

## PEACE AND SECURITY



1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Sixth Message

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Peace and Security. The coronavirus has shaken our sense of peace and security. In their place have arisen fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Some have asked if the pandemic is a sign of the End Times. And now the fires that rage all around us have turned the sun to darkness and the moon to blood. Is the end nigh? Is the Day of the Lord upon us?

We are all now conscious of the need for protective clothing to provide safety. We wear face masks to protect one another—even at the Tour de France which began yesterday. Healthcare workers suit up in PPE, personal protective equipment, to protect themselves. The firefighters suit up in protective equipment. The police suit up in riot gear. They all hope that their clothing is adequate for their security. What clothing should we put on to feel secure?

Two thousand years ago the young church in Thessalonica was anxious and uncertain about the Day of the Lord. They had two concerns. Firstly, they were anxious about their Christian brothers and sisters who had died under persecution. What would happen to these martyrs when the Lord returned? We looked at this last week (1 Thess 4:13-18). Paul gave them a word of comfort. At the Lord's return the Christian dead would be resurrected and reunited with the Christian living. Together they would greet the Lord in the air and escort him to earth as its returning King. "And so we will be with the Lord forever" (4:17). Paul urged them to comfort one another with these words.

Secondly, they were anxious about themselves. Would they be ready for the Day of the Lord? Would they pass the Lord's judgment? This is the concern we turn to today. Again, Paul gives them a word of comfort. And again this passage has aroused speculation about the future. What word of comfort does Paul give them? And how should we live today in such unsettling times?

Our passage today is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, which I will take in three sections.

### I. Like a thief in the night (5:1-3)

**Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thess 5:1-3 NIV)**

In general Paul is very pleased with how this young church is living in faithfulness to Jesus. But there are a few areas in which he feels they need some remedial instruction to "supply what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). This he provides in these last two chapters of his letter.

Paul now turns to the topic of "times and dates" or "times and seasons." This phrase is shorthand for the timing of the End, the arrival of the End Times. Paul uses two terms to refer to the End

Times. In the previous passage Paul wrote about the *parousia*, the coming of the Lord Jesus—his Second Coming, his return to earth. In this passage Paul refers to the Day of the Lord. What is the Day of the Lord? It is the day when God intervenes to put things right. It is the day when God acts in both judgment and salvation, to overthrow the wicked and save his people, and thereby vindicate his own righteousness. It is a day that has come but is yet to come. It is a day frequently mentioned by the OT prophets. Israel was eager for the Day of the Lord to come. But they shouldn't have been so eager, for God came in judgment first on them. God's own people had broken loyalty and defected to the side of the wicked. God brought judgment on them, first the northern kingdom Israel, then the southern kingdom Judah. The Day of the Lord arrived in the middle of time, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God in Christ defeated not any human enemy but the greater enemies of sin and death. Jesus rose as the firstborn into the new age. And all who are in Christ follow him into this new age. The Day of the Lord marks the transition from one age to the new age. But there awaits a yet future Day of the Lord, when God will finally put all things right.

The Day of the Lord is the same as the *parousia*, the Lord's return, but with a different focus. The Lord's return focuses on his presence with his people. The Day of the Lord focuses on judgment, salvation and vindication.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they know very well the timing of the day of the Lord. It will come like a thief in the night. This metaphor is used seven times in the NT, in the gospels, the epistles, and the book of Revelation. The phrase "like a thief in the night" was made famous by the 1972 movie of this name, featuring Larry Norman's song, *I Wish We'd All Been Ready*. If we knew which night and what time the thief was coming we would indeed be ready.

We are concerned today about home burglaries, so many of us have home security systems that can alert us anywhere in the world. Today many burglaries take place in the daytime, sometimes brazenly so. But the motif of the thief in the night was a very familiar one for me growing up in rural Thailand. The robbers always came at night. Every night we locked up our house tight. Every night my dad brought his motorbike into a storage area and locked it up with a heavy chain. Still the robbers would prowl around at night, and sometimes they would get into the house, even with us inside. We knew the robbers would come, but we didn't know which night.

We may feel secure, saying "Peace and safety" (NIV; "security" in most versions). But often this is a false sense of security. Hear what the Lord said to the leaders of his people in Jerusalem through his prophet Jeremiah:

**This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the**

**temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” (Jer 7:3-4)**

In Jeremiah’s day the leaders in Jerusalem were saying “The temple of the LORD...” Even as the Babylonian army was closing in on them they were confident that they were safe. The Lord’s temple was there, and surely he would never allow his temple to be destroyed. But they had things the wrong way round. They misunderstood Peace and Security. The Lord continued,

**If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. (Jer 7:5-8)**

The temple didn’t guarantee their safety. Instead they were to guarantee the temple’s safety by keeping the Lord’s word. “Peace and security,” but that wasn’t true for the little people whom they were oppressing: the poor, the widows, the fatherless, the foreigners. God’s vision of peace, of *shalom*, included justice for the marginalized, and righteousness in human relationships even with the oppressed.

“Peace and security,” said the leaders. But they were trusting in deceptive words. The Lord did the unthinkable: he removed his presence from the temple, leaving it just an ordinary building. Then he brought Babylon to capture it and destroy temple, palace and city. When they were claiming “Peace and security,” sudden destruction came upon them. Just as Paul writes here.

“Peace and security” was also a Roman slogan: *pax et securitas*. It was inscribed on monuments and stamped on coins. It was part of the imperial propaganda, how Rome presented itself. Rome did bring peace. It cleared the Mediterranean of pirates and the land of brigands. Travel was relatively safe by land or sea, allowing Paul to travel long distances. But this *pax Romana*, this Peace and Security, was imposed by a mighty military machine. It came at a heavy cost to the conquered peoples. The first century Roman historian Tacitus attributes these words to Calgacus, the Caledonian chieftain, facing the Roman army: “To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a wasteland and call it peace.” The Roman peace was peace to some but not to the conquered.

Apart from a small elite, the Jews in the Land did not view the Roman occupying army as the bringer of peace and security. When the disciples asked Jesus “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6), they were chafing under the peace and security of the Roman occupier.

While people are saying, “Peace and security,” destruction will come on them suddenly. Rome called itself the eternal city, but it eventually fell. It is a characteristic of the great city, the city of man, that it thinks itself secure behind walls of its own making. Though it say, “Peace and security,” it will fall. Thus happened to Babylon, to Rome, and to many others.

Peace and Security. At the beginning of this year we were feeling secure. Our economy continued its long, sustained recovery from recession with record highs in the stock market and record low unemployment. All seemed well. And then...the pandemic hit! Then the economy tanked. Then unemployment skyrocketed.

And then...the killing of George Floyd exposed an ugly under-

belly to the celebrated prosperity. Peace and security was not for everyone. Law and Order brings peace and security to some but at considerable cost to others. This week we’ve seen yet another black man, Jacob Blake, shot by police, shot in the back with a stream of bullets.

Like a thief in the night, like a woman going into labor, like a people living under the illusion of peace and security, the day of the Lord is coming but at an unexpected time. So how will we all be ready?

## 2. Day people and night people (5:4-7)

**But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. (5:4-7)**

One way to avoid the thief in the night is to live entirely in the day. So, in vv. 4-7, Paul reminds the believers that they are people of the day not of the night, they are people of light not of darkness. Day and night, light and darkness: these also are frequent biblical metaphors. In biblical imagery, darkness is chaos, light is order.

In the beginning God spoke light into the darkness, order into the chaos. He shines into our lives, dispelling the chaos of our darkness with the order of his Spirit. The Christian life is about transformation from darkness to light, from chaos to order. We come to Christ in a disordered state. This disorder isn’t immediately turned to perfect order. Instead, coming to Christ is only the beginning of a daily and lifelong journey of transformation. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our disordered affections are realigned and brought into order. We are turned from night people into day people. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph 5:8-10).

The distinction between light and darkness is a less powerful metaphor for us today when we can turn on a light switch and immediately dispel the darkness. We even have lights on our phones in case we are ever caught in the dark. In the ancient world, and in parts of the world even today, the distinction between darkness and light was stark. Darkness was full of night terrors, of danger lurking in the shadows.

The early church developed a song to celebrate the lighting of lamps in the evening that dispelled the darkness. They called it *Phos hilaron*, Hail gladdening light. Chris Tomlin and others modernized this into the song *Joyous Light*: Hail Gladdening Light, sun so bright, Jesus Christ, end of night, Alleluia. Jesus Christ is himself Light: “Light of Light,” as the Nicene Creed states. In him we come out of the shadows, out of the darkness into the light. “Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come; Into Thy freedom, gladness and light, Jesus, I come to Thee.”

“So then, let us not be like others” (6). As people of the Day let us not be like the others, the people of the Night. The gospel redraws the boundaries of identity and of associated behavior. There are only two identities: those in Christ and those not in Christ. People of the Light and people of the Darkness. People of the Day and people of the Night. Paul adds two more binary pairs of

metaphors: those who are awake and those who are asleep, those who are sober and those who are drunk. Here his use of the sleep metaphor is different than in the previous paragraph. In chapter 4 those who sleep are those who have died in the Lord. Here, using a different verb, those who sleep are those who are dull, unaware of realities. They are not alert.

If we are in Christ then God has shone the rays of his Spirit into our lives. If we live as people of the Day, awake and sober, then we will never be taken surprise by the thief in the night. We will never be caught unawares by the arrival of the day of the Lord, because we are always living lives of readiness. We are always ready to meet our Lord and Savior. We are always ready to meet his gaze.

How do we prepare for the Day of the Lord? How do we ensure we are ready? We prepare by living differently, by living as the people of the Day rather than the people of the Night. So what does living as people of the Day look like?

### 3. Living as Day People (5:8-11)

In vv. 8-11 Paul describes the life of Day people:

**But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (5:8-11)**

Since we are Day people, how should we live? We live wearing the right protective clothing. The Christian life is about death and resurrection: dying to self, rising to Christ. It is about putting off and putting on: putting off the old self, putting on Christ as if he were a garment. Putting off one set of clothing and putting on another.

As people of the Day what is our protective clothing? What should we wear so that we are ready for the Day of the Lord? We have put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Faith, love and hope. Again, this is the name of this series. Clothed in faith, love and hope we live as people of the Day.

Paul has praised the Thessalonian Christians for their faith, love and hope and for the fruit of these three virtues: “your work produced by faith(fulness), your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). Faith, love and hope. They live as children of the Day. Faith, love and hope are evidence of God’s calling, that he has transferred them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They are evidence that he is at work in them and through them.

Therefore, Paul assures them, “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (9). You have nothing to fear on the Day of the Lord. For people of the Night it will be a day of wrath. But for people of the Day, Christ’s people, it will be the day for receiving salvation. Notice here that Paul places the reception of salvation in the future. We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. We have been saved, transferred from darkness to light, so that we might live transformed lives of faithfulness, love and hope, so that in the end we might take possession of salvation.

All this is through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that

we might live together with him. So that we might live together with him: this is the possession of salvation. This is the goal of our calling: that we live together with him. Together not only with him, but together as those who are awake and those who sleep when the day of the Lord comes. Here Paul changes the metaphor of awake and asleep. Those who are awake are those still alive on the Day of the Lord. Those who sleep are those who have died in the Lord prior to that day. Here again we have the communion of saints, as in chapter 4. The Christian dead and the Christian living will be reunited and will live together with the Lord.

So that we may live together with him. Here is Paul’s word of comfort. It is similar to his first word of comfort: “And so we will be with the Lord forever” (4:17). “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (11). The Thessalonians are already living as people of the Day, as evidenced by their faithfulness, love and hope. Paul encourages them to encourage one another to keep on going, keep on persevering.

In our Scripture reading (Acts 1:1-12a), the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were eager for the day of the Lord to come. For them that meant the overthrow of the Romans, under whose peace and security they were suffering. It meant the restoration of physical Israel. They were thinking in nationalistic terms: us versus them, Jews versus Rome. But Jesus told them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And so they went back to Jerusalem and they waited. They entered liminal time, that is in-between time. It’s an uncomfortable place to be. It’s a place of uncertainty. It was only ten days, but how long those ten days must have seemed. “You will be my witnesses,” but how could they do this? “You will receive power,” but what would this power be? Ten days later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and they received that power, power to be witnesses. Peter got up and preached his first sermon. “This Jesus whom you killed God raised to life. He has made him both Lord and Messiah. Therefore repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” Soon he would bear Spirit-empowered witness about Jesus to a Roman centurion, an officer of the occupying army of Peace and Security. Cornelius became a follower of Jesus, and Peter stayed with him for several days, sharing table fellowship.

We live in liminal time, in the in-between time between the ascension of Jesus our risen Lord and his return in glory, his *parousia*. But we live in this liminal space empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus. We witness to him not only in our words when we share the gospel but also in our lives when we live as people of the Day. When we are clothed with faithfulness, love and hope.

This week I’ve been struck by words penned by Esau McCaulley, assistant professor of NT at Wheaton, in an editorial last year for the *Washington Post*. The NT tells us of “the trials and struggle of Christian communities trying their best to live lives indicative of the king that they claimed to follow.”<sup>1</sup> Communities of people of the Day. Communities such as the Thessalonians. Their trials included tribulation and opposition for following Jesus. We don’t face persecution, though there are plenty of Christians around the world who do. But we are beset by trials including the pandemic,

the economy, and the fires. Many of our brothers and sisters face the trials of racial injustice.

In our trials may we seek to live lives indicative of the King that we claim to follow. Lives of faithfulness, love and hope, living as people of the Day. Clothed with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope we will have peace and security, and so be ready for the Day of the Lord, whenever that may come.

*May God himself, the God of peace [and security], sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)*

1. Esau McCaulley, "Why it matters if your Bible was translated by a racially diverse group," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2019.

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