

People of the Day
Mark Heath, 9th December 2005

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 labour 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.

1 Thess 5:1-11 (ESV)

What You Need To Know (v1-5)

Have you ever asked a question, only to be told “that's on a need to know basis”? It's quite a frustrating answer to receive. Essentially we are only being told what we need to know in order that we might do what we need to do. All the interesting details that we might want to be filled in are denied to us. We simply have to trust the person who gave us the task that they know best, and that we have all the information required.

Paul has been discussing the subject of the second coming with the Thessalonians at the end of the previous chapter, and has been basing what he says on the teaching of Jesus (see 1 Thess 4:15). The Thessalonians, like many of us, would like to know a whole lot more about the details of the second coming and what it would be like. They didn't even have the book of Revelation to read at this point.

But in verse 1, Paul assures them that they are not in need of extra information. They may wish to know exactly when the second coming would take place. But they don't need to know it. What they need is first a reminder of what they have already been told, and who they are. And finally they need a reminder of what they ought to be doing.

Remember what you have been told (v2,3)

So first, in verse 2, we are reminded that Jesus himself has said that he will come like “a thief in the night” (Matt 24:43). You don't get a letter from a thief telling you when he will come. You need to be on your guard at all times or you will be in for a nasty shock.

In fact, there will be people living in complacency at the time of the second coming, imagining there is “peace and safety” (v3). Again this is something that Jesus had warned about, in the parable of the virgins (Matt 25:5), where they fall asleep and are unready for the return of the bridegroom. Peter also speaks of this when he prophesies that in the last days people will start to doubt that there will even be a second coming (2 Pet 3:4).

This day will not be a pleasant one for those who are living in complacency. It is described here as a day of *destruction*, bringing to mind some of the Old Testament prophecies about the “day of the Lord” (Isa 13:6; Jer 46:10; Ezek 30:3; Joel 1:15). All the futile things that people have built their lives upon will disappear in an instant. Drawing on Jesus' imagery of a woman in labour (Matt 24:8), Paul emphasises that once it has begun, the final result is inescapable. There is an urgency about accepting the salvation of Jesus now. Because once the final trumpet sounds, it is too late to turn around.

Remember who you are (v4,5)

Though the day will come suddenly and unexpectedly, it should not be the shock for Christians that it will be for unbelievers. We have been warned of some of the signs that must precede the second coming, and though we may not be completely sure of which of them exactly have been fulfilled, we can at least be on our guard, knowing that the time is near.

Also, we should remember that we are people who are not in darkness (v4). The light of God's truth has shone upon us. We know what the future holds, even if we don't know all the details. What's more, we know what sort of lives we ought to be living. This means that when Jesus returns, we don't need to be ashamed because he finds us living sinfully, but can gladly welcome him as our Lord and Saviour (1 John 2:28).

What You Need To Do (6-11)

So we have not been told anything new here about the second coming. But we have been told enough to get on doing what we are supposed to be doing.

Keep Awake (v6-7)

Paul has just reminded us that we are people of the light, not people who still live in darkness. If this is so, we should behave like people of the daytime, not people of the night-time. In other words, we should not be living our lives in the same way that unbelievers are doing. They don't know what is coming, but we do. We ought to be living differently.

We are given two contrasts here to help us understand what it means to be people of the daytime. First, night-time is for sleeping, but the day is for being awake. In Mark 13:34-36, Jesus tells a story about a man going on a journey and asking his doorkeeper to stay awake to let him back in. Because the doorkeeper doesn't know what time the man will return, he had better stay awake the whole time. Being awake speaks of being morally and spiritually alert. We are not to neglect the disciplines of living in obedience to God's word, cultivating a close relationship with him, and working to advance his kingdom. These are the tasks that we have been left with, and we do not want to be caught sleeping on the job.

Second, night-time is the time when people get drunk. Those who are drunk lose self-control and are liable to do foolish things they will be ashamed of once they are sober. Christians must therefore be especially vigilant not to get ourselves into situations where we are tempted to compromise and fall into patterns of sinful behaviour. There is a need for discipline in the Christian life, if we are to avoid behaving as people of darkness.

Wear Your Armour (v8)

The commands to keep awake and self-controlled at all times seems a hard one. How are we to ensure that we don't let our guard drop even for one moment? We know that there is a real enemy, the devil, who desires to trip us up at every opportunity.

Thankfully we have not been left to fend for ourselves. We have the armour of God to protect us. Although there are more items listed in Eph 6, just two pieces of armour are mentioned here – the helmet and the breastplate. These pieces of armour guard our hearts and our minds (see Phil 4:7). If we are to remain spiritually alert throughout our lives, then we need to keep close watch over our hearts (what we set our affections on), and our minds (what we let ourselves think about).

Paul says that the helmet and breastplate represent faith, love and the hope of salvation. We have already encountered the trio of faith, hope and love once before in this letter. Right at the beginning in 1 Thess 1:3, Paul observes that it is faith, hope and love that are at the heart of the hard work and steadfast endurance of the Thessalonians. It is faith in God, love for God, and hope in the future salvation that the second coming will bring that are enough to enable anyone to keep

going through the most severe of trials.

Encourage One Another (v9-11)

Not only do we have the armour of God to protect us, but we have one another to encourage us. As Christians we are not to be trying to survive on our own until the end, but working together. We need to encourage one another with the wonder of our salvation (v9). We can enjoy confidence about the second coming knowing that Jesus comes to rescue us from the punishment that God will exercise on those who have angered him with their sinful rebellion. We ought to remind one another regularly of what God has done for us.

This is why it is important for Christians to regularly meet together. One of the primary purposes of our gatherings is to build one another up (1 Cor 14:26). We must all go through times of trial and difficulty during our lives, and the church should be the place where believers can find the love, encouragement, wisdom, support and prayer to help them to persevere and overcome.

Conclusion

We have been told what we need to know and what we ought to be doing. Let us take hold of all the benefits that God has given us to help us endure through difficulties and trials. He has given us his Spirit and his Word, and has placed us in a family of believers. With the armour he provides we will be able to stand firm against anything that the devil throws at us. What's more, we do not have to be like a weary and hopeless band of soldiers desperately fighting for their lives, but we can enjoy the confidence and steadfastness that comes from knowing that victory is sure.