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The Second Coming of Christ

Most of us never own or even shop for items like these:

- A respirator
- A good set of operating equipment, like scalpels, operating tables, and lights
- A CT scan machine
- An X-ray machine
- An MRI machine.

Why is that? Each of these items are so important, and yet so few of us own them or even desire to own them. In fact, if you came into a lot of money I dare say on top ten things you'd want to buy, medical equipment wouldn't be one of them. When someone wins the lottery and becomes an overnight millionaire, you never hear of them buying medical equipment (*just in case*)!

And so I ask, Why? Why do so few of us own or are working to own the medical equipment I just mentioned? Is it because these items are not important? NO! Rather, it is because while we recognize they are important, we deem them irrelevant for daily living.

This unfortunately is how many of us view the Bible's teaching on the Second Coming of Christ. We see the Second Coming as very important and we are glad that there are scholars who have committed themselves to its study. But when it comes down to it, quite frankly, we think that the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is irrelevant for life today. And that's too bad. The impetus behind Paul's description of the Second Coming of Christ was so that the Thessalonians might have comfort and encouragement in the midst of difficulty.

The Thessalonians were losing loved ones and were suffering both with grief (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). As a means to address the Thessalonians' need, Paul addressed the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ. In the middle of it all, he wrote this:

1 Thessalonians 4:18: "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

Paul understood that there was no more practical truth than the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ. As we continue in our study of heaven let us consider the Second Coming of Christ with a view of doing much more than simply satisfying idle curiosity. Rather, let's study the text before us longing to be transformed by it! Accordingly, notice a fourth characteristic of the Second Coming of Christ.

The Second Coming of Christ will be Sudden

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2a, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well..."

The phrase "know full well" is in the emphatic position. Paul wrote of something that the Thessalonians were well acquainted of. Perhaps when Paul labored among the Thessalonians on his second missionary journey, he spent a significant amount of time discussing the doctrine with them. Regardless, what he wrote clearly was something they already had a level of mastery over!

1 Thessalonians 5:2b, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night"

This is something that Paul clearly believed was a crucial part of anyone's theology (again the Thessalonians "knew it full well"). The "day of the Lord" references a future period of catastrophic judgment when God vindicates His name by unveiling His character which necessarily will terrify His enemies. Truly on this earth Satan has and continues to have his day. The non-believer has and continues to have his day. Evil and cruel men and women have and continue to have their day. But the day is coming when God will have HIS day, and all who have rebelled against Him will be judged!

Now as awful will be that day for the non-believer, for the child of God "the day of the Lord" is a day of vindication, such that God's people look to the day with yearning and hope (2 Peter 3:12)! In fact when baptized into the waters of the New Testament, the expression has reference to the day of Christ's revelation in glory when He comes to vindicate His people and judge the world in righteousness (Acts

17:31; Revelation 16:14). As such, it is referred to this way in Scripture:

- The Day of Judgment, 2 Peter 2:9.
- The day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, Romans 2:5.
- The day of redemption, Ephesians 4:30.
- The day of salvation, 1 Thessalonians 5:9.
- The day of God, 2 Peter 3:12.
- The day of Jesus Christ, Philippians 1:6.
- The day of the Lord Jesus, 1 Corinthians 5:5.
- The day of our Lord Jesus Christ, 1 Corinthians 1:8.
- That day, 2 Thessalonians 1:10.
- The Last Day, John 6:39.
- The Great Day, Jude 6.

In light of this we understand that “the day of the Lord” has reference to the day when all men will stand before Christ’s judgment seat and be judged and so rewarded or punished according to their deeds (Revelation 19-20). Now, according to our text, this day “will come just like a thief [the word here is *kleptas* from which we get our word “kleptomaniac”] in the night.”

What does this mean? Notice that the imagery of a “thief” carries with it two prominent ideas in the Bible, each of which will teach us something about the Second Coming of Christ. The first image that Paul picks up on here is “its suddenness.”

1 Thessalonians 5:3, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.”

Notice the phrases that Paul uses to describe both the work of the thief and the Second Coming of Christ. “Destruction will come upon them suddenly” the word for “suddenly” has reference to rapidity of action or that which occurs in a moment. Here it is placed in the emphatic position which emphasizes the abruptness of Christ’s return. When Jesus returns it will be suddenly, “like the birth pangs upon a woman with child.” Once again we see the theme of suddenness. When a woman is in labor, contractions come with a force and a suddenness that is indescribable to someone who has never seen them, much less felt them. Now both of these images, the thief and labor depict swiftness and intensity!

From this we conclude that Christ’s Second Coming will be sudden and therefore shocking!

2 Peter 3:10, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”

In one moment all is calm and quiet, the next complete and total chaos! Speaking of the Second Coming Paul wrote this:

1 Corinthians 15:51-52, “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...”

The “twinkling of an eye” is the time it takes for a beam of light to pass from the outer perimeter of the eye to the retina. Once again note the idea is that Christ’s Coming will be sudden! And so, like the victim of a robbery or the woman experiencing a contraction, that glorious day will occur in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, with much intensity! What that means is that you won’t have time to prepare! Other than the general signs of the time intensifying (as we’ve seen), there will be no warning! This brings us to a fifth characteristic.

The Second Coming of Christ will Catch Many Off-guard

1 Thessalonians 5:2, “...the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”

The imagery of a “thief” carries two nuances, the first is suddenness! And yet, there is another picture here that Paul picks up on regarding the Second Coming of Christ, unexpectedness.

1 Thessalonians 5:3, “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them...”

This is such a graphic picture. The word *peace* as it is used here the term emphasizes the absence of alarm. It is a complete failure to reckon with the realities of the situation (e.g. Jeremiah 6:14; Ezekiel 13:10). The term *safety* emphasizes security. The word literally means that something “cannot be made to totter or shake.” This leads us to conclude that up until the moment of Christ’s Second Coming, the world will be confident, in control, and seemingly unmovable! There will be no need for alarm; everything will be safe and secure. That will be the marketing!

- Cancer and Aides will have been cured.
- There no longer will be shortages.
- Unemployment will be at an all-time low or none-existent.
- There will be very little unrest in the world.

Who knows? But this we do know, speaking of a “need” for Christ will seem odd. Even those in the church will grow cold in their love and devotion to the Savior (Matthew 24:11). And then, to the amazement of all “destruction will come upon them” (1 Thessalonians 5:3). They will have utter and hopeless ruin and the loss of everything worthwhile!

1 Thessalonians 5:3, “...and they shall not escape.”

Those who are unprepared for Christ’s coming will not escape the devastation! All will be destroyed! And so the picture is that of a completely unheralded approach, yet devastating in its effects! Christ’s Second Coming will be at the utter shock and amazement of the world. As the home-owner is taken totally off-guard when awakened by a thief, so will be the experience of most at the Second Coming of Christ.

Those of us, who were alive, recall the day in the 1980’s when the United States was in the midst of prosperity and success. Ronald Reagan was in the White House. The economy was booming. The

Iran hostages had recently been freed thanks to the threat of our power and might. And the “layman” had access to modern technology like never before (computers, microwave ovens, large screen televisions, remote controls). American’s felt at that time that there is very little that we as American’s couldn’t do if we put our minds to it. In fact American’s were so confident in their abilities that they allowed a civilian to fly to outer space in “The Challenger.” Now you may recall the press delighted to focus on one person at the time, a school teacher Christa McAuliffe. (The space shuttle also had the first woman astronaut, Judith Resnik).

Christa McAuliffe was the epitome of America. First she was a woman, a high school history and English teacher. She had a dream of riding on the space shuttle and entered a contest with 11,000 other applicants to be the first teacher in space. The New York Times reported that Vice President, George H. W. Bush announce she was to be first private citizen in space. As a nation we vicariously took the *challenge* with this lady and rode the Challenger to Space.

And yet, to the utter shock of all, seventy three seconds into the flight, in the twinkling of the eye, SUDDEN and UNEXPECTED destruction! The Challenger exploded. And this will be the case for the generation of those living when Christ returns. And yet, the child of God will be saved.

The Second Coming of Christ should be no Surprise

1 Thessalonians 5:4, “But you, brethren, are not in darkness...”

Another way of saying this would be this: “But you, on the other hand, are not in the realm of darkness, living in blindness...” The Thessalonians not only had been enlightened to Christ and reality, they also “knew full well” that Christ was coming again. This had become a conviction for them! Now because they weren’t in darkness, the Second Coming of Christ would not overtake them as a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:4). Because the Thessalonians knew that Christ was coming again, Paul exhorted them to live in light of it such that it wouldn’t overtake them. If you knew that a thief was going to strike tonight, wouldn’t you be ready? In the words of Christ:

Matthew 24:43, “...if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.”

We are that homeowner who knows that something big is about to happen! Christ is returning soon! And so, though the Second Coming of Christ will catch many off guard, such should not be the case when it comes to the child of God. Again, we “know full well” that Christ is coming back! In fact, this one truth is the source and substance of the ONLY hope we have in life today!

In Ephesians 4:4-5, Paul speaks of the “hope” that we have as Christians saying, “...there is one hope!” In the Bible there is but one, and only one hope remaining for each of us! Notice, it is NOT the thousands upon thousands of things we set our hearts upon and over which we get angry when God doesn’t give them to us! In fact, in Romans 8:24, Paul says that we were “saved in hope”! Unlike the non-believer who has NO basis or ground for any hope in life, WE have been “saved unto hope”!

This hope was conceived in the hearts of the apostles when Christ ascended into heaven.

Acts 1:9-11, "And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.'"

To be sure, if the disciples had been thinking at all they would have known that Christ was coming again! As we've seen, the Old Testament prophetic books are packed with promises and declarations to that effect! Yet they missed it (as they did the sufferings of Christ) and hence we read of the "rebuke" of the two angels! Now lest any of us "miss it," Paul couldn't have made it more clear than his teaching in Titus.

Titus 2:11-13, "For the grace of God has appeared [Jesus Christ], bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for THE blessed hope ["the" because there is only one hope; and what is this hope?] and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

This is the Christian's hope! This is why Church history finds Christians suffering so much and yet maintaining great joy, for what on earth could hinder the return of Christ? Paul prayed for the Ephesians.

Ephesians 1:18, "*I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling [specifically], what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints."

This truly is our hope, the Second Coming of the Christ and so the Consummation of the Ages! Family of God, it is assumed throughout God's word that the child of God will be driven by this one and only hope! And thus to Paul, because the Thessalonians were "not in darkness," it was unthinkable that "the day should overtake them like a thief"! Why?

1 Thessalonians 5:5, "For you are all sons of light and sons of day..."

In Semitic literature to be a son of something meant that you were "characterized by that thing."¹ Paul's reasoning was that having been saved by Christ, we have been brought into His Kingdom and so illumined in our minds as to what is real and what is false in this world! For example, we know:

- The "pleasures" of this age are shallow and passing (Hebrews 11:25)!
- Life is not about getting, but giving ourselves away (Luke 9:23-24)!
- The measure of a life is governed NOT by what we do, BUT by what we worship (Psalm 115:4, 8)!

And accompanying these truths, we also know that Christ is coming again; the Day of the Lord is real! It will be a dreadful, horrifying day of the non-believer. But for the child of God, it is our wedding day and so our day of vindication! Yet amazingly and sadly, the Bible also says that in the last days, many amongst God's people's hearts will grow cold! In Matthew 24, Christ is not speaking of the pagan but of those that would identify themselves as the people of God.

Matthew 24:12, "And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold."

Christ further warns His people:

Revelation 16:15, "Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!"

When you read a command or a warning in Scripture, we deduce that whatever is commanded is something that is NOT natural (otherwise it wouldn't be commanded)! The fact that Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to "stay awake" tells us that the temptation exists for us NOT to stay awake but instead to get caught up in the here and now!

If you are a child of God, you must guard your heart from the many distractions of this life and so either maintain or realign your hope! Notice how Paul exhorts us in this text.

1 Thessalonians 5:5-6b, "...We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."

What an important exhortation! The tendency as children of God is to view the Second Coming in the same manner as we view expensive medical equipment: Important but Irrelevant to our daily living! Paul warns us not to respond in such a manner. Rather, we must allow the truth to:

- Sober us- life will not always be as it is now.
- Temper us- where are your affections today and will you bring these passions into glory? If not, than they are worthless!
- Drive us to our knees in dependence upon God- and God alone!

Christian, if Christ's Second Coming is NOT your only hope in life and death, then you are living for that which is going to perish! If you are NOT a child of God, don't delay! Come to Christ today for to wait another minute is risking waiting a life-time!

Recall the story that William Barclay used to tell of the three apprentice devils? (Barclay, 1956, p. 317) As Satan questioned them as to their plan to ruin mankind, the first devil said, "I will tell them that there is no God." Satan responded, "That will not delude many, for they know that there is a God." The second devil said, "I will tell men that there is no hell." Satan exclaimed, "You will deceive no one that way; men know even now that there is a hell for sin." The third devil said, "I will tell men that there is no hurry." Satan said, "Go and you will ruin men by the thousand."

Friend! Don't be lulled to sleep in the thought that there is always tomorrow! There isn't! God said, "Today is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2) To put it off is to risk never receiving it!

Works Cited

Barclay, W. (1956). *The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.

End Note

¹ That is why when Christ referred to God as His Father, the Jews sought to kill; He was making Himself equal with God, John 5:18!

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About the Preacher

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