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We have just been singing songs celebrating the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are privileged in our continuing studies of 1 Thessalonians be able to take a second look at the events surrounding our Lord's return to take His people to Himself, the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the great themes of the New Testament, and one we can never hear too much about.

But having said that, it is a fact that the events surrounding our Lord's return and the order of these events is a matter of debate among theologians. In BCF we try to preach the fundamental truths of the Bible, what C.S. Lewis calls "mere Christianity", and so we try to avoid getting involved in debates about matters on which Bible-believing Christ followers disagree. So it is not my purpose here to get into a detailed discussion about the various interpretations of the timing of the events of the end times. It is however clear from 1 Thessalonians that several things are going to happen at the end of the present age. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 the apostle Paul addresses the concerns of the believers in Thessalonica about those who have died; were they going to miss out on meeting Christ at the end of this age? His answer is no; they will be resurrected and will meet Christ in the air along with believers who are still alive; an event that is referred to as the rapture. In his excellent message last week Dan Mock spoke from this passage about the great hope that we have as Christ followers; a hope that results in a unique kind of grief, a hope that is grounded in the truth of the gospel, a hope that has a focus on the return of Christ, on the resurrection and rapture of believers, and on their reunion with Christ, and finally a hope that inspires endurance.

And now we continue our studies in the book of 1 Thessalonians with today's scripture of 1 Thess 5:1-11

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1 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

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4 But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

NIV

Paul now turns in today's passage to the question of what else happens along with the rapture of Christ followers, and he uses the phrase "Day of the Lord" to describe this time. The Day of the Lord is a phrase that is used about 20 times in the Old Testament, and it usually referred to a time of judgment. Thus the prophet Isaiah warns the nation of Judah:

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Isa 13:9

See, the day of the LORD is coming
— a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger —
to make the land desolate
and destroy the sinners within it.

In our passage Paul speaks of the day of the Lord immediately after speaking about the rapture of Christ followers to be with the Lord. So then the Day of the Lord must come at the same time, or soon after, the

rapture. It is significant that when Paul is speaking of the rapture of Christ-followers in chapter 4, he uses the phrase “we who are still alive will be caught up”, but when he speaks of the Day of the Lord in chapter 5 he says “destruction will come on **them** suddenly”, implying that Christ followers will not be involved in this time of judgment. This interpretation, by the way, is known as the “pretribulation rapture” interpretation, for those of you who like to keep track of such things, and I should share that there are other Bible-believing Christians who have different interpretations of the timetable of these events.

With this background, let us look at our text and seek to understand what the Lord is saying to us today, in the year of our Lord 2016, about how we should understand and in particular obey His word.

Let us pray for His grace as we do so.

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Father, we come to you today to ask your grace as we seek to understand your word to us through the apostle Paul. Open our minds to understand your truth, enlarge our hearts to receive it, and mould our wills to obey it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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We will look into this teaching by Paul under four main headings:

1. The unknown time of the Day of the Lord
2. The negative motivation of the Day of the Lord
3. The positive motivation of the Day of the Lord
4. The challenge of the Day of the Lord

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1. The unknown time of the Day of the Lord

Our text is very clear on this one.

1 Thess 5:1-3 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. NIV

These verses clearly state that the Lord’s return will be unexpected, “like a thief in the night”. No thief seeking to break into your home and steal stuff is going to send you an e-mail message or call you on the telephone and say “I just thought you would like to know that I will be breaking into your home tonight”; his career as a thief would be short! Just to be sure of this I did a Google search, and the only thing that came close was a report of a man who pulled a gun in a crowded gun store in Seattle in 1990 and announced his intention to rob it. Unfortunately for him there was a policeman in the store, shots were exchanged, and the man died of his wounds.

And our Lord goes even further by saying that not only will the day of the Lord come like a thief in the night, but even he did not know the date; only God the Father knows. In teaching His disciples shortly before His arrest and crucifixion for our sake, He said this:

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Matt 24:36, 42-51

36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

So these two passages, and others like them, warn us not to try to set a date for the Day of the Lord. In spite of this teaching many people have tried to figure out when these events will happen.

I did a Google search for “Predictions of the Second Coming of Christ”, and found a nice table in Wikipedia listing over 50 predictions of the date of the second coming of Christ, ranging from 500 to 2057 AD.

You may remember one of the recent ones. Mr. Harold Camping, president of California's Family Radio, predicted that three million people would be saved, the rest perish, on May 21, 2011. When that did not happen the End of the World was recalculated for October 21, 2011. When that did not happen Mr. Camping to his credit "humbly acknowledged" that he had been mistaken, that his attempt to predict a date was "sinful," and that his critics had been right in pointing to the scriptural text "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

So take-home message number 1 is “Do not be fooled into believing anyone who predicts the date of the Day of the Lord”. They are clearly not paying attention to the words of our Lord.

But there is a take-home second message here that is not so obvious. Because we know that Christ will return and will establish a new heaven and a new earth, some Christ followers have said or at least thought something like this “Because this world is going to be destroyed, and because God is going to make a new heaven and a new earth, we do not have to take care of this earth”. The problem with this train of thought, however, is that we do not know **when** our Lord will return. It could be before I finish this message, which would no doubt please the children itching to get outside, but it might not be for another thousand years. So we do need to care for this earth that our good God made and pronounced it to be very good. If I did not believe this I would not have spent 20 years leading a research project focused in part on biodiversity conservation in Suriname and Madagascar.

And then there is a third take-home message for those of you here who are not yet Christ followers. Perhaps you came with a friend, or maybe you are intrigued with what Christianity is all about and are weighing the evidence before committing your life to Jesus. To you I say “don’t assume that you have all the time in the world before you commit your life to Jesus Christ” It may not be 1000 years before He returns; it could be today. Who knows when the Lord will return and when the trials of the Day of the Lord begin?

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2. The negative motivation of the Day of the Lord

Our passage then goes on to warn us about behaviours to avoid in the light of the coming day of the Lord:

1 Thess 5:4-7

4 But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

The major point Paul is making here is that those of us who are Christ-followers must be ready for the day of the Lord. The first words of this section “But you, brothers” is emphatic. In strong contrast to the people saying “peace and safety” in the first section, believers will not be surprised by the day of the Lord, since they will have been raptured. Christ followers are sons of the light and sons of the day, because we have new life in Jesus Christ. So the message to us is “don’t get caught sleeping!” Now obviously Paul is not talking about physical sleep, but about spiritual sleep.

So what does it mean to sleep spiritually? We start to go to sleep spiritually when we neglect to read God’s word for days at a time, or when our prayer life is reduced to a few brief requests, or when we decide that sleeping in on Sunday is more enjoyable than getting up to join with other Christ-followers in praise and worship and teaching. We start to sleep spiritually when we decide it is too much trouble to commit to serving the Lord in some ministry position, or when we decide that giving our money to the Lord’s work is too demanding. We start to sleep spiritually when we fail to witness for our Lord when we have opportunities to share our faith. We start to sleep spiritually when we neglect to remember the Lord’s death by participating with other believers in the Lord’s supper.

And so to us, as to the Thessalonians, God is saying “Don’t be like others, who are asleep, but be alert and self-controlled.”

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3. The positive motivation of the Day of the Lord

We turn now to the positive side of Paul’s message.

1 Thess. 5:8-10

8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Here we have a word of instruction and a word of encouragement:

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- a. **A word of instruction; something to put on:** “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”

What does this mean? The image of armor is used several times, most notably by Paul in Ephesians 6. It is based on the armor worn by Roman soldiers:

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The breastplate protected the vital organs: heart, lungs, etc. But it only covered the front to the body; there was no protection from the back, while the helmet protected the head. And in the Roman army the soldiers fought side-by-side. If they were surrounded by the enemy, they formed squares that protected each other, with each man depending on others in his unit to protect him.

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If one soldier got scared and broke rank, that left others in his unit open to attack, so each soldier had to be self-controlled and courageous to stand his ground even when surrounded by the enemy.

So when Paul commands us to be self-controlled, he is saying, in effect “you need to stay the course not only for your own spiritual health, but also for that of your fellow-soldiers, your fellow believers. Your faithfulness, your walk with the Lord, are important not just to you, but to them as well. They are your fellow soldiers in the battle against the devil, and your faithfulness will encourage them, just as their faithfulness encourages you.”

So we are to put on faith and love as a breastplate. Our faith in Jesus as our Lord and saviour protects our heart, and our love for Jesus and for others is the outward expression of that faith. But note that Paul commands the Thessalonians and us to “put on” these things. What does this mean? Well, it seems to me that this is intended as a deliberate act. A Roman soldier preparing to go to war would have to put on his breastplate in a deliberate act; it didn’t just get there by magic. As Christ followers, we are going to war every day with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so like a Roman soldier we put on our breastplate every day. How do we do this? By deliberately and consciously reminding ourselves each day that we are God’s children who have been saved through Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. By committing ourselves each day to love others as Christ has loved us. And by thanking God for His love for us in Jesus Christ.

And then there is the helmet. “Putting on ... the hope of salvation as a helmet.” Our hope of salvation is not just wishful thinking, but as Dan shared last week it is grounded in the truth of the gospel. And this hope of salvation guards our heads from attacks on our thinking, from the whispers of the devil asking “did God really say that?” So put this on by reminding yourself each day that you are a child of God, and that your hope of salvation is grounded in the truth of the gospel of Christ.

And how do we do this? Probably the best way is to set aside time each morning to hear from God by reading the Bible, and by praising Him and praying for ourselves and others; in fact, the exact opposite of sleeping.

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b. **We next have a word of encouragement:** 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

What a glorious hope! We are not destined for wrath, because Jesus Christ has suffered God's wrath for us. He died for us so that we will not have to face the wrath of a righteous God on our sin. He paid the price that we could not pay; he suffered that we can be freed from suffering the torments of hell.

This hope is wonderfully summed up in the Townend and Getty song "In Christ Alone"

In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save

Til on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again

And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny

No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Til He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand

To paraphrase John Piper:

And note that not only "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath" What then? "but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ..'" Not appointed for wrath, but appointed for salvation. What makes this word so encouraging is the absolute certainty with which it speaks. Not: you might reach salvation. Not: You might escape wrath. Not: Maybe you are destined for that happy future. But: You *are* appointed — for salvation. This decision in heaven has been made. The appointment has been set. It is firm. And it is unchangeable.

What a great hope we have! God has not destined us for wrath, but for salvation. This is the solid rock on which we stand. No power of hell, no scheme of man, Can ever pluck me from His hand, Til He returns or calls me home, Here in the power of Christ I'll stand! Amen and amen!

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4. The challenge of the Day of the Lord

Our final lesson is a simple but important one; 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

These truths are given not just for our benefit, but for the mutual benefit and blessing of the whole body of Christ. And so we need to share them with other believers. Encourage each other; remind each other of the fact that Christ died for our sins, Christ rose again from the grave, and Christ is coming again. Remind yourself of these timeless truths; remind others of them too. Encourage one another.

How can we do this?

Believe in other believers. Our goal must be to see spiritual potential in people whether it is fully developed or not.

Read the Word for other believers. Ask the Lord to encourage you so that you can be built up to encourage another brother or sister from the Word.

Hang out with other believers. Many Christians come to church discouraged and defeated. Some come disenchanted about life. Our warm encouragement might be just what they need that day.

Persevere in your faith for other believers. Someone said “The greatest thing I can do for a friend is to ensure that I walk with God.”

Idaho businessman Don Bennett was the first amputee to climb to the summit of Mount Rainier. That’s 14,410 feet, on one leg and two crutches! During a difficult portion of the climb, Bennett and his team had to cross an ice field. To get across the ice, the climbers had to put spikes on their boots to prevent slipping and to dig into the ice for leverage and stability. Unfortunately, with only one spiked boot and two crutches, the only way Bennett could figure to get across the ice field was to fall face forward onto the ice, pull himself as far forward as he could, stand up, and then fall forward again. On this particular climb, his teenage daughter, Kathy, happened to be with him, and she saw what was happening to her dad. Kathy stayed by her dad’s side through the entire four-hour struggle and shouted in his ear: “You can do it, Dad. You’re the best dad in the world. You can do it, Dad!” Kathy Bennett’s belief in her father and her verbal encouragement touched a place deep within her dad, strengthening his resolve and commitment. Consequently, he finished.

Will you speak words of hope and affirmation into the lives of your fellow believers? Will you wake up to opportunities around you? Will you go into this week with a renewed passion for Christ’s return? You can single-handedly make an eternal difference in someone’s life. Please don’t be guilty of sleep walking. Live today as if Jesus could return, because He just might.

Closing hymn

1 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does His successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

2 To Him shall endless prayer be made,
And endless praises crown His head;
His name like sweet perfume shall rise
With ev'ry morning sacrifice.

3 People and realms of ev'ry tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His name.

4 Let ev'ry creature rise and bring
His grateful honors to our King;
Angels descend with songs again,
And earth repeat the loud "Amen!"

Closing prayer

Jude 24-25 (modified)

To the one who will reigns throughout the whole universe, and who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen