

Sunday November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
“Being of the Light”

A Bible study group was discussing the unforeseen possibility of their sudden death. The leader of the discussion said, “We will all die some day, and none of us really know when, but if we did, we would all do a better job of preparing ourselves for that inevitable event.” Everybody shook their heads in agreement with this comment.” Then the leader said to the group, “What would you do if you knew you only had 4 weeks of life remaining before your death, and then the Great Judgment Day?”

A gentleman said, “I would go out into my community and minister the Gospel to those that have not yet accepted the Lord into their lives.” “Very good!”, said the group leader, and all the group members agreed, that would be a very good thing to do. One lady spoke up and said enthusiastically, “I would dedicate all of my remaining time to serving God, my family, my church, and my fellow man with a greater conviction.”

“That’s wonderful!” the group leader commented, and all the group members agreed, that would be a very good thing to do. But one gentleman in the back finally spoke up loudly and said, “I would go to my mother-in-law’s house for the 4 weeks.” Everyone was puzzled by this answer, and the group leader ask, “Why your mother-in-law’s home?” “Because that will make it the longest 4 weeks of my life!”

Now just to be clear. Lest anyone get the wrong idea. I love my Mother-in-law dearly, and I have spent days with her at her cabin in Spanish and we got along famously. Although I am playing with fire. One, of the reasons she indulges my presence, is that I occasionally bring fresh fish back for our supper which we both enjoy. However, I am not that successful many days, so I may be overstaying my welcome.

The reason I began with this little story, is to offer a bit of a confession. This little story, points to the whole subject of what scholars call the Parousia, or “end times” or some refer to it as the return of Christ. Some biblical teachers and pastors love the subject. They debate at length the minute details of apocalyptic parts of the bible, like Revelation, Daniel, and even some of Jesus’ words.

I have seen biblical scholars pull out huge charts that supposed explain in great detail the timing of these events. Mostly this draws from an old theology, largely debunked now called dispensationalism. It refers to the idea that reality, as God made it is divided into ages or dispensations and if we can discern when each dispensation begins and ends, we can ascertain the “end of the world as we know it”. To borrow from a Bare-Naked Ladies song.

However, I find this whole subject difficult, and frankly unpleasant to wrestle with. My aversion to this subject, likely has to do with the many years I have been bombarded in sermons, books, and debates; which often go off on wild speculations about signs that the second coming is about to happen. Some have even gone so far as to say that this period of time in the pandemic is a sign, or maybe the election turmoil south of the border.

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What most people do not remember is that predictions of a time table to the “end of things” have been around for thousands of years, even in the early church.

I have heard in my life time, many such predictions that the world is coming to an end and this despite Jesus telling us no one will know the time for these events. This acknowledgement by Jesus has not stopped people writing books on biblical prophecy. On a theological level and scholarly level, I find the whole thing problematic. Many good people take their understanding of this subject from fanciful creations like the “Left Behind” series of fiction.

Such fanciful ideas in these books, are as legitimate as Dan Brown’s “The Davinci Code”. It is a common pitfall for biblical scholars and others, like myself, to critique the apocalyptic world-view as dualistic, and it is certainly wise to be on guard against habits of thought that pit one group of people against another in a stereotypical fashion. Dualism, in a nut shell, describes reality as black and white, dark and light, or good versus evil. There is no grey in dualism.

Many describe the need for these two sides to remain in balance, lest the universe implode on its self. In eastern religion and philosophy, dualism is referred to often as the Yin and Yang.

Dualism is a slippery slope, because it is not a biblical position. It is actually paganism. However, too many of us find it easier to understand reality this way. This is certainly true of any thoughts of the end times, or apocalyptic biblical passages. But in order to understand the apocalypticism that pervades the New Testament, including the preaching of Jesus, it is equally important to pay attention to the possible social context to which dualism was a response.

This whole genre of writing does not come out of a vacuum, but was instigated by historical events and experiences of those who wrote them, and those who first read or heard them. Apocalyptic literature, is almost exclusively the product of persecution. This is certainly true of Daniel and Revelation. Daniel was a response to the persecution of Jews by Antiochus IV of the Seleucid dynasty. Revelation is a response to Roman persecution of the church.

However, the situation in Thessalonica is a bit different. The problem Paul is addressing in today’s passage is a situation in which certain members of the Thessalonian assembly are failing to make distinctions between their ethical codes as people of God, and the actions of the general society around them. They may not fully understand that the church is not just another social club, but a radically counter-cultural way of life, grounded in the cross of Christ.

The contrasts are certainly sharply drawn in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11: light vs. darkness, day vs. night, wakefulness vs. sleep, sobriety vs. drunkenness, urgency vs. a lack of urgency. Much of the vivid imagery in the passage (the thief in the night, the woman in labor, the armor of God) is drawn from the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel), and is echoed in other New Testament texts, as well as documents like the Dead Sea scrolls from Qumran.

Such prophetic speech was felt to have divine power to alter people’s interpretation of current events, and their moral responses to it. It actually sought to change what people see as they look around them, and how they respond to it. One important theme is that of urgency. The urgency is focused on the reference to the “day of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:2) It is also suggested by the phrase “the times and the seasons,” (*chronos* and *kairos*, 5:1).

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The reference to the urgency of time is really meant to be a call to recognize the urgency of being prepared by living as God's children. The entry of God (the day of the Lord, the *Parousia*) is inevitable, like labor pains, but indefinite, like the arrival of a thief in the night. I appreciate the power of the illustration of child birth. Once the baby is coming, it will eventually arrive. We may have a guess at the delivery date, but you just never really know when it's about to happen. Once contractions start, a woman cannot say, well I've changed my mind.

Paul's point here is that the people of God must be prepared at all times, like dutiful guards on watch. When we focus on the urgency of time, looking for signs of the end, we miss Paul's point and Jesus' as well. Preparing for the end is not about watching the clock or calendar, because we will never know when it's coming. It's all about being ready all the time, because God is already among us: working, saving, and preparing.

Another theme that causes us to lose sleep in this and other passages is the picture of God that emerges in apocalyptic literature, and by extension sermons and teaching on the end times. Many people are leery of the image of God as judge that runs through this passage. And given the judgmentalism that can go with religious fervor, they are right to be wary. You know of what I speak; like the fire and brimstone stuff. It even extends to negative views of marginalized groups, painting them as outside of God's grace and subject to burn for eternity.

But hold on a minute. What if passages like this one, from Paul, were not at all about God's specific decision or even desire, as some like to insinuate, to come in judgment. What if it all comes from a different place, such as from a deep-seated Jewish understanding of the awesome and terrifying power of God's sheer holiness.

For example, the reason for the elaborate description of the consecration of priests for the Temple (Leviticus 8) is to stress the means by which they were set apart and prepared to deal with holy things. On the negative side, the strange story of the death of Uzzah after he simply reaches out to steady the ark of the covenant when it is being carried in procession (2 Samuel 5:1-15) is another witness to the potentially destructive power of holiness when someone who is unprepared comes into contact with it.

Now this is important to help us balance God's holiness with his ever-abiding love for us. What if, as Jews believed "The day of the Lord" (or the *Parousia*) will entail judgment, not because God chooses to be judgmental, but simply because the full presence of absolute holiness is destructive to whoever or whatever is unprepared to be in its proximity. Call it God's refining fire if you will. Just being in God's presence can wreck us.

Our unworthiness becomes so obvious in the presence of such purity and holiness. There are precedents in the Old Testament, such as the story of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6, who finds himself in God's throne room, overwhelmed by God's holiness. The seraph (a type of angelic being) fly around constantly shouting to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts the whole earth is full of his glory"

How does Isaiah respond? "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips." (Is. 6:5)

I think there is also a representation of this in the Transfiguration story. The three disciples were overcome by the holiness of what they experienced. I think this understanding of God is behind Paul's theological rationale for concern about holiness of life among the communities he served.

Paul is preparing his communities (sometimes actually likened to the Temple, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16) to be in the presence of pure holiness on the longed-for day, sure to come, when God is all in all. So, naturally the question becomes; what then, are the characteristics of holiness at a human level? What are the implications of the impending presence of a holy God coming into fullness in this world?

In this particular passage, they consist of the strangely vulnerable armor of God, community practices of encouragement, and the model of "the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us" (5:9-10). In his theological foundation, Paul has drawn a sharp distinction between "you" and "them," between the "children of light" and those who are "of the night or of darkness." Literally he says, "sons of light," an image that depends for its force on the understanding that the role of sons in Greco-Roman families was to carry on the work of their fathers.

Thus, the sons (and daughters) of light carry on the work of God, who is Light. And those who derive their life from darkness carry on the work of darkness. Being a "son" (I would add daughter here as well) of light is a reference to what one does, as an outward manifestation of who one is.

But in spite of the stark distinctions Paul draws, the armor that the Thessalonians are advised to put on, consists of the seemingly-fragile but actually powerful breastplate of faith and love and helmet of hope of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:8-9). There is a difference here between being discerning toward outsiders (which Paul advocates) and opposing them with force, which he clearly does not endorse.

The action that Paul most explicitly commends is mutual encouragement (consolation), a repeated practical theme of 1 Thessalonians (2:12; 3:2,7; 4:1,10, 18; 5:11,14). What stands out forcibly is that the building-up of community in Christ is, for Paul, evidence of holiness of life. Holiness is not an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us. To be truly pursuing holiness we need each other.

Finally, as an image of holiness, Paul puts forward the model of Jesus "who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep (meaning alive or dead) we may live with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:10). This is an astonishing statement for several reasons. One is the assertion that *whether we are awake or asleep* we may live with him. Having drawn the distinctions so keenly between sleeping and waking, light and dark, Paul gathers up the whole community of the baptized in this assurance of their salvation.

The other interesting aspect of Paul's mention of Christ is less explicit, but is a theme he returns to often in his teaching: the cross as a moral pattern (Philippians 2:1-13; and the stunning statement, "I die every day" of 1 Corinthians 15:31). A holy community is one in which the participants are giving themselves away in the small currency of everyday acts for the common good.

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When I think about this passage in the terms I outlined, I am more at peace with this whole subject. The picture that emerges here of God is more beautiful and certainly more consistent with the character of God being love. In Paul's day, the people understood the awesome power of the kings, emperors, and their underlings in causing terror when you were brought before them. A sense of unworthiness may even be in their hearts as their legs shook beneath them.

If you were summoned before the king, you would prepare. You would seek to not offend. Paul is saying that when we meet God face to face, like Isaiah the prophet, his mere presence will undo us. God's holiness will drive us to despair over our unworthiness. But then the Son of God enters beside us and speaks on our behalf. We may be unrighteous, and unworthy, but Jesus is worthy. It is his righteousness that God will see, not ours.

I am also heartened by Tony Campolo's approach when people ask him about the Second Coming and when it might happen. Campolo's usual response is to say that "he is on the welcoming committee, not the program committee". Or how about a true story of the anxiety this subject can cause many people. It was during, his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives:

On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait.

I can think of no better approach to this whole difficult subject.

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**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious God, you are the Lord of all seasons, especially the seasons of our hearts. You are mindful and responsive to our cries of joy and celebration, as much as our deep heart wrenching lamentations. You see our need whether in the brightness of the noon-day sun, or in the inky blackness of the darkest night. David the psalmist captured our feelings fully when he recognized that there is no place, we can ever run to hide from you, and frankly, many of us are tired trying to escape you. In our brokenness, and our need, we do not want to languish in hidden realms, but rather to be embraced and held tightly to your chest.

When our relationships are strained and fractured, we need your friendship and companionship. When our bodies are broken, or sick, we need the great physician. As our minds swirl in confusion, and troubles, we need the Great Counsellor. In the midst of strife among our neighbours, our families, and even as a nation, how we long for the Prince of Peace. If nothing else, O God, we have learned by experience that we cannot journey through this life with any sense of meaning and hope, without you along side us, and even often carrying us.

We as your creatures take great pride in our accomplishments and our ingenuity. We stand in the public square, and love to shout our own praises, "Look at what we have done." But in reality, what most us experience is hardly anything to brag about. How much of what we have claimed to have made, was built with: selfishness, exploitation, and even motivated by fear. For all our achievements we still suffer as a people. Sure, we have fancy gadgets, magnificent buildings, entertainment beyond compare; but we still long for peace, and meaning, and love. Have we really advanced as a people? Are we better off than our ancestors? Sure, we live longer, and can-do marvelous things, but we still mistreat one another, judge those who are different and live in fear.

Wake us up out of our slumber, O God. Help us to see that no matter how smart and creative we are, we can never save ourselves. Our earthly treasures are worthless in the grand scheme of things. How soon we forget the sage advice that we gain nothing if we possess the whole world, but forfeit our souls. And frankly, we know only too well, that we are readily willing to forfeit our souls, to sell our birthrights for a pot of stew.

Forgive our foolishness, and our short-sightedness. Restore some sanity to our inner conflict between your truth, and what the world claims as truth. Remind us regularly where our loyalty should lie. Help us to choose the light over the darkness.

O Gracious Father, you know the struggles among your people. Even today among us are: those who are ill, those who struggle with emotional health, financial health, and some whose relationships with a spouse, child, or friend are less than ideal. We all need a word from you today, to speak into our hearts. Help us to hear your voice through the din of our busy minds and busy lives. Restore again our joy, to be among your people. May our fellowship, and our worship be authentic and heartfelt. Help us to listen to one another beyond the words; to really dwell in the presence of one another. May we know each other as people of love, compassion and grace.

**BENEDICTION:** People of Christ, encourage and build up one another. Strengthen the fainthearted, lift up the weak, be patient with the anxious, and rejoice in all circumstances. The One who calls you is faithful; the God of peace shall make you whole. Amen.