

July 4, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Children of Light – Children of the Day

1 Thessalonians 5:4 – 11

Last week we saw something about the Day of the Lord and we understand that to be the time of the culmination of all things. It is a time that sees the the final salvation of all those who have believed the gospel and embraced Christ – those who died in Christ will be resurrected in new bodies and those who are alive at His coming will be changed in the twinkling of an eye and raptured with them to meet Christ in the air and, as Thessalonians tells us – to be with Him forever. And the Day of the Lord encompasses the judgements of God and His final outpouring of wrath upon a sin-sick world that has continually rejected Him and disregarded both His promises and His warnings.

The Bible tells us that we have all the information we need to be ready for the Lord's return and that readiness for Christ's return does not involve dates, or clock-watching or sign-seeking. Rather we who know Christ should live in a state of continued expectancy of His return in order that the day of His coming does not take us by surprise. That day will come **suddenly** upon everyone, because no one knows the hour, but it will come **unexpectedly** and **surprisingly** upon those who have rejected Christ. The Bible and Jesus Himself say over and over that His coming will be like a thief in the night. But we need to understand that His coming will only surprise those who aren't ready or expecting Him. If you look at the passages where His coming is described that way you see find that the warning is to **not** be caught by surprise. If you are not expecting and anticipating His glad return – be sure that His coming will be to you like a thief breaking into your house. It will be incredibly surprising and extremely unwelcome – in fact to you, it will be judgement, not celebration. So if you are in Christ at His coming – all is rapture – in the fullest sense of the word. If you are not – all is judgement.

And this is Paul's point as well. He told the Thessalonians in verse 3 of this chapter: *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.* That is not a happy scenario. There is nothing positive about that day for those who have not embraced Christ. But Paul is not dealing with unbelievers, but those who call themselves believers so he goes on in verse four: *But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.* 1 Thessalonians 5:4

Darkness here refers back to the Day of the Lord in verse two. Remember our description of the Day of the Lord as it refers to judgement? *"Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light?"* Zephaniah 1:14 *"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."* Darkness is the characteristic of those without Christ. **It is a mental, moral and spiritual darkness.**

It is a mental darkness because their thinking is not full of light – in fact the Bible says that those who don't know Christ – even their wisdom is really foolishness. You don't have to look any further than the theory of evolution to see that. At some point in time the universe leapt into existence by some means that we do not know nor can we find out, stars and galaxies were born, planets were formed and at least on one, by processes we don't know, non-life became life. As eons passed, through processes that we do not know, that beginning of life grew more and more complex. From one cell, which in itself was quite a feat, it grew into billions of cells that developed, again through processes we do not know, into plants and animals and insects and finally man. In the attempt to explain our existence without acknowledging God or giving Him honor, this is the best that man can do. G.K. Chesterton wrote over a century ago, *'It is absurd for the Evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing, and then pretend that it is more thinkable that nothing should turn itself into anything'*

It is a moral darkness as well. Men who reject Christ, who reject God, reject His Law which is the only moral guideline in this dark world. Without God's law, everything is dark, the boundaries between right and wrong are blurred and distorted and finally disregarded altogether. The Apostle John tells us in his gospel that the life of Christ is the light of men which means that without Christ all is dark. And what is more, John tells us in chapter three of his gospel that unregenerate men love darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. In fact they hate the light and won't come to the light because that would expose them.

And finally **it is a spiritual darkness**. It is a darkness of ignorance, a darkness of sin, and it is dark because they are blind spiritually. 2 Corinthians 4:4 tells us that: *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers*, 2 Corinthians 4:4 They cannot see the light of the glory of Christ in the gospel because they are blind. You would not expect a blind man to appreciate the glory of the magnificent art in the Louvre – precisely because he is blind. What they need is a miracle – that is one reason Jesus was all the time healing blind people. In part it was to show them that they needed God to open their eyes to the truth.

But Paul says, you who belong to Christ are not in darkness and you won't be surprised by His coming, and the day of His coming will not be dark for you. **Light is the characteristic of those who belong to Christ.** Jesus said, *'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'* John 8:12 And it is not only that we are walking in the light, we are by virtue of a new nature, children of light, children of the day. We are day people, not night people. *For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.* 1 Thessalonians 5:5

When a person comes to Christ, a significant transformation takes place. It is as though they have come out of a dark place where all was shadows and gloom, into the day where everything is bright and clear and full of light. **Where once we were characterized by and shared the nature of darkness, now we are characterized by and share the nature of light.** *In Him was life and the life was the light of men.* John 1:4 tells us. The nature of the life of Christ is light because that is the nature of God. *God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.* 1 John 1:5 And when a person comes to Christ, that life of God that is light is imparted to them so they become children of light.

If you look at the history of the world and the spread of the gospel, wherever the truth has been proclaimed, light has come. It comes firstly as the true knowledge of God to a people in darkness, but then the effect of light of the gospel is that it transforms and reshapes their thinking, their behavior and their culture. Our country was founded by children of light. Those Puritans and Pilgrims who came to these shores from England did so with the acute realization that their coming meant spreading light in a dark place. One of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, put that sentiment into words in a sermon in 1630: *'...that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us...'*

However, as a nation, I fear that light has been so dimmed as to be considered not light, but darkness in our day. It was children of the day that first penned these words: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* This is no longer so. It is no longer self-evident in this nation that life is endowed by our Creator – let alone the certainty that we even have a Creator. And the light that shone forth from these shores has become instead deep darkness.

We are sliding into darkness because we have turned from the path of light to pursue our own pleasures. Our mental, moral and spiritual foundations have crumbled because we as a nation have turned from relying on God to relying on ourselves. The liberties and freedoms we enjoy as Americans flowed from our belief and trust in God, and they will not remain if we reject Him. Calvin Coolidge, our 30th President once wrote: *The strength of our country is the strength of its religious convictions. The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.*

So for those who are children of light comes this admonition: *So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night.* 1 Thessalonians 5:6-7 Here Paul is not using the word sleep as he did in chapter four to describe those who had died in Christ. Here he is talking about being spiritually sensitive. He is contrasting day people and night people. Day people are alert and sober-minded, they are anticipating and expecting the Lord to return and call them to glory. They are living in the light of His return. Night people on the other hand are like those who senses have been deadened by drink, unconscious of their real condition, living as if judgement was not right around the corner, they are asleep and unaware of what is really happening. Warnings against sin and exhortations to righteous make no sense and run off them like water off a ducks back.

Paul says, 'Don't be asleep – stay awake – be sober'. In a world that is hell-bent on maximizing pleasure and comfort and titillating their senses – spiritually numb to the things of God, children of the day are alive to God and the things of God – waiting and watching, vigilant and self-controlled. 'Watch is the same word Jesus uses in the gospels when He tells the disciples to *'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour...'* Matthew 25:13, and in the garden before the cross He tells them to *'watch and pray'*. It is a kind of watching that is wrapped around prayer – praying till He comes – ***Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven – Come Lord Jesus, come!*** It is also a sober view of life that says because He is coming back, I will do what it takes to be ready. The word sober here means to be free of confusion or self-controlled. Children of light are not confused about what is important and what the will of God is for their lives and they are self-controlled in their pursuits. They are alert and awake to truth and righteousness and the reality that Jesus is coming.

Paul continues: *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.* 1 Thessalonians 5:8 Because we are children of light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, we need to have our hearts guarded by faith that works through love so that our affections will not wander and be seduced by the things of this age. We need our minds and thoughts, our plans and aspirations guarded and guided by the hope of salvation. We need to have our emotions and minds guarded against temptation – the temptation to worry, the temptation to be discouraged, the temptation to wander, the temptation to give in to the world, the flesh and the devil. That is what the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation are for – to keep us from sinking into the stupor and darkness of the world and to keep us from sin.

All sin reflects our failure to love God and trust Him. Putting on the breastplate of faith and love means that **we are continually putting our trust in God**. We trust Him to be enough. We trust that delighting ourselves in Him is more fulfilling and satisfying than the fleeting pleasure and momentary satisfaction of sin. We trust that He is enough, even if we should lose houses, or cars or friends or loved ones. We trust that nothing is too hard for Him – nothing is beyond His power to control – no one is beyond the reach of His grace – He is not surprised by anything, rather He ordains all things for His own glory and purposes – and His purpose will be accomplished.

Putting on the breastplate of faith and love means that **we purpose to delight ourselves in God** and not in other things. It means that we count His love toward us and our love toward Him as the highest value in this life and in the next. It means that we allow our love for Him to keep us from the deadly loves that sin offers – that we consider His love so valuable – so treasured – so incredibly desired that we would be inconsolable at the thought of losing even a moment of the sense of His presence through sin.

Putting on the helmet which is the hope of salvation means that **we fill our thoughts with the great promises of God** who saved us from the wrath to come and will one day replace our broken and sin-sick bodies with perfect ones and take us to be with Him forever. It means that we rehearse the gospel daily so that we won't be sucked into living like the world and fritter our time away in empty pursuits. It means that we inject our souls with the hope that is to come so that the hope of eternal glory with Christ will protect our minds against the temptation to sin.

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. 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 Children of light – children of the day are not destined for wrath. The day of God's wrath is great darkness and since light has no fellowship with darkness, the Day of the Lord for us will be light, not darkness. So whether we are asleep in Christ at His coming, or we are alive when He returns, our great hope is that we will live with Him forever when He comes to take us home. *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.* 1 Thessalonians 5:11

*Our gracious God and Father,
Grant that we would live as children of light, children of the day in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Help us O Lord to walk in the light even as You are in the light because we are people of the day and not people of the night. May we live watchful and awake, alert and sober so that Your coming does not take us by surprise. Grant that we would never cease from putting our trust in all the promises of God and delighting ourselves in You above all things. May the gospel light we have embraced and daily rehearse, shine out from us to bring the glorious light of Christ to those still in darkness until the darkness is finally swept away by the glorious light of Your appearing we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*