

5.31.20 Challenged by the Hope of the Lord's Return 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

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Are you the type of person who likes surprises? Some people seem to like surprises – they enjoy the unexpectedness, the spontaneity, especially if the surprise is a positive one – like a surprise party with family and friends that was well concealed so that it caught the person completely unaware. Unpleasant surprises are not as enjoyable. It can be as simple as someone hiding and leaping out and scaring us, so we jump, yell, or otherwise make a fool of ourselves at which point they start laughing. There are other surprises that can be a lot worse and more lasting in their impact including the surprise and shock of an unexpected death. Would you describe yourself as someone who likes surprises or someone who doesn't? In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul talks about a situation in which you don't want to be surprised.

If you joined us for worship last week you may remember the question Paul was addressing was what happens to believers who die before the Lord returns and he shared words to comfort the church reminding them that we will be with the Lord forever if we've put our trust in Christ and lived for Him. **The Thessalonians other questions about the second coming related to when it would happen and how to be prepared. What did they need to do so that it didn't take them by surprise?** This is how Paul answers those questions.

"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For **you yourselves know very well** that the day of **the Lord will come like a thief in the night**. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are **not in darkness**, for that day to surprise you **like a thief**; 5 for you are all **children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness**. 6 So then let us **not fall asleep** as others do, but let us **keep awake and be sober**; 7 for those who **sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night**. 8 But since we **belong to the day**, let us **be sober**, and **put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation**. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for

obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether **we are awake or asleep** we may live with him. 11 **Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.**

When the Holy Spirit came upon the first believers on the Day of Pentecost; it caught everyone by surprise and people were perplexed, amazed, and confused until Peter got up and explained what was taking place. In similar way, there were some people in Thessalonian church and others today who worry that they might be surprised by the return of the Lord when it happens. They want to know if Paul can give them a clue about when it might happen and what to expect. Paul replied that he didn't need to write any more to them than he had already taught them, that *the day of the Lord* (Luke 17:24, 30) would resemble the arrival of a burglar in that it would happen suddenly at an unexpected time, just as Jesus had said (Matthew 24:43 Luke 12:39-40, *"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, **for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.**"*

1. Expect Christ's return. We need to be watchful, so we're not surprised.

People who are paying attention and aware of their surroundings are less likely to be surprised by the unexpected. Paul is echoing Jesus' warning in **Luke 21:34** (NIV), *"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."* We've seen in recent days and months how suddenly and dramatically life can change in ways people never imagined. **The promise of Christ's return is intended to purify the church.** Christians believe that God is love and God loves the world and every single person, and every person is created in the image of God. Because God loves us, God also has expectations of us. God can love you and at the same time be disappointed with a choice or decision you make that isn't in line with God's will and desire for your life. Some of what we do pleases and honors God; that's what we want to do as much as possible. We've heard Paul urge the Thessalonians to lead lives worthy of God and to seek to please God and to love others more and more. Anyone who identifies as a

Christian must be seeking to do this as well as we can at all times. We also can make choices that neither please nor honor God.

One of the choices that displeases and dishonors God that we see happening over and over again in our country is the choice of white people, often white people in positions of authority who don't respect the value, worth, and dignity of people of color. We've heard the latest stories and seen the latest sickening videos of lives being threatened or taken needlessly. It is infuriating that these situations keep happening. They reflect the ignorance, evil, fear, and racism that motivates so many human hearts and it breaks the heart of God that human beings created in God's image continue to repeat the sin of Cain killing their brother because they see him as "other rather than brother." Each human being is a representation of God and deserves treatment as sons and daughters of God. The failure to do this surely risks the wrath of the Almighty. To anyone upset by what I've just said, I offer these words from Martin Luther King Jr. in Letter from Birmingham Jail, *"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."* We must not be silent in the face of brutality or injustice.

We Expect His coming. The promise of Christ's return is intended to purify the church. We're to strive to please God in all that we do. 2. Believers aren't to live like unbelievers. We're to live as people who belong to the day. Paul says, we don't need more information about when the day of the Lord is coming (in the hope we can quickly put our lives in order at the last minute). Paul says don't do what other people do at night which includes carousing, drunkenness, and violence—but **be alert and ready for the Lord**. Since we know that Christ could return at any time, we're **alert and self-controlled**. Knowing Christ may return at any moment motivates us to live morally pure lives. We live with the end in mind - meeting Christ and being unashamed.

Part of being children of the light or day, Paul says, is being sober and not getting drunk (5:7). One of the things that has concerned me these last couple months is the significant increase in alcohol sales while people are largely at home. The marketing research firm Nielsen said last week that total alcohol sales from stores in the United States have grown 26.5% between mid-March and mid-May compared to the same

period a year ago. Online sales of alcohol are up much more than that. While neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament condemn the use of alcohol itself, each condemns drunkenness. The images in the Bible associated with drunkenness - reeling and staggering (Psalm 107:27; Isaiah 19:14), wild spending and poverty (Deut. 21:20; Proverbs 23:21)—suggest a loss of physical control and a loss of judgment. In the New Testament drunkenness is associated with evil practices (1 Thessalonians 5:7) and is mentioned in lists of sinful practices that believers are not to engage in (1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:21; 1 Peter 4:3). Paul's best-known statement on drunkenness is *'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit'* (Eph. 5:18). Christians are to surrender control and judgment, not to alcohol, but to the Holy Spirit, who will teach us how to glorify God. The coming of the Lord should motivate believers to be sober, mentally alert, and morally vigilant.

Expect His coming. The promise of Christ's return is intended to purify the church. **2. Believers aren't to live like unbelievers. We're to live as people who belong to the day – sober, alert, and godly.** **3. Be like soldiers on watch and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.** Paul returns repeatedly in his letters to faith, love, and hope. The most important of these in 1 Thessalonians 5 is ***the hope of salvation***, and it rests on the conviction that believers have not been destined by God for the wrath but to receive deliverance and salvation. This deliverance is possible because of the death of Jesus for us. Paul doesn't explain here how it produces this effect, but writes elsewhere that Jesus has borne our sins and endured judgment on our behalf - Romans 3:25, *"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith."* Consequently, we will share his life—and this will be true both for faithful believers who are still alive when he comes and for those who died trusting in Christ. In appreciation for all Jesus has done we encourage each other and build each other up in actively living our faith in a way that is worthy of God and pleases God.

Finally, verse 11 concludes, "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." With this hope before us, we're to help one another by offering mutual encouragement and doing whatever else would help to make our faith strong. I hope to encourage you by sharing a few stories.

Last week we bought the house at 1076 Millstone Road that will be a second parsonage and we've had a good response to David Pranga's and Bill Harwood's appeal for volunteers in addition to the people they had already lined up and organized. We also have some of our tradespeople making time to help us. It's incredible how much work has been accomplished in less than ten days thanks to more than 30 dedicated BBC people sharing their time, talents, and gifts. Being able to work with other believers and strengthen relationships while accomplishing a worthwhile task is a great way to build encouragement and to practice humility and the fruit of the Spirit because as my dad liked to say, *"Wherever two or three Baptists are gathered there are at least four or five opinions!"* Thank you to all who are serving and helping so generously and faithfully. We appreciate you very much.

On Wednesday, Mary Ormon answered the phone in the church office and had a long conversation - with a woman named Katrina, in Jacksonville, FL. As she always is, Mary was gracious, kind, and sensitive in listening to her questions and her heartfelt sharing. Katrina requested prayer that she would be able to find a new church home ... one like BBC. Katrina said that she was looking for a church that would emphasize serving and sharing, and this was the phrase she put into her search engine that brought her to BBC's website. She was so encouraged by what she read about serving God with your gifts that she called. We sent a Prayer Chain email on Wednesday asking people to pray that Katrina finds a church home that would encourage her to use her spiritual gifts, for her current housing situation and that her family would be supportive. We asked, *"If anyone knows of a church in Jacksonville, FL, please let us know."* Bev Olsen who handles our email prayer concerns received suggestions from people in less than 24 hours and Bev has passed the name of a church on to Katrina on Thursday. One of the blessings to come out of this pandemic is how the Spirit of God is using the church's online presence to encourage and bless people near and far.

On Monday I received a text message that encouraged me. It was from Cathy Marino and I asked her permission to share part of it with you today. She wrote: Hi Doug, My mother and I look forward to the verse of the day each and every day. We so appreciated today's reminding us exactly what Memorial Day really signifies. We

sometimes lose sight of true meanings. Sunday services have been wonderful; exciting new and old music, different people offering our readings; and your sermons, so moving and thought provoking. My mother and I so look forward to our Sunday mornings.

In the midst of all that we're going through, my faith and relationship with God has soared. I just need to share my recent emotional and awesome awareness with you. As you well know, my life has been quite a struggle. But through it all, I kept coming to church... searching and craving answers and hope for my future. After years of searching and struggling, these past few months have been life changing. I found strength. I have learned patience, compassion, and understanding in caring for my mother. Some of my kind words towards her, I don't know where they come from.

And then there's the COVID 19 crisis, and **I'm dealing, not dissolving.** I feel a sense of peace and faithfulness which I know comes from God and his Son. I'm reading Acts everyday (and I'm not a reader and the Bible always scared me). I'm working on my relationship with my family. So much is happening. My dear friend, Nancy, has taken me under her wing, with no judgments, with her gentle understanding and her constant support and love. Bible Study has brought the best out of me, deepened my Christian understanding, and connected me with a group of wonderful friends. BBC is my family and I always feel safe, comforted, and loved by so many in our united Christian Community. Thank you for so much. I am stronger, more peaceful, more faithful, and trust in our Lord with all my heart."

Cathy's text is a great example both of how one person has been encouraged and in sharing it with me she encouraged me as well.

I hope one of the things you will consider making a habit is to surprise someone with encouragement. It can make someone's day and make you feel good too. With everything going on right now, let's also put on faith, love, and hope, and let's share **words of encouragement and solidarity remembering that in Christ** "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28, (NIV)

Prayer: Holy Spirit, fill us with the Spirit of Pentecost, so that we might speak to one another in ways that are respectful of the needs of those around us. Remove from us our inward focus, so that we can see the ways we impact other people by the choices we make or refuse to make. Surround us with people who are filled with the Spirit of Pentecost, so that they might speak words of wisdom to us as we navigate an ever-changing world.

Help us to translate your love into every corner of your beloved world, O God, so that the Spirit of Pentecost can transform our world from a Babel-like place of discord and suffering into the image of your kingdom where each and every person is valued, nurtured, and encouraged to thrive. Amen.

Blessing: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2 Corinthians 13:14

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Are you someone who likes surprises? Why or why not?
2. Paul is telling the church to expect Christ's return, be watchful, be ready. How might thinking about how suddenly and unexpectedly the Lord could return serve to motivate us as members of the church to live purer lives?
3. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and compare those who belong to the light and day and those who belong to the night and darkness. What differences can you identify? What does it look like to live in a way that clearly demonstrates to everyone that we're children of the light and the day?
4. The Bible has some strong verses condemning drunkenness – see the following for examples. (Deut. 21:20; Psalm 107:27; Proverbs 23:21; Isaiah 19:14) in addition to 1 Thessalonians 5:7. Why does Paul urge us to remain sober and alert?

5. Repeatedly in his letters Paul returns to the three pillars of Christian living – faith, love, and hope. Why does he encourage us to be like soldiers on watch and to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation? How do faith, love, and hope prepare and equip us to live each day for Christ?

6. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 exhorts us, “*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*” What are you doing daily to encourage and build up other people? How can you make “surprising people with encouragement” a daily habit or practice?