

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Preparing for the Lord's Coming

Introduction

The church members at Thessalonica were worried whether those who had died before the second coming would be at a disadvantage, unlike those who were still alive at the time. Would they be lost, would their bodies be left in the tomb? Paul answers by explaining the sequence of events at the Lord's return. He does not answer all their questions, but these events are sufficient to give solid grounds for comfort and assurance.

Then he deals with the question we (and undoubtedly they) ask as to when these events will take place. The answer is - we do not know. They will be sudden, unexpected, and a surprise. Like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43) – who does not usually send a postcard telling us to lock up our valuables. The “day of the Lord” in 5:2, is an Old Testament phrase found in the prophets, beginning with Amos, who spoke of the “day of judgment”.

Even the Lord Himself does not know the answer to this one. **No-one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father** (Mark 13:32). N.B. Christ did show supernatural knowledge at times, and He was God, but when He came to earth He gave up the independent exercise of His divine attributes, and could use them only under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Just before His ascension, Jesus reiterated **It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set** (Acts 1:7).

So the Second Coming is sure, but it will be at a time which will take people by surprise because it will be unexpected and sudden. People who do not belong to Christ will be totally unprepared – eating, drinking, buying, selling, building, planting, marrying and being given in marriage (Luke 17:26-36) – nothing wrong in these things in themselves, but wrong when they are ends in themselves, and cause people to neglect spiritual truths. Indeed, some will even be caught ridiculing the very idea (2 Peter 3:1-10).

How to prepare for the Second Coming

You are all sons of light and sons of day (1 Thessalonians 5:5) because we belong to the Lord. We have God's light in our souls and are destined for the realization of the eternal day. Day and light mean joy, gladness, purity, righteousness, having nothing to hide, no guilty secrets. So the Lord's return will not surprise us, like a thief.

This is in contrast with the world. The world is marked by darkness and night. The world is not alive to God and to spiritual reality. In this regard they are fast asleep, as though there was no second coming and no judgment. The Greek word for “asleep” in 5:6 is different from that used in 4:13, which described believers who had already

died. Here, the word suggests moral indifference. Their lives are full of self-indulgence and moral laxity.

But let us be alert and self controlled (1 Thessalonians 5:6). We are to be alert, awake, calm, steady, disciplined, living in God's will and fulfilling our ministry. The Christian lives in joyful anticipation of the Lord's return and therefore will not be ashamed when He comes. N.B. One of the tests we can put to our Christian conduct is asking ourselves "Would I have cause to be ashamed if the Lord suddenly returned and found me in this place, or found me doing this, or heard me saying that?"

We should not be found living for the things of this life – its treasures and pleasures – as if they are the most important things. We should be different, our purposes, interests, and delights should be different, because this is not our home, and we are only passing through. This does not mean to say we should be cold or aloof. Dr. Alexander MacLaren once said that the last piece of furniture a Christian Church needed was a refrigerator. A poker and a pair of bellows would be more useful. We should be enthusiastic about the things that matter. Avoid things which harm the spiritual life, and be self disciplined about the things which are good and important in themselves but which could distract us from the things of God.

Dr Campbell Morgan had a card on his desk saying "Perhaps today" – a valuable touchstone by which to judge and assess every aspect of our lives.

A tourist to Lake Como came across a villa with a beautiful garden, and spoke to the friendly old gardener. He learnt that the owner had not visited for over 12 years, and the gardens were only ever seen by the odd passing tourist. The tourist commented that the gardener was keeping the grounds as though he expected his master to return tomorrow. The gardener replied, "Not tomorrow, sir, I always expect he might come today."

Practical steps to making preparations

Having mentioned watchfulness, Paul's mind automatically thinks of a soldier, and his equipment. **Putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet** (1 Thessalonians 5:8), covering the breast, shoulders, back and head. Faith, hope and love – already discussed earlier in this letter (1:3), and also the theme Paul takes up in 1 Corinthians 13:13.

These have been called the "theological virtues". Faith and love have one object, the Lord Jesus Christ. We *trust* Him first of all for salvation. When a chaplain offered to read from the Bible to Queen Mary of Orange at her deathbed, she replied "I have not left that matter to this hour". An old dying Scotsman, when a friend was trying to offer comfort, said "I thatched my house when the weather was warm". Then having trusted God for salvation, this same faith enables us to deal with the arrow of temptation and satanic attack. Then *love* to Christ follows faith when we delight in Him and yield ourselves to Him, causing the world to lose its charms. Finally we have the *hope* of the completion of our salvation at the Second Coming, when we enter our full inheritance.

We can be sure of that salvation because that is precisely why Christ died for us. Because of His death, we have eternal life now, and will enjoy it in fuller measure at His return. He was made sin for us. He bore our sins. He made an end of them. He was separated from His Father on the Cross as He bore our penalty. So we do not fear the Second Coming. There will be no judgment for sins or hell for us. The Cross has dealt with that. So *faith* in Christ, *love* for Christ, and *hope* in the Second Coming assures us of the last stage of salvation – these things which enable us to control self and be alert, and keep our eyes fixed in things which matter.

When we cultivate these things, the world loses its attractiveness. When Christ governs us we are able to govern ourselves.

*“Make me a captive Lord,
And then I shall be free.
My will is not my own
Till thou hast made it thine”*

Note that salvation is used in all three tenses in the New Testament. We have been saved (past tense) – **For in this hope we were saved** (Romans 8:24). We are being saved (present tense) – **The message of the Cross, to us who are being saved, is the power of God** (1 Corinthians 1:18). And we shall be saved (future tense) – **We shall be saved from God’s wrath through Him** (Romans 5:9). We have been saved from the penalty, we are being saved from the power, and we shall be saved from the presence of sin. Justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Final exhortation

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11). One of the main services we render to one another is to encourage and build up. To care and support. The church is a society of mutual support. The world we live in is tough and unfriendly. All events which come to us in life – sickness, bereavement, fear of future – where else can we turn except to God and His people? We minister by word or handshake, all the way to patient listening, sympathy and friendship.

We find as we build others up we build ourselves up and receive blessing to our own soul. The best way to learn is to teach others. How often in preparing a message for others, our own souls get blessed. In Rome, some monks used to greet one another with “Brother, we must die”, and the reply, spoken in equally sepulchral tones, was “Yes, brother, we must die”. Hardly edifying one another. In the Navy it is an offence to make discouraging remark to an officer in the course of his duty. Knew someone who always greeted with “Be of good cheer”. **Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt** (Colossians 4:6). If you are going to say anything – have something worthwhile to say.

Conclusion

As we think of the past, present and future, remember the coming King is also the crucified and risen Lord. Nothing in this life or the next, bereavement, death or judgment, can separate us from His love.