

**1st Thessalonians 5: 6; “The Believer Awake or Asleep”, Sermon # 22 in the series -
“A Persevering Faith”, Delivered on September 9th, 2018,
in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

In our past two sermons we have looked at the Day of the Lord and have seen that that Day is coming as thief to all those who are not ready for it. In past sermons we have seen that the Day of the Lord is the Day of Christ’s appearing and that it will be the Day for the resurrection of all the dead, both the wicked and the righteous. No one is going to miss out on this great Day; we will all be there, whether we go up to meet Christ in the air in the Rapture, or whether we are not found in Christ and are forced to hear those awful words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”.

It is of the greatest importance that each Christian come to obey the injunction given to us by the Apostle Paul which is found in verse 6: “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.” The words of eternal comfort or the words of eternal doom will come on the Day in which our Lord returns. And the words that we will hear personally will largely be determined by whether we have been spiritually asleep or spiritually awake during our life here upon the earth. If we are insensible of our need to be saved from our sins; if we are insensible as a professed Christian, of our need to repent and forsake the sins of the flesh, the sins of our heart and mind and actions which are dishonoring to God and hurtful to men, then how will we ever stand in this great Day of Judgment? So, with the time that is allotted to us this morning, I would like to open up the two great subjects which are mentioned in verse 6; sleeping and watching. We will look at being sober the next time that I preach to you.

The 1st great subject of concern which relates to our being ready for Christ’s return is the subject of sleep.

“Let us not sleep as others do...” When it says in verse 6, “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober”, Paul is giving instruction to every Christian about their duty. Their duty at all times is to be awake spiritually, and to do what is right; to watch against evil; and by faith, to live to Christ, by seeking to keep His commandments and hold fast His Word. Even if he may be asleep physically, yet his heart is awake. The issue is not to be physically awake at the time of Christ’s coming; the issue is whether the believer is spiritually awake at the time of Christ’s coming. The issue will be, first of all, whether during your lifetime, that you were born again. And then, second, whether you actually did repent of all of your sins and learned to follow Christ in humble obedience. This is what it means to be spiritually awake. The Apostle Paul confirms this for us in the book of Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 14, when he says, “Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.” “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” To be asleep in regard to the Lord’s return is to be insensible to the idea that death can come suddenly, and at any time, and that judgment upon any society can come at any time.

These sudden earthly judgments which God sometimes brings, and which sometimes takes people physically away in death, they are intended to be a warning to others who remain that it is time to get right with God. It is time to prepare to meet your Maker, for you most certainly will meet Him on the last Day, at the Last Judgment. Once a person dies physically, the next event that they will participate in physically, will be Christ’s Second Coming. For that is the Day of the Resurrection of all the dead. If you are asleep spiritually while you live your life now, you will not be ready for death or the judgment. As we have studied before, there are many comings of Christ spiritually, where He comes in judgment against a society or a church. They are not His Second Coming, or His appearing. Rather they are His coming in His earthly judgments in the lives of people, or to confront and bring judgments upon a whole society. It is His ordaining, in connection with the Father and the Spirit, that in accordance with their eternal purposes, God

will either build up a society, or a church, or group of churches, or He will tear them down and remove them. But this is always done in relation to matters of sin or righteousness.

You can see an example of this in relation to a church in Revelation 2: 4, where Christ addresses the sin of the church of Ephesus. He says, “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent.” So to be “sleeping” spiritually is not simply to be insensible that Christ Himself could come at any time in His appearing. It is rather when individuals, or churches, or the whole society fall asleep to the fact that God in heaven, is the Judge of all men. Christ has been appointed be the Judge of all mankind at the Last Judgment. “God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world through the man who He has appointed, having furnished proof by raising Him from the dead.” And John 5: 21-23 – “For as the Father raises the dead and give life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.” “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father.”

Now, I want to open up verse 6, somewhat more for you, by having you turn to Matthew Chapter 24. We will be looking at verses from both Matthew 24 and 25. Let’s look first at Matthew 24, verse 36. “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” No one will know the day or the hour of Christ’s Second Coming, and yet everyone reading these words or hearing them preached must prepare for it. It is not simply addressed to the people of a generation somewhere in the future when Christ will appear. It is not simply addressed to the Jews of that “generation” which lived during the time of Christ; some of which would be alive at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. It is addressed as a warning to all people since these words were written. “For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”

Now as I have said before, all of us will be there, on the Day of Christ’s Second Coming. When all mankind are raised from the dead on the final day, they will all then be looking at Christ at the time of His return. It will be a very necessary thing that both the wicked and the righteous be raised from the dead at the same time and they all be judged on the same day. For it will be at that very time that it will be discovered who has been sleeping or who is awake in the ultimate sense. This cannot be the case if there is a thousand year separation between the time of the resurrection of the wicked from the resurrection of the righteous. In the days of Noah, they had all been warned of the judgment coming upon the world of that day through the preaching of Noah. They did not believe him. They were asleep to their eternal danger. They had willingly gone to sleep in their minds as regards Noah’s preaching to them about Christ in the building of the ark, and the judgment which was coming upon their world in the flood. They were also asleep to their physical danger. The flood would come at a specific time which was set in God’s holy mind. The people of that day continued on eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until that day came. And you remember that Jesus says this – “They did not know..., until the flood came and took them all away”.

They were asleep spiritually at this “coming of Christ”. He did not come to them bodily and physically. He came to them in the flood of waters. Psalm 32: 6 and 7 says – “For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; surely in a flood of great waters, they shall not come near Him.” “You are my hiding place; you shall preserve me from trouble; you shall surround me with songs of deliverance.” “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is over many waters.” “The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.” “The Lord sat enthroned at the flood, and the Lord sits as King forever.” The same was true in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Christ was enthroned on high. He did not come back physically and bodily in that awful destruction

which is described for us here in Matthew 24, verses 1-28. Those verses clearly refer to the awful judgment that our God and our Christ brought upon them for their rejection of His words, His life, and ministry to them; their crucifixion of Him, and their failure to heed the preaching of the Apostles after Jesus left and went to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father on high. It was a “coming” of Christ in judgment upon their nation and their society, but it was not Christ’s Second Coming.

Here in these verses 1-28 of Matthew 24 we find Christ answering the question, “When will these things be?” That is, when would Jerusalem be destroyed? It would be about to happen when the Jews would hear of wars and rumors of wars. It would be about to happen when nation would rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, when famines and earthquakes would take place in various places. It would be about to happen when Christians would be delivered up to tribulation and be killed and hated by all the nations around there. Paul’s instructions here in 1st Thessalonians would be very applicable for this time period of 70 A.D. even if the church there was not directly affected by the calamity of Jerusalem being destroyed by the Romans. The love of many Christians might grow cold because of the severity of persecution, and because some who were apostate would betray one another, and hate one another. The gospel of the kingdom of God and heaven would be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations as Paul claimed that it had been in Romans 16: 26. He states there that the preaching of Christ “had now been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for the obedience of faith”. And then “the end” would come.

This was the end of the Old Testament age. The proof of this is in the destruction of the temple in which the Old Testament worship was conducted, and the Old Covenant sacrifices were offered. Not that it had not ended when Christ died on the cross. It technically did in a spiritual sense. He broke down the barrier, spiritually, between Jew and Gentile and made of the two one new man. But when the temple and the city were destroyed, it was the end of their world and the end of their age as the theocratic nation. The “carcass” of that Old Covenant system had come to a complete end when the standards of the Roman eagles were gathered together in triumph over all the resistance by the Jews to keep the temple from being taken and destroyed. The Roman soldiers under Titus set up the “abomination of desolation” in the holy of holies. And they leveled the city to the ground after they had conquered it.

But when we come to verse 29 and following, of Matthew 24, we need to see that our Lord Jesus is speaking of something far more significant than even the destruction of Jerusalem. It is true that “the sun being darkened and the moon not giving its light, has been interpreted by some as being picture language for the Jewish Theocracy falling, and along with it, the whole ceremonial system of the law. This can be substantiated by looking at Isaiah 13: 10, Joel 2: 31 and 3: 15. Nevertheless it seems too forced to me to spiritualize the whole rest of the passage from verse 30 to 32. It seems to do great exegetical violence to 1st Thessalonians 4: 13-18, and Revelation 1: 7 to think that our Lord Jesus, who is to return in the same literal way, coming in the clouds, even as the Apostles and disciples saw Him ascend up into the heavens (Acts 1: 8) and into heaven (a different dimension altogether which we cannot see), should not return bodily and physically in His Second Coming at the end of the World, at the end of the New Testament Age, at the consummation of all things. I most certainly believe that He will. “Every eye shall see Him, and even those who pierced Him.” “He is coming on the clouds”. “We will be caught up together with Him in the clouds, and meet the Lord in the air.” These phrases are not merely spiritual; they involve our resurrected bodies.

So when we come to Matthew 24: 30 and we find Jesus saying that the “sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory,” I believe that it is His Second Coming, the Day of the Lord which spoken of in our text in 1st Thessalonians 5. It is that

Day that should not overtake us like a thief; the Day of Christ's return, the Day when all of God's people shall be raised from the dead, changed and glorified, and escorted by the angels personally to be with Christ forever. Verse 31 seems to confirm this in my mind. "And He will send His angels with a sound of a great trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Certainly we have no report of this kind of thing happening in 70 A.D. But it perfectly fits the description of what is spoken about here in the book of 1st Thessalonians as to what will happen in the future; literally and physically, at Christ's appearing.

I am aware that John Gill and others do an admirable job of trying to interpret verses 29-32 as referring solely to the destruction of Jerusalem. But it should always be remembered that even they did not believe that Christ's Second Coming was in 70 A.D. as some Full Preterists believe. The way that this fits together with the subject of sleep is, that every generation since Christ ascended on high, is to be looking for His return; that glorious Day of His appearing. Titus chapter 2, verse 11 and following sums it up in this way: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ..." The present age that he is speaking of is not the Old Covenant age which actually ended with the death of Jesus Christ. He is speaking of the New Covenant, New Testament age of the Spirit, the age in which we still presently live. The question that we should ask ourselves is whether we are asleep or awake in relation to our own death and our future resurrection at the time of Christ's coming? We are either awake or we are asleep. We are either living a godly life or we are living a worldly life. Which is it for you, my friend?

The 2nd great subject which relates to our being ready for our Lord's return is watching.

"Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch," it says. Once again in Matthew 24 we find this subject mentioned emphatically, in verse 42. "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming." "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into." "Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." The master of the house, here, is not the Lord Jesus. It is every individual Christian. You are the master of your own house. You are the one who either will be wise or foolish in regard to whether you will so defend the house of your mind and heart against sin, and whether you will so clothe yourself with the righteousness of Christ, that you will always be prepared for the appearing and return of your Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is coming at an hour you do not expect. You are the master of your own house, and you are a servant in Christ's. He could break in upon you as a thief at any time He thinks best. Certainly He will be a Thief in the night on the Day of the Lord, to those who do not watch.

Watching for Christ's return means that we who believe in Him are living in light of Christ's soon return and the judgment. When I say Christ's soon return, I am not meaning to say that I believe that He must necessarily come at any time now, or shortly in the future, in His Second Coming in history. I mean that I know that He is coming, and when He does come, I will be there. And so I will consciously strive to live my life now, in these days and all the days of my life in light of that coming. I will be living as though He could come at any moment. And indeed if He comes for me in death very shortly, I am then prepared for that great Day, however long it might be until He actually comes back, and appears bodily and physically upon the earth again. This is what I call the grace of readiness. I watch and I pray that I might not enter into temptation. I continue steadfastly in prayer and watch in it, looking for the Lord's answers to my prayers.

Look at Matthew 25 with me now, and you will learn a little more about watching for Christ's return. "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom." "Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish." "Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps." "But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept." "And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'" "Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps." "And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'" "But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'" "And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut." "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!'" "But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'" "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

Here, once again we have a situation where the grace of readiness is being spoken of. These 10 virgins all make the same profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They all have lamps and this lamp is meant to shine with a profession of faith in Christ and be lit by the grace of His Holy Spirit; which symbol is the oil for the lamp. All the virgins went out to meet the Bridegroom who is our Lord Jesus Christ coming in His Second Coming, but five of the virgins took no oil with their lamps. The wise took oil in their lamps. But the Bridegroom was delayed, and they all slumbered and slept. This must mean that they were all negligent to one degree or another in preparing for the Bridegroom's coming, but the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins was that the wise had received not only the outward form of religion and a profession of faith in Christ (which was the lamp), but they had actually transacted salvation with those who sell.

Christ says in Revelation 3: 18 – "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may rich; and white garments that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see." We could add that they should "purchase oil for their vessels". This is what the foolish virgins did not do, and the wise virgins could not give them what Christ and the Spirit had given those who came to them. The wise virgins had asked for the Holy Spirit's power to be able to be awake spiritually in their hearts, so that they could discern the difference between good and evil, and mortify their sins. They had had real dealings with God over the sinfulness of their hearts and had not only thereby come to know Christ, but they were also able to "pursue peace with all men and the holiness without with no one shall see the Lord".

Romans 8: 13 says – "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." This is what the wise virgins did, and so when Christ returned they were able to realize that they had oil in their vessels to light them and thus showed that they were ready for the Bridegroom's return. The others when they came knocking on Christ's door after His return found that it was too late to buy. The door was shut, and they would be lost forever! You see, the Holy Spirit is always with those who truly believe in Jesus. He is with them whether they are physically awake or asleep. He is with them to encourage them to be spiritually awake at all times, as well. Let us always remember to have real spiritual dealings with our God and our Christ, so that we will know that we have transacted this important matter of salvation with Him, to obtain grace and salvation and the oil of the Holy Spirit's working. And if this has been the case, let us also to pray for grace to mortify all of our sins so that we will be unashamed before Christ at His glorious appearing.