

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Isaiah 26
Psalm 30

“The Day of the Lord”

December 24, 2023

“In that day...”

It may seem odd to preach on the coming Day of the Lord on Christmas Eve –
but this is the point of Christmas Eve!

As long as it remains Christmas Eve – if Christmas Day never comes –
then we remain under the looming threat of Judgment Day.

And that is why Isaiah 26 is the perfect OT reading for Christmas Eve! –
this awful picture of a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs –
“we were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind”!

Can you imagine that?
Ladies – Mothers!

Going through all the pain of labor – all the hours of contractions and pushing –
just to pass gas.

What is it that makes labor worth it?
The joy of bringing a child into the world!
This little person who resembles me!

But to go through all the agony of childbirth – only to pass gas?
Talk about futility!

“We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth.”

It was only on Christmas Eve as the blessed Virgin felt the beginning of the birth pangs,
that there would be a labor that would accomplish deliverance in the earth!

And as she was delivered of her child,
as the hymn-writer put it, “to show God’s love aright, she bore to men a Savior,
when half-spent was the night.”

We sing of this deliverance in Psalm 30!

Sing Psalm 30
Read 1 Thessalonians 5

Last time we looked at the Coming of the Lord –
and now we turn to the Day of the Lord.

The idea of the Day of the Lord
is closely connected with the theme of “Judgment Day” in scripture.

Isaiah 13:6-9 speaks of the Day of the LORD as the day of destruction.
Jeremiah 46:10 refers to the Day of the LORD as the day of vengeance.
Ezekiel 30:3 speaks of the Day of the LORD as the day of doom for the nations.
The whole book of Joel is organized around the Day of the LORD as the day of judgment.
Amos 5:18-20 warns that the Day of the LORD is a day of darkness – not light.
Zephaniah 1 speaks of the bitter sound of the Day of the LORD.
And Malachi 4 says that the Day of the LORD will be a day of consuming fire.

So when Paul speaks of the “Day of the Lord” here in 1 Thessalonians 5,
he is building on a familiar theme.

While the coming of the Lord is used at the end of chapter 4 as a comfort and encouragement,
the day of the Lord has a very different connotation!

And while the main theme is the judgment day at the end of history,
it is important to recognize that for each of us,
we all face the Day of the Lord.

For each of us it is appointed to die once – and then judgment.
And no one knows the hour of your death!

As John Chrysostom put it,
“Do not place your confidence in your youth,
nor think that you have a very fixed term of life,
‘for the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night.’...
Let the old man keep this admonition; let the young man heed this advice.”

Whether you are well-off or in need – whether you are afflicted or comfortable –
“Affairs change often.
We are not masters of our end.
Let us be masters of virtue.” (92)

So as we look at the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5,
remember that this life is the training ground for the next.
How you live now sets the trajectory for eternity.

1. A Thief in the Night (v1-3)

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

In verse 1, Paul says that the Thessalonians have no need of instruction
“concerning the times and the seasons.”

He had said the same thing in 4:9, “concerning brotherly love.”
It didn’t stop him then – and it doesn’t stop him now!!

Just because you already know something doesn’t mean that you don’t need to hear it again!
Besides, Paul’s point is solidify your hope.

I keep asking this question – what is your hope?
What is it that motivates you to do what you do?

We are all motivated by hope.
We all have something that we look forward to.
For some, it may be that you look forward to getting married.
For others, it may be that you look forward to some future phase of your career.

And then comes the Day of the Lord.
Judgment Day.

I spoke with a young man recently whose father had just died.
As long as his father was alive,
he felt as though there was a shield between himself and death.
And now his shield is gone.
He said it felt strange to have nothing left between himself and death.

Generations come – and generations go.

What is the hope that endures?
Only one hope can survive Judgment Day!
Because only one hope has already passed through Judgment Day.

We saw that last time
as we saw how death is the entrance into the realm of God’s wrath and curse.
But this is why Jesus came in our flesh!
He triumphed over death, so that those who live and believe in him might never die!

The first image of the Day of the Lord is something utterly unpredictable:
“a thief in the night.”

No one expects a thief to break in!
The coming of a thief is unexpected – and unwelcome!

Even so – the Day of the Lord will be unexpected and unwelcome

to those who live in rebellion against God.

But then the image shifts in verse three – and shifts in a way that may strike you as odd:

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.*

A thief in the night is utterly unpredictable!

Labor pains do not quite sound like “sudden destruction”!

Yes, there is considerable regularity in the pattern of pregnancy and childbirth.

After nine months, a woman will give birth!

But no matter how “expected” it is – it can sometimes be rather sudden!

Like when Virginia asked me if I could make a phone call for her,
since she couldn’t make it more than a couple minutes in between contractions.

I looked at her and said, “How about if I call the midwife – ‘cause you’re in labor...”
and shortly thereafter, William was born!

And a few minutes later, the midwife showed up!

The point that Paul is making here is *not* that labor pains are totally unexpected!

The point is that a pregnant woman *will* give birth!

There is no way to escape the coming judgment.

In the same way, there is considerable regularity in the pattern of God’s dealings with his people.

You reap what you sow.

Judgment day is coming!

How do you know?

You can see it every time a woman gives birth.

But – as we saw from Isaiah 26 – until the first Christmas,

there had never been a child-birth that had brought salvation!

Until Christmas, every childbirth ended in death and the grave.

Death kept winning.

Generations come.

Generations go.

What’s the point?

And then we come to the greatest word in the whole Bible:

“But”! (verse 4)

Yes – Judgment Day is coming!

BUT!

2. Why Will We Escape? “We Belong to the Day” (v4-8)

⁴ *But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.*

Judgment Day will not surprise you.

Whether you live until the Coming of Christ –
or whether you die – and “fall asleep” – to use Paul’s phrase –
that day will not surprise you.

Why?

Because Christmas is here!

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us –
and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.

You are not in darkness.

The light shined in the darkness, and darkness and death have been defeated.

a. Children of Light (v5)

⁵ *For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.*

You were once darkness –

but now you are light in the Lord!

You are children of light – children of the day!

How did you become children of light?

By faith – as John says:

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:9-13)

You were once darkness – but now you are light in the Lord!

And Paul uses this as a way of motivating you.

If you have been united to Christ by faith,
then you “have put off the works of darkness
and have put on the armor of light
and are no longer the children of darkness or night,
but have become sons of the day and walk honestly as in the day.” (Origen, 93)

This is who you now are – in Christ.

So then, *be* who you are – in Christ! (v6)

b. Stay Awake and Be Sober (v6-8a)

⁶ *So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.*

In the previous chapter, Paul had spoken of death as a sort of “sleep.”

Those who sleep *in Jesus* will be raised at the Coming of the Lord.

It’s important to note that Paul uses two different verbs for sleep.

The verb “to sleep” is used in chapter 4 to speak of those who sleep in Jesus.

There’s no major difference between the two –

the point is that Paul is talking about a different sort of sleep here!

The one who sleeps in Jesus is resting in the arms of his Savior.

Sure – your body and your soul are not connected to each other –

but both your body *and* your soul are connected to Jesus –

and so therefore, you do not experience death as a curse!!

But now Paul is using a different image (and so he uses a different verb).

So let us not *slumber* – as others do.

Slumber might be a better translation just to capture the laziness of the mood.

Paul is not saying that sleep is bad.

He is saying that laziness is bad.

Slothfulness is bad.

⁷ *For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night.* ⁸ *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober,*

We are not characterized by the night – by sleep – by drunkenness.

We belong to the day – we are watchful – sober – focused.

Perhaps in our crazy 24/7 culture, I need to explain what Paul is doing!

To us it may sound like Paul is saying that we need to be busy, busy, busy.

But that’s not what “sober” means.

Sober is not merely the opposite of drunk.

Sober means to be calm, temperate, moderate –

not given to extremes.

To be sober means to be clear-minded.

I had one of these sorts of moments this summer.

I was getting distracted – and I realized that I was not fearing God.

I was fearing man.

I was more concerned with what people thought of me,

than with what God thought of me.

When we are sober-minded, we see ourselves clearly –
because we see *God* clearly!

You will never see yourself clearly until you see Jesus clearly!

There's a way in which anything that distracts from Jesus is a sort of "drunkenness."
I think Paul would say that our obsession with our devices is a type of "drunkenness."

Being *sober* – being moderate – temperate –
means that we are not addicted to anything!
Addictions – by their very nature – are intemperate, immoderate, and inordinate!
Because they take what properly belongs to God
and gives it to something else.

I want to be clear here!
"Sober" does not mean "boring"!

When Proverbs 5 contrasts true love with adulterous lust –
listen to how the father describes it to his son:
"Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
be intoxicated always in her love.
Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?" (5:18-20)

Sober does not mean "boring"!
A healthy amount of wine enlivens a party.
Too much wine destroys a party.

Both the ordinate and the inordinate use of wine (or sex) are intoxicating.
But one leads to joy and life – the other to sorrow and death.

After all – look at the rest of the sentence:
⁸ *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober,*

c. The Armor of Faith, Hope, and Love (v8b)
having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

In Ephesians 6 this will get worked out into the whole armor of God!
But here Paul focuses on the armor of faith, hope, and love!

We have seen throughout this series that Paul is centered on the themes of faith hope and love.

We are to keep believing God in our work of faith.
We are to keep loving God and neighbor in our labor of love.
And all of this because of our steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

The imagery here reminds us of how faith, hope, and love protect us
from the assaults of the devil.

Satan wants nothing more than to trip you up and cause you to stumble.
And so God has given you his own armor – the armor of his beloved Son –
to protect you.

The language of the armor of God comes from Isaiah 59 –
where it speaks of God putting on his armor and coming to save his people.
It's actually the language of Judgment Day – the Day of the LORD!

“The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak...
And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression
declares the LORD.” (Is 59:15b-20)

The armor of God is what Jesus wore when he came to save us.
And in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God strapped on his armor!

And as we are joined to the life of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Spirit of God clothes us with Christ –
and thus with his armor.

That's why Paul refers to it as the “breastplate of faith and love” –
protecting our heart – guarding our affections.

And then he speaks of the helmet as “the hope of salvation.”
After all, hope has to do with what you are looking at – what you are looking for!

And the hope of salvation keeps us looking to Jesus.
We see him.
He is our help and our shield!

That is why *hope* is so important in Paul's letter.
And hope is intimately bound up with the coming of Christ – as we saw in 3:11-13:

*and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all,
as we do for you,
that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father,
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

When Paul speaks of the coming of the Lord,
he is usually referring to the future coming of Christ –
but for Paul – as for Isaiah –
the future coming of Christ cannot be divorced from his first coming.

What is it that motivates our love for one another and for all?
Hope.

What is it that establishes our hearts blameless in holiness?
Hope.

But this “armor” language reminds us that we are in a conflict.
The devil would love to distract us and get us to forget what we are doing!

We need to remember that the Christian life will always be lived in the way of the cross.

I like the way John Chrysostom says this:

“therefore, let us stir up our conscience to fervor,
let us afflict our soul with the memory of our sins,
not so that it is crushed with anxiety
but so that we may make it ready to be heard,
so that we make it live in sobriety and watchfulness
and ready to attain heaven itself.

Nothing puts carelessness and negligence to flight the way grief and affliction do.

They bring together our thoughts from every side
and make our mind turn back to ponder itself.

The man who prays in this way, in his affliction,
after many a prayer, can bring joy into his own soul.” (94)

I think of the Anthony Esolen piece that Dave sent around last week.

“The thing about joy is that you can’t pursue it, because it isn’t something *you accomplish*, or earn, or create, or ferret out of a hole in your life. It is closer to solemnity than it is to pleasure, and that’s why tears sometimes accompany it, tears that well up uncalled from the heart.”

But while pleasure can come or go, joy – real joy, deep-down-abiding-joy –
endures.

3. God Has Destined Us for Salvation through Our Lord Jesus Christ (v9-11)

⁹ *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,*

¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

This is the point of Christmas!

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

God himself took our form – that through his own death and resurrection
he might triumph over sin and death – and bring us to himself.

As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:14

“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

After all, those who have died and been raised with Christ
can never enter into the sphere of God's curse

As Paul will say in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 –

“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.”

All those who are in Christ have been united to his death and resurrection.

This means that sin has no more power of you than it does over Christ.

It also means that death has no power over you than it does over Christ.

In John 11:25-26, Jesus said,

"I am the resurrection and the life.

He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Those who live and believe in Christ receive life from him.

How does this work?

Jesus said in John 6

that unless you eat his flesh and drink his blood you have no life in you.

Today as we partake of the Lord's Supper we are feeding upon Christ.

Today as the Word of God is proclaimed to you,

you are receiving the Words of eternal life which flow from Christ's throne.

And this has always been true:

in the Garden of Eden there was the tree of life--

as long as Adam and Eve ate of the tree, they would live forever;

in Proverbs, "whoever finds Wisdom finds life

and receives favor from the Lord";

in Revelation we saw the river of life

flowing through the city of God,

bringing healing to the nations;

and in Ephesians 2--

the passage which talks about being dead in transgressions and sins,

Paul tells us that God, who is rich in mercy,
"made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--
it is by grace you have been saved.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him
in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."

You are no longer under God's curse.

You have been brought out of the land of death,
into the land of life and of blessing in Christ Jesus.

And just as God did not abandon his Son to the grave,
so also he will never abandon you who are in Christ.

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

This is God's purpose in Christ.

This is God's purpose *for you*.

That we might live with him.

This is why we must put on breastplate of faith and love.

It is ours in Christ – but we still must put it on!

The work of faith and the labor of love are the everyday tasks that God has called us to!

And for a helmet, the hope of salvation!

Take this off – and your eyes will wander far from the way of Christ.

As you spend time with family and friends tomorrow –

ask yourself, "am I putting my hope in Christ?"

When you are tempted to get frustrated with things not going the way you planned –

ask yourself, what is my hope?!

And so *encourage one another and build one another up – just as you are doing.*

Look for ways throughout the week to encourage each other.

Look for opportunities for discipleship – for edification –
ways to connect in our day-to-day life together.