

Foundations of a Flourishing Church
The Imminent Return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on March 7, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ Let me just say up front that I believe the end is near. I am completely convinced that we are living in the last days. Now before you write me off as some crazy doomsday preacher. Before you tune me out – hear me out. **What I mean when I say “The end is near” or “We’re in the last days” may not be what you mean or what you think someone means when they talk like that.**
 - You might be thinking of those teachers, throughout church history, that were bold enough to predict the Second Coming of Christ, which corresponds to the end of the world as we know it. In the 16th-century, **Thomas Munster** – an Anabaptist preacher associated with the Radical Reformation – claimed that the thousand-year reign of Christ would begin in the year 1525. He was written off, rightly so, as radical. In the 19th-century, **William Miller** – of the Millerite movement from which the Seventh-Day Adventists were birthed – predicted that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. Of course, that day came and went like any other. Descendants of the Millerite movement call that historic date The Great Disappointment.

- ❖ **Charles Taze Russell** – the founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses – predicted the Second Coming to take place in 1874, which came and went as any other year. And more recently, **Harold Camping** – bible teacher and founder of *Family Radio* who died back in 2013 – predicted the return of Christ on three separate occasions. The first time he said it might be on September 6, 1994. He gave himself enough wiggle room, but later he was more definitive when he claimed that the end was coming on May 21, 2011.
 - Many of his radio listeners were convinced, sold their possessions, and donated the proceeds to his radio ministry so he could spread his message even further. Well, May 21st came and went, and instead of repenting of his error, Camping claimed that a spiritual, invisible return occurred that day and a physical, visible return would occur later that year on October 21st. I don’t think I need to tell you that he was wrong.

- ❖ So knowing the kind of damage that false end time prophecies have inflicted on people – on their lives and on their faith – I need to be extremely cautious if I’m going to speak about us living in the last days. **But this is where I would point out how the biblical authors used the phrase “last days” in their writings.** They were consistently referring to an age (era) that began with the first coming of Christ and extends into our day.
 - For example, the prophet Joel spoke of how the Spirit of God will be poured out “*in the last days*”. And then in Acts 2, Peter connects what happened at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples, with the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. **In other words, “the last days” that Joel spoke of arrived with the coming of the Christ and the inauguration of his Church.**
 - So that’s why the author of Hebrews could speak of the days that he and his audience are living in as “*these last days*” where God has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:2). Or why the Apostle Paul could write to Timothy about the difficulties he’ll face as a pastor ministering in “*the last days*” (2 Tim 3:1).

- ❖ So that's why I'm comfortable using that kind of language. And why I am completely convinced that we are living in the last days. **Because Christians have always been living in the last days – ever since Acts 2 and the start of the Church.**
 - Friends, what I hope to show you is that a belief that we're in the last days and that Jesus's return is imminent – meaning it's near or close at hand – such beliefs have less to do with keeping an eye on the sky waiting for the clouds to break. **And have far more to do with keeping an eye on each other – encouraging one another to pursue faith, love, and hope.** All in light of Christ's return.
- ❖ Lately, we've been walking through 1 Thessalonians. Last week, the text we looked was all about the fate of deceased Christians. What will become of those who died in Christ when he returns? Will they be forgotten? Will they take part in that glorious event when Christ returns in power and glory? The answer was: They won't be forgotten. In fact, they'll be first in line in that great parade welcoming Christ back to earth to establish his kingdom forever.
 - **Today's passage stays with the same concern over Christ's return, but now the focus is on those who are alive in Christ and how we ought to live in these last days, in light of his imminent return.** There are three lessons we learn about the return of Christ. (1) The return of Christ will be sudden and unexpected for many. (2) The return of Christ should be expected and prepared for by believers. (3) The return of Christ is meant to encourage and edify the church.

The Return of Christ will be Sudden and Unexpected for Many

- ❖ The first lesson we learn in vv1-3 is that **the return of Christ will be sudden and unexpected for many.** To make this point, Paul makes use of key terms and metaphors familiar to his audience by drawing from the OT prophetic tradition and the teaching of Christ himself. Listen to his words in vv1-2, *"¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."*
 - **The Day of the Lord was a phrase often used by OT prophets to refer to a day of future judgment when the LORD will destroy Israel's enemies and restore her former glory** (Isa 2:12). Well, this idea of a day of judgment was carried over into the NT, but now, when Paul refers to the day of the Lord, he means the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 2:2; 1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 2:16). And Paul associates that Day with his Return – with the event known as the Second Coming.
- ❖ Look in v2. **He says the Thessalonians were fully aware that this Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly like a thief in the night.** That's a metaphor from Jesus's own teaching in Luke 12 about the coming of the Son of Man (which was his preferred title for himself). There he said his return would occur at an hour you do not expect. Listen to **Luke 12:39-40**, *"³⁹But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* **His point was that thieves never announce their coming. Otherwise they'd be guests.**

- ❖ Unlike guests, thieves show up at your house uninvited, unannounced, and unexpected. They catch you off guard. That's what thieves do; otherwise they wouldn't be good at thieving. **Paul goes on in v3 to explain that that's how the non-believing world will experience the return of Christ. They'll be caught off guard.** They won't see it coming. Listen to v3, *"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."*
 - **So while non-believers might assure themselves that everything is fine, that everything is peaceful and secure – in reality their peace and security are illusions.** They're like citizens of Pompeii, enjoying the weather, taking in the sun, telling themselves there is peace and security – up until the moment Mount Vesuvius began to rumble. Then sudden destruction will come, and they will not escape.

- ❖ **Notice how Paul compares the suddenness of their destruction to the suddenness of labor pains.** I'm sure the mothers among us can relate. One moment you're enjoying dinner, you're out shopping, you're watching a movie – and the next moment you're bent over in unspeakable pain. And you know there's more pain to come, and you can't escape it.
 - Well, that's as far as Paul stretches the metaphor. **Mothers can at least take comfort in knowing that their suddenness of pain is a prelude to a bundle of joy.** But for the non-believing world, there is no comfort to be taken. There is no joy awaiting – to be cradled in your arms. There is only wrath and destruction, and you will not escape.

- ❖ **That's Paul's warning to all who have yet to be delivered from the wrath to come (1:10).** He's alluded to this wrath in chapter 1:10, chapter 2:16, and here in chapter 5:9. **This is referring to God's holy wrath – his settled opposition to all that is evil.** Now let's be careful not to mistake his wrath with that of a child's – as impetuous or impulsive; capricious or cruel. No, God's wrath towards evil is an extension of his holiness – his commitment to all that is good and just. And because of the reality of sin and evil that infects – not just the world around us – but the hearts within us, we are objects of that divine wrath unless we have been delivered. Unless we've been saved from the wrath to come.
 - **Now if you're not a Christian, I know it's easy to ignore this.** To write Christians off as being alarmists. You don't feel like an object of God's wrath. You don't feel like you're in any particular danger. Sure, the world isn't perfect and life can be hard. This pandemic and the recent winter storm were clear reminders. But overall, you're life is fairly peaceful and secure.

- ❖ **But because of v3, I hope you have a better sense now why your Christian friends are compelled to tell you about the gospel** – about the danger all of us are in if we're not delivered from the wrath to come. It's because your Christian friends really do believe there is a God who made us for relationship with him. But in our sinful hearts, we have all rejected him and gone our own way – making a mess of our lives and of this world he gave us.
 - So he's coming back one day to put everything right. To cleanse this world of all sin, including sinners who have yet to be saved. It will be an apocalyptic end of this world as we know it and the beginning of a new creation – a new heavens and new earth.

- ❖ That might sound alarmist to you. **But honestly, how does that differ from all the apocalyptic scenarios that we've been warned about by those with a secular outlook?** We've heard plenty of warnings against nuclear proliferation, climate change, overpopulation, etc. We're warned not to be complacent – not to be fooled by the relative peace and security we enjoy right now. Because a cataclysmic end is coming.
 - Now I give the benefit of doubt that climate activists like Al Gore or Greta Thunberg really do care – not just for the planet's suffering – but for human suffering that can result from climate change. So if you can understand why they would speak with dire urgency and issue warnings of imminent danger for you and for the world as we know it – if you can see that it's because they do believe in a danger to come – **then you can see why Christians would try to awaken you out of complacency about sin and judgment and warn you about the sudden and unexpected wrath to come.** We believe this to be true, and we love you too much not to warn you.
- ❖ If you look down at vv9-10, you'll see that salvation from this wrath to come is obtained through the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us. **The good news is that God did not spare his Beloved Son but sent him to die for us on the cross** – bearing our sin and absorbing God's wrath – that we might be delivered and set free to live in true peace and security in relationship with our Lord and Savior.
 - If you have yet to obtain this salvation – or if you don't know if you've been delivered – then today is the day. Today you can turn from your sin and trust in Jesus as the One who died for you. The Day of the Lord no longer needs to worry you. If Jesus has delivered you on *this* day, then there's nothing to fear on *that* day he returns.

The Return of Christ Should be Expected and Prepared for by Believers

- ❖ That's the message Paul wants all believers to hear. The warning of an unexpected and sudden destruction doesn't apply to the Thessalonians or to any believer in Jesus Christ. Look at v4, *"But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief."*
 - So if you're a believer – notice Paul addresses brothers and sisters in the family of God – then the return of Christ may be unpredictable but it should not be unexpected. This leads to the second lesson we get from vv4-8: **The return of Christ should be expected and prepared for by believers.**
- ❖ In the following verses, Paul resorts to three images of contrasting pairs – light vs darkness; day vs night; sober vs drunk. They all communicate a similar idea. **He's saying that, as children of the day or of the light, the Thessalonians are not in the dark about the reality of Christ's return.** So they shouldn't be surprised. They shouldn't be caught sleeping and unprepared when that fateful day of the Lord arrives.
 - If we look back at v1, Paul says the Thessalonians have no need to have anything written to them on this subject of Christ's return. He says in v2 that they are *"fully aware"* of the imminent nature of this day. He's saying, "I didn't leave you in the dark on these matters." Remember that Paul's time in Thessalonica was cut short by persecution, and he didn't finish all the discipleship lessons he had planned.

- ❖ That's why, in last week's text, he had to explain to them what happens to those who die in Christ when Christ returns. He apparently didn't cover that. But notice what he did cover – notice what was an essential component of his teaching ministry. **The return of Christ and the Day of the Lord must have been one of his core lessons when he disciplined people.** Apparently he had fully covered the subject before he was kicked out of the city.
 - I find that convicting. Can we assume the same of each other? **Can we assume that each of us is fully aware concerning these matters on the return of Christ and the Day of the Lord?** Most of us, if we're honest, would admit that eschatology – the doctrine of last things – is one of the weaker areas of our theology. We often treat it as a nonessential matter full of differing views and opinions. We generally just believe that Jesus is coming back to put everything right, which is good and true. But we probably wouldn't prioritize eschatology in our discipleship.

- ❖ If I were in Paul's shoes – planting a new church in a hostile environment where I could be kicked out any minute – I can think of a number of essential doctrines I would cover. The doctrine of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of Christ and his death and resurrection. The doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the church. I'd make sure to cover those subjects. **But to my shame, I probably wouldn't have covered a lot of eschatology.** At least not enough to say that that church would be fully aware and need no further instruction about Jesus's return.
 - So let's learn from the Thessalonians and their example. If you haven't given much thought to the doctrine of last things – the return of Christ or the Day of the Lord – then make it a priority to build up this area of your theology. **Let me recommend a balanced, biblical, and broadly accessible resource – a book called *40 Questions about the End Times* (Eckhard Schnabel).** It's broken up into forty concise chapters, each answering a specific question. Perhaps you can read this book with another brother or sister in the church.

- ❖ Now let's look back at vv5-7 and these contrasting pairs. **Again, his point is that if you are a Christian then you are a child of the day, of the light.** You've been awakened to the truth that Jesus is Lord. That he's the coming King who will one day return to judge the living and the dead. That he's our Savior from the wrath to come.
 - So let us keep awake and be sober (v6). Let us be prepared for that Day of the Lord. We've seen how, for non-believers, that day will be an unexpected surprise. **But for believers, the Day of the Lord should be an *expected* surprise.** It shouldn't surprise us like a thief in the night. Like something that catches you off guard.

- ❖ **No, for a believer, the return of Christ should surprise us like how a soldier surprises his family when he returns home.** Look, I'm not one who cries very easily. It's not that I don't feel things, but I'm just rarely moved to tears. Well, I said rarely because one thing that gets me are those videos of soldiers returning home and surprising their parents or their spouse and children. Most of the time, the family already knows the soldier has finished a tour. They've been counting down the days as well. So they're expecting them to return.

- But what they don't know is when their beloved son or daughter; husband or wife; daddy or mommy will step through that door. **And when they finally do – when that day comes – that exhilaration you witness in the faces of those loved ones is the joy of an expected surprise.**

- ❖ **Church, those moments of pure joy – as beautiful as they are – are but shadows compared to the infinite joy we will experience on the day when Christ returns.** We know he's coming. He promised us so. It's in the Scriptures. So it won't be unexpected. But when it happens, it will be an overwhelming surprise of joy.
 - Now think about it: **Just as every family is prepared for their returning soldier – eagerly awaiting the day – in the same way, believers should be preparing for Christ's imminent return.** But don't misinterpret me. What that doesn't mean is selling all your possessions, quitting your vocation, abandoning your responsibilities, and spending your days with your eyes fixed up in the sky.

- ❖ No, to prepare for his return means to spend your days faithfully stewarding the vocation you've been given and fulfilling your responsibilities – whether that's in the capacity of a faithful parent, a faithful employee, a faithful student, etc. **It means spending your days in the company of the saints with your eyes fixed on your brothers and sisters in Christ.** Discipling one another in the faith. Demonstrating brotherly love to one another. And helping one another hold on to the hope we have in Christ.
 - Listen to v8, *“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.”* Paul is shifting imagery once more. Here he resorts to one of his favorite images – the armor of God, which he borrowed from Isaiah 59:17 and used in other letters, most notably in Ephesians 6. Now I think there's little to be gained in v8 trying to decipher why he picked these pieces of armor. **The important observation is that he's emphasizing, once again, the triad of Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope (cf. 1:3).**

- ❖ What Paul is saying is that living in light of Christ's imminent return means putting on these virtues and not taking them off. Put on faith. Put on love. Put on hope. And keep them on. **So that when Christ comes back, he'll find you growing in faith, showing love to others, and holding on to the hope of his return.**
 - When a soldier is on the battlefield, he keeps his armor on at all times. Even when there's a reprieve in the fighting and he's not engaged in combat – he could be eating, resting, even sleeping – but he keeps his armor on. He never removes his breastplate. His helmet is never far from his side. He wants to be ready, prepared at all times, so that nothing catches him off guard. That, brothers and sisters, is the attitude we are to have. **Always faithful. Always loving. Always hopeful. Always prepared.**

The Return of Christ is Meant to Encourage and Edify the Church

- ❖ This is what good eschatology is meant to do. Teaching each other about the return of Christ is meant to inspire a soldierly vigilance and preparedness. It's meant to encourage you towards godly living. That's what we see in vv9-11. Let me read that, "*⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*" This is the third lesson we get this text: **The return of Christ is meant to encourage and edify the church.**

- ❖ What's sad is that eschatology is often used as a threat. **The teaching of Christ's imminent return is often used to threaten Christians to get their act together.** "You better stop that sinning. You don't want Jesus to come back and find you doing that. You're going to be in big trouble when Christ returns."
 - Notice that Paul is doing the opposite. He's not using the return of Christ as a threat. **He's using it as reassurance, as an encouragement to weary saints.** We've noted in previous messages that the Thessalonian church was a persecuted church (1:6). It's why Paul was kicked out of their city. It's why he wrote 1 Thessalonians – because he was worried all that persecution had negatively impacted their faith (3:5-6).

- ❖ Imagine if we were a persecuted church. Imagine if mobs, enraged by the gospel we preach, dragged us out of our homes and in front of authorities, falsely accusing us of insurrection (Acts 17:5-9). Remember that that's what happened to Jason and other Thessalonian believers back in Acts 17. Imagine if our lives and livelihoods were constantly being threaten by opponents of the gospel.
 - **Imagine then if we're taught in church that a Day is coming when all these injustices will be rectified.** When the enemies of God – who opposed his gospel and persecuted his church – will face his sudden and unexpected wrath. Imagine if you're reminded that that Day will *not* be a day of wrath for you – because you are not destined for wrath but for salvation through Christ who died for you. Imagine if you're thoroughly taught that the Day of the Lord will be a day of overwhelming joy for you. An expected surprise. A sweet reunion where we'll meet our King in the clouds with all the saints. Do you see how good eschatology is meant to encourage?

- ❖ **Do you see how we're wasting our eschatology if it's all about end-time prophecy charts?** Trying to predict the Second Coming. Trying to decipher the book of Daniel or Revelation. Looking for clues to determine whether we're in the end times. If that's been your experience, then I'm sorry but those who taught you eschatology failed to point out the point of this doctrine. They failed to mention that it's meant to encourage and edify the church.
 - **If your eschatology can't help you comfort a grieving widow who lost her husband of thirty years or to give a word of consolation to heartbroken parents who recently lost a child, then you've missed the point of studying this doctrine.**

- ❖ If your eschatology offers you no help in counseling a victim of abuse or in advising someone who had been swindled by a business partner – **if you can't translate your knowledge of the end times into a word of encouragement to help fellow Christians to endure their suffering and to hold on to hope, then what's the use?**
 - Good eschatology is designed – not to fill up your head with endless speculations – but to build up your faith and love and hope. The only kind of eschatology worth learning is the kind that helps you live faithfully in these last days and helps you to encourage one another and to build up the church.
 - Let's dedicate ourselves to that kind of eschatology – as we live in these last days, waiting for Christ and his return.