

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Waiting in the light of the gospel

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 6 November 2022

Walking Worthily [8]

Story so far

¶ Paul began by being thankful – thankful to God, thankful for the faith, hope and love of the Thessalonians (1.1-4). He looked back to his visit, their conversion and how they were transformed from living as people of this world, to living as God’s children (1.5-10). That brought with it persecution (1.6, 2.14-16) – it wasn’t easy for them to live differently, but Paul was encouraged to hear from Timothy that they hadn’t given up (3.6-9). He prayed they would love one another more and more, and live holy lives while waiting for Jesus to return (3.11-13).

Then he fleshed out what that life looks like in practice – including sexual purity, hard work and service (4.1-12). He looked ahead to Jesus’ return when we will be reunited with our sisters and brothers who have fallen asleep (4.13-18).

Paul knew that it's so easy for pressure from outside the church – pressure from persecution, pressure to conform to the world's way, pressure to follow the desires of our deceitful hearts – Paul knew those pressures can knock Christians off course. So he reminded them of the truth: a significant amount of the letter is Paul reminding them of what he had taught them before. He wanted to **encourage** (2.12, 3.2, 4.18) them, to build them up in the truth, to make sure their foundations were *firm*.

The Bible Project sums up Paul's teaching in this letter like this:

following Jesus produces a counter-cultural holy way of life..
..that responds to hostility with love and generosity
..that is motivated by hope in the coming kingdom of Jesus

The Bible Project, Read Scripture (1 Thessalonians)

The Thessalonians were wobbling – for all sorts of reasons. In his pastoral response to that Paul does two things:

1. He reminds them of the truth: truth in the Old Testament Scriptures, and truth in Jesus' teaching
2. He encourages them to live as who they are: God's children

We see both of those in this passage, which is about **the day of the Lord** and what it means to live waiting for it.

Sudden (1-3)

Jess and I were burgled in Amington. I had left a downstairs window open a crack, and someone got in. She took my drill, an extension lead, my wallet, and Jess's car keys, went through every cupboard and drawer in the kitchen looking for cash – and then left through the front door, leaving it wide open.

Though she didn't take the car, she opened it, found and took Jess's purse, and then left the keys on the front seat. For her next trick she tossed my wallet in our hedge (we found it several months later), walked down the road to Tesco, and used Jess's bank card in full view of the CCTV cameras.

Jess and I were asleep upstairs the whole time. The first we knew about it was when Jess woke up, checked her phone, and saw messages about her card being used and blocked by the bank. I ran downstairs, heart pounding, confused, angry, upset – and more besides. We rang the police and thanked God she hadn't taken anything of any value.

Losing stuff was annoying, but the worst part was knowing someone had been in our house while we were asleep.

The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (2).

Paul was drawing on Jesus' own teaching here:

'Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'

Matthew 24.42-44 (NIV)

People have wasted so much time trying to figure out when Jesus will return. I mean, I'd love to know, but Jesus said, '**you do not know**' when it will be – in fact Jesus said *he* didn't know when he would return – **only the Father** (Mark 13.32). Like a thief coming in the night we don't know *when* Jesus will return – it will be sudden.

But for God's people it won't be a surprise. That's the point of Paul's next metaphor (there are many in these verses). It's not that the thief is pregnant; Jesus' return will be like **labour pains** at the end of a pregnancy (3): sudden perhaps, but not a surprise! So **the day of the Lord** is **inevitable, but unpredictable**¹ – but what is it? As well as Jesus' teaching Paul drew on the prophets...

The day of the Lord is ¶ Judgement Day (only with fewer Arnold Schwarzenegger-shaped and liquid metal robot assassins!).

The day of the Lord is described first in Amos (5.18) – it is the day when God will right all wrongs: God says, **‘let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream’** (5.24). That’s great – unless you are responsible for unrighteousness or injustice – then it will be a day of **darkness, not light** (5.18).

Amos prophesied against those who felt **complacent** and **secure** (6.1), who observed **festivals** and made **sacrifices** (5.21-22) but failed to live as God’s people – even worshipping **idols** (5.26).

In Paul’s day **‘Peace and safety’** (3) was the ¶ *Pax Romana*. As long as you towed the line there was no threat of war or invasion – and with it plenty of indulgence and self-confidence. As Amos prophesied, so Paul said: **destruction will come suddenly** (3).

Passages in the Bible that talk about judgement and destruction are difficult. Some are tempted to ignore them or dismiss them. The problem is: the Bible says God *both* judges sin *and* loves sinners. It’s not a question of cruelty, as if God is ¶ a small boy with a magnifying glass burning ants. His anger and wrath are not like ours: they aren’t about emotion, they are about justice.

And then God says this in Ezekiel (33.11): **'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!'**

Jeremiah 14 describes God weeping over his people – in the middle of a passage about his righteous judgement:

[God says,] 'I will pour out on them the calamity they deserve... [and in the next verse:] Let my eyes overflow with tears night and day without ceasing; for the Virgin Daughter, my people, has suffered a grievous wound, a crushing blow.'

Jeremiah 14.16-17 (NIV)

From start to finish the Bible holds those two things together: God's justice and his love. Ultimately they meet on the cross: Jesus died so all who *do* turn receive forgiveness and life from God. If you find it difficult to read passages that talk about God's judgement or vengeance or punishment – I encourage you to sit with them, pray through them, talk to other Christians about them – please don't dismiss them. When we start doing that we build and worship a fake god who cannot satisfy. Instead we need to listen to what God says about himself and about us – and about sin, because rebelling against God, worshipping things that are not god, living *my* way – these things have consequences.

Salvation (4-11)

But... Like ‘therefore’, ‘but’ is one of the most important words in the Bible. **But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you** (4).

I really don't like surprises. As an April baby my birthday is often in the Easter holiday. For my 21st my parents organised a few days in Northern France, staying in a cottage owned by the vicar of the next-door parish.

Only, they told me we were going to Paris. So I got confused when we drove past all the signs to Paris on the motorway.

We arrived at the cottage, unloaded our stuff, and headed out to the supermarket to buy some food. Truth be told, I was a bit grumpy, because I had been looking forward to Paris.

At the supermarket, I ran into one of my school friends – and then another – and then another. ‘What are you doing here?’ I asked. ‘We’re staying with you!’ they replied. ‘No you aren’t!’ I said – and promptly had a bit of a breakdown. It took me hours to calm down, I was so shocked and upset – and Mum promised never to do a surprise party again!

I apologised to them all, and we had a lovely time.

I was in the dark about what was going on, so it was a complete surprise to run into a friend in another country. Paul's teaching – like Jesus' on this topic – was given so God's people would *not* be in the dark, but might know and have confidence in the future.

But there's a much more profound way in which God's people **are not in darkness** (4) any more.

You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

1 Thessalonians 5.6-8 (NIV)

Paul does two things here, the two things I highlighted right at the start:

1. He reminds them of the truth
2. He encourages them to live as who they are

The contrast between light and dark, night and day, is about who we are and how we live as we wait for Jesus' return.

Pauls contrasts two kingdoms:] the kingdom of this world, and the] kingdom of God. To this world belong words like] **night, darkness, asleep, drunk**. To God's kingdom belong words like] **day, light, awake, sober** (5-7).

Paul says God's people **are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness** (5). This is a central part of the Bible's teaching about who we are as God's people: in Jesus we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5.17), we are born again (John 3.3-7, 1 Peter 1.23), we are crucified and made alive again (Romans 6.4-7). **For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord** (Ephesians 5.8).

God's people do not belong to the kingdom of this world any more, with all its **darkness** – we belong to the kingdom of God, we have passed from **darkness** into **light: we are children of the light and children of the day** (5).

Except it's not quite as simple as that diagram. God's kingdom is already here – but not yet in full. Jesus described it like this: **'The kingdom of God has come near'** (Mark 1.15) and told us to pray: **'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'** (Matthew 6.10). This is where I get to show off my PowerPoint skills...]

God's kingdom is breaking into this world, and God's people live **here**, in the overlap. We belong to the kingdom of God, **we are children of the light and children of the day**, but we are still in this world, with all its challenges and temptations.

That's why so often Paul tells us to be, to become, to behave as the people we already are. **We are children of the day, so let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake** (6). And again: **those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober** (7-8).

Let us live, not like we belong to this world, but like we belong to the kingdom of God – because that is who we are: **children of the light**. Let us be and become who we are.

Friends, it's not easy! I suspect that's why Paul often described the Christian faith as a battle, and God's people as soldiers: **let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet** (8). We fight against the devil's lies, the world's temptations, and our own desires. Sometimes we will look and feel like **children of the light** – sometimes the **darkness** and the **night** will threaten to overwhelm us. We won't win every skirmish, but we keep going because the battle has already been won, and the future of God's people is certain.

Look with me at verse 9:

God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

1 Thessalonians 5.9-10 (NIV)

Everything turns on the cross. It is the central point of God's story and our story, literally the crux of history.

On the cross Jesus **died for us** – on our behalf – in our place – doing what we could not do – defeating evil and death – killing sin dead in his own body – paying the price – willingly suffering the punishment we deserve, so we might go free and live.

All that comes elsewhere in the Bible – here Paul's point is simple: who we are, and where we're going is based on something that has already happened and can never be undone: Jesus **died for us**. Jesus **died for us so that we may live together with him** (10). The life of God's people depends not on our abilities or on where we are born or on **our own performance or feelings**:² it depends on God's choice (9, also 1.5) and on what Jesus has already done.

That is why we can sing, as we did last week **℟**:

On that day we will see you shining brighter than the sun
On that day we will know you as we lift our voice as one
Hallelujah what a day it will be
For at home with you my joy is complete
As I run into your arms open wide I will see
My father who is waiting for me

On that day by CityAlight³

God's kingdom is at hand, it is breaking in now and will one day come in full. Life in that overlap is messy and complicated and difficult – but the future of God's people is assured.

While we wait for that day when God's kingdom comes in full, let us be ready, and live as who we are: **children of the light and children of the day** (5). While we wait for Jesus to return to bring us home, **let us encourage one another and build each other up** (11) with these truths: building our foundation on the solid rock of God's Word, trusting in God's choice and what Jesus has done, and living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians (TNTC)*, 94.

² Stott, *1 & 2 Thessalonians (BST)*, 114.

³ <https://cityalight.com/song/on-that-day/>.