

Preparing for His Coming

Paul's theme in his Thessalonian letters is the Return of Christ. In Chapter 4:13-18 Paul deals with the question on the minds of some in the church about their loved ones who had died. Since these new believers were expecting the Coming of Christ to be immediate, they wondered about the destiny of those who were now dead and buried. Paul charged the church to encourage one another that these believers were with the Lord, and their bodies would be raised when he returns with those who have gone to heaven to be with him.

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So, then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, 7 for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

With all the catastrophic world news there's a surge of apocalyptic hype and predictions about the return of Christ. We need to remember that Jesus expressly said that only the Father in heaven knows the time of the Son's return (Matt. 24: 36). I suppose the temptation to delve into the unknown and even the unknowable is irresistible to some, and more enticing in turbulent times.

This was true for some in the church at Thessalonica. Paul said they didn't need for him to write anything else about this subject "about times and dates." What is important is not that we try to understand the unknowable, which is futile, but that we focus on doing the important. We need to prepare for the coming of the Lord, first of all, by being alert to his coming. Paul uses the Old Testament *Day of the Lord* to speak of the return of Christ. He's certainly not describing a secret rapture of the church, but the Parousia of Christ, who will come to bring judgment to unbelievers and fulfilled salvation to those who belong to him (Rev. 19: 11-21).

Old Testament prophets like Amos speak of how Israel was lulled into complacency about the day of the Lord, and because of a false sense of security, were not prepared for it (Amos 5:12). Because the Israelites continued to observe their religious rituals, they were actually looking forward to the day of the Lord, thinking God was pleased with them and would reward them for their empty, hypocritical religion (Amos 5:18-21). Amos says that for them the Day of the Lord will be a day of darkness and not light. He says graphically that,

"It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him" (Amos 5:18-19).

Not only is God unimpressed with our religious rituals, but Amos says God despises and cannot stand hypocritical religiosity and his judgment of us will not at all be averted by our offerings (Amos 5:21-22). Paul describes the Day of the Lord as coming like a thief in the night.

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases verse 2 as "*He (Christ) won't call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would.*"

Paul took this analogy of a thief in the night from Jesus himself: "...*the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him*" (Matt. 24:42ff).

People will be talking about unprecedented peace and safety (v.3) when judgment comes upon them suddenly. Jesus himself described the day of his return as being during a time of secular, everyday preoccupation (Lk. 17:26). We are in a day of unprecedented prosperity but also of economic uncertainty. Wall Street and financial predictions have never been more uncertain. Every now and then a voice cries out in the wilderness, warning that everything could collapse, and this time of prosperity could come to a grinding halt, but these voices go largely unheeded. The reason predictions of anything less than unmitigated successes are ignored are that they are so unwelcome. Talk of a flood in the days of Noah was unwelcome, and even ridiculed. Judgment will be as unavoidable as labor pains for a pregnant woman (v.3).

Paul uses the analogy of our being children of the day, and of belonging to the Light. God has shone in our hearts with the light of the Holy Spirit, to give us life, and the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6). We are shining as lights in a world described as darkness, and we are to live in the light of the kingdom and coming of Christ. Though we still live in the realm of this kingdom of darkness, in this old fallen order, we are reborn into a new realm of light, and are already living by the new order that will be consummated on the Day of Christ. We are to live by faith and trust in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus.

We are to grow in our love for God and one another (Ch. 4). In a world so consumed by self-love and self-aggrandizement, how counter-cultural is this! And, we are to live as people of hope, which gives us a true perspective on life. Hope is what enables us to persevere, as we look beyond the immediate to realize all present hardship and suffering is temporary. Not only is it temporary, it's also preparatory for eternal glory. Christ-like virtues are to be put on like armor, in preparation for spiritual warfare (e.g. Eph. 6). We can expect that spiritual warfare will increase prior to an intervening work of God. The coming of Christ to earth the first time aroused intensified opposition from Satan and his demons, who sought to counter Jesus' work in people's lives. Prophecy seems to indicate that the coming of Jesus on his day will be immediately preceded by a "great tribulation." *Revelation* uncovers the ugly conflict, opposition and persecution that Satan and the antichrist and the false prophet will bring to the people of God. How important it will be that we are equipped with the full armor of God!

I still have anxiety dreams about a fast-approaching event, such as a pulpit appearance or a football game. It's inexplicable that someone as far removed from playing football as I am would still dream that I'm still playing. Usually, I arrive at the stadium late, the rest of the team is warming up, and poised for the kick-off, and I'm still fumbling around in the locker room, desperately trying to don my pads, helmet, and uniform. Some of my dreams are about being unprepared for a school exam or paper requirement.

But in reality, we must not be found unprepared in these days before the return of Christ, but must be alert to his coming, assured of where we're going. Paul reminds the church in Thessalonica that their hope is not based on something they have done, but rather upon the will and work of God. He says, "*For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 9). This use of the word "*salvation*" (v. 9) refers to our consummated salvation. Paul uses "*salvation*" to include salvation past (justification), salvation present (sanctification), and salvation future (glorification). In this context, Paul is referring to our future glorification, when we shall have arrived at our final destination.

People of hope are those who have entire confidence in the promises of God, and his sustaining grace, which will see us through to the end. People of hope are not the date-setting curiosity-indulging consumers of end-time, prime-time prophecy writers and movie producers. We are not expecting to be spared suffering and conflict by an any-moment secret rapture, but are trusting in grace to be ready for the last days and great tribulation, should they appear.

Jesus talks of the unprepared as being like those in the days of Noah, and like the five foolish virgins who were unprepared for the bridegroom's return (Matt. 24-25). Paul here talks about the foolish as those who are drunk in the night. It's quite possible to be among the foolish and unprepared, who are, in the eyes of the world, respectable and sober. To be drunk is to be influenced beyond your control by another substance. It's possible to be "drunk" with preoccupation with a lot of good things, but unaware of the need for a relationship with God. One can even be unprepared for the coming of the Lord while preoccupied with and under-the-influence of busy, religious, church activity.

We must prepare by being alert to his coming, assured of where we're going, but finally active in what we should be doing. The entire tenor of our text speaks to this concept - that we are to be active, not only in our being alert through our personal holiness and hope, but active in ministry to others. We're to be active in doing! I always think of the words of Lloyd John Ogilvie: "The best way to prepare for the last things is to be busy doing the first things!"

Jesus says this in his parable of the servant put in charge of his master's household. Jesus says with masterful understatement, "It will be good for that servant whose master finds him *doing* so when he returns" (Matt. 24: 46). We likewise, as God's people of hope, are given certain tasks to be doing in preparation for Jesus' Coming.

This is like military troops encouraging one another in preparation for the next battle, not knowing which might be the last. It's like teammates encouraging one another to prepare for the big game."

Paul uses one of his favorite word pictures when he says we are to "build each other up." In using the analogy of the church as a building of God, Peter also reminds us we are living stones that God is quarrying and gathering to be part of his holy temple (1 Pet. 2:4-9). In his second letter, Peter talks about the second coming, issuing an invitation to repent and believe before the coming of the Lord, who is patient and not willing that any of his chosen should perish, but to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

Evangelism and missions are the only activities that we know will speed the coming of Christ, who himself said he would not come until the gospel is first preached to all the ends of the earth. Every one destined to believe (v.9) will be among those from every tribe, nation, language and people group who will gather around the throne, and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). We are commissioned to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that the Master has commanded us (Matt. 28:19-20). Our task is to encourage each other in faith, hope, and love, till Christ is formed in all of us.

The work of preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus is the work of building lives that also are ready for his return who also will be unashamed when he comes (1 Jn.2:28). Our greatest work is people-work, to serve "the least of these his brothers" (Matt. 25:40). Only as we busy ourselves with investing in people's lives are we doing the kind of work that will win his approval when he comes.

No doubt, when the early church prayed "*Maranatha*," "*our Lord come*," they were living in readiness for his return (1 Cor.16:22; Rev. 22:20). They were busy getting themselves and others ready for heaven, and knew that when the final one of God's chosen was evangelized and discipled, the Lord would come.

Every believer can be prepared for the coming of the Lord, unlike an any-moment secret rapture of the church. But we must begin getting ready right now. And, the changes that must take place in our lives need to begin immediately.

Just as Paul admonishes us to encourage and build up one another, I am reminded of the constant danger of discouraging and offending "the least of these" children of God. Also, I face constantly the danger of tearing down the faith of others because of a lapse in holiness and spiritual vigilance over my temperament and my tongue.

I'm impressed by the prayer of the church, as recorded by James, Paul and John, *Maranatha!* meaning "Our Lord come!" And I wonder why we don't pray this today? The first century church, often persecuted and considered outsiders socially and underprivileged economically, had a kingdom focus and were daily encouraged by their hope of being with Jesus. We don't pray for the Lord to come because we're perhaps too occupied with this present world and too comfortable in our circumstances. We may actually *hope* the Lord doesn't come today!

Those first century believers had a heavenward focus and their hope was an anchor for their souls in times of difficulty and turmoil (Heb. 6:19). Praying "Our Lord come" means we are preparing to meet him with joy, having finished the work he has called us to do, rejoicing that he will set the whole world to rights, eradicating all evil, injustice, poverty, suffering, war, violence, and illness. And he will restore his damaged creation into unimaginable perfection and glorious beauty.

May God give us grace to live, and to live so that we are always preparing for and looking forward to his Coming.

Maranatha! Our Lord, come!