the end of the reign of sin and Satan in this earth realm, the end of our sin-cursed hearts and bodies, and the beginning of when all things will be made new and right, an existence where there will be no sin, no pain, no tears, no fear, no struggle, and no death.

The believers at Thessalonica got really excited about that. However, when Paul told them that Jesus could return at any time, they really thought that He *would* return. And as time went on and He did not, they became confused and troubled, especially when some things happened that they didn't expect, like the deaths of some of their believing loved ones.

So, in chapter 4 verses 13-18, the passage we studied last week, Paul asserts that believers who die before the Second coming of Jesus will most certainly not miss out on the Parousia. Their decayed and disintegrated bodies will be recomposed and resurrected, and,

along with believers who are alive at the time, will ascend together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

In chapter 5 Paul continues his instruction on this subject. However, whereas in chapter 4 he focuses on the fate of *deceased* believers at the Parousia, in this section he emphasizes the need for *living* believers to be ready for Jesus' imminent return. **Verse 1**, *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.*

Paul is answering another question raised by the Thessalonians on the subject of the Parousia, this one having to do with the question of *when*. As we read on in the passage, we discover that the question arose out of *more* than mere curiosity. They were concerned about their own participation. They were wondering if, by being morally or spiritually lax, the Lord might consider some of them to be unworthy or inadequate or ill-prepared to be summoned to meet Him (Marshall, 132).

Perhaps they wanted to know if there were any signs that would give them some advance warning that the Parousia was about to happen so they could be fully prepared. But no such information was available. Indeed, there was nothing that *could* be written, as we discover in **verse 2**, *² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*

Apparently, Paul had already given the church oral instruction on this matter when he was with them in person, and he reminds them that they already knew all that there was to know about the *timing* of Jesus' return.

Of course, it is natural to want to know exactly when the big event will be. But the fact is, we *cannot* know, which means that there is really no such thing as a prophecy expert. Those who claim to have figured out exactly when Jesus will return are being presumptuous. When Paul was asked for more details, he had nothing more to say than what he says in this passage. And Bible teachers today would do well to follow his example.

Paul says that *the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*. What is *the day of the Lord*? Some have made a distinction between "the day of the Lord" and the "Parousia" referenced in the previous chapter. They insist that Paul is describing two different events. They assert that 4:17 is a reference to the church being raptured and taken to heaven, and that there is a seven-year gap known as the Great Tribulation before the Day of the Lord.

I would humbly submit to you that is *not* the natural, simplest reading of the text, which is another rule of hermeneutics. A person would have to do a number of exegetical maneuvers to come up with that interpretation, for there is nothing in Paul's reference to the day of the Lord to suggest that Paul was distinguishing between the events of chapters 4 and 5.

I believe that the Day of the Lord was one and the same as the Parousia. Paul was simply borrowing a frequent and familiar Old Testament phrase that signified the day on which God would act in power to establish His sovereign rule on earth; a day that would involve both judgment and salvation. Since Paul wanted to emphasize the judgment of unbelievers in this passage, it is only natural that he would use this phrase, "the Day of the Lord."

But Paul's real emphasis in this verse is on the manner in which this day will arrive. He says it will come like "a thief in the night." Jesus himself used this simile when He said, *"But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him"* (Luke 12:39-40).

I believe this figure of speech is intended to convey three things: First, Jesus' coming will be **unexpected**. A burglar typically does his devious work under the cover of darkness when the household is sleeping, oblivious to the fact that there is an intruder in the home. Likewise, Jesus' coming will take the world by surprise.

Second, His coming is **unpredictable**. That's what Jesus meant when He said, *"If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into" (Lk. 12:39)*. Indeed, a thief can only be successful if no one knows he is coming. In the same way, Jesus' coming will be as unpredictable as a thief's.

Third, the thief-in-the-night figure of speech is intended to convey that Jesus' coming will be **unwelcome** by some. Obviously, a burglar is an intruder, not an invited guest. Many of those living on the earth at the time of the Parousia will find that the day of the Lord is a day of judgment, and therefore it will be as unwelcome as the visit of a burglar.

Look at **verse 3**, *³ While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

Jesus told us in Matthew 24 and 25 that there would be signs indicating that the time of the end was getting near. There will be wars and rumors of wars; nation will rise against nation; there will be famine and pestilence and earthquakes; there will be an increase in the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. There will be an epidemic of hatred and strife and betrayal and faithlessness.

These are *not* signs of peace and security.

How is it, then, that Paul describes a scenario where people, presumably unbelievers, say, "Ahh, peace and security! Everything is fine. All is well!?"

In 1930, President Herbert Hoover made an astonishing announcement to the American people. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to inform you that the recession is officially over." If you know anything about American history, you know that the worst part of the Great Depression wasn't until two years later. More recently, in May of 2003, President George W. Bush gave his now infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, declaring that victory in the war with Iraq had been won. In actuality, it was just beginning. And in January of this year, President Trump declared that there was no need to worry about the Coronavirus, confidently asserting, "We have it totally under control."

It is not uncommon to think that things are better than they really are. It is not uncommon to completely misinterpret the actual state of things, or to be deceived by a *false* sense of peace and security. All of the things that Jesus talked about in Matthew 24 are occurring right now, and yet many are declaring "peace and security." Both Jesus and Paul said that at a time when all "seems" to be well, destruction will arrive with the suddenness of labor pains.

We know that "labor pains" are unbearably painful, but Paul's emphasis by using this figure of speech is not on the pain but on the way in which the birth pangs come upon an expectant mother more or less without warning. He is also emphasizing that judgment is inevitable. A pregnant woman who is two weeks overdue sincerely wonders if she will ever have her baby, but no woman in that state has ever failed to eventually give birth. Likewise, it may feel to the unbeliever that Jesus' promise to return to judge the earth is an empty promise, given the fact that it has been two thousand years. But it *will* happen, and it will be catastrophic for those who will suffer His wrath.

Jesus said in another place that it would be so terrible that people would cry out for the mountains to fall on them and the hills to cover them to hide from the wrath of God.

But Paul's major emphasis in this passage is not on the judgment of unbelievers, but on the way believers need to be prepared for the Day of the Lord. So, he says in **verses 4-5**, *⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.*

The images of "light" and "darkness" and "day" and "night" are often used in Scripture to designate "insiders" versus "outsiders"—those who are friends of God versus those who are enemies of God; those who have a knowledge of the Truth versus those who are ignorant of the Truth or have rejected the Truth. Here, Paul is saying that because followers of Jesus belong to the light they have nothing to worry about. The day of the Lord will not come as a dreadful surprise to them. It will *not* have the character of a thief but of a friend (Marshall, 135).

So even though it is impossible to know precisely *when* Jesus will return, Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that it will be a *happy* event for them—they can enthusiastically look forward to it because it will be the day when they shall inherit their salvation.

But Paul goes on to say that while the question regarding the time of the Parousia cannot be answered, what *does* matter is being prepared for it. And so he says in **verses 6-7**, *⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night.*

Unlike unbelievers, who "sleep" in ignorance and thus will be caught off guard by the coming of the Lord, believers are to "keep awake" and "be sober." Keeping awake is a figure of speech that emphasizes the need to be spiritually alert. Paul understands the human tendency to become lax over time. But he also knows that when we are spiritually lax, we become vulnerable to discouragement, temptation, and the allurements of the world. And if we succumb to these things, we can lose sight of what we are really living for and, thus, be unprepared for the Lord's coming. The Apostle John put it this way: *And now, dear children, continue in Him so that when He appears, we may be confident and unashamed before him at His coming (1 Jn. 2:28).*

The second word translated "be sober" certainly suggests a state of mind and being that is the opposite of being drunk, but in this context, it is referring to *spiritual* sobriety, rather than physical sobriety. Paul is contrasting those who are *spiritually* inebriated—those who are out of touch with reality, who have no idea what is going on in the spiritual realm and are, therefore, unprepared for the day of the Lord—to those who are spiritually sober, those who *do* know what is going on in the spiritual realm, those who *are* living for the day when Jesus comes to finish his work of salvation.

Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians to keep their spiritual wits about them so they can be fully prepared and ready for the big Day.

In 1979, the day after Mindy and I were engaged to be married, I flew to British Columbia for the summer to work as a short-term missionary on an Indian Reserve. That was an agonizing experience for me, primarily because I was so lonesome for Mindy. I didn't think that summer would ever end—the days dragged on and weeks seemed like months. I found myself living for the day when we would be reunited, and as that day grew near, I made plans and preparations so that everything would be just so.

The plan was for her to come to Canada with my parents and meet me at a predetermined spot in the little town of Chemainus on Vancouver Island. They would be driving a rented motor home, and they expected to arrive about six o'clock in the evening. I started getting ready at six o'clock that morning.

I was living on a small island with no running water, so I took a ferry to another small island to take a rare and badly needed shower. I scrubbed for at least forty-five minutes. I

brushed my teeth three times and combed my hair just the way she liked it. I splashed a generous portion of aftershave on my face and tucked a pack of breath mints into my pocket. When I put on my shirt, I rolled up the sleeves so she would notice my bulging biceps.

Then I took the ferry to Chemainus and arrived at 3:00 in the afternoon. I didn't want to be late, and I didn't know if they might be early. So, I got to that predetermined meeting place and took my position on the sidewalk. And I began to wait. I stood there...and waited. I didn't dare sit down because if Mindy came around the corner and saw me sitting, I thought she might interpret that as a lack of excitement.

So, I stood. I stood on a six-inch curb.

Across the street in the top story of a two-story house a woman kept peering at me from behind the blinds. Finally, she opened her window and threatened to call the police if I didn't stop loitering. I smiled and waved, but I refused to budge. Nothing was going to deter me from this reunion.

At 10 PM—seven hours later—I was still standing on the curb. By that time, I was disheveled. My legs were stiff. My back was sore. A strong sea breeze was blowing and had messed up my hair. My aftershave had worn off and I had run out of breath mints. It was so cold that my biceps had turned blue and were covered with goose bumps.

But I had another, more pressing problem. I was feeling the call of nature. Finally, when I could stand it no longer, I left my post and sprinted to the nearest public restroom. And when I came out not more than two minutes later, I discovered they had arrived and were looking everywhere for me.

I believe there is a good way to measure how important someone is to you when you are anticipating an encounter with that person. You can measure it by what lengths you are willing to go to, what measures you are willing to take, what sacrifices you are willing to make to be fully attentive, alert, and ready. Of course, that is not difficult to do when that person means the world to you.

Peter said in his first letter, *“Prepare your minds for action, be self-controlled, set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed”* (1:13).

What are you living for? What are you setting your hope on?

With the deaths of two loved ones in our church this week, I have been reminded of Peter's statement that “We are strangers in this world.” This world is not our home, and therefore it is fruitless to be consumed and pre-occupied with the things of this world.

Real hope is in the Lord. And that hope is to see Him face to face. To be in His presence, without the limitations and constraints of these earthly bodies we live in. Without the hindrances of our flesh. To be able to have sustained, uninterrupted fellowship with Him for all eternity, where we shall never cease to praise Him for His mercy and His love, never cease to marvel at His glory and His beauty.

And all of that begins when Jesus comes. Look at **verses 8-10**, *“But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him.”*

Once again, let us be careful not to read our theology into this text. When Paul says that God did not destine or appoint believers to suffer wrath, he is not referring to the Great Tribulation, the seven-year period spoken of in Daniel. He is referring to God's judgment in which He will condemn unbelievers to hell for rejecting His provision for their salvation in Jesus. Notice, the reason that Paul says we will not suffer wrath is because of the death of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. Our salvation is rooted in what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Had He not died for us, had we not appropriated His death by putting our faith in Him, we, too, would be destined to suffer wrath.

The point is our eternal security is grounded in the death of the Lord Jesus. When He died for us, He purchased us with His blood, and nothing can change our status as belonging to Him. So when He comes, whether it is in the day time and we are awake, or whether it's in the middle of the night and we are asleep, He will take us to be with Him so we can live with Him forever. And that is the best news of all. We get to be with Him for all eternity.

Verse 11, *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing*

I started this message by describing the bold assertions that many self-proclaimed prophecy experts made in the 70's and 80's about the timing of Jesus' return. I want to make a bold assertion of my own. The passages of Scripture that deal with the end times and the Parousia were not written so we could know the precise timing of the Second Coming. They were given to encourage weak and weary saints who needed to be assured and needed to be prepared.

Here is the specific encouragement Paul is giving in this passage:

First, for unbelievers the Day of the Lord will be a sudden, unexpected, and unwelcome surprise, because it will be a day of judgment, a day in which they will begin to experience the wrath of God. Our response to that unpleasant fact ought to be to live with a sense of urgency to share Christ with those who don't yet know him. Because when Jesus comes, it will be too late.

Secondly, for believers the Day of the Lord is a cause for eager anticipation not fearful apprehension, because it is not a day of wrath, judgment, or destruction, but the day of our salvation—a day in which we will meet the Lord and begin living with Him forever.

Thirdly, the way to prepare for the Day of the Lord is to live as though He were coming back today. To walk in the light as He is in the light, to be vigilant, and to set our hearts and minds on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

In this present earthly existence, it's not how long you live, but how well you live. It's not how many toys you accumulate, how many adventures you have, how many friends you make, how much power you possess, how healthy, wealthy or pretty you are. It's about seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness. It's how you invest your time and energy and resources for His pleasure and His glory.

We exist for Him. And the climax of our existence is when we see Him face to face. Life on this earth is only a shadow of reality; it is merely a preparation for when we start to really live.

Ready or Not, Here He Comes!

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Main Idea: Since the Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly followers of Jesus must always be spiritually prepared

The (Great & Terrible) Day of the Lord (1-9)

The Question of "When" (1-3)

No One Knows (1)

"A Thief in the Night" (2-3)

Unexpected (2)

Unpredictable (2)

Unwelcome (for Unbelievers) (3)

False Sense of Security (3)

Inevitable and Inescapable Destruction (3b)

The Day of Salvation for Believers (4-10)

It is a Day to eagerly anticipate (4-5)

It is a Day for which we must be prepared (6-8)

Keeping awake (6-7)

Being sober (8)

Spared from the Wrath of God (9-10)

Through Jesus' Death

For Eternal Life with Jesus

The Purpose of this Instruction (11)