



To Catch a Thief

It's always good to be back after a long break from preaching. I have to admit, though, I always come back from these times feeling somewhat self-conscious. Most of you have been around here long enough that you knew that sooner or later I was bound to show up again, and so you're not surprised. But I'm also aware that some of you have perhaps showed up here at CPC in the last couple of months, and so you're wondering, "Well, now, who is this?"

The arrival or the return of the very same person can mean different things for different people. For some, it can mark a long-awaited reunion. For others, the arrival of the same person can invoke feelings of fear or confusion or even shame.

One of the things that the Bible unequivocally states is that Jesus Christ will return. His arrival will mark the end of history as we know it. On more than one occasion Jesus himself said he would come again. If this is nothing but a pipe dream, our Lord is a liar. Every NT writer hammered home the same idea: Jesus is coming back.

All of us who read the Bible and take it seriously must deal with the reality of that fact. How does the reality of his return strike you? For some of us, if we're honest, it scares us. Perhaps we've read some of the descriptions such as we read from 2 Peter a few moments ago, describing how the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. That's pretty scary stuff! The first time Jesus came, he came in humility and meekness. He came as God incognito. No one recognized him. The next time he comes, he'll come in all his glory as a conquering king. No one will miss him. Even for those of us who've come to know him, we wonder what that will mean for us.

As Paul wrote his letter to the believers at Thessalonica, they were asking that question. Paul had passed on the news to them that the day of the Lord was coming, the day when Jesus would appear in the clouds and life as they knew it would come to a sudden end. The Thessalonians had two questions which no doubt we ourselves can identify with. First, they wondered what this meant for those who had already died. They were especially concerned about their loved ones. Would they somehow miss out? Would they be sold short? If you were here two weeks ago, you saw how Paul dealt with that in

1 Thess. 4:13-18. The second question was a bit different: what will happen to those of us who are alive when he returns? They knew this would be a day of reckoning; a day of judgment. The prophet Amos had warned Israel, "**Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord...That day will be darkness, not light...pitch dark, without a ray of brightness**" (Amos 5:18). The prophet Joel had called it "**the great and terrible day of the Lord**" (Joel 2:31). You can understand why the Thessalonians might be a bit concerned. How are we going to handle that? What will happen to us?

This is the issue that Paul addresses in chapter 5:1-11.

"Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. 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, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing."

As I've thought about Paul's words I've been struck by a series of contrasts. As he tries to help us prepare for this coming day of reckoning, he says a number of different times, "not this, but this."

1. Knowledge vs. Mystery: *Instead of knowing when the day will come, we live in mystery (vv. 1-3).*

The first contrast is what I would call knowledge vs. mystery. It's clear from v. 1 that the Thessalonians had asked Paul about "times and epochs." In other words, they wanted to know the dates. They probably figured that if

they could just know WHEN Jesus would return, they could make suitable preparations.

A few weeks ago I flew to Ottawa to speak at a church there. Waiting for me at the airport was an old friend I hadn't seen for 25 years. We didn't know if we'd even recognize each other! So I gave him the exact time and flight number. I told him how to spot me so there would be no surprises. When I got there, he was ready because he knew when I was coming.

But Paul says it won't be like that with the arrival of Jesus. You can't know the arrival time and the flight number. That's why he says there is no need for me to write to you about specific dates. It would be pointless because you know very well what I told you. I told that when he comes he will come suddenly. He will come when people least expect it. And Paul uses two metaphors to illustrate this.

First, he says he will come like a thief in the night. No doubt Paul borrowed this illustration from Jesus. In Matthew 24:43-44 Jesus said, **"...if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will."** The point is clear - a thief doesn't announce his arrival.

Last weekend I was at a soccer tournament and a number of us parents parked our cars in a parking garage at a mall and went in to eat lunch. While we were eating, a thief smashed the window of one of the cars and stole a digital camera. We couldn't believe it. A busy mall in the middle of the day! But he came when no one expected it. That's what thieves do. While Jesus is not a thief, his coming will be like a thief in that he'll come suddenly and unexpectedly.

The second metaphor is just a bit different. He says he'll come like birth pangs upon a woman with child. I laugh at this because before our first child was to be born, we discovered she was in the breech position, and the doctors decided to do a C-section just to be safe, and they scheduled the exact date for our baby to be born. We had it all planned out, but she didn't cooperate because Lynn went into labor before the surgery. Labor is like that; it comes upon you rather suddenly. But it's different than a thief. While both come suddenly, labor is expected, even unavoidable, that is, if you're pregnant! Paul's point is that not only is Christ's coming an unexpected event, it's also an unavoidable event. Not only will there be no warning, there will be no escape.

Both of these metaphors urge us towards a kind of humble acceptance of the mystery of this event. It will happen, it's unavoidable, but you cannot nail down all the details and you cannot know the dates. Most of us are probably aware of a series of books that have taken both the secular and Christian world by storm. You can buy the *Left Behind* series even at Costco! Everybody is reading this stuff. It's not unlike in the 70's, when the best-selling book of the decade, secular or Christian, was Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. I know how to fill a room in any church in America. Just announce a class on the end times; mention Armageddon; throw in something about the Tribulation and the Antichrist, and people will flock to your meeting. Why the curiosity? Why would that class fill up a room, yet a class on prayer or on missions be lucky to get five people? Isn't at least part of it a desire to get it nailed down, to know what will happen and when? We don't want mystery, we want knowledge. But I would tell you to be cautious about this craze; to stay balanced; to be discerning. It's enough to know that he's coming, and he's coming at any time.

Notice Paul says that for some this event will be painful; it will bring destruction. By the way, that word conveys the idea of separation rather than complete annihilation. There will be people for whom this event will mean eternal separation from God (2Thess. 1:9). Notice he uses the third person to describe them: **"while they are saying...destruction will come upon them...and they will not escape."** Again, that sounds pretty scary. But in the next contrast Paul turns to the believer and says something different.

2. Surprise vs. Expectancy: *Instead of being surprised by the day of the Lord, we live in expectancy (vv. 4-6).*

He says, **"But you, brethren, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief."** The contrast here is between surprise and expectancy. While we cannot know the date, we can live in a state of expectancy so that when he does come we're prepared. If they were prepared, my soccer friends would have kept the camera out of plain view in their car. After the earthquake of 1989, most of us are far more prepared for the next big one than we were then. After Sept. 11, our country is far more ready for a terrorist attack than we were then. We still don't know when these things will happen, but we do live with the conviction that they can and will happen, and so we try to be ready.

Now there are some reasons why we might not be ready. Thieves usually take people by surprise because they come in the night, under the cover of darkness. It's much harder to see them coming in the dark. Not only that, but most people sleep at night, and so they aren't ready for the thief when he comes. With this in mind, Paul says to us as believers, "You are not in darkness...you are sons of light and sons of day...and so rather than sleeping like people do at night you're to be wide awake and alert.

It might help for you to know that the Bible divides history up into two ages. There is the present age and the age to come. The present age is evil. The age to come is different because it is the age of Christ. Sometimes these two ages were portrayed in terms of night and day. The present evil age is like a long dark night, but with the coming of Christ, the sun would rise, the day would break, and the world would be flooded with light. When Jesus arrived 2,000 years ago, that new age began. He ushered in the light; he is the light. But the old age hasn't completely come to an end. For a time, the two ages overlap. Those who believe and trust in Christ, have entered into the light, but those who have not, are still in darkness. John wrote **"the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining"** (1 John 2:8). But when Christ comes again, the darkness and all those who belong to it will finally be destroyed.

So being ready for his coming depends on whether you're in the light or in the darkness. If you're in the light, you'll not be caught by surprise; you'll not be caught sleeping. In Christ, we're in the light, and Paul urges us to live what we are. We're in the light; now live as those in the light and stay awake! Some of us aren't morning people. We may be awake, but we're not awake. My wife is a morning person, I'm not. She says more before 7:00 AM than I say can manage to say before 7:00 PM.! I'm awake in the morning, but I'm not alert until the coffee sets in. But Paul says, "It's daytime! You're in the light! Now stay awake; be ready." Have you ever been sleeping at night and suddenly you were woken up by a strange noise? Immediately all your senses are alert to any noise; any movement. That's how we're to be; alert for Christ.

This doesn't mean that we check out of the world, that we quit our jobs, isolate from the world, and just read prophecy books. That's what some of the Thessalonians were doing. They were escaping. But we're to live in wide-awake discipleship.

You see, the coming day of the Lord gives more meaning to the present; it makes us more responsible. Back in 1994 the baseball strike resulted in the cancellation of the World Series. As a result, the games played in 1994 were meaningless, like exhibition games. Without a World Series at the end, the whole season was a farce and nobody cared what happened. You see, the end gives meaning to the present. Knowing we'll meet Christ makes us better husbands and parents and employees. It gives meaning to our work and our ministry and our suffering.

The next contrast tells more about how to live NOW in light of this coming day.

3. Drunkenness vs. Sobriety: *Instead of living in excess, we live in sober-minded preparedness for battle (vv. 7-8).*

At the end of v. 6 Paul talks about being sober. In v. 7 he says that those who get drunk do so at night, which is not always true today, but in Paul's day it generally was true. In v. 8 he says that since we're of the day and not the night we should live in sobriety. So the contrast here is between drunkenness and sobriety.

Obviously, you won't be ready and prepared for the Lord's return if you're drunk. But Paul is not just talking about our use of alcohol. He's warning us against all kinds of excess; against being intoxicated with anything. It could be a relationship. It could be a job. It could be a hobby. It could be money or TV or just maintaining our home. None of these are bad things, but we can become so absorbed in them that we're not sober; we're allowing ourselves to be drugged by the world.

I've mentioned before that I enjoy coaching Little League baseball. I love coaching Little League baseball. I'm passionate about my team and about my kids. It takes a lot of time and a lot of mental energy. And I'm really aware that during baseball season I tend towards the point of intoxication with baseball. I leave the office early for practice or games. I stay awake at night thinking about who the cutoff man should be between right field and third base. I check out books from the library on pre-game warm-ups. It's a little excessive. I really hope the Lord doesn't come back during baseball season!

In all seriousness, it's a battle for us to stay sober in this world. That's why Paul describes sobriety in terms of wearing the armor of a soldier. To stay sober we have to wear the breastplate of faith and love, as well as the helmet of salvation. I'm not going to be ready for the day of the Lord if I think I can just cruise through life. I must treat life as a spiritual battle. I fight the devil. I fight a world system that is opposed to God. And I fight my own sinful nature. If I don't protect my heart with the breastplates of faith and love I'll be mortally wounded. If I don't protect my mind with the helmet of the hope of salvation I'll be spiritually decapitated. Both my affections and my mind must be protected by faith, love and hope. Faith is my conviction, anchored in the Scripture, of things I cannot see but I believe are true. Love is my practical commitment to those I can see. Hope is my eager confidence that my suffering will one day be swallowed up by the goodness and glory of God. Let me ask you - are you protected, or are you prancing through the world thinking you're invulnerable? Don't be drunk with anything besides the Spirit of God. Be sober, ready for battle.

4. Fear vs. Confidence: *Instead of being fearful of the day of the Lord, we live in confidence (vv. 9-11).*

Paul's mention of the hope of salvation brings him to the last contrast. And this is really the crux of the whole matter. Should we be terrified of Christ's return? If somehow we're caught with our pants down will we be condemned and destroyed with the rest? Up until now, in this passage we might not be so sure. But in vv. 9-11 he makes it clear that we can face this future not in fear but in confidence. We're confident for two reasons, and both have to do with God, not us.

First, we live in confidence because God hasn't destined us for wrath but for salvation through Christ. That's our destiny. That's where we're going. A story is told about Albert Einstein riding a train to an out of town engagement. The conductor stopped by to punch his ticket, but after rummaging through his coat pockets Einstein couldn't find it. The conductor assured him, "No problem, Dr. Einstein, we all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket." He walked down the aisle and began punching other tickets. But before he moved to the next car he looked back and saw Einstein down on his hands and knees, looking under his seat trying to find his ticket. The conductor came back and said, "Dr. Einstein, don't worry about the ticket. I know who you are." Einstein looked at the man and said, "I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going!"

Paul assures that as those who are in the light, trusting Christ, we know where we're going. Our destiny has been secured by God. He bought the ticket. He put us on the train. He drives the train. We're headed not for wrath but for salvation. But how can we be so sure?

We can be sure because of the second thing - he died for us that we might live together with him, whether we're dead or alive when he returns. Someone asked one of the astronauts who walked on the moon what he thought about when he looked back at the earth. He said, "I remembered how the spacecraft was built by the lowest bidder." Our salvation was not secured by the lowest bidder so that we're not sure we'll arrive safely at our destination. Our salvation was secured by the precious blood of Christ. When we doubt our salvation we're doubting the sufficiency of his death.

You see, our confidence is built on what God has done. We can look forward to that day, not with fear but with eager, wide-eyed anticipation, because he destined us for salvation, and he paid the highest price to make it possible. This soon and coming King, awesome in glory and majesty, is none other than our crucified and risen Savior.

Now we all forget that from time to time, especially when we suffer. That's why he says to encourage and build one another up with these truths. You can't do it alone. You can't stay alert and sober and confident without the help and encouragement of other believers. Paul believes they're doing that. I wonder if he would say that about us? Could he say to us as he did to them in v. 11, "**...just as you also are doing**"? I have to tell you that at times it's a concern of mine that we as a body aren't doing that as well as we could. That we're not woven together in tight enough fabric of fellowship. That's why we meet together here on Sunday morning, in small groups, and in informal fellowship - to encourage one another, to build one another up, to be there for one another, to listen, to pray, to meet needs, to show up. I hope that Paul could say to us, "Encourage one another and build one another up, *just as you also are doing.*"

CONCLUSION

One person, one return, one arrival; two very different experiences. Some try to figure out the dates. Paul says be willing to live with the mystery. Some sleep, thinking that life will just continue to go on and on. Paul says to stay awake and be alert. Some intoxicate themselves with whatever feels good. Paul says fight the battle to stay sober. Some live in fear, standing on the foundation of their own works. Paul says put your confidence in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and live in certain hope that this coming king is also your crucified Savior.

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