

THE GOOD THIEF

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

November 15, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. It's a continuation of last week's lesson. If you read the end of chapter four and this first part of chapter five, you will see that the two passages very much go hand in hand. They're addressing the same event. But Paul divides them into two sections. In the section we read last week, his sole concern is to comfort the living with the gracious truth that the dead in Christ are not dead forever. He calls death "sleep," because at Christ's return, he will wake them from death. Now in this section he goes on to talk about the judgement that will also come on that day. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Thessalonians 5, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

"The day is surely drawing near,
When He, the Lord's Anointed,
Will with great majesty appear,
As Judge of all appointed." (*Ambassador Hymnal*, #158)

This will be a marvelous and also dreadful day. But we should not be surprised when it comes. Our Lord Jesus has told us that he is coming again. He has not told us when, but he has promised that he is coming. So we should not be surprised when it does finally happen.

For us who are waiting for it, it will be the most marvelous day ever. We will see our Lord Jesus face-to-face. He will raise the dead. He will transform all of his believing saints into his perfect image. He will judge us to be faithful. And he will welcome us into his joy, the new creation. In that new creation, we will "live ... and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (*Small Catechism*, p. 10) forever and ever. The day of Christ's return will be the best day yet. So we should live in constant expectation of it.

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When you live in expectation of something, it never surprises you. When you're excited about something, it doesn't catch you off guard. If we lose interest in the kingdom of God and start to love the things of the world instead, it may surprise us. But if the coming of Christ is our greatest hope, that day will not catch us off guard.

It's kind of like a small child waiting for their birthday. And I realize that a lot of my illustrations have to do with small children. Maybe that's partly because I have small children at home, but mostly because God reveals himself as Father to us. The primary way Scripture speaks of God's relationship to us is as father and child. And I tend to think of that toddler age as being the sweet spot for thinking about it. It's that stage where a child is starting to understand the world, but they're still so small that they're totally dependent on mom and dad. That's kind of the stage we find ourselves in before God. Even as adults, we are little children, totally dependent on our heavenly Father's care.

So our anticipation of Christ's return is kind of like a two-year-old waiting for his birthday. He's mature enough to know that he has a birthday, but he doesn't really understand how far March is from November. He can't count months and weeks yet. So it's like he knows it's coming, but he doesn't know when. So every day he asks, "Is it my birthday?" And every day the answer is, "Not yet." But someday the answer will be, "Yes." And since he lives in such anticipation of this day, it's not going to surprise him. He won't say, "Oh, no! I forgot! I'm not ready!" He will be ready.

That's how it should be for each of us as we await the return of Christ. We don't know when it will be. Over and over again, every day we've experienced so far, the answer is, "Not yet." But we don't believe that pattern to be eternal. We know it's coming. So the anticipation remains. And someday, the answer will be, "Yes." Since we believe this will be the best day yet, we live in anticipation, and it will not surprise us. It's easy to see how it might surprise some people, because it will be the first day ever that the pattern of night and day will be broken. But since we live in expectation of it, it will not surprise us. We will say, "Of course it's the day of Christ's return, he promised he would come, and here he is."

To some that day will come like a thief in the night. "While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them" (5:3). I find this description a little surprising. It might not be what we expected Paul to say. We generally think of the state of affairs in the world as going from bad to worse right before the return of Christ. In Matthew 24 the disciples ask Jesus what the signs of his Second Coming will be. And Jesus tells them of famines and earthquakes. The *Revelation of Jesus Christ*—remember, that's the real title of the book of Revelation—is filled with disaster and destruction before the return of Christ. But then there are other passages, like this one, where there is peace and security. And there's no warning at all before the return of Christ. It comes as sudden destruction.

It's very similar to the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Zephaniah. Zephaniah also talks about the Day of the Lord as a great surprise to those who aren't looking for it. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (Zeph. 1:1). Josiah was a good king. Actually, he was a very good king. He led the entire nation in repentance. So God granted peace to Judah during Josiah's reign. But there were, of course, still unbelievers in Judah. So God says, "I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill'" (1:12). This is what we could call "practical atheism." They were complacent. They didn't openly deny God. They probably even confessed the faith. But in their hearts they didn't expect God to do anything either good or bad. They lived and acted as if God doesn't exist.

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That's practical atheism. To them, destruction will come suddenly. "While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them."

So what do we make of Jesus saying there will be signs of destruction? What do we make of all the disasters in Revelation? Christians have been observing the signs of the end since the very beginning. Immediately after Jesus' ascension into heaven, persecution began. There have always been wars and rumors of wars (Matt. 24:6). And there will be until the end. There have always been famines and earthquakes (Matt. 24:7). And they will continue until the end. These tribulations remind us that the world is not the way it is supposed to be. There is sin and death all around. These are always signs to Christians that there must be an end, because God is good, and he will not allow evil to continue forever. There must be an end to it. The purpose of the signs is not to gauge how close we are to the end. They don't tell us when we're eighty percent of the way there. They don't tell us that we have fifty years left, or seven, or three and a half. That's not the point of the signs. Jesus specifically tells us that no one knows the day or the hour (Matt. 24:36). We can't use the signs as a checklist to gauge how close we are. The signs simply reveal to us, and remind us, that the end must be coming, because God will not permit evil forever.

So for Christians, tribulations and disasters have an ironic kind of encouragement to them. They remind us to lift up our heads (Luke 21:28), because Christ is coming. But unbelievers don't get this kind of encouragement from disasters, so they just kind of forget about them and move on. They try to get back to peace and security. We see this over and over again in the world. When something tragic happens, people get agitated ... for a time. But nobody can live that way forever, so when things start to settle down again they find their way back to peace and security. The scream becomes a yawn. And they spend most of their time in peace and security, thinking, *We don't really need a god to save us from anything.* But someday—we don't know when—but someday, "While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them."

But we, as God's children, are not to trust the world's temporary peace and security. We don't have to, because we have the sure and certain hope of perfect peace. The tribulations of this world cannot shake that peace. So whether there is calamity or peace and security, we live in constant anticipation of that day.

Paul uses four rapid-fire metaphors to illustrate our anticipation: light and day, keeping awake and being sober. In contrast to these four metaphors are night and darkness, sleep and drunkenness. We are children of light (5:5). God is light (1 John 1:5). So we live our lives, at all times, in his light. This, of course, is a metaphor, so it doesn't mean we have to keep the lights on in our homes and stay awake 24/7. It also doesn't mean that if we are literally sleeping, or even drunk, when Jesus returns, that we will miss it. Sleeping is not a sin. And while drunkenness is a sin, that's not really Paul's concern here. They're metaphors. When you're sleeping or drunk, you're not ready for anything.

You might remember from last week that "sleep" is one of the Bible's sweet names for death. Christians don't die, at least not in the same way that unbelievers die, and not in the same way Jesus died. Since Jesus has died for us and rose again, we merely fall asleep in him. Our souls live with Christ eternally, and our bodies sleep in their graves until the resurrection at Christ's return. So sleep is a blessed way that we have been given to understand the death of Christians. And Paul will come back to using the term "sleep" in this way, but here he uses it negatively, as a metaphor for not being ready for Christ's return.

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To be awake means to live in anticipation for Christ's return. And it means faithfulness while we wait for his return.

This is what Jesus taught us in the gospel lesson, the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). At first glance it seems like Jesus is a harsh and demanding master, but it's really a very gracious parable. Jesus compares himself to a master who went on a long journey. Before leaving he distributed a large sum of money among three servants. To one servant he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to the third one talent. A talent, by the way, was a weight measurement of money. One talent was worth about twenty years' wages. So they all received quite a large sum. The talents represent our lives—everything God has given us. This does include our finances, but also our bodies, our abilities, our relationships, and everything we have.

The first two servants put the money to work and doubled it, while the third servant, out of fear for the master, just dug a hole in the ground and buried it. When the master returned, he called each of them to settle accounts. And here's the surprise of the parable that reveals just how gracious the master is: He does not ask for any of the money back. The first two servants say, "Here, I have made five" or "two talents more" (25:20, 22). The word "here" is actually a little misleading. It makes it sound like the servants are giving the money back, but they're not. A more literal translation is, "*Look!* I have made five" or "two talents more." They don't actually offer it back, and the master doesn't ask for it. We see this proven at the end of the parable when the master takes the one talent from the wicked servant and gives it to the first servant who still has all ten of his talents. The money wasn't an investment—not in the sense that the master expected it back. It was a gift. And this is the difference between the two faithful servants and the wicked servant. The two faithful servants understood it to be a gift from the very start, so it was a joy to put the money to work. But the third servant didn't understand this. To him, it was a burden. He saw it as a test, and he didn't want to fail, so he just buried it in the ground. Then, when the master returned, this third servant did offer it back. He said, "Here, you have what is yours." The first two servants didn't do that. They recognized it as a gift, and no one is afraid of a gift. The third saw it as a test, and everyone is afraid of tests, especially big, life-changing tests. The first two rightly understood their master to be gracious, and they enjoyed that grace from start to finish. The third servant wrongly believed the master to be harsh, and according to his faith—or lack thereof—he received wrath instead of grace.

Your life is not a test, and God is not a harsh master. Your life is a gift from him. This is the key to faithfulness in the Christian life: to recognize everything as his gift. Then it becomes a joy to offer fruitful obedience. This is how we stay awake and live in anticipation for Christ's return.

"The day is surely drawing near." And we are not to be surprised when it comes. We are not to be caught off guard. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, has told us that he is coming again. We have confidence in this because he has risen from the dead, and has ascended into heaven. And we have confidence that when he comes, he will judge us to be righteous and faithful. This is not because of our own performance, but because of his sacrifice for us. His righteousness is given to you as a gift. This is yours through faith. So when he comes, he will find you in that righteousness. He will say, "**Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your master**" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

That day will be our deliverance. For the unbelieving, it will catch them off guard like a thief in the night. It will mean sudden destruction. But for us, for the believing, it will mean salvation. On that day our faith will become sight. We will see our Savior face-to-face, and we will share in

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his glory. All of our suffering for Christ's sake will be worth it. Our faith will be vindicated. And we will experience the joy of God's new creation in perfect righteousness forever and ever. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, "**Surely I am coming soon.**" Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)