



## BACK TO THE FUTURE

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Seventh Message

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There is a strong predictive element in both of the apostle Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Many people find prophecy intriguing, but it is easy to become preoccupied with the future, either out of mere curiosity, or perhaps even dread. Wars and rumors of wars persist. We are living in very uncertain times.

The current preoccupation with end-time scenarios and timetables that go beyond what the Bible reveals is a cause for concern. Such is not the emphasis of Scripture. I enjoy "theologizing" as much as anyone, but it is important to distinguish between what we know for certain and what is rank speculation. We need to remember that in both the Old and New Testaments, the predictive element was given, first, to authenticate the fact that the writer was speaking for God; but, second, the specifics were often quite vague.

Some people find that unsettling. They want to know precisely how everything is going to turn out so they can draw it up on a chart. But the Bible does not allow for that. We have Jesus' word for corroboration. Following his resurrection, the disciples asked him, "Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" His reply, both to them and to us, was, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons the Father has set by his own authority." Their responsibility, he told them, was to evangelize the nations, beginning with Israel.

Jesus went further. He himself did not know the answer to their question, he said; only the Father knew that. Laying aside his omniscience, the Son of Man said he did not know the day of his coming. So much for our present-day predictors! Here is what Jesus actually said to the disciples, "The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." That was the dilemma of the OT prophets; they did not know about the first coming of Christ. Peter makes that quite clear in these words from the first chapter of his letter: "The prophets ...sought intently and with the greatest care [they didn't even understand their own writings] trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet 1:10-11, NIV).

Now what the prophets did not understand about the first coming of Jesus, we do not understand about his second coming. I think it is a sad thing when we Christians allow issues that are unclear to cause divisions among us. Some believe Jesus will come to rapture the

church seven years before his second coming. Others believe he will come in the middle of what is called the tribulation period (the seven years which precede the second coming). Yet others say that the rapture of the church and the second coming are the same event.

I believe we should think through these issues and come to our own conclusions, based on our understanding of the texts, but they should never, ever divide us as Christians. What Scripture emphasizes is the kind of character we ought to have as result of our knowledge that the Lord is coming back. That is Peter's conclusion. He says as much at the end of his second letter: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, *what kind of people ought you to be?*" That is the emphasis of the apostle.

Ruth Bell's Graham's poem is apt in this regard:

*Why argue and fight and worry how the world ends?  
Pray for the best, prepare for the worst, and take whatever  
God sends.*

Our walk with the Lord should mirror somewhat Israel's life in the wilderness. Every morning when they got up, the first thing they did was look at the cloud. If it had lifted, they would start packing up their belongings and prepare to move. When the cloud moved, they would follow it through the day. They had no idea where they were going to be that night. But when they had followed the cloud through the wilderness, at the end of their day they could know that they had followed the course. They had arrived at where God wanted them.

Many Christians don't like to live with that kind of uncertainty. We prefer our human uncertainty to what appears to be divine uncertainty. We prefer to rely on ourselves and our own planning and scheming rather than keep our eyes on the Lord. We want a plan to follow rather than a person to trust. Yet Scripture instructs us to keep following the Lord, to keep our eyes on him. We must not look away from him and drift to other things. If we keep looking at him, he will get us where he wants us to be. And one of these days he will come back. We can know that for certain. When that will be and how it will take place, we do not know. We have to live with that uncertainty.

Now, because Jesus is coming, Christians have cer-

tain responsibilities, and it is these that Paul addresses in this passage from 1 Thessalonians, beginning at 5:1:

**Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.** (1 Thess 5:1, NASB)

The idiom, “times and epochs,” is used in a number of places in Scripture. “Times” refers to a date on the calendar; “epochs” to the circumstances surrounding that date. Thanksgiving falls on November 23rd this year. That is the date on the calendar. For each of us, a number of circumstances surround that event: the gathering of the family, the turkey, the dressing, cutting down the Christmas tree, shopping, etc. The events that surround the date are the seasons.

The point which the apostle is making to the Thessalonians is this: if you are thinking of marking a date on the calendar, you can’t do that. He explains why, in verse 2:

**For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief;** (5:2-4)

The Thessalonians were asking Paul about times and epochs, just as the apostles had asked Jesus earlier. They wanted to make preparations for the day of judgment. But Paul, like Jesus, declares that the solution to their problem does not lie in knowing the date. Nobody knew or could know it.

Evidently, during his visit to Thessalonica, Paul had taught them about the “day of the Lord.” No doubt he had explained from the Old Testament that it would be a day of judgment. The term, “the day,” or “the day of the Lord,” occurs in a number of places in the OT. The prophets referred to it as the time when the Lord would have his day. Man is having his day right now. He is allowed to do as pretty much as he pleases—hurt other people, destroy their own lives, etc. But the story is not an idiot’s tale. One of these days, God is going to have his day. His day will come! He will appear, the heavens will disappear, the earth and everything in it will be burned up, and God will set about making a new heaven and new earth. That is how the prophets looked at it. And when his day comes, it will be a day when he is manifest as God in all of his glory—“God undisguised,” as C. S. Lewis put it.

The people in Amos’ day were saying the things that we say at times today, things like “Why doesn’t God do something about the mess in our world?” “Why doesn’t God do something about child pornographers, child molesters and wife batterers?” “Why doesn’t he do something?” But Amos responded to the people of his day, “I don’t think you want that to happen, because when God comes, he will not only deal with those forms of sin, he will judge sin right across the board.

You who are asking God to come back and set things right are not finding your security in God. You are going to experience judgment as well.” Here are the exact words of the prophet, “It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, [and after he escaped from that] as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.”

God is waiting. The world, like a time bomb, is ticking its way toward oblivion. God is delaying, not because he is indifferent or impotent, but because he does not want anyone to perish. His timetable is determined by his love for the world, not by its rotation or the number of times it circles the sun. He is waiting, waiting, waiting for us to announce the gospel to others so that they can brought in. That is what Peter says.

So that is the great and terrible day of the Lord, as Amos describes it. And it is going to happen. There is no doubt about.

C. S. Lewis describes it this way:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on his side then, when you see the whole universe melting down like a dream. And something else, something that never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in - something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. For this time it will be God without disguise. Something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use then saying that you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we have already chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever.

The apostle uses two metaphors to illustrate how the Lord will come. First, he says, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” It will be unexpected. Burglars do not give advance notice of their plan to rob a house. It is the same with the “day of the Lord.” Second, it will come like labor pains: “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety’ [they imagine they are entirely secure], destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Christ’s coming will be sudden and unexpected (like a thief in the night), and sudden and unavoidable (like labor at the end of pregnancy). In the first case there will be no warning, in the second, no escape.

Jesus said that it would much like the days of Noah. Then, people were eating, drinking and getting married. There is nothing wrong with these activities, except that these people were partying their way through life, thinking about what life could provide but not about what it meant, where they came from or where they were headed. They were not thinking seriously

about spiritual things. Suddenly the flood came and took them all away. Jesus said that is the way it will be when he comes back. People will be taken by surprise.

But Paul says, “you are not in darkness.” Jesus will come like a thief to those who are unprepared. The way to catch a thief is stay up, be alert and keep all the lights on. That is Paul’s argument. Believers are not groping around in darkness. We are in the know. We know Jesus is coming back. The rest of the word is saying God will never intervene, that he has no interest in this world, but we know better.

And why do we know better? Verse 5;

**for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; (5:5)**

This idioms “sons of light” and “sons of day” are used throughout the NT of people who are characterized by a certain thing. They have the inherent characteristics of the thing from whence they sprang. They come from the light, so they have light. They are sons of God, so they are like God. Paul characterizes believers as those who do not belong to the darkness. So, let’s not be like those who are in the dark, unaware that our Lord is coming back.

How then should we live? Here is what Paul says, in verse 6:

**so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. (5:6-7)**

Christians are not to party their way through life, living trivial existences. We certainly are fun loving, and we have every reason to enjoy life, but at the same time we need to be serious about it. We need to be thinking about where we came from, what we are here for, and where we are going. Our purpose in life is not merely make money, acquire possessions or retire and live in affluence and idleness. We are here to “seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” Paul is saying that if we remember that everything we have is going to burn up one day—our real estate, cars, boats, computers, all the things that we spend our time and money amassing—we will have a different perspective. Now it’s not wrong to have any of these things, but if we are preoccupied with them, then we really don’t understand the meaning of life. We are investing ourselves in treasure that is going to burn up.

Last week, a wildfire destroyed dozens of homes in Marin County. The television news interviewed a man whose home was burned to rubble. He was sobbing uncontrollably, and all he could say was, “It’s all gone. Everything I had is gone.” While we certainly grieve with those whose lives have been disrupted, how sad it is to have invested everything in possessions that may be stolen or burned up—and which will certainly be burned up one day when the Lord returns.

People who live in the day have a different set of val-

ues. They are characterized by faith, love and hope. Notice how Paul puts it, in verse 8:

**But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. (5:8)**

As the apostle said at the beginning of this book, every Christian is a believer, a lover and a hoper. It’s very simple. We are to believe God, and love people, with a sure hope that one day we will inherit completely what has been promised.

Verse 9:

**For God has not destined us for wrath, [He is talking about the future wrath of God that falls upon those who are not safe in Christ] but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake [i.e. living] or asleep [i.e. dead], we may live together with Him. (5:9-10)**

This goes back to the passage in chapter 4 that we looked at last week. There, Paul referred to certain Christians who had died as being asleep, and to others who were awake, i.e. that they might be alive when the Lord came back, Some of you may actually be alive when Jesus returns. In view of the fact that he is coming back, how should we live? We should keep clinging on to God, trusting him, believing him, relying on him, and keep loving people. Knowing that the Lord is coming back gives us a whole new set of values.

A number of years ago, Tony Campolo wrote a book called *Who Switched The Price Tags?* He shared a story about pranksters who broke into a clothing store in the middle of the night and switched all the price tags. Next morning customers found shirts that normally sold for \$29.95 had \$150 price tags, while suits that sold for \$300 had \$99 price tags. A number of hours went by before someone realized what had happened. Some people were getting great buys while others were being ripped off, because they had no idea of the proper value of the items they were buying.

That is our problem today: We live in a world where the price tags have all been changed. That is what Paul is saying in this passage. If we realize that everything that we are investing our lives in on this earth is temporal and transient, that one of these days it is all going to burn up, that will change the way we look at everything. It will change the way we spend our time. It will change the energy we put into certain activities. We will realize that most of what we are doing is not going to last. It’s all passing and transient.

There is a story told about a stockbroker who found a bottle with a genie inside. When the genie gave him one request, the astute stockbroker asked for a copy of a newspaper one year hence. He opened to the stock market reports, rubbing his hands as he contemplated the fortune he was going to make. When he looked at the adjoining page, however, he saw a photograph of himself. He glanced at the headline and saw that he had

opened to the obituaries. That tends to put things in perspective, doesn't it? That is what the Lord is teaching us in this passage.

Supposing you got a letter from Nordstrom inviting you to a free shopping spree for one day. For twelve hours you dashed back and forth, piling things into your car—shoes, clothes, perfume, everything you wanted. But at the end of the day, you had a cardiac arrest and died. You had worked too hard. This happens all the time. It is not quite as obvious or dramatic, of course, but it happens nonetheless. People go on a shopping spree over their whole lives, amassing a fortune, and then they drop dead.

Once we understand the nature of matters, our way of evaluating things changes. We start seeing people as the most important commodity on the face of the earth. What are we investing in? In eternal commodities or things that will be destroyed? Some of you are considering a change of job. You are looking at a position that offers upward mobility and more money. But taking it will mean uprooting and disrupting your family. If money is the primary reason you are considering that move, is it worth it? Money will not make you happy. You will not be one bit happier with that pay raise.

Maybe God does want you to uproot and move, but if the move is determined simply because you are going to make more money, then I would urge you to think twice.

That is the new perspective that is given to us here. We begin to realize that this life isn't all there is. Our Lord is coming back! And he is going to set everything right. All of our aches and pains, all our hungers and longings, all our legitimate desires will be fulfilled. We will have bodies that are equal to the demands of the Spirit. We will be with our loved ones who have gone on before. We will spend eternity with the Lord who died for us. That changes everything.

And that is why Paul closes with the same words as he did in the last section:

**Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (5:11)**

First century Christians saluted one another with the greeting, "Maranatha!" (the Lord is coming). I know that for many of you, life is hard. But I want to encourage you with the same word that our brothers and sisters used two thousand years ago: Maranatha! Do not lose heart. The Lord is coming back. Count on it.

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