

June 27, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

The Day of the Lord

1 Thessalonians 5:1 – 10

Some have said that Paul wrote the last few verses in chapter four to **comfort troubled Christians – and here he writes to trouble comfortable Christians**. If you remember last week we saw that Paul was answering a couple of questions the Thessalonians had for him, namely, what happens to Christians when they die and what about those who die before Christ returns – will they participate in the glorious appearance of Christ for whom they have been waiting? And so Paul wrote to comfort them. He reassured them that the bodies of all those who die now before His return are sleeping as they wait for the day of their resurrection to new life and they will certainly participate in that great event. So they should not grieve as those who have no hope, but as those whose hope is rock-solid and secure, and because Christ died and rose again, so shall they. And I believe this was to comfort and encourage them to be watching and waiting, looking and hoping, for the day of the Lord's return. And also to encourage them to be faithful and patient, as those who are so in love with Him that they cannot wait to see Him.

And I would say this next passage is simply a continuation of this kind of encouragement. However, the tone and tenor have changed, as Paul frames this explanation of the Day of the Lord in terms of a warning as well as an encouragement to be ready. *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.* 1 Thessalonians 5:1 Apparently the Thessalonians had questions about the timing of this great event as well because Paul takes time to answer the unspoken question here – **when will this take place?** And Paul makes a curious statement – basically he repeats Jesus' words to His disciples just before He left earth, when they asked Him if now was the time when He would restore the kingdom to Israel: *"It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority..."* Acts 1:7 And so Paul echos that by answering the Thessalonians question on timing with *'...concerning the times and the seasons [epochs], brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you...'*

What did Jesus mean? What did Paul mean? I think a couple of things are working here. One is that **God has determined that it is better for us not to have advance knowledge of the times and seasons.** **'Times'** here is the word *chronos* from which we get our word chronology and it simply means clock time, calendar time, chronology. **'Seasons'** is the word *kairos* which means seasons, epochs, events. It would be like talking about the Bronze Age or the Age of Enlightenment or something like that – a period of history that is characterized by certain events. And the Thessalonians were understandably curious about this. Because the issue of the end of all things includes a lot of events and knowing the timeline might be helpful.

Obviously there is the Rapture of the saints – there is the Great Tribulation – there is the rise of the AntiChrist – there is a series of judgements through natural and supernatural means, the battle of Armageddon, the judgement seat of Christ and the Great White throne judgement – a lot of events. And a timeline might be helpful. But Paul simply says that they didn't need to know the timeline. That is, God has determined that it is not in our best interests to have an advance knowledge of exactly when things wrap up. In fact the church has been anticipating this for 2000 years, but it still hasn't happened. A lot of people have set dates and determined times and still we are here and still the Lord tarries. This is one aspect of the knowledge of God that Moses was referring to when he wrote: *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.* Deuteronomy 29:29 That is, there are some things we are supposed to know and do – but there are other things that God has not revealed for His own purposes.

This does not mean that we should just be ignorant and never study the Scriptures to learn what we can about the end of all things, or indeed anything else. I believe it means that we are not to be focused on timelines, because the other side of not needing an advance knowledge of times and seasons is that **we have all the information we need to be ready for the Lord's return.** As Peter tells us in his second letter: *seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.* 2 Peter 1:3

Peter also tells us in his first letter that those who loved the word of God searched hard in Scripture to see if they could determine when the Messiah would come: *As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.* 1 Peter 1:10-11 But obviously He never gave them a timeline, otherwise it wouldn't have been just Simeon and Anna at the Temple that day when Jesus came on the scene. All the signs of the Messiah's coming were there, but most people still missed it. I believe Paul's point here is that **readiness for Christ's return does not involve dates, or clock-watching or sign-seeking.** In fact those things are probably a hindrance rather than a help.

Last week we saw that when the Lord returns to gather His own, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky – large and visible to the earth. If you want a sign – there it is. But notice that it doesn't appear in advance – but when He comes. Jesus said the same thing to the religious people of His day when they pestered Him for a sign: *'Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet...'* Matthew 12:38-39 The sign of Jonah was the three days and nights in the belly of the fish, and that is the sign Jesus gave them, His death and burial for three days. But notice again, that sign didn't do them any good. They didn't believe. They thought the Messiah would come in power and glory – He came and died on the cross. What they wanted was a sign that fit their pre-conceived idea – what they got was a criminal's death that left them still looking for a sign and they missed Jesus.

One of the other reasons it is not for us to know the times or the seasons, is that **the Day of the Lord comes unexpectedly.** If we had a timeline – it wouldn't be unexpected. *For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.* 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 Jesus Himself, speaking of His return and the Day of the Lord, said, *But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.* Matthew 24:36 What would be the consequences if we knew the precise moment of Christ's return? If we knew His coming were a long way off, we would most likely be apathetic, indifferent, unmotivated to live godly lives – or on the other hand if it were tomorrow, some of us would be in a panic mode. I believe God has chosen not to give us an exact timeline **so that we would live in a state of continued expectancy of His return.** And indeed that has been the testimony of church history for 2000 years, from the apostles until now.

The other thing to notice here is how Paul links the coming of Christ, the resurrection and the rapture of the believers in chapter four with the Day of the Lord in chapter five. Apparently they all refer to the same event – Christ's coming on clouds of the sky with power and glory, the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ, the rapture of those resurrected and those found living at the time – and something called the Day of the Lord. There are those who separate the rapture of the believers and Christ's coming in the clouds from the Day of the Lord, but I believe that the Day of the Lord, mentioned many, many times in both the Old and the New Testament, refer to the culmination of all things at the end of this age. We need to remember that this day, is probably not a literal 24-hour day, but rather most likely refers to an epoch or season of time in which God wraps up history with a series of events.

In Acts chapter two, Peter quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel when he is preaching the gospel and says: *But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: In other words Peter is saying, What you see happening today is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.* Acts 2:17-20

Peter makes it clear that he considered the day in which he was living among those that the prophet called the 'last days' (by the way, these 'last days' have lasted for nearly 2000 years) – and that there was coming a day in the future called the **Day of the Lord.** From Paul's words in chapter four of this book, we understand that the Day of the Lord encompasses Christ's coming and the resurrection and rapture of the saints, but here in chapter five he lets us know that there is another side to it. *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.* 1 Thessalonians 5:3 So it appears that **the Day of the Lord is full of joy and fear.** We know it will be joy for those who are Christ's – and apparently it will be full of fear for those who have rejected Christ, because Paul tells us that destruction and pain are coming in that day as well.

The Day of the Lord is a great and magnificent day, Christ returns to take His bride to be with Him forever, there is joy and gladness and great rejoicing – **and** it is a day of great fear and darkness and terror and judgment. Here is what the Old Testament prophets said about it: Isaiah 2:12, *"For the day of the Lord of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up and it shall be brought low."* Isaiah 13:6, *"Wail, for the day of the Lord is at hand."* Isaiah 13:9, *"Behold, the day of the Lord comes cruel with both wrath and fierce anger to lay the land desolate."* Jeremiah 46:10, *"For this is the day of the Lord, a day of vengeance, that He may avenge Himself on His adversaries."* Joel 1:15, *"For the day of the Lord is at hand, it shall come as destruction from the Almighty."* Joel 2:11, *"The day of the Lord is great and very terrible."* Joel 2:31, *"The sun shall be turned into darkness, the moon into blood before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord."* Amos 5:18, *"Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord, for what good is the day of the Lord to you?"* Amos 5:20, *"Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light?"* Zephaniah 1:14, *"The great day of the Lord is near, it is near and hastens quickly, the noise of the day of the Lord is bitter."* Zephaniah 1:15, *"That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness."* And finally, that great Italian prophet Malachi 4:5, *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet [Matthew 11:14 – John the Baptist] before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord."*

Now if you look at the context of these prophecies, you will discover that each one referred firstly to the judgment of God brought upon people using nation against nation, as He used Assyria and Babylon to judge His people, and using famines or earthquakes or other natural calamities for the same purpose. And each of these events are referred to as 'the Day of the Lord'. But these were only preludes to the final supernatural cataclysmic events that bring final judgment on a wicked and rebellious world when the wrath of God will consume the wicked. The prophets were looking at a historical day of the Lord that was very near them, but they also pointed to that final Day of the Lord in the future. **The Day of the Lord looks ahead both to the believers final salvation and God's final outpouring of wrath.** We call these near/far prophecies and they have a near/far interpretation.

For example, if you turn to the book of Joel, you see that the first two chapters talk about the day of the Lord and the context is the impending invasion of Assyria. *Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes'* Joel 1:15 And then in chapter two he seems to look ahead to the Babylonian invasion and captivity. And those things happened – Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria and then Judah was taken by the Babylonians around 586 B.C. But then Joel leaps millennia into the future at the end of chapter two in the passage that Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost and starts talking about a Day of the Lord to come upon the whole earth. And in chapter three he is no longer talking about a localized event but rather about a nations gathering in the valley of judgment and the Lord sitting in judgement and all of sudden we are at Armageddon and the sun and moon get dark and the stars fall and so we understand this is the ultimate Day of the Lord.

So what we have is a near/far prophecy that has its fulfillment both historically and in the future. And this was meant to give us a picture, as it were, of the coming Day of the Lord and the wrath of God on sinful people. The historical events were meant to anticipate the final eschatological events and warn people to flee the wrath to come. Because, while on the one hand, the Day of the Lord is a much anticipated joyful event, on the other it is a terror-inspiring, fear-generating prospect. It is the wrath of God unleashed on sinful rebellious men who will not turn to God. And it should inject the fear of God into our thinking. The Bible says that God will not contend with us forever – one day accounts will be settled. That is why today is the day of salvation – this is the age of Grace – God's great grace that will save us from the wrath to come. In the Day of the Lord, believers will not experience the wrath of God – in fact 1 Thessalonians 1:10 tells us that we are delivered from that wrath. But our opportunity to avail ourselves of the grace ends on that day.

And strangely enough, even though the wrath of God is poured out on people, they still harden their hearts **not to turn to God.** In Revelation chapter six, starting with verse 12, we read about the wrath of God being poured out starting with the sixth seal: *When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who can stand?"* Revelation 6:12-17

This simply points up the fact that no one who goes to hell leaves skid marks on the floor. They go willingly, defiantly, and without remorse. Look at what is happening – a great earthquake shakes the earth, the sun goes black, the moon looks like blood, the stars are falling, mountains and islands moving around – and their response is **not, Lord save us** – but asking for help from the rocks and mountains so they can hide from God! Psalm ten tells us this about those kind of people: *For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek Him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God."* Psalm 10:3-4 And Job tells us: *They [the wicked] say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of Your ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit do we get if we pray to Him?'* Job 21:14-15

As we mentioned at the beginning this morning, Paul frames this explanation of the Day of the Lord in terms of warning as well as encouragement to be ready. The warning is clear – there is a great day coming, and you will either anticipate and welcome that day or it will take you by surprise and you will try to hide from it. Paul makes the distinction between the two kinds of people by contrasting those in darkness and those in the light: *But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.* 1 Thessalonians 5:4 In other words, the Day of the Lord will come **suddenly upon everyone**, because no one knows the hour, but **unexpectedly and surprisingly** upon those who have rejected Christ. Even while people are saying '**Peace and security**' destruction will rain down. I believe that when the Lord likens His sudden appearance to a thief in the night, He intends us to understand that **to those who know Him, His sudden appearance won't be thief-like, but to those who do not know Him, His appearance will fill them with terror.**

Those who know Christ are not living as if were in darkness, but in light, and usually thieves break in and steal under the cover of night. And those who know Christ also know that He is no thief so His appearance would not be as an intruder but a member of the family. So the Day of the Lord won't be unexpected or surprise those who belong to Christ. It will just surprise everyone else.

So what should we take away from this? **For those who know Christ** – for those who have embraced the good of the gospel and look forward to the coming of Christ, we need to live in the light as He is in the light, anticipating and looking for His return. We don't need to get caught up in clock watching or sign seeking but as Paul told the Corinthians '*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him*'. 1 Corinthians 5:11 so that at His return there will be joy and not fear, exultation and not terror.

For those who do not know Christ, you have not embraced the good of the gospel, let this warning serve to shake your complacency and awaken faith in your heart to hear and believe that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for your sin on the cross, and died and rose again so that you might rise to meet Him on that day. Don't let the Day of the Lord take you by surprise – because if that is the case, it will be a day of terror and not joy, sadness and mourning instead of gladness and light. I urge you this morning by the mercies of God to be reconciled to Him – because Christ is coming on the clouds of the sky and every eye will see Him – some to their eternal joy, others to their eternal shame.

Our gracious and loving heavenly Father,

We thank You this morning for the great and glorious hope we have in Christ, that we are not destined for wrath but glory, to one day be with You forever. Grant that we would live in expectancy, anticipation and obedience so that we will be ready for Your return. Help us to live as children of the light because we do not belong to the night, and to understand that we are living in the last days. Teach us to number our days that we may present to You a heart of wisdom and not be surprised by Your coming. We pray, O Father, for those who do not know Christ, who do not have this great hope, that You would, in mighty prevailing grace sweep over them by the power of the Holy Spirit to convict of sin, righteousness and the coming judgement that they might come to salvation and hope. May we who live in the light of Your coming do all we can to persuade others to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, as those who have been made glad in God, living to make others glad in Him for Your Name's sake and for Your glory, we pray in the precious and saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.