

**1st Thessalonians 5: 2-6; “A Thief in the Night”, Sermon # 21 in the series –
“A Persevering Faith”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall,
on August 26th, in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

The apostle Paul was convinced that the church at Thessalonica was not in darkness; that the Day of the Lord should overtake them as a thief. And yet he urged them on to watchfulness and soberness in relation to this day. His prayer for them would be for this watchfulness to become such a reality in their lives; that they, would be ready for the Day when Christ would appear a second time; the Day when the World would end and the Last Great Judgment would come. Their concern had been as to when this gathering together of all the Lord’s chosen people would take place. And so Paul wisely gives them 4 reasons why this Day should not overtake them as a thief. Let’s see if we can learn a little more about how each of us can be prepared for the Lord’s appearing.

1st of all, this day should not overtake them like a thief – Because they did in general know the times and the seasons.

Verse 1 says – “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.” “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.” If they knew perfectly, in relation to the times and the seasons, that the day of the Lord would come like a thief, it was because Paul had thoroughly instructed the believers there, in general, what this term meant. The last time that I spoke to you from this amazing text I attempted to explain to you the phrase, “the Day of the Lord”. In my last sermon to you, we looked at several verses in the book of Joel, Chapters 1 and 2, and we found that the phrase has had more than one fulfillment. It had a fulfillment in application to the immediate situation of that time period when the prophet wrote the book. It can also be legitimately applied to each of those times of God’s judgment when the nation of Israel was invaded and conquered by the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans in 70 A.D. That last date brought a complete end to the Old Testament, Old Covenant times. The age of the Spirit had already commenced upon the resurrection of our Lord, and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Church on the Day of Pentecost.

“The great and terrible Day of the Lord” spoken of by the Apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost was referring to the coming judgment of the Jewish nation in 70 A.D. He quoted these words from the book of Joel, chapter 2, verses 28-32. But it also applied to the judgments of God upon Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem at several other points in Old Testament history. We saw that the phrase can also be legitimately applied to other days of God’s judgment in New Testament times. There was the judgment which came upon the Pagan Roman Empire in the time period of 476 A.D., spoken of in Revelation 6: 15. And there is also a time of God’s great judgment spoken of in Revelation 19 which is coming at the end of the 1260 years prophecy when the Antichristian powers shall fall. But none of these “days of the Lord” is the ultimate Day of the Lord which is spoken of in these verses; in verses 2 and 4 of Chapter 5 of 1st Thessalonians. The Day that is spoken of here, I believe, is the Day of Christ’s Second Coming which we looked at in the previous chapter. That is the context of these verses.

There in Chapter 4, verses 13-18, we saw that the resurrection of the dead and Christ’s Second Coming take place on the last Day of the world, the world as we now it now. They both take place at the same time. It is not a secret or invisible coming. He will come in the clouds; in the physical clouds. And on that great Day we will be raptured; caught up together with Him physically in those clouds, having been glorified. We saw from 1st Corinthians chapter 15, verses 51-55 that at that very time, those who are alive and who remain until the coming of the Lord shall be changed. They will undergo an instantaneous change which will be like a split-second death and resurrection, all at once. And all of God’s Elect from all generations shall be glorified on that Day. Body and spirit will be reunited, but there will not be any sin to molest or hinder us ever again. What a glorious Day it

will be for all the people of God; for everyone who has ever trusted in Christ for their eternal salvation. And what an awful Day it will be for those who have not trusted in Him. For them it will come as a thief in the night. This was something that Paul says in verse 2 that the believers in Thessalonica knew perfectly well.

For after all, what did the believers in Thessalonica ultimately have to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.? Some of them would have been Jews certainly. They certainly would hear about the awful destruction; the death of well over a million people in the fighting and the starvation that occurred. They would hear about the atrocities of the Roman armies and the women who were so hungry that they ate their own children. But this was not a judgment upon them personally, or upon their society. They were believers in Jesus. Their concern would not ultimately be with the destruction of Jerusalem. That Day would come and go, and the Old system of sacrifices and temple worship would cease. But they knew that their worship of God was not tied to Jerusalem, or to the Old Covenant regulations of the Law. They would sympathize with the plight of the Jews in Jerusalem, but their greatest concern would be that they themselves would be found faithful in living the rest of their life to the glory of God.

2nd – This Day when Christ returns it should not overtake the Christian like a thief because we are not in darkness. (verse 3)

“For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them as labor pains upon a pregnant woman.” “And they shall not escape.” Now remembering what we have studied in our last sermon, you can see how, when the Day of the Lord is spoken of, it can apply to a number of earthly judgments which God would bring; but here, only to the last and final one. The reason that I say this, is because there are many situations in which wicked sinners promise themselves peace and safety when really, they are right on the verge of judgment, but they do not know it. They persecute Christians and they think that they can get away with it. I am sure that there have been many instances of this in the long history of the Church. Those who were persecuting the Thessalonian believers probably thought that they could get away with their vicious words and acts. No doubt some of them were Jewish and some of them were Gentiles, as it would appear from the account in Acts 17. A person could say that verse 3 of our text is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem as a pay-back for what they had done if they were unrepentant. But verse 3 is not speaking about an earthly judgment in which some of the wicked will escape. The destruction of Jerusalem, as I have said before, did not affect the wicked persecutors in Thessalonica. Rather it is this appearing of Christ on the last Day that affects not only the wicked persecuting unbelievers in Thessalonica; it also affects all the wicked unbelievers in every generation.

Turn over with me to 2nd Thessalonians chapter 1, and I will show this to you. Here Paul is comforting the Thessalonian believers with the return of the Lord Jesus in His Second Coming. Verse 3 says, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and tribulations that you endure, which is a manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When did this event which Paul is describing take place? Christ did not return in Paul’s lifetime, or in the life time of these dear believers. Paul is speaking of the final destruction of all the wicked at the last day. Verse 9 says, “These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.” When did this happen; in the days of Paul or the Thessalonian believers? It did not. It did not happen in 70 A.D. either. The awful thing that took place at that time was Christ’s

coming to judgment upon the Jews as a nation for their rejection of Him as their Savior. He did not come to give the Thessalonian believers and Paul rest and relief in those days. He did not repay their persecutors with tribulation at that point. No, He will do this when He is revealed a second time. He shall punish them, then, with everlasting destruction. The only way that He can do that, my beloved brethren, is if He raises all the wicked dead on the same day that He raises the righteous dead. And I believe that this is what the Bible teaches.

The reason that this Day shall not overtake Christians as a thief is that no Christian who is at all sensitive to keeping God's word, walks in darkness, when they are thinking of how they can be ready for the Lord's coming. This Day will overtake as a thief, all those who do not believe in Jesus, all those professed Christians who will not watch. Darkness is the picture of ignorance, unbelief, and sin. When a person is saved from their sins, Christ calls them out of darkness and into His marvelous light. He says in John 12: 46, "I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness." This final Day of the Lord shall not come as a thief; it shall not overtake those who believe in the Lord Jesus because they are not in the darkness or walking in darkness. But listen to Revelation 3: 3 – "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God."

Jesus was speaking to the church in Sardis, a church who had a name and were alive, but they were dead. A true Christian will be preparing for this Day of the Lord because they know that they will be there. A Christian prepares by repenting of all their sins, and endeavoring after a better obedience. Our text is saying in verse 3 that when all the sinners who persecute God's dear people think that they will get away with it; that somehow they will ultimately be able to have, peace and safety, without a sincere and thorough repentance of their wickedness; that the Lord will come upon them as a thief in the night. No wicked person will ever ultimately get away with their sin; they will never ever ultimately be able to find peace and safety. It is because they have sinned against God and His dear people, and that they will not repent; that is the reason that they shall not find rest.

Now the 3rd Reason that this Day should not overtake the Christian as a thief is because they are all sons of light and sons of the day. (verse 5)

"You are all sons of light and sons of the day." "We are not of the night nor of the darkness." Turn with me over to Ephesians 5, verse 1. Here Paul will explain himself as to what he means by "you are all sons of light and sons of the day", "not of night or of the darkness". He is speaking about how the Christian should live his Christian life, seeing that he has been forgiven of all of his sins. "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children." "And walk in love, as Christ has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma." "But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither foolish talking, nor coarse jesting which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks." "For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

Let me pause here, and say, that this is the very thing that I have been trying to explain to you all along in this sermon. The wrath of God is upon all those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus, but it is also coming upon the sons of disobedience, and it will fully come on the unrepentant sons of disobedience on the Day when Christ appears to judge the world, the last Day. Verse 7 says, "Therefore do not be partakers with them" This is addressed to all professed Christians who may be fooling themselves thinking that they are Christians when they are not. If you are a practicing fornicator, secret unclean person, or a covetous man you do not have any inheritance in Christ. You are still in the darkness. You may not realize this, but you need to awaken to righteousness. Or it may also be applied to true Christians who are fooling themselves thinking that they can continue in sin that grace might abound. You must repent and forsake all of your sins. Christ will not let you hold on to any of them and live in the darkness. He will bring you to the place where you do not even want to play in the shadows. Look at Paul's explanation of what he has just said.

Verse 8 says, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” “Walk as children of light.” You were once darkness means that you were once walking according to your sinful nature, before you believed in Jesus Christ, There was great darkness in you when you were doing this. Sin had its residence in every area of your being. There was nothing of truth or clarity in your life about why you were living this way. Your relation to God was this; that you didn’t believe in God as the Bible reveals Him; you were ignorant of what pleased Him; and when you didn’t want to hear about what His will was when Christians tried to tell you. Your heart and mind rebelled against the truth and you rejected it. You were going to live for your own pleasures and not come to Christ.

This is being in darkness; this is what you as a believer once were; darkness itself. But now you are light in the Lord. “Walk as children of light.” This is why the Christian should not be overtaken by the Day of Christ’s return; it is because they are now light, in the Lord. God has shined the light of Christ into your dark heart by His Spirit in your conversion, and that light remains with you, showing you what is true and good and right and you learn to walk in that light, and abide in that light, and you want to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. When you die, and when the Day of Christ comes, as it surely will come to all of us; it will not overtake you as a thief if you have come to prove by the grace of Christ, that you are a son of light and a son of the day. The path of the righteous is as the light of dawn. It shines brighter and brighter until the perfect day. (Proverbs 4: 18) The full day is the Day of Christ when He returns and all the dead are raised. It will not be as a thief to you, to meet your Savior and Lord on that blessed day.

And then the 4th reason that this Day should not overtake the Christian as a thief is because the Christian learns to watch for His coming. (verse 6)

I will simply introduce this subject this afternoon. I do not have time to open up Matthew 24 and 25 in relation to this, as I would want to. We will open those chapters up at a later date and look at them the next time that we are together around these verses. But Paul says here in verse 6 – “Therefore let us not sleep, as other do, but let us watch and be sober.” It is interesting how Paul mixes his metaphors at this point. In Chapter 4, verses 13 and 15, he talks about those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. He is speaking about the physical death of the body of the Christian as sleep. But here in chapter 5, verse 6, he speaks about sleep, and he is not saying anything about physical death. He is speaking about the possibility that a Christian can become sleepy spiritually, and not watch against sin in their heart and life. He is saying that a Christian, unless he watches against it, can fall into a spiritual state where he is not sober; he is not self-controlled, he is not thinking about how he can do his duty to God in terms of keeping His commandments.

And because of this laziness, and selfishness, and neglect, a Christian can allow themselves to sleep. This is a very dangerous condition for the Christian to be in; and so Paul exhorts the believer to “watch and be sober”. It really matters very much to God how we live our lives out; whether we will live them to His glory, or whether we will live them to ourselves only. We must pray not to be sleepy. We must discuss with one another what we can do for Christ to promote His glory. Let us not sleep, but let us always remember the words of this text. They remind me of the verses of Hebrews 10: 23 as well. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” “And let us consider one another in order to stir up one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”