

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

The Day of the Lord

October 4th, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 5.

Our passage this morning could really be considered “Part 2” of our passage from last week. In both passages, Paul is “filling up what is lacking” in the Thessalonian’s understanding of the day of the Lord. Last week, he addressed their fears and concerns regarding their Christian loved ones who had already passed away. This week, however, Paul shifts to the theme of judgement. It would appear that there were some believers in Thessalonica who were afraid that the day of the Lord would catch them unprepared. Commentator Jeffrey Weima notes:

The way Paul addresses this topic in the remainder of the passage strongly implies that the Thessalonians are not merely curious about the timing of this eschatological day but rather **question whether they are worthy enough** to avoid the judgement associated with that end-time day and instead experience salvation and eternal life with Christ.¹

When Christ returns, everything will be exposed – including the authenticity or lack-there-of of our faith. There were some in this Thessalonian church who were deeply concerned that they were not ready for this final judgement. Therefore, Paul wrote to them to provide clarity and comfort.

I would dare to presume that there are some people sitting in the congregation this morning who are struggling with the same fear. If Jesus returned today – if the trumpet sounded and the Lord

¹ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 342.

descended and the great dividing line between the righteous and the unrighteous was drawn – which side of that line would you be on?

Our passage this morning was written to help the church in Thessalonica to engage with that question in light of all that has been accomplished for them through Christ. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

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. 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. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 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, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 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. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, I believe that there is a fundamental question that we need to ask before we can really begin to unpack this text and that question is this:

What Is the Day of the Lord?

We could spend an entire sermon unpacking the development of the day of the Lord in the Old Testament and what we would discover is that there were MANY “days of the Lord” in Israel’s history. So, for example, the prophet Zephaniah prophesied a future “day of the Lord” and, while that day was fulfilled in part by the invasion of the Babylonians, it pointed forward still to an ultimate fulfillment. Zephaniah’s prophecy helped us to see that the Babylonian invasion was a “type” of God’s judgement. It served as miniature example of what the final day of the Lord would look like.

Let's pause here and get really practical: Does anyone here struggle to read the Old Testament prophetic books? Right now, if you're using the RMM plan, we are making our way through Ezekiel and we're reading about God's judgement against the nations surrounding Israel. I would dare to guess that some of you have found yourself wondering, "Why do I need to know this?"

Understanding typology makes us better Bible readers. As you read about God's judgement against the nations in Ezekiel, take careful note of how little God esteems the power, wealth and authority that our world takes pride in. Notice how quickly the proudest rulers are brought to ruin. That judgement is a picture of the ultimate judgement that will come in the final day.

In the same way, the Old Testament passages anticipating the day of the Lord help us to understand what the final day of the Lord – the day that Paul is describing in today's text – will entail. First, the day of the Lord will be:

1. A day of wrath for the unrighteous

As one commentator puts it:

The *day of the Lord* is a well-known phrase throughout the Bible and without exception refers to God's judgement of and defeat of his adversaries²

The prophet Zephaniah describes the day of the Lord with shocking language. He warns:

The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.
¹⁵ **A day of wrath is that day,**
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

² G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 143.

¹⁷ **I will bring distress on mankind,**
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the Lord;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the Lord.
In the fire of his jealousy,
all the earth shall be consumed;
for a full and sudden end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (Zephaniah 1:14-18 ESV)

The day of the Lord will be a day when God's justice and wrath is finally poured out on all unrighteousness. Now, I know that there is a swelling movement in the modern church that would have us downplay the wrath of God against sin, but if we are going to be faithful to the text then we can't allow ourselves to do that. The prophets didn't downplay the wrath of God against sin. Jesus didn't downplay the wrath of God against sin. In fact, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones states it:

If you take out of the Bible this idea of the wrath of God against sin **there is very little Bible left.**³

God HATES sin. He is repelled by it. Sin is a rejection of the goodness and the wisdom of God and it brings death and destruction everywhere that it is found. There will come a day – the day of the Lord – when God's justice will finally rain down on those who have made peace with sin. Everyone who has chosen to accept and to perpetuate this damnable virus of sin and to reject His rule will experience the outpouring of the wrath of God. THAT is the day of the Lord. If we don't see that then we won't be able to understand the concern that Paul was writing to alleviate in the Thessalonian church. They understood that judgement was coming. And they were afraid. So much so that Paul needed to comfort them in verse 9:

For **God has not destined us for wrath**, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:9 ESV)

The day of the Lord WILL be a day of wrath for the unrighteous, but it will also be:

2. A day of salvation for those who trust in the Lord

³ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1995), xxvii.

Zephaniah went on to prophecy:

Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
²⁰ At that time I will bring you in,
at the time when I gather you together;
**for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,**
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes,” says the Lord (Zephaniah 3:19-20 ESV)

On this final day of judgement, God will bring ultimate, eternal salvation and vindication for his people.

Those who have been scattered will be gathered together. As we saw last week, those who felt the sting of death will be brought back from the grave. The enemy of God’s people and all those who are aligned with him will be thrown down once and for all.

All of the promises that God has made to His people – eternal life, perfect peace, health, an inheritance in the kingdom, a new heaven and a new earth – ALL of the promises were unlocked for us when Jesus died and rose again. But, while those gifts have been unlocked, the time hasn’t yet come for us to receive them in full. That’s why Christians still get sick, the wicked still prosper and our loved ones still die. But on the day of the Lord we will finally, once-and-for-all inherit all of the blessings that Jesus won for us. It is the day of the great reversal!

If you have confessed your sin and placed your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then the day of the Lord will be a day of glorious salvation for you! “Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight! The clouds be rolled back as a scroll. The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend! Even so, it is well with my soul!”

And, before we can understand this text as we should, we need to see that the day of the Lord is:

3. A day that will come like a thief in the night

Paul tells the Thessalonians in verse 2:

²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2 ESV)

There was a season before I got married when I was working for two separate restaurants at the same time in order to try to pay off my student debt. One of those restaurants was owned by a wealthy franchisee who rarely bothered to check in on the location. The other was owned by a husband and wife duo who dropped in on the restaurant on an almost nightly basis. This isn't a profound observation, but I can attest that employees work harder when they believe that their boss might show up at any moment.

Friends, Jesus could return at any moment. This cataclysmic day when all wrongs will be righted, and all justice will be brought to account is imminent. People who believe this to be true live very differently than people who don't.

The Thessalonians understood all of this. They knew that the day of the Lord would either be a day of wrath or a day of salvation and they knew that it could arrive at any moment. What they didn't know was whether or not they would be found worthy of judgement or blessing. They were afraid. They saw this day of judgement approaching over the horizon and their question was one that we all ought to be asking:

How Should I Prepare for the Day of the Lord?

This morning, we're going to start where Paul ends, because everything else that he commands is rooted in this first step. How should you prepare for the day of the Lord? Step 1:

1. Rest in the completed work of Jesus

Paul writes:

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. (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 ESV)

Look at the language Paul uses here. God has not *destined us* for wrath. Once again, Paul talks about salvation with language that we are hard pressed to find in our modern culture. Paul says, “Your salvation isn’t contingent upon your efforts. Your salvation is contingent upon the plan that was written before the foundation of the world! And God didn’t DESTINE you for wrath, but for salvation through our Lord Jesus!” He said the same thing in the introduction to this letter:

For we know, brothers loved by God, **that he has chosen you** (1 Thessalonians 1:4 ESV)

How should you prepare for the day of the Lord? Stop looking at yourself and look to your Saviour! If it were left to you, you would NEVER be ready for that judgement day, but it’s not up to you! Jesus has done it! He has settled your debt and secured your salvation! As one commentator puts it:

In this way Paul grounds the future salvation of his readers not in any human merit of his own or of theirs but in the work of Christ generally, and as the following words of verse 10 make clear, in his atoning death specifically.⁴

I heard it said recently that, for the Christian, the way forward is always back. I wish I could remember who said it, but that is exactly right. The way forward is back.

Back to Golgotha. Back to the crown of thorns. Back to the nail-pierced hands. Back to the perfect, sinless man who died so that you could live. Back to that old gospel story. I’ve never met a Christian who has graduated out of the gospel. I’ve never met a Christian who doesn’t need to draw daily from this life-giving well.

You may progress in your theology. You may learn some complex truths and some five syllable words, but if you would go further and deeper into your understanding of who God is, who we are and why we have any right to call ourselves His people, then back to the cross is your way forward.

⁴ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 367-368.

The Thessalonians, obviously, had strayed from their assurance. They thought that somehow, they might lose the blessing that Jesus had purchased for them. They thought that somehow, there might still be some wrath leftover for their sin.

But Jesus didn't satisfy the wrath of God against some of your sin. He paid it all! When we allow ourselves to believe the lie that we still deserve condemnation and that we will still experience some of God's wrath, what we are really saying is that the death of Christ on the cross was not enough.

So, was it enough?

When the perfect, sinless, spotless lamb of God took your sins upon himself and suffered indescribably on the cross – when God in the flesh DIED the death that you owe – was that enough? Do you really believe that there is something that you can add to that offering?

Then stop with the doubting. Stop with the self-loathing. Stop with the fear. Stop with the dread.

Rest in the completed work of Jesus Christ on your behalf. Shout out with the Apostle Paul:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39 ESV)

When you have seen that, believed that, and are resting in that, you will be ready for step two.

How should we prepare for the day of the Lord?

2. Put on your spiritual armour

You can't do this until you've done step one, because your armour is JESUS! Faith, hope and love will not protect you in and of themselves because you can place your faith, hope and love in the wrong places, can't you? You can place faith in your ability to rise to every challenge, and hope in your plans and provisions, but that is no spiritual armour at all. What matters is the OBJECT of your faith, hope and love. When you fixate all three of these onto Jesus – when he is the object of

your faith, hope and love – THEN you are equipped with armour that will see you through any attack. Paul writes:

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 ESV)

God has given you everything that you need to stand against the schemes of the enemy.

The enemy who will seek to oppose you is the devil. The Bible describes him as the accuser. His method of attack is written right into his name! How would he derail you from the narrow way? How would he knock you off the path and leave you unprepared for the day of the Lord?

He would accuse you. He would point at your life and say, “You are a loser. Look over here at this sin. You’ll never overcome this sin. Everybody else is growing but you’re never going to be able to be like them because you’re just a miserable sinner. You might as well just stop trying.”

These are the fiery darts of the evil one. I can tell you, as one who has felt the sting, these attacks will very quickly send a believer backsliding. Growth in holiness doesn’t come from a place of self-loathing condemnation. The devil knows that, which is why he does his best to keep you there.

But these darts of accusation can’t penetrate through the breastplate of faith and love. If we believe in faith that the love of God is ours through Christ, then the attacks of the enemy will lose their penetrating power. John Calvin is known for his theological precision, but he also had a tender pastoral heart. He wrote:

We cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.... Believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief...
He who, struggling with his own weakness, presses toward faith in his moments of anxiety is already in large part victorious.⁵

Does God hate your sin? Yes. Do you deserve the wrath of God? Yes. Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins? Yes! Then, has your sin been removed from you as far as the East is from the West? YES!

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.17.

Jesus has paid for your sin, past, present and future on the cross! So, don't slouch back into a defeatist attitude. Don't climb back into the shackles of shame and condemnation. If you have placed your trust in Christ, then you have been set free! Elsewhere, Paul writes:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1
ESV)

The devil knows that there is no more dangerous Christian than the one who believes in faith that he is forgiven and loved. Such faith and love lead naturally to hope, which Paul commands us to wear like a helmet.

Hope looks forward with anticipation, not dread. The Christian who wears the helmet of hope knows that the day of the Lord will be a day of salvation for him because of all that Christ has accomplished on his behalf. That's what the Thessalonians needed. That's what you need.

Christian, the day of the Lord is going to be a day of salvation and glory! Not because of who you are, but because of who Christ is. And there is nothing that the you, or the world, or the devil himself can do to thwart the plan that God has set into motion. You have been destined for life! Hallelujah!

Our final step flows out of these first two steps. How should you prepare for the day of the Lord?

3. Wage war with apathy

Apathy is just a fancy word for "meh."

"I should probably stop living in this sin. But meh. I should probably read my Bible. I should probably pray. I should probably be prepared. Christ is coming at any moment. Do I really want him to find me here doing nothing? I should really make a change, but... Meh." Have you met that Christian? Have you BEEN that Christian?

It pulls us in like a magnet, doesn't it? I would dare to presume that there is not a Christian in this room who does not feel the powerful pull of apathy on a daily basis.

Apathy is a particularly dangerous sin because it's harder to spot than outright sins of commission. Unless you have an extremely hardened conscience, there are very few Christians who can steal, or lie, or commit adultery without feeling guilt. Those are sins of commission – sins of action – and we typically know when we have actively disobeyed God.

But apathy is a sin of omission – a sin of *inaction* - and those sins tend to fly under the radar with relative ease. It is easy and, unfortunately, quite common, for a Christian to go an entire day without giving a single thought or effort to spiritual things. And that is very dangerous. Because one day can very easily turn into one week, and one week can quickly turn into one month, and before you know it, you have the outward *title* of Christian, but you think just like the world, and you share the same priorities as the world, and you run your family just like the world and you ARE just like the world.

And it all started with this subtle sin of apathy.

This is a danger in 21st century Orillia and it was a danger in 1st century Thessalonica. Paul warned them:

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. (1 Thessalonians 5:3 ESV)

Notice the quotation marks around “There is peace and security.” Bible scholars suspect that Paul was quoting a well-known Roman slogan. The Roman empire was the political superpower of Paul's day, and Thessalonica had the status of a Roman free city. In the Roman empire, people found comfort in the “peace and security” that their leaders had won for them. Thessalonica also happened to be extremely wealthy due to its location on some key trade routes. Culturally and politically, these Thessalonians were tempted to live with a false sense of security. Wealth, comfort and security make for sleepy Christians. Amen?

Paul reminds us here that, if we live the same way as the relaxed, pleasure-seeking culture around us, we will drift into a drunken sleep of apathy that will leave us dangerously unprepared for the day of the Lord. But, he goes on to say:

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ **For you are all children of light**, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6 ESV)

Don't you love the way that Paul takes a command and turns it into an encouragement? He could have said: "If you want to be a Christian then you need to WAKE UP and ready yourselves for the day of the Lord!" That would have gotten the command across, right?

But, as you walk through this passage, look at all of the "since" and "for" statements. "For you are fully aware! For you are children of light! Since we belong to the day! For God has not destined us for wrath! Therefore encourage one another!"

Paul is not commanding this church to do something that they were unable to do. On the contrary, he was encouraging them to step into who God made them to be!

You are a child of the light! You have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and are you being sanctified by His Spirit! So LIVE LIKE WHO YOU ARE!

We cannot separate our working from God's completed work. That would be legalism. The only way that we can fight against sin is if we rest in Him. Isn't that a mystery? I think Charles Spurgeon expresses this better than I ever could. He wrote:

That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgement. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other.

If then I find taught in one place (in the Scriptures) that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place (in the Scriptures) that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other.

These two truths, I do believe, can never be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind

that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.⁶

I've met Christians who are bothered by this mystery. They wish that they could bring God's sovereignty and human responsibility together and tie it up with a nice theological bow. But if we take Him at His Word, we see that there is a complexity here that is beyond our understanding.

Paul doesn't struggle with this tension in the slightest, nor does he expect the Thessalonians to struggle. He tells the Thessalonians to put on their armour and to fight! All the while, he calls them to rest in a destiny that has already been written – a work that has already been accomplished. As we go from here, I want to conclude as Paul concluded:

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, 'Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility', sermon, delivered on Aug 1, 1858.