

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

The Sojourner's Guide Toward Home

Destination: Our Christian Hope, II: 'The Day of the Lord' (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)

Take a first look.

I. WHAT KEEPS us from giving up?

The Toronto Sun reported, "A wildfire erupted on September 1, 2002, in the Angeles National Forest—a park in the San Gabriel Mountains of California. Sigrid Hopson, age 60, was alone in her home with her three dogs when she noticed walls of blazing fire roaring toward her house. She called for help. Two deputies, Paul Archambault and John Rose (who both knew Hopson), drove their Ford Expedition through walls of flames to save her. Dodging rockslides on remote mountain roads, they had to stop about 200 meters from the home because the fire was too fierce. Just as Rose ran to the house a gunshot rang out. When he got closer, he saw Hopson holding a gun to her head and a dead dog lying at her feet. The woman was about to shoot herself to avoid being burned to death.

"The deputy yelled, 'Don't shoot! It's Rose.'

"He ordered Hopson to drop the gun, but she said she had to shoot the dogs. Meanwhile walls of flames were roaring toward the vehicle and her house. Rose grabbed the gun, got her in the vehicle, and they drove away. The vehicle drove down the narrow pass, through walls of flaming chaparral. On the way, two tires melted, but they kept driving. The engine seized because of the excessive heat, and the vehicle stopped. But they were below the fire line and were able to walk out to safety."¹

II. PERHAPS WE haven't faced such imminent danger in the same way that Sigrid Hopson did, but we may have been tempted to lose hope. Is this not why people decide to plan their own exit from this life? I have heard despair defined like this. *Despair is the condition you are in when you can't remember the last time you had hope.*

III. BUT THANKS BE TO GOD, because of the work of Jesus Christ, there is always hope. We must say from a Christian view of the world and of humanity, *without Christ there is truly no hope.* But with Him, we have every reason to risk all for the sake of those who are almost to perish in the flames. Paul speaks of this hope in his letter to the Thessalonians. Let's take up his words of encouragement in chapter 5.

Take a closer look at 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

I. THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL SURPRISE MANY WHO ARE NOT READY. Vv. 1-3

1. Paul assumed that the Thessalonians did not need to be instructed as to the "times and dates" regarding the Day of the Lord. These are two interesting words, the two words in the Greek New Testament for "time." The first one, *chronos*, is the word for time measured by the clock. The second one, *kairos*, translated "dates" or "seasons," has more to do with a significant moment or period of time, sometimes translated as "time," "moment," or "opportunity." In Ephesians 5:16, Paul writes that Christians should be "redeeming the *time* because the days are evil." This translates *kairos*. The NIV translates that passage, "making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil." Here in the passage before us, Paul uses both of these words. Paul said, "Concerning the times (*chronon*) and the dates (*kairon*) I do not have need to write to you." The reason was, they already knew that the Day of the Lord would "come like a thief in the night." Apparently, they had enough knowledge to be prepared. I presume that Paul had already instructed them about these matters, but he reminded them again of some of the highlights of that teaching here.

¹ Toronto Sun (9-04-02), from PreachingToday.com.

2. Paul observed that some people would not be ready, people who would be saying “peace and safety,” not realizing that the End was near. There is something of a predicting factor given here. People will be saying “peace and safety” whenever the end comes. This contrasts with the usual “war and danger” that has been common to the world at most times and places. This is where the human perspective and the perspective of God are in such contrast. When humanity thinks it is the safest, it will be the ripest for the coming of the Day of the Lord.

3. Paul drew two analogies to the coming of the Day of the Lord:

a. He said it would come “like a thief in the night.” This emphasizes that the coming of the Day of the Lord will be ...

(1) Sudden. The thief doesn’t send someone ahead to knock on the door at the house he plans to rob and say, “Hey, the thief will be along at about midnight tonight. He just wanted you to know. If you could be sound asleep when he comes that would make it easier for him. Have a nice night.” In contrast, the thief plans his caper to strike suddenly, without giving any time to prepare.

(2) [It will also be] unexpected. Again, the thief doesn’t announce his arrival at all. He succeeds in his mission only because he is *not* expected. In the same way, the Lord’s return will come at a time that people think everything is all right, when they think that they are secure in themselves, when they think they don’t need God to disentangle the world any longer.

The Day of the Lord will come “like a thief in the night,” *suddenly and unexpectedly*, without warning and without any more time to make preparation.

b. Secondly, the coming of the Day of the Lord is “like labor pains upon a woman.” This emphasizes that the coming of the Day of the Lord will be ...

(3) Irreversible or inescapable. Labor pains mean only one thing: the baby is coming soon. This analogy differs from that of the “thief in the night” in that labor pains can be predicted with some accuracy. You know that they are going to hit, because you know that the woman is pregnant and coming to full term. Such an analogy teaches us to develop an expectation that the world is becoming ever closer to its “full term” when the Day of the Lord will come. Once those labor pains strike, there is no going back.

Insight: How about us? Are we going about our lives not realizing that at any time the events that portend the End of this age could fall upon the world?

I—I think our children understand the times better than we do sometimes. John McFayden, a dad living in Woodbridge, Virginia, sent this little bit of family life into *The Christian Reader*: “We decided to let our three-year-old son record the message for our home answering machine. The rehearsals went smoothly: ‘Mommy and Daddy can’t come to the phone right now. If you’ll leave your name, phone number, and a brief message, they’ll get back to you as soon as possible.’

“Then came the test. I pressed the record button and our son said sweetly, ‘Mommy and Daddy can’t come to the phone right now. If you’ll leave your name, phone number, and a brief message, they’ll get back to you as soon as Jesus comes.’”²

Maybe this little boy gets it more than they think! Had he observed them dragging their feet in calling people back, or in complaining about the number of calls they had to return? We aren’t told.

But we do know this. If we wait until Jesus comes, it will be too late. When the Day of the Lord arrives, there will be no more time left for preparation. The time to prepare is now.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (NIV): “¹ As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. ² For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ {Isaiah 49:8}

² John G. McFayden, Woodbridge, Virginia. *Christian Reader*, “Kids of the Kingdom.”

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

If you have not put your trust in Jesus Christ, what are you waiting for? For the Day of the Lord to come? That Day is a day of reckoning, not a day of preparation. This day is the day of preparation.

II. THE DAY OF THE LORD SHOULD CHALLENGE CHRISTIAN COMPLACENCY OR SLACKNESS. Vv. 4-8

1. Paul says that Christians "belong to the day," not to the darkness. Vv. 4-5. He says, "You, however, brothers, are not in darkness, so that the day should overtake you as a thief." The force of this saying is this: "As followers of the Lord Himself, you don't live in the realm of the night and so the 'thief in the night' should not suddenly and unexpectedly come upon you."

2. Because of this, Christians should develop the kind of character appropriate to those who are "sons of light and sons of the day." This would include the following (vv. 6-8):

a. Alertness (in contrast to "those who sleep"). This clearly contrasts with the statement, "Those who sleep, sleep at night." He says, "Let us not be like others, who are asleep." We should be alert, wide-awake to what really matters and what is really happening in our culture.

b. This also calls for Self-control (in contrast to "those who get drunk"). The person who is drunk is not in control of his/her own faculties and is worthless both to himself/herself and to others. The person who is self-controlled, on the other hand, is able to put his/her full self at the disposal of the Lord.

c. This calls for Faith. Paul says that the followers of Christ should be putting on "faith and love like a breastplate." When writing to the Ephesian Christians, Paul changes the image slightly, calling for them to "take up the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). Here, he calls it part of the breastplate. In each case, faith is part of our defensive armor in the war for the soul.

Faith is the God-given ability to trust God even when our emotions betray us, to keep flying straight and true when we feel like we are upside down, staying the course because our instrument panel tells us that we are in reality right-side up. Faith in this sense is the ability to keep doing what is right even when we are tempted to give in to cultural and spiritual vertigo. The temporary world around us seems so permanent, even while it changes before our eyes with every season. We can easily mistake this present world for the real one. It is not.

d. Love is the other facet of the "breastplate." We defend against spiritual attack by developing love for God and for each other.

It is most interesting to me that when Jesus prayed for His disciples, one of His chief requests was that we all would be united in love to such a degree that our unity would be just like the unity between the Father and the Son in the nature of God. Do we love each other like that? Not often and not usually to that degree. That makes His prayer all the more amazing and compelling (see John 17).

e. Hope ("the hope of salvation like a helmet"). This completes again what we have observed already, the trilogy of theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Hope is what protects our minds from giving in to despair. It is our "helmet." Satan will surely attack our sense of well-being. He will cast doubts on our readiness for the Day of the Lord. He will try to shake us away from our confident expectation in the coming of our Lord Jesus. Hope is a decisive response of mind to the promises God has made regarding the future. It has no element of uncertainty to it.

Insight: As those who have such a great hope for the future, we must develop the quality of living that matches our destiny.

—**Dr. George Sweeting, [while] President of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, [told] of the day he noticed an unusual combination of bumper stickers on the car of a man who was visiting the school. The coincidental message conveyed by the two stickers prompted Dr. Sweeting to suggest to the**

unsuspecting visitor that he might want to remove one of them. One read: JESUS IS COMING! and the other: ESCAPE TO WISCONSIN.”³

Our great hope does not give us an escapist spirit at all (and we wouldn't be safe in Wisconsin from the Day of the Lord, anyway!). Rather, our great hope compels us to become even more engaged in life than ever before. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, **Romans 13:11-14**: ¹¹ *And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* ¹² *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.* ¹³ *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.* ¹⁴ *Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature”* (NIV).

Having such a destiny, we are even more compelled to keep ourselves holy before the Lord, to be alert and self-controlled, to keep trusting the Lord and loving each other like never before. We will stand before the Lord of all the cosmos on that great Day and give an account of ourselves.

III. THE DAY OF THE LORD PROMISES GREAT BLESSING FOR THOSE WHO ARE PREPARED FOR IT. Vv. 9-11

1. Paul asserts that Christians are not destined to “suffer wrath” but rather to “receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Note that vv. 9-10 are not separate sentences in the Greek New Testament. I have made distinct emphases in these sub-points, but they cannot be separated. Those who have come to follow Christ are not destined to “suffer wrath,” God’s justice expressed to those who have hardened their hearts against His love and grace, but rather to “receive salvation.” The word translated “receive” can either mean “preserve” or “obtain.” Our friend (in heaven) and guide (through his writings) to the Greek New Testament, A. T. Robertson suggests it is the latter. We are destined to obtain salvation in its fullest and final sense on the Day of the Lord.

For those who have refused to become ready, they will “suffer wrath.” Without justification by faith there is only justice. But for those who have humbly responded in faith to the first coming of Jesus Christ, the Day of the Lord holds no fear, only the promise of complete fulfillment.

2. Paul reminds his readers that because “Christ died for us” Christians will “live together with Him.” This again is the heart of the matter of our Christian hope. Death is not the end. The Day of the Lord is not to be feared. Because we have entered into the power of the death of Christ, we are assured of entering into the power of the life of Christ, as well. As He Himself said to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion, “*Because I live, you also will live*” (John 14:19, NIV).

3. And so he calls all Christians to be those who “encourage each other and build each other up.” This is the only logical course of action based on our shared hope in Christ.

Insight: As “children of the day” we have every reason for hope today, and so we should be known as the most encouraging and up-building people in the world.

!—“At the 2002 Winter Olympics American Apolo Ohno hoped to win his second gold medal in the men’s 5,000- meter short track speed-skating relay. During one of the turns, an American skater fell but quickly got back into the race. While the fall and recovery only took a few seconds, it essentially put the American team out of the race. What was interesting was that the American team began to skate slower and slower, eventually being lapped by the gold-medal Canadians.

“Why did they slow down? The hope of doing well was gone.”⁴

Here is the contrast between those who know the Lord and those who don't. If you have no hope for eternity, why even hold out until death? Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher and novelist, concluded that the only real question, given his conclusions about the emptiness of life and the finality of death is this: are you going to commit suicide yourself or just wait for the inevitable darkness to descend on

³ Dr. George Sweeting, President of Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, IL. Christian Reader, “Lite Fare.”

⁴ Paul Richardson, Half Moon Bay, California, from PreachingToday.com.

its own? The issue for the American team in the Olympics was similar. Why race your hardest with no hope of winning? Why skate your best when your best will never be good enough?

The contrast cannot be more distinct. When we know how it will all end, when we know that victory is sure, we can race our best because we already know what the outcome will be. We win! Now, of course it is really Christ Who wins. But when we are united with Him in the spiritual union of grace-and-faith, His victory becomes our victory.

—John Donne put this well (Holy Sonnets, #10):

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but they pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Take it home (applications).

I. OUR VICTORY over sin and death is found in the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. We no longer have to live in fear of what may come. We know what will come: "Because I live, you also will live."

II. AS THOSE who have such a destiny, we are compelled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit to live fully in His grace and power.

1. We must cultivate our faith.
2. We must express His love to each other and to those outside the Church who need His grace and truth.
3. We must express our hope in Christ through our encouragement to each other and through our witness to those who think death is the end of the human experience.
4. We must cultivate a holy life, putting aside all practices that are out of step with His Spirit and allowing Him to fill, lead, and empower our daily living. We must live in the fullness of His light and life.