

Message #8

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1 Thessalonians

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THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

I.

She sailed out of Southampton on her maiden voyage on April 10, 1912, with 2,224 passengers and crew. She was the pride of the White Star Line. She featured a swimming pool, gymnasium, squash court, Turkish bath, opulent cabins and advanced safety features that included watertight compartments and remotely controlled watertight doors. Even third class passengers had their own cabins.

On the maiden voyage of this largest ship afloat there were millionaires and movie stars. The celebrities included John Jacob Astor IV and industrialist Benjamin Guggenheim. It promised to be a great trip. After picking up additional passengers in Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, the ship headed across the Atlantic.

Wireless reports indicated that there was floating ice along the route to New York City, but the ship continued at full speed. Then on the evening of April 14 at 11:40 PM the ship struck an iceberg. Five of the sixteen watertight compartments were breached. At 2:20 AM the Titanic slipped beneath the waters of the Atlantic. There were not enough lifeboats for all of the passengers and crew. Over 1500 people drowned.

When initial reports of a problem reached the New York offices of the White Star Line, the company's vice president issued this statement: "**We place absolute confidence in the Titanic. We believe the boat is unsinkable.**" At that moment the Titanic was resting on the bottom of the Atlantic. American and British boards of inquiry both determined that the captain and his crew were following standards of maritime operation and safety accepted at the time. The American board of inquiry declared that the tragedy was an act of God.

The passage before us this morning contains a divine prediction about a time that is yet future to our day. According to v. 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.**"

We have been studying Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians in recent weeks. (PROJECTOR ON--- THESSALONICA MAP) We have seen that about six months after his visit to Thessalonica in Greece, Paul received a report while he was in Corinth about how the Thessalonian Christians were doing. It was a good report. Paul responded by sending this letter to the church in that city.

In his letter Paul describes the Thessalonian congregation as being a healthy church. In the process he leaves us with characteristics worth emulating if we want to be a healthy church. Last time we saw that being a healthy church involves a confident hope in the return of Christ. In vv. 13-18 of #4 we found a description of the return of Christ that involves the rapture of the church. In vv. 16 & 17 of that passage we are told, **"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."** In our passage today Paul tells us about the day of the Lord that follows.

II.

So first, in vv. 1 & 2 of #5, we find that THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME UNEXPECTEDLY. (II. THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL...) In v. 1 the apostle writes, **"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you."** Paul's comments in the last chapter about the rapture may have involved new information for the Thessalonian Christians. But discussion about the times and the seasons is apparently a subject that he has previously discussed with the church there.

The only other use of this phrase in the New Testament occurs in Acts #1 vv. 6 & 7. Just before His ascension into heaven (ACTS 1:6) the disciples ask Jesus, **"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel."** According to v. 7 Jesus replies (ACTS 1:7), **"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."** The reference to the restoration of the kingdom involves a time in the future when Jesus Christ establishes a kingdom over which He rules upon the earth. This necessitates the Second Coming of Christ.

Paul in this verse and the next one indicates that he has talked to them about this subject. Thus in v. 2 of our passage we read, **"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."** So we are introduced to this term "day of the Lord" for the first time in this letter. It does appear, however, a number of other times in the Bible. It appears about 15 times in the Old Testament. The related expression "last days" appears 14 times in the Bible, and the expression "that day" appears about 100 times. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So the question is: What is the day of the Lord? I have provided a list in the bulletin insert of most of the appearances of this specific term in the Bible. As you look down this list, you will notice that "the day of

the Lord" appears to be associated with judgment from God. In the first two references on the list, Isaiah #13 vv. 6 & 9, the warning is that judgment is coming upon Babylon, which has been an enemy to God's people in Judah.

Most of the following Old Testament verses refer to judgment that is coming upon Israel. Some of these verses seem to describe the coming Babylonian invasion of the southern kingdom of Judah. In Malachi #4 v 5 and in Joel 2:30 and 3:14-15 there is reference to a day of judgment that seems to go beyond a near term judgment to a judgment that lies far in the future. In the New Testament passages the day of the Lord seems to involve the return of Christ. Jesus is the Lord who brings judgment with Him.

Paul in v. 2 of our passage says that this day will come like a thief in the night. Thefts and burglaries still often occur at night. But this was even more the case in the ancient world. For towns and cities had no street lights. It was expensive for many people to burn oil lamps in their homes during the night. So a thief could suddenly appear and do his dirty work with no warning. Such was the suddenness of the tragedy of the Titanic. The passengers were partying and enjoying their cruise when tragedy struck suddenly. Such will be the suddenness of the coming of the day of the Lord.

III.

We also find, according to v. 3, that THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL MEAN DESTRUCTION FOR UNBELIEVERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL MEAN...) Paul says, **"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."**

For Thessalonians and many other residents of the Roman Empire the first century was a time of relative peace and security. Several decades earlier Caesar Augustus had established the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. The Mediterranean world was relatively free of conflict. The citizens of Thessalonica some years earlier had built a temple to Julius Caesar and Augustus who succeeded him and who was called "the son of God." But Paul warns that judgment is coming.

Notice that he speaks of "they," not "we." In his discussion of the rapture in #4 Paul identified himself with those who will be subject to this being snatched away with Jesus. He used the first person plural pronoun "we." "We will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air."

His use of "they" here in v. 3 suggests that Paul does not expect that he and fellow believers will be around for the day of the Lord. The order of his discussion of the rapture and then the day of the Lord gives at least some support to the idea that the day of the Lord begins after the rapture. Those who

remain upon the earth, at least at the beginning of the tribulation, are not followers of Jesus. They are the ones who become objects of God's judgment.

It will be fascinating to see how the disappearance of Christians will be explained, if my understanding of the timing of the rapture is correct. Perhaps most will regard it as a good thing. A few years ago a commentator by the name of Andrei Codrescu spoke on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." He ridiculed conservative American Christians and made reference to the rapture, saying, "**The evaporation of four million [people] who believe in this crap would leave the world a better place.**" Perhaps this attitude will contribute to the feeling of peace and safety that will initially be prevalent after the rapture. There won't be any of these annoying right wing religious fanatics around any more.

There are a couple of additional hints in the Bible that the beginning of this tribulation period will be characterized by peace and security. Daniel #9 v. 27, in the understanding of some of us students of the Bible, speaks about a Roman prince, the Antichrist, who signs a peace treaty guaranteeing the peace and security of Israel. What happens to Israel has an important role in the events of this day of the Lord. Then also chapters 38 & 39 in Ezekiel speak about northern invaders who come to Israel and find its borders undefended, suggesting that before this invasion there was a false sense of peace and security.

But suddenly destruction comes to the enemies of God. Verse 3 in our passage uses a double negative to describe the certainty that people will not escape this destruction. It will come like the birth pangs upon a woman with child. For a pregnant woman who comes to full term, the pain is inevitable. For most of human history C-sections and pain medications were not available. Pain was sure to come. So also destruction will come upon those who are upon the earth during the day of the Lord.

There are a number of passages in the Bible which appear to describe this time of judgment and display of God's wrath. Daniel chapters 8-12 speak about it. There are references in #9 and #12 which support the idea that the time of tribulation will be seven years long. Ezekiel chapters 38 & 39 describe battles that occur during it. Jesus spoke about it in Matthew #24. The most complete description of the day of the Lord is found in the Book of Revelation. Chapters 6-19 are focused upon describing this period of judgment and display of God's wrath.

Much of this judgment is described as three series of seven judgments each. These series of seal judgments, trumpet judgments and bowl judgments involve wars, earthquakes, famines and celestial happenings. There is a description of a ruler who will come to control much of the earth. After a seemingly fatal wound, he will claim to be divine and will seek to be worshipped at the site of the temple in Jerusalem. People will not be able to buy or sell anything unless they have his mark on their forehead or their right hand. With the advent of implantable silicon chips that have already been used on pets and humans, this prediction seems plausible.

Look at just one passage that gives a flavor for what conditions will be like during this day of the Lord. (REVELATION 9:2) In Revelation #9 vv. 2-6 the Apostle John describes his vision about this future time: **"He [the angel] opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. (REVELATION 9:3) Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. (REVELATION 9:4) They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. (REVELATION 9:5) They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. (REVELATION 9:6) And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them."**

Some will turn to Christ during this difficult time. Many of these will die because of their Christian commitment. A significant number of new believers will be Jews who come to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah. They will take a leading role in evangelism. At the last battle, the Battle of Armageddon, Jesus will return to earth physically with the saints. The enemies of God will be defeated. The Antichrist will be cast into the lake of fire. Satan will be bound and thrown into the abyss. The Lord Jesus will establish His kingdom upon the earth. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In my interpretation those who are not Christians at the time of the rapture of the church will live through this time of tribulation. Some will turn to Christ. Most will not. We do not have to worry about this time of judgment--- if indeed we have put our trust in Christ, if we have come to the point of recognizing that we are sinners and that the Lord Jesus died for our sins. If we accept Him as our Savior, we will never have to experience this judgment from God. For the day of the Lord means destruction for unbelievers.

IV.

In the remainder of our passage we learn that THE DAY OF THE LORD SHOULD PROMPT A HEALTHY RESPONSE OF ALERTNESS AND SOBRIETY FROM BELIEVERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE DAY OF THE LORD SHOULD...) Paul writes in vv. 4 & 5, **"But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness."**

Paul makes a sharp contrast between day and night. He does not envision a separate category of twilight or dusk. He imagines only two categories--- sons of day and sons of night. The expression "sons of" was commonly used in Israel and in the Ancient Near East to describe a person's character. The specific term "sons of light" appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls in reference to a religious group called the Essenes. In all of these ancient usages one who is called a son of light or a son of day has characteristics of light and

day. One who is called a son of night or a son of darkness is described as having characteristics of night and darkness.

In our passage night and darkness refers to spiritual blindness and ignorance. Sons of night cannot see spiritual truth. They are in the dark, and they are headed for trouble. Light and day refer to spiritual enlightenment and understanding. Christians are connected to spiritual truth. Notice that Paul includes himself in this category by using the personal pronoun "we."

Paul urges fellow believers in v. 6, "**So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.**" Back in v. 13 of #4 we saw last week that Paul used the term "sleep" (KOIMAO-SLEEP) to describe the status of Christians who die, or at least the status of their bodies. The basic Greek word used in that verse was *koimao*. Here in v. 6 Paul uses a different Greek word for "sleep." (KOIMAO-KATHEUDO) It is the Greek word *katheudo*, which is sometimes used of moral laxity. Such is the meaning that it has here. Genuine Christians cannot be in the category of darkness. They will not be unprepared for the rapture. But they can become caught up in the lifestyle of those who are sons of night and sons of darkness. (PROJECTOR OFF)

First century Thessalonians and twenty-first century Christians in the USA can consciously or unconsciously adopt the values of the world around us. We can become focused on pleasure, on self-fulfillment, on personal accomplishment, on the accumulation of wealth, on the acquisition of power, on believing that the end justifies the means and on accepting the rationalization that everyone is doing it. Paul indicates that if and when Christians buy into these wrong moral values, we are guilty of sleeping spiritually.

A couple of weeks ago we saw in our study of the first part of #4 that Paul stressed the need for Thessalonian Christians to pursue sexual purity. Sex outside of heterosexual marriage was largely accepted in that first century culture. It is largely accepted in our culture. Participation in sexual immorality would seem to be one example of what Paul would describe as sleeping. It is not following God's moral standards. Christians should stay away from that kind of behavior.

Instead, Paul says, we Christians should keep awake and be sober. We should live in anticipation of the Second Coming and the rapture. Part of the reason that the Thessalonian church was healthy was that the Christians there had a strong, conscious belief that the Second Coming could take place soon.

The term "sober" in v. 6 does not necessarily refer to not being drunk. It more generally refers to being temperate and self-controlled. It means that the Christian takes life seriously. He or she can have fun and enjoyment and pleasure, but the believer is not like nonchristians who miss the meaning of life. The Christian realizes that there is a heaven and a hell, that there is a day of the Lord that is coming. He

realizes the urgency of the need for people to turn in faith to the God who is really there. He realizes the importance of serving God.

In vv. 7 & 8 Paul adds, "**For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 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.**"

The word for "sleep" here is the same as the word for "sleep" in v. 6. The apostle is saying that moral laxity and drunkenness are characteristic of unbelievers, the sons of night. Christians are sons of day. They should not be characterized by moral laxity and drunkenness. Instead they should be sober--- self-controlled, or actually, God-controlled.

In order to be God-controlled we need to put on armor. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMAN SOLDIER) What Paul describes is the armor of a warrior who is involved in front line combat. This is not the dress of an archer or a general who is safe in a rear area. The implication is that we Christians are involved in front line combat with our spiritual enemy.

In Ephesians #6 Paul also refers to the dress of a Roman soldier. In those verses he goes into more detail, and he makes slightly different comparisons between the equipment of a soldier and Christian virtues. Here the breastplate is said to represent faith and love. The helmet represents the hope of salvation. So notice that Paul is again returning to his emphasis upon faith, love and hope. We saw earlier in this letter that these are virtues that were characteristic of the healthy church at Thessalonica. They are virtues that should be characteristic of us.

The breastplate and the helmet are defensive items. Faith and love protect the heart. Faith in God and love for people and for God keep our heart from going astray. The helmet of the hope of salvation protects our mind. If we keep our mind focused on the salvation that awaits us in the future, we will maintain hope. Maintaining hope will keep us from getting discouraged and from buying into the world's values. Our hope will remind us that we will not be subject to the tribulation of the coming day of the Lord. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then in v. 9 Paul assures his readers, "**For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...**" It is wrath that characterizes this day of the Lord. This period will be a time when God displays His wrath upon sinful people who continue to resist His will and His grace.

The last three verses of Revelation #6 make reference to this wrath of God displayed during the day of the Lord. (PROJECTOR ON--- REVELATION 6:15) The passage tell us, "**Then the kings of the earth and the**

great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, (REVELATION 6:16-17) calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

Isn't it interesting that the Lamb is wrathful? That Lamb, of course, is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. It is Jesus Christ. John says that the day of **their** wrath has come. To whom is the "their" referring? It is "him who is seated on the throne"--- God the Father, and the "Lamb"--- God the Son.

So Paul says that God has not destined us Christians for this wrath. (PROJECTOR OFF) According to v. 9 in our passage He has destined us for obtaining salvation. Now the term "salvation" in the New Testament has different meanings. Sometimes it refers to the gift of eternal salvation that every believer receives at the moment at which he or she is regenerated, or born again. Sometimes "salvation" refers to a present aspect whereby we are to live out the changed life that we have in the present.

(PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13) Paul refers to this present aspect of salvation when he writes in Philippians 2 vv. 12 & 13: **"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."**

Sometimes the term "salvation" in its use in the New Testament refers to our future and final deliverance to heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF) Here in v. 9 of our passage it has a meaning related to that. It refers to deliverance from the day of the Lord by participation in the rapture of the church. The Second Coming of Christ will thus mean that Christians will be raptured and will meet Jesus Christ in the air. Also this will begin the day of the Lord, which will be characterized by judgment for the unbelievers who remain upon the earth.

In v. 10 Paul asserts that the Lord Jesus Christ **"died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."** Here is a reference to the foundational truth of the gospel: Jesus died for us. Here also is a clear expression of the grace of God: The word for "asleep" is the same word that appears in v. 6 and v. 7. The reference is to moral laxity, not to deceased Christians. The grace of God is that even if we are not walking with the Lord as we should, we will be delivered from the day of the Lord by participating in the rapture. For salvation is by grace, not by works. Whether we are awake or asleep, we genuine Christians will live together with Him.

The motivation for living the Christian life is intended to be a grateful response to what God has done for us. In the Old Testament God often told the people of Israel to obey Him so that He might bless

them. In the New Testament God stresses that the people of God should obey Him because He has already blessed us. In Ephesians #1 v. 3 (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:3) Paul writes, "**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...**"

In Romans #12 v. 1, after describing the various blessings that God has provided for His people in the previous eleven chapters, (ROMANS 12:1) Paul says, "**I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**" We will live together with Christ if we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior and sin-bearer. That is the sole requirement for entrance into heaven.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Finally, in v. 11 we read, "**Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.**" Paul recognizes that the Thessalonians have a healthy church. They display faith, love and hope. They just need to keep it up. They need to keep growing spiritually. They need to keep encouraging each other to walk with God, to obey His word, to grow in faith, love and hope. They need to avoid the temptation of buying into the world's system of morality. That is also what we need to be doing here. We need to encourage each other to walk with God.

When World War I came to an end, some politicians described it as the war to end all wars. But twenty short years later that war was followed by an even more horrendous world war. Then came Korea and Vietnam. When the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s, a political scientist by the name of Francis Fukuyama wrote an essay in a political science quarterly that gained a fair amount of attention from the press. It was entitled "The End of History." Fukuyama was hopeful that we were finally entering a time of less world conflict. He argued that the fall of Communism had led to the triumph of western liberal democracy. There was now universal recognition that democratic government and capitalism and individual rights are the best ingredients for the successful operation of nations.

But since then, democratic elections have put Vladimir Putin in power in Russia, the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Egypt, the socialist dictators in power in Venezuela and Hamas in power in the Gaza Strip. Then we have perhaps bigger threats to world peace from radical Islamic terrorists and rogue regimes seeking nuclear missiles in Iran and North Korea.

As Christians we are responsible to be peacemakers. But our hope is not in this world. The Bible tells us that conditions will ultimately get worse before they get better. But we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, and we wait for the return of our Savior. If we are part of a truly healthy church, we will recognize Him as the ultimate source of our hope and our salvation.