

June 3, 2001 by Steve Brandon



The Return of Christ - In Relation to Those Who Are Living (Part 2)

1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

1. Christ's Return (5:1-4)
2. Our Response (5:4-8)
3. Final Results (5:9-11)

As you all know, in the last year of his life, James Montgomery Boice compiled 12 hymns for the church to sing. After his first two hymns, he found great pleasure in writing them and suggested to Paul Jones, who put the music together for these hymns, that he would attempt to write one hymn every month. Well, in the last year of his life, he wrote 12 hymns - one per month.

I would like to read for you the last hymn that he wrote. It is entitled, "Keep Watching and Be Ready."

We do not know if Christ will come when life is rough or steady;
we only know that Jesus said, "Keep watching, and be ready."

"Keep watching!" For Christ will appear at night or some bright morning,
like lightning flashing through the sky without a moment's warning.

"Be ready!" When the Lord descends to render final judgment,
when men shall rise to heaven's joy or suffer dreadful torment.

So watch with care; in grace abound, get ready soon to greet him,
that when you hear the trumpet's sound you'll be prepared to meet him.

I believe that those words encapsulate entirely this section of 1 Thessalonians that we have been looking at in recent weeks. From chapter 4:13 through 5:11, Paul has been focussing his attention on the return of Jesus Christ.

In 4:13-18, he wrote in relation to those who have died. We ought to be comforted to know that when Christ returns, it is the dead who will be raised first. We need not fear that they will miss the return of Jesus Christ from heaven. They will resurrect first!

In 5:1-11, Paul wrote in relation to those who are still living. The main point he made is that you don't need to know about when Jesus will return, you simply need to be ready. You remember last week when we looked at this, Paul addressed the issue of when Christ would return by simply telling the Thessalonians to be ready!

And I would like to repeat this. You want to know when Christ will come? The answer is: Be alert! Be ready!

In recent weeks, I have come to know that living the Christian life is much like selling your home. As we have attempted to sell our home, we have discovered that we always need to be ready for a showing. The house cannot get too messy, because people can come by at any time! We also have found out that many of our practices in keeping the house clean have become a good habit for us. So also, the very things a Christian ought to do as he thinks of the return of Christ, are the very habits that he ought always to do.

Those who consume their minds with all of the details of when it will be that Christ returns are often in the most danger of not being ready themselves. Jesus, Himself, in answering the question of when he will return gives exactly the same advice: Be alert! Be ready!

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 24. Chapters 24 and 25 are known as "the Olivet Discourse," because Jesus spoke these words while he was on the Mount of Olives. (i.e. like the sermon on the mount, which was given when Jesus was "on the mount," so likewise here, Jesus discoursed with his apostles while he was on the Mount of Olives -- the "Olive-et Discourse.")

The stage is set in the first three verses of chapter 24.

"And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down." And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:1-3).

The disciples are essentially asking Jesus 3 things with their two questions.

1. When will these things be?
2. What will be the sign of ... Your coming?
3. the end of the age?

Having received these questions from His disciples, Jesus then launches into His discourse (a sermon really). He totally ignores the first question: "When will these things be." He then answers the 2nd question with the first 25% of His sermon (24:4-31). With the remaining 75%, Jesus applies this to His disciples by telling them to be alert and be ready:

1. The Fig Tree

"Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, [right] at the door" (Matthew 24:32-33). In other words, be ready!

2. Noah

In verses 37-41, Jesus compares His return to be like in the days of Noah - some were ready (Noah and his family) and some were not (the rest of the world).

3. Thief

"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think [He will]" (Matthew 24:42-44). You need to be ready.

4. Servant in Charge

In verses 45-51, Jesus tells the story of a master who set a servant in charge. "Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes" (Matthew 24:45-46).

This slave is contrasted with the evil slave of verse 48, who says in his heart, "My master is not coming for a long time" and acts unfaithfully. Jesus says (in verse 50) - "the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know."

5. Ten Virgins

In chapter 25, Jesus continues to pound this similar theme of being ready when He returns. In verses 1-13, Jesus tells the story of the 10 virgins. 5 of them were prepared with their lamps and 5 of them were not. Jesus' concluding application is in verse 13: "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour."

6. Talents &

7. Sheep and Goats

In the last two parables (about the talents and about the sheep and goats judgment), the emphasis is upon doing what the Lord requires in His absence. They both describe Jesus at the judgement. He will separate those who have been doing his will and those who haven't.

Let me simply read verses 31-34. "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"

Jesus goes on to explain the how they were divided - those who were faithful in meeting the needs of others on the one side and those who didn't on the other. Similarly, Christ will also evaluate what people did with what they were given. They will be divided accordingly.

But the point in both of these parables is that those who are doing their master's business are those who are ready for His returning.

In describing what it means to be ready, James Montgomery Boice said, "Being ready means loving, trusting and waiting for Jesus Christ. The faithful servant is faithful because he is expecting the Lord's return. But it also has to do with faithful service, that is, continuing to carry out what Jesus has left us in this world to do... So I ask the question again, even as Jesus asks it over and over again ... Are you ready for his return? Are you watching? This is no light matter. It is extremely serious. To be ready when Jesus returns is salvation. Not to be ready is to perish!" (Hymns for a Modern Reformation, p. 30).

"To be ready when Jesus returns is salvation. Not to be ready is to perish!" What Dr. Boice said is true of what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "For God has not destined us for wrath [i.e. destruction, death, and eternal punishment], but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." "To be ready when Jesus returns is salvation. Not to be ready is to perish!"

This is the point that Paul (and Jesus, for that matter) is making with all of these contrasts:

- There are some, who, at the return of the Lord, will be unprepared for his return and will face the torments of hell forever.
- There are others, who will be prepared for Christ when he returns and will be saved from the wrath to come.

Last time we looked at ...

1. Christ's Return

We saw that His return would be characterized by three things.

1. Jesus will come as a thief in the night (verses 2,4).
2. Jesus will come when "All is well" (verse 3)
3. Jesus' coming will be like birth pangs (verse 3)

We also saw ...

2. Our Response

1. Light/Darkness (verses 4,5)
2. Day/Night (verses 5,7)
3. Alert/Sleepy (verses 6,7)
4. Sober/Drunk (verses 6,7,8)

We briefly looked at these contrasts last time. These are the things that will distinguish between those who will experience the wrath of God and those who will experience the salvation of God.

Those who are characterized as being ...

in the Darkness,
in the Night,
Sleepy, and
Drunk will face the wrath of God.

Those who are characterized as being ...

in the Light,
in the Day,
Alert, and
Sober will receive the salvation of God.

May I press upon you, church family, that this isn't simple a small, non-relevant issue for us to deal with. This is real. As certainly as you are hearing my voice, this is a reality. Some will face the wrath of God. Some will receive the salvation of God.

As I quoted Dr. Boice earlier, "This is no light matter. It is extremely serious. To be ready when Jesus returns is salvation. Not to be ready is to perish!" (Hymns for a Modern Reformation, p. 30).

Let's look at the ...

3. Final Results

The destiny of every man will be either salvation or wrath. For those of us who are genuine believers in Jesus, "God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). Let's look first at the wrath of God.

Wrath

In 1945, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones commented that "during the past fifty years, very little has been heard about the wrath of God. The whole emphasis has been placed upon the love of God, almost to the exclusion of all else. The effects and repercussions of this have been very widespread--much more than we often realize" (The Plight of Man and the Power of God, p. 62). What Lloyd-Jones said in 1945 is every bit as true today in June, 2001 as it was in 1945.

There are many reasons for this. I don't really want to spend our time seeking to analyze our culture and the culture of the Christian church today as much as I want simply to declare that God's Word declares clearly that His wrath is coming upon the unbelieving world. We need to believe this!

This isn't a new theme in 1 Thessalonians. Look back in chapter 1, verse 10. True believers have "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, (:10) and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, [that is] Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." The wrath of God is coming upon the unbelieving world, but true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will be delivered (i.e. rescued)

from God's wrath.

Also, look at chapter 2, verse 16. This verse is speaking about those in Paul's day, who were actively hostile toward the gospel and hindering him from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. -- Paul says that these people, who are not pleasing to God, are "filling up the measure of their sins." ... and "wrath has come upon them to the utmost." (See also Romans 1:18).

Paul will bring it up again when he writes again to the church of the Thessalonians. Paul will speak about the affliction which God will place upon those who are persecuting the church. God will be "dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed" (1:8-10).

Not only is it not a new theme in Thessalonians, it is not a foreign theme in the Bible. John the Baptist's message included the wrath of God, for the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him for baptism, but he turned them away by declaring, "you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:7,8). Jesus' message included the wrath of God. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). These words, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel.

I would contend that we need to understand what this wrath is if we are going to understand the salvation that is spoken about in 1 Thess. 5:9 - "obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

So what is this wrath?

Wrath is really another word for "anger" or for "indignation." One lexicon that I have described this Greek word for wrath (orgh), as "that reaction of the divine nature against sin which in anthropomorphic language is called anger." In other words, the best English word that we can find to describe God's wrath is anger, though it isn't the anger that we normally associate with men, which is often sinful anger. However, we need to be careful in thinking about God's wrath by comparing it to man. When people are filled with wrath, more often than not, it is usually sinful anger. But there is nothing sinful about the wrath of God.

No, there is nothing sinful about the wrath of God.

Often, I believe, men shy away from this doctrine, because they fall into the error relating God's wrath to man's wrath. This was illustrated perfectly, when I was speaking to a man this week about the need for disciplining our children. He told me, "you need to be careful in hauling off and whacking your children. You are going to get in trouble." See what he did? He assumed that disciplining a child implied "hauling off and whacking" your child. I tried to correct his view of biblical discipline (i.e. always done in love and never done in anger or for vengeance), but his mind was so eschewed against it that he couldn't understand.

This sort of perspective with respect to God's wrath is false and will lead us to believe that God's wrath is more controlled by God's arbitrary impatience or uncontrolled anger. When we think this way, we will think of God to be like the father, who is angry with his children for something that they have done and gets red in the face, raises his voice, and simply cannot control himself because of his anger. But that isn't what God is like.

So, what is this wrath of God we are talking about? God's wrath is that attribute of His character which expresses his displeasure and indignation against sin. Realize that God must be like this. For, as A. W. Pink points out, "to be indifferent toward sin is a moral blemish" (The Attributes of God, p. 83). Pink even went so far as to say that "the wrath of God is ... a divine perfection" (Ibid. p. 83).

In other words, for God not to express His displeasure and indignation against sin would be, in itself, sinful - it would be an indifference toward sin. We ought to glory in this. "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6). He reigns because he has first judged the world and set it in order.

God's wrath is something which we ought to prize, because it speaks to God's purity in that he cannot overlook evil. It is something that ought to capture our hearts. Because God must punish sin and will punish sin. But here is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus, God has punished sin. He has become our substitute! He was punished for us! He was punished in the place of us!

As the hymn writer wrote, "He bore my sin on Calv'ry's tree and righteousness bestowed on me" (from James Montgomery Boice, "How Marvelous, How Wise, How Great." In this way, God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:36).

Salvation

This is called the substitutionary atonement. This is called the propitiatory atonement - appeasing God's wrath, which much come upon sin. I began this short discussion with a quote from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Let me now finish the quote:

In 1945, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones commented that "during the past fifty years, very little has been heard about the wrath of God. The whole emphasis has been placed upon the love of God, almost to the exclusion of all else. The effects and repercussions of this have been very widespread--much more than we often realize. ... Its effect in the world of theology has been profound, and especially with reference to the most central of all the doctrines, namely the doctrine of the death of Christ and the Atonement. ... The idea of a mighty transaction by God in which sin was dealt with and punished in our Lord's body on the Cross, is scarcely known at all. The Cross has become nothing but a manifestation and demonstration of the love of God. We cannot stay with this, but we note it as a direct consequence of the rejection of the doctrine of the wrath of God." (The Plight of Man and the Power of God, p. 62).

This substitutionary work of Jesus Christ is plain and clear in this passage before us this evening: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us" (5:9-10). Christ died in our place. He died "for" us. The Greek word here is *huper* (huper), which means, "in place of, instead of."

He bore the brunt of God's wrath for us. He took what we deserve--death. He gave us what He earned--life.

The best way to do theology is to do it as it comes up in the texts we are studying. Notice here in verses nine and ten, we see that the death of Jesus was both ...

- propitiatory (i.e. it appeased God's wrath).
- and
- substitutionary (i.e. Christ died in our place).

Both of these truths of the atonement need to be believed by us. Furthermore, they must be held dearly and precious in our sight, because they describe what the death of Jesus on the cross actually accomplished for us. It appeased God's wrath through the acceptance of a substitute.

Well, I have spent much time on God's wrath and our salvation (:9,10). I have done so, because I thought it was important for us to understand. This is the driving force behind Paul's admonition to be alert and ready for Christ's coming back. Paul knew that when Christ would return, it would be a day of reckoning! Some will be unprepared (and will be destined for wrath). Others will be prepared (and will receive salvation).

How can I be prepared?

Paul has just come off of a discussion with the Thessalonians of the different characteristics of people.

- Light/Darkness (:4,5)
- Day/Night (:5,7)
- Alert/Sleepy (:6,7)
- Sober/Drunk (:6,7,8)

To be prepared, you need to be in the light and of the day. You need to be alert and sober. Thus, the exhortation comes, "let us be sober." In other words, let us not be drunk and inattentive, but let us be attentive in our Christian behavior.

The Thessalonians were sober, "having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (5:8). Notice the occurrence of Paul's famous triad of faith, hope and love.

Notice also that these are couched within the framework of military metaphors, "having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation." This sounds like Ephesians 6 and the armor of God. But, in Ephesians 6, Paul speaks of a breastplate of righteousness (not faith and love) (Eph. 6:15). In verse 16, he uses the term, "shield of faith" (not breastplate of faith). Finally, in Ephesians, Paul describes the "helmet of salvation," which is close to the "hope of salvation" we have here in 1 Thessalonians.

However, since these metaphors are so different from one another, I think that we best understand the military metaphors here to simply mean that our Christian life ought to be one of disciplined devotion to continue to keep the faith. We ought to be fervent in our love for one another, trusting in our hope: salvation to come. Or, as Paul writes elsewhere, "The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12).

As a footnote, I believe that picks up much of his imagery from Isaiah 59:17, "And He put on righteousness like a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; And he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle."

Final application

"Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing" (5:11). This week, in my reading of Pilgrim's Progress, I read about Christian and Hopeful in Doubting Castle. Hopeful was a continual encouragement to Christian, who was led to dependency in the castle. May the Lord increase our hope to be an encouragement to others as well.

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