**Like A Thief In The Night**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

Last Sunday of Church Year

11.22.2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Once again, we have come to the end of the Church Year. One more time God has given us the grace to remember together that this world is not all that there is, and the last day, the end, is coming. Life in our world today is tumultuous, and with the increased number of those who are testing positive for COVID, and people keep talking about the fact that the end must be soon.

But that day is described as coming **like a thief in the night** because it is not going to be generally expected by the world around us when it comes, it is not bringing good things to all. In fact, for most people – yes, you heard me correctly – for most people that day is a day of horror and sorrow and damnation. Those eternally lost will suffer the public humiliation of being called out before all of mankind as one of those who foolishly refused the goodness, mercy, grace, and love of God.

That day is going to come when the world least expects it. Scripture declares that when the world and even some of those posing as part of the Church, are convinced that nothing is ever going to happen, and that the end, long-promised in Scripture, is not going to come – that is when it will happen. It is going to catch them all off-guard. They will be like the pregnant woman who set out shopping or going to work in the morning and is suddenly disabled by the onset of labor. There will be no warning, no time to prepare, no last-minute getting ready. They will be caught flat-footed and red-handed in their sin and unbelief.

Paul writes, **"But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day."** Paul is proclaiming that believers, you, on the other hand, should never be caught off-guard. You know that day is coming. And if you haven't wrapped your mind around that thought yet, get wrapping! The end is coming and it is coming soon. The difference between you and the world around you is like day and night – literally. You are of the day and in the light of the Lord and His Word. The world is of the night and in darkness. The day of the Lord should not catch us unprepared, or surprise us in sin and unbelief. We know that the end is near.

You know the grace of God in Jesus Christ. You know that He died for you. You have heard and believe what a terrible thing sin is, and how great a price was paid for your salvation! The price is the cross. You look at it every week in the chancel, on our altar, maybe even in the jewelry you wear. Each week you hear what Jesus did on your behalf and hear how He has cleansed you of sin, how He bestows forgiveness. You eat of His very body pierced for you and drink His precious blood, shed for you in death. You do so as Jesus commanded, in remembrance of him. You walk in the light of God's grace and love day by day.

You are to keep that truth uppermost in your mind day to day, not just on Sundays. God clearly states through Paul’s pen that we cannot honestly believe all that He has revealed to us and still be caught off-guard, unprepared, and self-deceived.

**"For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night."** Either you are wide awake, alert and prepared, expecting Jesus to return, or you are either unconscious or purposefully out of contact with the realities that God has pressed on your attention with so many warnings and exhortations. **"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."** You are the people of the day and of the light - not lost in the darkness of the world around us.

There must be a difference in how you handle life and the expectation of the coming of the end, and how you handle yourselves in that expectation. We are not to be numbered with those who sleep, as though we do not know which day is coming. Sleep, here, means to act as though unaware of the great spiritual realities confronting us. We cannot behave as though we have all the time in the world and no urgency about what we do. Yes, we actually do have all the time in the world, but the world is simply running out of time. There are many who need to know of Jesus, and we need to prepare ourselves as well. We need to be alert and sober.

In part this means we need to be honest about our sins, confess them, repent of them and hear and believe the gospel of our forgiveness and salvation. We also face terrible dangers, but not the kind everyone around us faces. We face discrimination and persecution for the faith we confess. And God promises it will only grow more severe as time passes. We face strong temptations to doubt. We face temptations to lusts and pleasures. We face temptations to fear. And we face death – it has touched our family of faith a few times in the past couple weeks.

These are not pretend terrors and dangers. They are effective and powerful. They are the tools of the enemy - the devil who **prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.** All too often, Christians are deceived by what they perceive to be God delaying His return. We have each seen friends, and sometimes members of our own families, seduced by this problem of perception and led to walk away from the faith. But the end is coming and it is coming soon!

Those who fall asleep, as regards the faith, are distracted by the pressures of life. They slowly find themselves weaned of the habit of regular worship - weaned away by many pursuits; traveling, sporting events, hunting, fishing, and even family get in the way. Occasionally missing worship may seem inconsequential, but when we allow ourselves to be persuaded that it is not a big deal, or that our gathering for worship does not matter at all. Some have already slipped away. It starts by irregular attendance, perhaps missing once a month. That becomes attending once a month, then once every couple of months, and then it seems to be too much trouble and takes too much time to stop and worship at all.

That is the sleep into which so many are lulled. Loss of urgency is the drink which intoxicates so many. It blinds reason and dulls the senses until those who have become drunk with it cannot tell that they have stopped believing. They do not feel the big emptiness inside until it is too late. Like the drunk who thinks he is sober and could fool anyone, and yet everyone else can see that he is unsteady, sometimes we become so sure that we know all that we need, and we do not need absolution, sermon, sacrament, or Bible Study. Many anoint themselves priest and expert, they can believe what they want to. This is to ensure that our personal religion does not get in our way of our life or accuse us of sin.

There are entire church bodies which have already followed that path!

But the time for such silliness and unconsciousness is at night, in the dark - that is to say, those are the thoughts and the errors of the world. We are of the day. We know our need, we know the danger, we know our weakness, and we know where we find our strength and comfort. We understand that all we possess in Christ is the gift of God through His Word, through the hearing of His Word. We need that comfort, even when we are not aware of our need. We need that strength, even when we do not feel our weakness. We need the Word!

And we need the heavenly food which God sets before us in this Holy Supper! This is not some ordinary bread and wine, this is the very body and blood of Jesus Christ, once given and shed on the cross for us. Now it is offered to us by Christ Himself, from the hands of His called servant. It is a heavenly mystery which delivers all that Christ won for us by giving His body and shedding His blood.

True, we cannot see all of that or taste it, but we are not so **sleepy or intoxicated** that we cannot believe that God does what He promises. Here is forgiveness, life, and salvation! This holy food does not merely nourish the tissues of our body, it feeds and strengthens our soul and comforts us in times of distress and temptation. And **since we are of the day, and not of the night, we need to be alert and sober.**

Paul also speaks of **the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation.** Our armor is faith in God, love for one another, and the confident expectation that when this life is done, life isn't over, rather, death is defeated. Our faith is the very thing that the world around us calls superstition, and foolishness, and wishful thinking. This is the armor against the pessimism of this age, the hopelessness that settles upon so many in face of COVID and the situations in our world. No matter what is happening around us, even in our own lives, we know that we are loved by God. His will for us is eternal. We can trust God - and faith always does. Knowing God does not decrease your pain or limit your frustrations, it is not intended to do so. Jesus even promises that the pains and frustrations may increase. Satan wants you to doubt, wants you to despair, wants you to give in to hopelessness.

**Faith** gives us the answer. Trust in God is powerful stuff. **God's strength is perfected in our weakness.** His power shines through our troubles when we give up on ourselves and trust Him instead. His Word carries remarkable power! It doesn't magically make troubles go away, but, through His Word, God strengthens us to be equal to the obstacles, challenges, and dangers that we confront. He may even use them for His glorious purposes. Eventually the troubles of life will end, God will take them away, or He will take us away out of all of them. But while we struggle, He is there to strengthen us, protects us, and bring us through. So our hope is in Him.

God also gives us one another – He has given us to each other – to encourage and comfort one another; to hold our hands in times when we need that, and to help us bear the load. We work for one another. We feed one another. We drive one another places. We sympathize, and weep with each other. We rejoice together and confess the faith with one another. We do it out of love - not obligation. You hear this in the last verse of our text, **Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.**

While we stand protected by faith and encouraged by our love for one another, we wear the helmet of the hope of salvation: **For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.**

On this last Sunday of the church year, we consider the end of the world. Yes, It is a somber and serious topic. But it is not a cause for fear for the Christian. God is with us every step of the way, and we know that the end of the world is not the end. End of this present world, yes, but not for us. God has destined us for eternal salvation! Whether we live, which Paul refers to here as **"awake"**, or we have passed on, which Paul calls **"sleep", we are with the Lord**, and our hope is sure that we will live forever. For the Christian, the end of this life and the end of this world are, like the end of the church year, part of God’s plan. They are a cause for remembering God's faithfulness and love, and encouraging one another to hold fast and be faithful and never lose hope.

We know that it is not death to die - and while we live, we have God's help, comfort and strength. And so we prepare. We live as His holy people and we encourage one another. We share the good news of Jesus and of forgiveness and of salvation. We don't hide, and we don't run, and we don't try to blind ourselves with the intoxications of this world. **For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. 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. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.** Amen.