

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Intro July 22, 2007 Living in Light of the End

Have you ever had a so-called friend, annoying co-worker, or obnoxious sibling who told you about a movie he or she saw, and then go into the greatest detail, including the ending, that surprise which ruins all the suspense of what you otherwise were hoping to see?

Hollywood is quite adept at such surprise endings. We learned that Rosebud is a sled, Darth Vader is Luke's father, she's a he, he's Mother and he's really dead. Now if you haven't seen ... I won't spoiled some good movies. But when you know the ending and see a movie the second time, you see things differently. No longer lulled into believing what you see, you know how it all unfolds.

Unfortunately, life is not Tivo'd, we cannot replay the events to know how they will turn out. But yet, as Christians, resting on God's Word, we are told the end of the story, so that we know how to live in light of the end today. Knowing the end from the beginning when it comes to our lives, does not spoil life for us, rather it gives us a perspective that allows us to move forward with confidence.

This is what Paul offers us in 1 Thessalonians. Last week, looking at 4:13-18 we read how believers in that church wondered, if those who had already died have now missed out on the future. Paul gives encouragement that at Christ's second coming the dead will be raised and those left alive will join them for all eternity. In our passage this morning, a different facet of the end is examined ... what about the end? How should we, today, live in light of Christ's return? READ

Simply put, to live in light of the end means we're calm in crisis and clothed in Christ. As we know how the story ends, we live without fear either for the end in general or our own demise in particular.

What Paul writes here is all that is needed for us to know about the end, but knowing this makes a difference as to how we live today. When we know the end; we watch our world differently. How should we live today in light of the end of time?

LIVING IN LIGHT OF THE END MEANS WE SHOULD BE CALM IN CRISIS vv1-7

We remain calm in crisis because we are not surprised by the future 1-3

What does the future hold? Paul's readers knew and we must know the Day of the Lord is coming.

The Day of the Lord is described in Isaiah 13, using the destruction of Babylon as the type of what will come. This is the archetypal apocalyptic annihilation (read 13:6-8). Joel likewise speaks of this day (read 2:1-2), as does Amos in 5:18-20. A pattern of immediate destruction pictures the final destruction to come, giving a taste of what is to follow. Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2 links the events of Christ's death and resurrection to the next event, his eventual return.

With that in view, Paul wants us to understand the circumstances of this coming day. That it will come is certain. When it will come is not. This is pictured by the thief and labor pains. That the end comes like a thief is found in Mt 24:43, Rev 16:15 and 2 Peter 3:10, from this we know the return is unexpected and secretive. But it also calls for preparedness, a response of watchfulness and care.

Christ's coming is our reason to live holy lives.

When Janet and I were in Florence, we had a small apartment on the fifth floor in the old city. After arriving, unpacking, we locked the door and went to explore the city. Upon our return, all looked quite normal, except we noticed a bag had been turned inside out; our things had been rifled through. We thought we were secure, but we weren't. A thief had come in. He was looking for cash, passing over my iPod, credit cards. We could not stop a thief from entering, but we could be better prepared. From that day on, I put a small wad of paper in the doorframe so that when we returned, we would at least know if he had been there. We took what measures we could. Knowing what could be, we could be calm in crisis and not surprised.

Paul's warning is against the complacency that falls on us when we stop thinking about what is to come. When people begin to forget what is coming, they imagine that all will continue as has been and think they are safe. The second picture furthers the need to be calm in crisis when we live in light of the end. Like a pregnant woman in labor, it is too late to stop but one should not be surprised by what is about to happen. (see Isa 13)

The pulsating contractions of divine wrath, ever strengthening and intensifying give birth to the final judgment. No one should be lulled to sleep by political or economic conditions.

In the midst of the worst contractions, we may wish not to be in labor, but there is no turning back. With the strongest form of negation there is no escape

There should be neither forgetfulness nor frantic fright.

We must not forget the day of the Lord is coming, so that when everyday trials come or the final day, we are not surprised, but calm in crisis, having been prepared for its day.

In 1919, in Boston, an enormous steel vat, containing 2.3 million gallons of molten molasses, burst. Hot, sticky waves of syrup thirty feet tall, destroyed buildings, crushed freight cars, wagons, automobiles, and drowned people. One author called it the "Dark Tide." The enormous tank, 50 feet high and 240 feet around had been poorly designed.

Company officials reacted to the constant leaks by repainting the tank to match the leaking molasses. Out of sight, out of mind. These people knew the molasses vat was dangerous but didn't do anything about it. Forgetfulness killed 21, injuring 150.¹

They should have known it was coming. They should have prepared. Like knowing the end of the movie before its over ... but when we aren't prepared trouble comes.

When and where are we forgetful? Do we whitewash the problems in our world, claiming that while trouble may brew in the Middle East and turmoil may erupt in South America, all will be well with us? Do you imagine you can escape God's judgment and play with sin?

On the other hand, some Christians, with a view to preparedness, imagine that despite the admonition that none know the day of Christ's return, seek to set dates. With frenzied foolishness, they are anything but calm, but rather the focus becomes the end, not living today.

History is replete with date setters. Like Y2K, around 1000 some imagined that the end would come then. When it didn't, some got ready around 1033. In 1186 the "Letter of Toledo" warned everyone to hide in the caves and mountains. In 1420 the Taborites predicted every city would be annihilated by fire. Only five mountain strongholds would be saved. A hundred years later, Muntzer, a leader of German peasants, announced that the return of Christ was near. After he and his men destroyed the high and mighty, the Lord would return. Muntzer claimed to have a vision from God where the Lord promised that he would catch the cannon balls in his cloak. The vision turned out to be false when Muntzer and his followers were mowed down by cannon fire.

William Miller was the founder of a movement that was so prominent it received its own name-Millerism. From his studies of the Bible, Miller determined that the second coming would happen sometime between 1843-1844. A spectacular meteor shower in 1833 gave the movement a good push forward and some 50,000 people joined his cause. The build up of anticipation continued until March 21 1844, when Miller's time table ran out. His followers termed the event, "The Great Disappointment" A new date was set a year later and again in 1884, to no avail. His spiritual descendants, the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses still seek to pinpoint a date.

In 1975 the Killer Bees not only inspired John Belushi's SNL character, but some thought this was a sign of the end.(Rev 9) The alignment of planets convinced some the end was near in 1982. In 1988 Edgar Whisenant published *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988* that sold 4.5 million copies. When Jesus failed to show up, he published a new edition for 1989. That one did not fare as well. Subsequent volumes through the 90's likewise flopped

Today it is the Mayan calendar predicting the end to be December 21, 2012. We'll wait. In the meantime we must remain calm and we do so by being self-controlled.

We remain calm in crisis when we are self-controlled today 4-7

Self-control begins with our position in Christ

Using the theme of darkness and night, Paul reminds us of where our confidence is to be found. If the thief comes by night, we should not be surprised, for we are children of the light.

Paul's reference here is not so much to any inward illumination we possess, but of the one who possesses us. By calling us children of the light, he picks up the image that John uses of Jesus in John 1:1-5. This is further developed later in our passage, so for sake of time, let's move from the basis of that position to how we are to live in light of it.

Self-control is maintained by our attention to Christ

It appears as though Paul is mixing metaphors. He tells us not to sleep in v7, but in the last chapter, sleep is a euphemism for death. But the word he uses here is different. Here sleep means laziness, indifference. a refusal to engage in one's duties that he is warning against.

Since 9/11 our nation has been on high alert. Although for several years nothing as catastrophic has happened in this country since that day, terrorists have struck elsewhere. On March 11, 2004, terrorists exploded 10 bombs in Madrid, Spain, killing almost 200, wounding another 1,800.

Two months later there was a scare in Philadelphia. A conductor for Pennsylvania's transit authority discovered something frightening on the tracks near Philly's massive 30th Street Station. It was an electronic transmitter, planted alongside the tracks in the commuter rail yard. Agents from Homeland Security and the FBI swarmed the scene. Investigators discovered that the mysterious gadget was in fact a motion detector designed to send a signal to a nearby receiver. Tension mounted.

Finally, a train mechanic stepped forward and admitted installing the transmitter. Was he a terrorist, or a disgruntled employee looking for revenge? No, the mechanic worked the graveyard shift and had installed the motion detector to sound an alarm in his work area whenever his supervisor was approaching. That way he could safely take a nap; if the alarm went off, he could get up and look busy when the boss showed up.²

Our attitude should not be one of "Jesus is coming, look busy!" but one of diligent self control. That is what is called for by the two words used in v6

The word "awake" also means to be alert and was used to describe people crossing a river while stepping on slippery rocks. If they did not pay attention to what they did, they could easily fall into the river. Likewise we must watch our step, not asleep at the wheel of our life, grabbing whatever pleasure pleases us. Rather, mindful that there is an end.

The second word, sober, likewise communicates the attitude we are to have about our lives. Literally meaning *without wine* the word means to be clear of mental fuzziness, an affliction of those who have not imbibed a drop of drink.

This is not a picture of dreary somberness, of a staid severity, but of stability. It refers to one not easily ruffled. How can we remain calm in the face of an uncertain future, even if we do know the end? What will keep us from being lulled to sleep by a pleasant life and forgetfulness of what is to come?

LIVING IN LIGHT OF THE END MEANS WE SHOULD BE CLOTHED IN CHRIST vv8-11

We are clothed with Christ when we look to him for protection

Christ's armor covers us fully

The list of armor here, similar to what we read in Ephesians 6, is not something we enact on our own, for our own protection. Rather, Paul describes what is ours because we are children of the light, because we belong to the day, because we are in Christ.

Earlier we heard read Isaiah 59 where this final judgment by God is described. In v17 the Messiah, Jesus Christ is said to put on the breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation. But in 1 Thessalonians we are told to clothe ourselves with this.

What is pictured here is the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Our only hope is to look to Christ. The little faith I have, the extent to which I love matters little. But knowing that Christ has secured for us what we need to protect ourselves on that day, that we can be covered by faith and love that has been granted to us, we know that we will remain fixed and firm no matter what happens.

What is of supreme importance when discussing the end to time are not the events leading up to that end, but what Christ has done for us 2000 years ago. That is where we are to look. Our concern should not be with what we read in the newspaper, but what God did in Christ on the cross for us.

As capable as we may think we are, in the face of an uncertain future, we need the perfect life of Christ. Nothing else will protect us.

Steve Irwin, known around the world as the "Crocodile Hunter," was killed last year while filming wildlife along the Great Barrier Reef. Irwin was best known for the wildly popular, wildly dangerous antics on "Crocodile Hunter," his long-running television program. During the 14 years that the documentary was on the air, Irwin survived countless snakebites, being chased up a tree by a deadly komodo dragon, being spat in the face by a red spitting

cobra, and being pulled into the water by a massive crocodile. At the time of his death, he was in the Great Barrier Reef to film a documentary on the ocean's deadliest creatures.

Ironically, it was one of the ocean's least harmful creatures that delivered Irwin's fatal blow. While swimming with his cameraman, he came across a 5-foot-wide stingray and began to follow along behind it. Stingrays are often called the "pussycats of the sea" because of their docile nature. In fact, they can be hand-fed by tourists on excursions from cruise-liners. Unfortunately, Irwin reportedly got a little too close to the animal, which thrust its poisonous, barbed tail upward in a defensive reflex. The 10-inch, serrated barb went into Irwin's chest and pierced his heart. He was only the 17th person in the world to be killed by a stingray. If the blow had struck almost anywhere else, he would have survived easily.³

No matter what your make-up may be, no matter how emotionally stable you are today or well protected you are from whatever deadly attacks this world may throw, what may bring you down is the what you least expect.

You need the breastplate of another, who has withstood death itself and will return victorious. You need to have the hope of the salvation to cover your head, so when doubts arrive, you know that because Jesus died and rose from the dead, you are secure.

You need the faith, hope and love coming not from our world nor from within you, but from the one who has secured it, who created this world and who, at its end will be its Judge.

It is only in Christ can you with any certainty know that your destination is not wrath but salvation. Only in Christ can you have the hope for what tomorrow may bring. Only in Christ are we able to know, that we, whether awake or asleep we live in him.

Note the hope of the gospel in v10. The awake or asleep is not what he spoke of in 4:13-18, but in the immediate context. Your standing in Christ, the armor you wear is not something that exists or is absent based on whether you are alert or not. But to be in Christ is to be so clothed and therefore safe.

Since life is not about entertainment, our knowing the end is not bad. Rather our life is fulfilled because we know how Christ will keep his promise to us

As believers we are able to move forward with confidence not just because we know how all this ends, not just because we have the inside scoop and know who lives and dies. What carries us through the tough times is much deeper than that. We are able to live in light of the end because we live in Christ.

This what we sing in the hymn In Christ Alone, when we say:

No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the pow'r of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.

¹ Bipasha Ray, "Exhibit Recalls 1919 Boston Molasses Flood," AOL News, (1-23-04)

² Jere Downs, "Device Found by Tracks," Philadelphia Inquirer and <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/25/national/main619408.shtml>

³ AnimalPlanet.com (9-7-06)