



1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
 Living as Followers of Jesus
 "Expect the Unexpected"

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Have you ever been in a situation where you knew some event was going to happen or an announcement was going to be made, but you didn't know when? Could be a pregnancy, where there's a due date but who knows how accurate it is. Or maybe it's retirement, but you don't know exactly when that will be...or maybe you're younger and you're thinking about a job change or whole career change, but when to make that change just isn't clear at all. Maybe you've got a grown child living at home...and you know they'll move out some day...you want them to...but you have no idea when. Sometimes we know something is eventually going to happen, but we just don't know when.

This morning, as we continue in 1 Thessalonians, we see the apostle Paul resuming the theme from last week about Jesus' return and what that means for us. And just like last week where we saw that his eventual return gives us hope and encouragement, we see that continued today as well. But he also writes more about the timing of Jesus' return. When will Jesus return? What's the date? Maybe you've wondered this. Well, the good news is that the apostle Paul gives us the answer in today's passage. So, let's turn to 1 Thessalonians 5. We'll read the first 3 verses to start with, and then read the rest of today's passage a bit later. This is God's word to you and me today **(Passage up now)**....

So, if you were expecting a date, you're probably disappointed; Paul's audience in Thessalonica wasn't, because they knew the answer already. **Paul says very clearly "about the times and dates we don't need to write you" (1 Thess. 5:1). Why? Because they knew the answer.** This is most likely because Paul and Timothy and Silas had talked about this when teaching these people about Jesus and their church began. And so, they know that the "day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Now, there are other parts of Scripture, including teachings from Jesus, that talk about things that will happen prior to Jesus' return. But even there, Jesus dissuades us from trying to guess the date, by giving a similar teaching to what Paul writes here.

For instance, in the Gospel of Luke at the end of a parable Jesus gives about the owner of a house whose house is broken into, we read, “But 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. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” In Matthew 24, where there is similar teaching, Jesus says, **“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Jesus, Matthew 24:39)**. In Jesus’ humanity as he walked the face of the earth, even he does not know the answer to “when will this be?”

So, Paul is simply reiterating this teaching, using the “thief in the night” language of Jesus. For many Christians, including us Presbyterians, this is the synopsis of what we believe about Jesus’ return: We believe that it will happen, but we don’t get into the prediction business. We expect the unexpected. It’s unexpected (as Jesus says in that Luke teaching I mentioned) in the sense that we don’t know when it will happen; but it’s expected because Jesus says it will happen at some point, and we would be wise to be prepared for that. And so by faith, we live expectantly, by putting our faith and trust in Him as he invites people to do.

So: In line with Jesus’ own teaching, Paul is reminding them, and now us, that we don’t know when Jesus will return, but we are to be ready. Not everyone will be ready. Some will be lounging in “peace and safety” as Paul writes in verse 3. In other words: they’re living without a care at all about eternity and Jesus return, believing all is well, they’re “good enough” and not really paying any attention to God, giving Jesus no heed...and Paul writes that “destruction will come on them suddenly.” Jesus says similar things. Some people are just not going to be ready for Jesus to return, whether it happens in their lifetime or after their death. Jesus, however, invites us to be ready by trusting in Him, because of his life, death, and resurrection...and his eventual return. Let’s continue reading the rest of today’s passage, picking up in **verse 4, and continuing through verse 11....**

The light and dark metaphor Paul then uses is one we see throughout Jesus’ teaching and other parts of the New Testament, even back into the Old

Testament actually. Jesus says that he is the light of the world (John 8:12), he tells his disciples to shine the light for the world to see so that others would glorify their father in heaven (Mt. 5:16), John the gospel writer writes in chapter one about Jesus being the light and how that light has come into a dark world, but the darkness has not overcome the light (John 1:5). And **Paul is saying here that those of us who are “children of the light” are not in darkness, and so Jesus’ coming should not be a surprise.** They, and we, expect it, and are ready for it, regardless of when it happens.

Those who don’t are in the darkness. They’re spiritually unaware and unprepared. He then uses a couple metaphors about things that tend to happen at night to describe those who are in darkness. And the metaphors are sleeping and drinking. He writes, **“For those who sleep, sleep at night and those who get drunk get drunk at night” (I Thess. 5:7).** The point he’s making with the metaphors is that when a person is in either of these two states, they’re not very aware of themselves or perhaps even their surroundings. Perhaps you have seen people, or maybe it’s been you, who had too much to drink who said and did things they regretted the next day; they weren’t very aware of what they were doing or saying.

And then there’s sleeping. You can ask my wife about her concerns sleeping next to me because if I have an active dream like I’m playing a sport, or I’m being chased by someone, I will start acting it out in my sleep sometimes. I have kicked her in my sleep. I have even gone head first out of bed, dreaming of being goalie in a soccer game diving for a ball. I played a lot of soccer as a kid, but never goalie...so I’m not sure what’s up with that. But as I slept, I was completely unaware of what I was doing until I woke up as I was falling out of bed, head first, catching myself with my hands on the floor. I’ve had several similar kinds things like that over the course of our marriage. And **Paul is saying that people who are in spiritual darkness are like this: They’re not even *aware* that they’re in the darkness.** They’re not alert to their spiritual condition – in part because they’ve built their sense of peace and safety with worldly things that have no eternal value. So, they’re in the dark and don’t even know it. Maybe that’s some of us here this morning. It’s not a word of judgment or condemnation. We’ve all been there, and occasionally as Christians we walk in the darkness because of sin. So, it’s

really an invitation to acknowledge your spiritual condition, and to turn to the light of Jesus Christ, and to live in and by that light.

Instead, Paul says that we who are in the light, are to be “awake and sober” (verse 6) meaning: spiritually awake and aware. “Sober” doesn’t refer to never having a drink, just as his admonition to be “awake” doesn’t mean “never sleep.” It’s metaphorical language where he’s encouraging us to be alert, alive, and awake spiritually. And that happens through faith in Jesus.

In verse 8 he talks about putting on faith as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, he gives a full picture using armor as a description of how we are to spiritually prepare ourselves to follow Jesus in this world that will constantly barrage us with messages and attacks against our faith. It’s in Ephesians 6 and is called the Armor of God. And so here, in 1 Thessalonians, he gives sort of an initial run at it. The general consensus is that 1 Thessalonians was Paul’s first letter he wrote to one of these churches. So, it’s like the armor of God is touched on here, and then more fully developed later in Ephesians. And it’s a spiritual protection and alertness that he’s calling them to. If you put on armor to go to battle, you want to be alert, and ready. So, it’s a call to alertness and readiness...to expect Jesus’ return, even if the exact time is unexpected...it’s not known.

And then, as Paul reiterates in verse 10, whether we are “awake or asleep” ...So, here the metaphor changes a bit. Now he means: whether we are living and breathing or whether we have breathed our last and passed on from this world...**Either way, if we walk in the light, we live together with Jesus (verse 10).** We experience Jesus here and now while living, and in the hereafter when we pass away. And so here, Paul is really completing his answer to the question the Thessalonians had that we looked at last week in the last third or so of chapter 4: that whether a person lives to see Jesus return or dies before, Jesus makes a way for us to be with him. And as we saw last week, he again tells them to encourage one another, and now he adds, “build each other up” (verse 11).

This building up is, perhaps at one level an emotional “building up” especially if we have had a loved one recently die, or maybe not even recently and it still impacts you emotionally. This might exactly be the emotional place of Thessalonians as they seem to be wondering about those who die “in the Lord” and their emotions might be down some as a result. In those times, we encourage and support one another and build one another up. And Jesus’ death, resurrection, and the promise of an eternity with him is certainly the foundation for our hope and helps us cope with losses. But first and foremost, it’s a spiritual building up. **This ‘built up faith’ is our foundation, and the framework for navigating life and all its ups and downs.** We build up our faith, and the faith of others (here in the church and elsewhere) through studying God’s Word on our own and with others, prayer, engaging with other believers in ministry, and through acts of service – whether that’s in the church community or out in the broader community. These things help us to stay expectant.

So, are you expecting the unexpected? Are you ready for Jesus’ return, for him to take you to be where he is, and to the place he’s preparing for you, as he puts in in John 14? The good news is that he has done all the hard work. He went to the cross. He paid the price for our sin – justice has been served, the penalty is paid. And he’s done this because of his incredible love for you and me. He stepped down from eternity (that’s what we celebrate at Christmas), lived, died and rose again...all because of his love. And because of that same love, he will come to take you to be with him. I don’t know when that will happen. Might be today, might be far off in the future beyond our lifetimes. But let’s expect it, and live by faith in Jesus, leading each other and building each other up in faith along the way. Let’s pray...Amen.