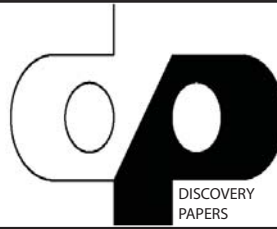


SURPRISED BY THE DAY

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



Catalog No. 20150503
1 & 2 Thessalonians
8th Message
Paul Taylor
May 3, 2015

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

We had been dating for almost two years. Most of that time was spent long distance. Rachel went to a university in Texas. I was in school in this area. Our relationship was serious. We had talked at length about getting married and decided that we both wanted to move forward. We even had a rough timeline that took into account when we were graduating and my starting a new job.

My question was how to ask this woman to marry me with at least some element of surprise. She knew it was coming, but she didn't know exactly when. So I picked the weekend before she was planning to come out California to secretly fly to Texas. I took a red-eye flight and asked some friends of hers to pick me up from the airport.

I arranged with another one of her friends to plan a shopping date with her on a Friday afternoon after classes. But instead of that friend showing up on her doorstep at 2 pm, I was there. As soon as she saw me, she knew exactly what I was doing. A few hours later we were engaged.

Later she told me that she was happy to see me, but had some mixed feelings. She had really been looking forward to going shopping with her friend.

This morning we are continuing our series in the books of the 1 and 2 Thessalonians called *Between the Times*. We have observed that these books reference the return of Jesus more than most of the other New Testament letters. They emphasize that this young church was trying to figure out how to live between two major events: the resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and the return of Jesus on the other hand.

So far, we've spent the majority of our time on the resurrection of Jesus, talking about what life looks like because Jesus is raised from the dead. But two weeks ago, Scott Grant walked us through a passage that dealt very specifically with the return of Jesus. That passage addressed the particular issue of the fate of believers in Jesus who died before Jesus returned. Our

passage for this week is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. In it, the apostle Paul moves on to the issue of what happens to believers who are still alive when Jesus returns.

Jesus had a lot to say about anticipating his return. In fact, a lot of the imagery from this passage mirrors his words in Matthew 24 when he tells several stories about the day of the Lord. It's likely that in some ways this passage in 1 Thessalonians is an exposition on those stories that Jesus told. This is the apostle Paul helping us to understand what Jesus meant through his stories.

With such a big event looming in the future, there were a lot of questions about it. What will the day of the Lord actually be like? Should people be worried about it? Will it be expected? Will it be a surprise? How should that day be anticipated?

Rachel knew my marriage proposal was coming. She just didn't know when. This is how the apostle Paul speaks of Jesus' return. We know he is returning, but we are still going to be surprised.

Honestly, this was one of the big reasons why I was excited to preach the letters of the Thessalonians. I don't think that we know how to think about this topic. I suspect that most of us don't think about it very frequently, at all. I suspect that it plays a relatively small role in our understanding of what it means to believe in Jesus.

And yet, that is completely different from how the early church operated. The fact that Jesus was returning for them was absolutely critical to their faith. Nothing made sense if Jesus wasn't coming back. The whole thing fell apart without that piece of the puzzle.

We need to consider what "the day" is all about. We need to find out why it isn't more important to us. We need to learn and practice and encourage each other to look forward to the return of Jesus.; to know that we will be surprised by the day, but to know that it is coming. For many contemporary believers in Jesus, this is one of the most underappreciated parts of what it means to believe in Jesus.

So let's see what help the apostle Paul gives to the Thessalonians, and find out how it can help us to expect the return of Jesus

Avoid false hope

We'll start by looking at how the apostle Paul introduces this topic. Here is **1 Thessalonians 5:1-3**:

Now 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. ³While 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.

Paul begins by introducing the topic of "*times and seasons*." This is a reference to when Jesus will return. The only other place that these words occur together is in the first chapter of Acts, just before Jesus ascends into heaven. The disciples ask him if now is when Jesus is going to establish his kingdom on earth. He answers that they don't get to know when that will happen. "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Then we are introduced to this phrase, "*the day of the Lord*" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). This is another way of referring to Jesus' return. This phrase is rooted in the Old Testament. The prophets used to speak of the coming day when God would set right in his creation. It was a day of intervention. It often involved destruction. But at the heart of this day would be justice—God's broken creation would be fixed.

People thought that when Jesus came, the day had arrived. But he spoke of that day as being in the future. So, the early church adopted the phrase as a description of the day when Jesus would return. Sometimes they called it "the day of the Lord," (1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:2) sometimes "the day of the Lord Jesus," (2 Corinthians 1:14), sometimes "the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6), and sometimes just "the day" (Romans 2:5, 1 Corinthians 3:13, Ephesians 4:30).

The imagery begins by the apostle Paul describing this day as coming like "a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). That's a direct reference to

Matthew 24:43 when Jesus says:

If the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

It's an interesting image with which to start. We speak of Jesus coming back as a good thing, but this is a negative image. No one likes a thief. It's one of our greatest fears: that while we sleep someone will come into our home and take our belongings. Our homes are supposed to be safe places. We're supposed to be relaxed and secure in them. But sleeping makes us vulnerable, so we're worried that our safe place will be violated while we're not expecting it.

Just a few months ago, our high school intern, Jim Jacobs, and his wife were asleep in their apartment. In the middle of the night, something burst through a window and landed on the floor, waking them. Jim and his wife first thought it was their cat, but then realized it was a man. Before they could do much, the man ran out through their front door.

When something like that happens, you feel terrible—you're surprised and violated. Something has happened that you don't expect. Something has happened that makes you feel vulnerable in a place that is supposed to be safe and secure.

It is this element of surprise that the apostle Paul continues to explore. First, people are interrupted by a thief in the night. Next, he describes people walking around talking about "*peace and security*," when sudden destruction comes upon them out of nowhere. In that time and place when you think you're okay, something terrible will happen. It's a similar image to the thief in the night—you think you're in a safe place, but it turns out you aren't.

The phrase "peace and security" is actually a piece of Roman propaganda. This is what the Roman government said that it offered her citizens. The Roman historian Paterculus described the founding of the city of Rome as a day that brought peace and security.¹ Augustus Caesar is quoted as saying, "I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble."²

Rome promised her people that she would take care of them. One contemporary scholar describes the goals of Rome as creating a Golden Age for her citizens. Three things would characterize this glorious period: peace and security, a lifestyle that expresses the ideals of the Republic, and prosperity for all of her citizens.

So when Paul describes people talking about “*peace and security*”, he is talking about people who are relying on Rome to give them the life that they’ve always wanted. They are believing the propaganda that the state can give them what they want. They are drinking the Kool-Aid. They are buying into the slogans.

This is why the Thessalonians think they are safe. They are trusting that Rome will save them. Caesar will take care of them. Then, out of nowhere comes judgment and destruction. Instead of deliverance, they face destruction.

It’s a grim picture. But this is not a threat. It’s a warning. It’s a warning that if you’re looking in the wrong place for deliverance, then you’re not going to find what you want. If you expect Rome to bring in the Golden Age, you’re going to be disappointed. Don’t pin your hopes on something that can’t deliver. Avoid false hope.

What about people today? Do they think they are safe? Do we think we are safe? As it turns out, a lot of people still talk about “peace and security.”

In 2009, President Obama gave a speech in Prague, declaring his intent to “seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”³

The webpage of the UN states that “The United Nations came into being in 1945, following the devastation of the Second World War, with one central mission: the maintenance of international peace and security.”⁴

The African Union has a Peace and Security Council that is responsible for the “maintenance of continental peace and security.”⁵

A few weeks ago, politicians in Israel met together after a historic election to proclaim their goal of finding “peace and security.”⁶

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh gave a speech last week calling for “peace and security” in his region.⁷

Everyone wants peace and security. Plenty of people are promising peace and security. But how many of those promises can be fulfilled? How many of those people will be surprised that find that politics

and governments and agencies and councils can’t bring peace and security?

Do you think that you are safe? What do you think is bringing you peace and security? Are you placing your hope in something that isn’t worth hoping in? How many of us will be surprised to find that 401(k)s and the real estate market and a great job in tech and a stable family and a beautiful girlfriend and a prestigious degree can’t bring us peace and security?

We want peace. We want a life of ideals. We want prosperity. This is what the Romans wanted. It’s what the Jews wanted. It’s what we want. Listen to the candidates that are already starting to campaign for your vote. What do they promise you? Peace and Security. The American Way. Prosperous jobs.

We’re all looking for a Golden Age. We’re all looking for this kind of a life. And we are all tempted to believe the messages about where it can be found. What are you tempted by? What do you believe is going to bring you your golden age? What propaganda about peace and security do you walk around repeating to yourself?

The Day that is coming is the day of the Lord. The day of Jesus Christ. He is one that will return to set the world right. But if you’re not looking for him to deliver you, then you might be surprised. You might be looking in this direction to find what you want from life, and from out of nowhere you’ll find destruction. Avoid false hope.

Live toward the day

This passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3, begins by describing people who are putting their hopes for peace and security in the wrong place. They will be surprised and dismayed at the return of Jesus. But the apostle Paul quickly points out that the people he is writing to are in a different category. Because of this, they can live a different way. Let’s read **1 Thessalonians 5:4-8:**

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸But 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.

“But you.” If you believe in Jesus, things will be different for you. If the coming of Jesus will be like a thief in the night, you don’t have to worry, because for you, it isn’t night. You do not live in darkness. You are not of the night. You are children of light. You are children of the day.

That phrase is really interesting. You are “children of the day” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). There’s a great double meaning here. Believers in Jesus don’t live in darkness. They don’t have to fear the thief in the night. They are of the day. But they are also of “The Day.” They live lives expecting that day to come. They aren’t repeating the Roman propaganda slogan of “peace and security.” They worship the Prince of Peace.

“Artichokes are delicious!”

You probably didn’t expect me to say that. It probably caught you by surprise. The sentence seemed to come out of nowhere. But if I had prepared you for it, then you wouldn’t have been surprised. If I told you that in a few moments I would emphatically declare my opinions on the flavor of a very unique flower-based vegetable, then you would have been prepared. You would have anticipated me saying: “Artichokes are delicious!”

If you believe in Jesus, you have been prepared. You should know that Jesus is returning.

It is recorded in the book of Acts that immediately after he ascended into heaven, an angel told his disciples, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

The apostle Paul said in Philippians 3:20 (NIV), “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The author of Hebrews in 10:37 said, “For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay.’”

Jesus himself told his followers that they ought to expect his return. If you believe in Jesus, you expect Jesus to return. That day that is coming in the future is the destination of our lives. We might arrive before our earthly life ends. We might arrive after we pass away. But that will be our final destination. We are not surprised by it. We live toward that final day.

The apostle Paul uses two different images to convey how to live toward the day. He says to stay awake and to stay sober. Stay awake and stay sober. These are the dominant images from the stories that Jesus tells in Matthew 24.

We’ve already talked about the homeowner who could stay awake if he knew when the thief was coming. Paul also tells a story about a manager who is left in charge while his master is away. Because he thinks his master will be gone for a long time, this manager gets drunk and abuses the servants. When the master returns, the manager will be punished severely.

Let us think about what these two instructions: stay awake and be sober. What does that look like in our lives?

I love falling asleep. At the end of day, I climb into bed and pull up the covers. I usually lie on my back for a few minutes and then roll over, curl up, and fall asleep. My wife always gets mad at me because I fall asleep so quickly. We fall asleep when we’re comfortable—warm and cozy. We’re not focused on anything else that is going on. We drift off to sleep.

Think about how much of our lives is built around comfort. We want comfortable jobs, comfortable beds, comfortable houses, comfortable lives. We want to minimize suffering—make it all go away. And when it has, we can fall asleep.

If falling asleep is focused on comfort, then getting drunk is focused on distraction. Whatever is going on is too difficult to face—too complicated, too overwhelming. As a response, we’ll get distracted by something that will take our minds off it. It could be drinking. Or maybe it’s entertainment, or recreation, or reading, or social activities, or professional achievement. We try to fill every last gap in our lives so that we don’t have to actually think about what is going on.

Listen to these headlines: “*Can You Solve These Kids’ Riddles That Stump The Average Adult?*”; “*14 Reasons Why First Dates Are Exactly Like Job Interviews.*”; “*Great News, A New Study Says You Can Shove Your Face With Cheese To Lose Weight.*” I found all of these on a website called distractify.com. This is what we fill our time with. Do we really need to see pictures of “*21 Pets Taking Full Advantage Of The Glorious Spring Weather?*”

What about you? How much do you focus on comfort? What are the ways by which you tend to distract yourself? Why do we do this?

I think we’re just trying to escape the difficult part of life. We’re trying to handle suffering. We minimize it by getting comfortable and falling asleep. Or we try to not to think about it by distracting ourselves.

What if we stayed awake and stayed sober? What if we identified with suffering instead of trying to escape it? Part of what it means to stay awake and stay sober is to identify with suffering.

If you're facing something difficult in your own life, don't run away from it. Don't run from it or try to escape it. Face into it. God uses the suffering that we are going through for his purposes. This is the message of the cross: We die with Christ so that we may live with him.

If you're in a season of comfort, you have the opportunity to engage with the suffering of others. That doesn't mean that you have to be overwhelmed by it. It doesn't mean that you aren't allowed to be doing okay. It means that you are able to do something about the pain of the world. You're able to help. You're able to comfort others.

I suspect that one of the reasons we don't think about the return of Jesus is that we are so comfortable and so distracted that we don't need to. It's hard to look forward to Jesus setting things right if you've managed to forget about all the things that need to be set right.

But this is what the Christian life is all about—it's a realistic view of this broken world and the hope for its final redemption; Acknowledging that I am prideful, angry, entitled, judgmental, lustful, and jealous, but that I am saved by Jesus and fully redeemed on that day. Recognizing that our world is full of injustice, racism, poverty, suffering, and tyranny, but knowing that the true king is going to return and bring justice.

We live toward this day. That is our final destination. Everything we do points toward this day.

And we don't just sit around waiting for it. If we're just supposed to sit around, of course we're going to fall asleep. Of course we're going to distract ourselves. But we have a mission while we wait.

The passage we heard in 1 Thessalonians 5:8. uses a military image. We are wearing body armor and a helmet. There is a quote from Isaiah 59 which describes the Lord himself putting on these items in order to fight his enemies. In that passage God is the one wearing the armor and the helmet as he fights for justice. The enemies are defeated and God's people are vindicated.

But now we are the ones wearing the armor and the helmet. Jesus has come to fight his battle. He will return to complete it. In the meantime, he has left us as his representatives. The apostle Paul associates these

items with the three Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. This is what the follower of Jesus does as he waits for his king to return.

This is what it looks like to live toward the day. Believe. Hope. Love.

This is what Christians do. This is what we did last week when we went out into our community and served at three different elementary schools. This is what we do as we wade into the struggles that youth are facing in our schools. This is what we do as we work for justice in our local area and around the world.

This is what Christians do. We strap on the armor and helmet of faith, hope, and love and we get to work. We follow Jesus into the world. We bring justice in small ways as we wait for Jesus to return. You only fall asleep when you get bored. But following Jesus is never boring. We are the image of God, serving as the outpost of his kingdom until his king returns. That's a huge responsibility.

We don't avoid our own suffering or numb ourselves to the suffering of the world. We identify with suffering. We believe in a God who redeems. We hope for a king who returns. And we love those who remain.

Embrace the future

Our passage began by describing how some people will be surprised by the return of Jesus because they are looking elsewhere for deliverance. It continued to say that those who believe in Jesus are different. They know Jesus is coming and wait for his return. The passage concludes by describing why we can eagerly anticipate the day of Jesus. This is what allows us to live toward the day.

1 Thessalonians 5:9-11:

For 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.

We like stories about the end of the world. We have movies and songs and books about how things will end. I read an article last week on Earth Day that suggested if the temperature of the earth rises 2 degrees Celsius, then we could be facing a global climate cataclysm. There are other versions of the end of the world that we're afraid of. Maybe an asteroid will hit the earth and destroy everything. Maybe there

will be a deadly disease that kills everyone. Maybe computers will take over and we'll all be enslaved by Siri. Or maybe there will be some kind of zombie apocalypse.

Most of our stories about the end of the world have to do with a terrible natural disaster that we can't escape, or some way we as humans completely make a mess of things. I think what we're doing in these stories is playing out our fears. Maybe we aren't as safe as we think we are. We're exploring those things that make us really afraid about our lives. We're afraid that something outside of our control will destroy us, or we're afraid that we will make really bad choices and have to face the consequences.

Even the Christian story of Jesus returning is scary. We have a Bible called *The Action Bible* that is like a graphic novel version of the Bible. Several years ago, one of our children had a terrible time falling asleep and woke up saying his dreams were full of nightmares. When we asked him what he was reading before he went to bed, he said he was reading Revelation in *The Action Bible*. A graphic novel version of Revelation? Of course that's scary.

So much of our life is lived in fear. Worry. Anxiety. Terror even. We are afraid of so many things.

But here is the one thing about what is coming that enables us to anticipate it: we do not have to be afraid of The Day. If we believe in Jesus, we don't have to fear the future. This day that is coming will not be a day of wrath for us; it will be the day of salvation. It will be culmination of all that God has done and is doing in the world. It will be a celebration. A feast. A reunion. A homecoming.

As followers of Jesus, we don't have to fear the future. We can embrace the future.

In the third episode of Star Wars, the great philosopher Yoda instructs his pupil Anakin. He tells him, "Careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the dark side."⁸ Yoda warns Anakin that only bad things will come of fearing the future. It is out of his fear that Anakin does end up losing himself and becoming Darth Vader.

What about you? What are you afraid of? There really is a lot that could go wrong. Jobs are lost. Sickness invades. Loved ones die. Relationships shatter. In truth, there is a lot that we could fear about the future.

As I've gotten older, I've realized that there is a lot more to fear. I remember looking for a job the summer after I graduated from college. Not getting that job seemed like the worst thing that could have happened to me. A few years after that, not finding a summer internship that could lead to a good job seemed like the worst thing that could happen. A few years later I worried about where my wife and I were going to live. Now I look at my children and there is so much to worry about. So many terrible things could happen.

But what if we didn't have to be afraid? What if we knew how the story ended? Wouldn't that change everything?

Now, when I look back on the things I used to be afraid of, they seem so minor to me. At the time, they were huge. Now that I have bigger things to fear, I can see how insignificant they were in the grand scheme of things. I wonder if I'll look back on everything that I'm worried about now with the same realization. Do I really have to fear what might happen in the next few years when I know what is going to happen for eternity?

When Jesus returns, we who believe in him are going to live with him. It will be a day of salvation. That long term security can bring me short term peace. Long term security brings me short term peace. I don't have to be afraid of tomorrow because I know what next week will bring.

So I can embrace the future. And I can help you to embrace the future. The passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11 ends by instructing us to encourage each other with these words. That's the point of thinking about the day of the Lord: to encourage and comfort each other. It is good news that Jesus is going to return. It is the best news. This is what helps us to face the difficult parts of our lives. "This, too, will pass." Whatever season you are facing won't last forever. Jesus will come back.

The instruction to "build one another up" is very unique in the New Testament. It is the only place this particular phrase is used. It's different than the standard phrase usually translated as "one another." It's literally "one to one."

With this knowledge of the day that Jesus is returning to make things right, we build each other up—one to one. This happens in our relationships. It's not just something we hear about in sermons. We

share this with each other. We can give each other personal comfort and encouragement. We tell each other that we don't have to be afraid.

Whatever pain you are going through won't last forever. Jesus is returning. Whatever suffering you see in the world doesn't have to overwhelm you. Jesus is returning. Whatever despair or frustration or hurt that you've suffered won't remain. You will eventually be fully healed. Jesus is returning.

Comfort each other with these words. Build each other up—one to one.

Conclusion

I did manage to surprise Rachel when I proposed to her—somewhat. She wasn't shocked, but at least I showed up without her knowing. After that day—once we were engaged, once we knew we were going to get married—the first thing that we did was to set a date. Then, we could really start planning.

That's mostly how life works. We plan for things when we know when they are coming. But it's hard to wait and plan when you don't know when something is coming. Maybe that's why over the history of Christianity people have spent so much time and energy trying to predict when Jesus will return. If we're going to look forward to it, we want to be able to predict it. If we don't know when it is coming, how can we anticipate it?

This is the tension of living in between the times. This is the tension that Jesus captures after telling stories about his return. He says this in Matthew 25:13, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Live toward the day because you don't know when it is coming.

It's a tricky thing to do, but we are given a lot of help to do it. A lot of the world is looking to other things to solve their problems. Everyone wants hope and they'll find it wherever they can. But we need to avoid false hope. Avoid thinking that something other than the return of Jesus is going to set right all the things wrong in our lives and the world.

Once we're focused on his return as the object of our hope, we can live toward that day. We stay awake, not numbing ourselves with comfort. We are sober, not distracting ourselves with activity and entertainment. We identify with suffering in our own

lives and the pain of the world. We put on our battle gear and carry on the work of Jesus until he returns. This is what it looks like to live toward the day.

We can do all of this because we aren't afraid. We know something good is in the future. We will not face wrath. We will live with him. The long term security of knowing Jesus will come back to accept us gives us short term peace. We can embrace the future.

And so we wait for the day. We will not be surprised by the day. If Jesus comes back in our lifetime, we will welcome him eagerly and rejoice at his coming. Live toward that day.

(Endnotes)

¹*Compendium of Roman History*, II. 103.5, April 28, 2001, A1.

²"Augustus." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2015. 4 May 2015.

³Lerner, Ben. "About that 'peace and security' without nuclear weapons thing ..." *The Washington Times*. 27 March 2015. Web. April 2015.

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⁸Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith. Dir. George Lucas. Twentieth Century Fox, 2005. Film.