

Like a Thief in the Night

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me this morning to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verse 2. 1 Thessalonians 5 and verse 2.

Like a thief in the night. That of which we do not speak. May it never be said of any gospel church that there are truths of which it can be said, that they are that of which we do not speak.

May it never be said of any reformed church that there are truths of which we are ashamed and embarrassed, and when it comes to them, they are that of which we do not speak.

May it never be said of any biblical or evangelical church that there are truths so embarrassing that we say of them that there are truths that are that of which we do not speak.

How tragic that in today's Western church, a church exploding with health and prosperity, the second coming of Christ is very rarely mentioned, that it's become a truth, that of which we do not speak.

[1 : 15] And yet the clear teaching of scripture is that a day is coming when Jesus Christ will come again. Just as surely as he left, so he will return. Just as surely as he rose again, he will come again.

Just as surely as we saw him die in misery, so we shall see him appear in majesty. The Bible talks of the day of Jesus' return as the day of the Lord.

And although Jesus speaks of it most often, it's to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5 I want us to turn. The second coming of Christ is not a truth to be ignored, far less ashamed of and embarrassed about.

It's a truth in which we as Christians are to rejoice and to encourage each other with. Well, in 1 Thessalonians 4 verses 13 through 18, we read these verses together, the Apostle Paul has described what Christ's return will do and what it will look like.

In verse 16 he says, The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and the sound of a trumpet of God.

[2 : 30] What a day that shall be! The majestic Christ shall come down from heaven. Every eye will see him and every ear will hear him. On that day there shall no longer be any atheists nor sceptics.

For all will see and hear the majestic King Jesus for themselves. And as I say from Paul's argument, just as surely as he came the first time, so he shall come the second time also.

And the question that scripture is asking us today is this. Are you ready for Christ to come again? Are you prepared for your eyes to be dazzled by the sight of his glorious appearing and for your ears to be filled with the sound of his angelic voice?

Are you ready? Or is that second coming a truth of which you say, It is that of which I do not speak? Christ will come again.

Every Sunday morning as we recite together the Apostles' Creed, we profess to believe it. When we say, from there, that's the Father's right hand, he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

[3 : 44] We profess to believe it. But if we really believed it, would it not impact our lives? Would the great truth of Christ's second coming not altogether change our outlooks and our perspectives?

Would it not take away our gloom? And would it not fill us with hope? In 1 Thessalonians 5 verses 1 through 3, the Apostle Paul is emphasizing the unpredictability and the suddenness of Christ's second coming.

He shall come, Paul says, like a thief in the night. This day of glory shall come when we least expect it.

And seemingly out of nowhere we shall see Christ our majestic Lord and we shall hear his voice booming in our ears. It's so unpredictable.

It'll be so sudden, like a thief in the night. For a short, all too short while this morning, I want us to consider together this truth of which it can be said to our considerable shame as a reformed evangelical church, that it's often that of which we do not speak.

[5 : 04] Namely, the second coming of our Lord. I want us to do so by exploring three contrasts in our passage. Expected and unexpected.

Salvation and destruction. Encouragement and evangelism. You see, this second coming of Christ isn't a truth to be ignored. Not a truth to be ashamed of and embarrassed about.

It's a truth in which we as Christians are to rejoice. But if there are any among us who are not yet Christians, it is a truth of which perhaps we are to be afraid.

First of all, then, the second coming of Christ shall be expected and unexpected. Expected and unexpected. Paul uses the imagery of like a thief in the night to emphasize the sudden and unexpected nature of our Lord's return.

In verse 3, he writes, While people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

[6 : 15] I hope you're not listening too carefully, Kyrene. It'll happen very suddenly and very unexpectedly. All of a sudden, the day of glory will come when Christ at the head of his angelic host of heaven will appear in the sky, and the booming blast of this trumpet shall call the attention of all the world's people both to see him and hear him.

It'll all be so unexpected, all the more so since at that time, people will be enjoying a time of unprecedented peace and security.

Many Christians believe that the second coming of Christ will be preceded by a series of cataclysmic signs, the so-called wars and rumors of wars and raptures and tribulations.

But according to verse 3 here, the second coming of Christ will be preceded by a time of peace and security, with the result that his second coming will be sudden, unexpected, surprising.

Scientists are constantly working to predict where and when major earthquakes will happen. Hollywood, of course, not Hollywood, but Hollywood, of course, cashes in on the San Andreas Fault just off the west coast of North America.

[7 : 41] But for scientists, this is a very serious matter. Because even if these scientists can predict correctly within the range of perhaps one month when a particular fault will become active, they'd potentially be able to save tens of thousands of lives.

At present, the science of earthquake prediction is in its infancy. But even supposing the scientific community have a great breakthrough so that they can predict where and when major earthquakes will take place, no one will ever be able to predict when the Lord Jesus Christ will return in glory.

It is a day fixed in God's mind. And for his own good reasons, he's chosen not to share that date with us. People will be going about their daily duties.

And Christ shall come again. They'll be changing loads in their washing machines. They'll be emptying the dishwasher. They'll be doing the ironing. They'll be worshipping in church. They'll be visiting the sick.

They'll be burying the dead. They'll be chairing meetings at work. They'll be teaching children. They'll be filling in their time sheets. And if you were to ask them, what will you be doing that day?

[8 : 56] They'll say, well, I don't expect to be doing anything different today from what I did yesterday or the day before. And then all of a sudden, the sky will open.

Christ shall come down from the heavens with the trumpet blast of his glory. It'll be so unexpected. It will all be so unexpected. Maybe that's one reason why the second coming is that of which we do not speak.

Because more or less, we can control everything in our lives, but not this. We can control our environments, but not then. It's going to all be so sudden and so surprising.

And yet, for the Christian, even though we cannot predict when Jesus will come, his second coming is not totally unexpected in that we know he will come. That's why Paul says in verse 4, Maybe it's the same with you, but I really don't like it when you book an appointment with the gas engineer to come to your house to fix your boiler.

And he says, well, I'll be with you at some point between 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. So you have to stay in that whole afternoon and wait for him to come. You know he's going to come, so you can't say when he does come that you didn't expect him to come.

[10 : 27] It's just that you can't pin him down to coming at 2.45 or 3.15. You just need to be ready for him to come all afternoon. We know Christ is coming again.

We just don't know exactly when he's coming again. And so for the Christian, the second coming of our Lord is both expected and unexpected. We know he is coming, but exactly when he is coming, we neither can do know or can know.

During the early days of the lockdown last spring, one of the lovely things about getting up early in the morning was that there was no traffic on the roads. And you heard the most wonderful dawn chorus from the birds.

As the sun was rising, the birds were singing at the top of their voices. They'd got their wildness back again. And in those days, sometimes I'd get up extra early just to hear that dawn chorus.

1 Thessalonians 5 verse 2 is calling upon us to wake up in the morning and say to ourselves, Today may be the day my Lord returns in glory and I shall see his face.

[11 : 45] Today may be the day my Lord shall return in glory and I shall see his face. I guess if you're anything like me, the first thing you think of as you wake up in the morning really isn't the second advent of Christ.

But then maybe if it was, maybe if the doctrine of Christ's return like a thief in the night was more important to us, we'd learn to hold on to the worries and anxieties of this life less tightly than we do.

We'd be more anxious for Christ to find us trusting in him and working for him than we would be feathering our own nests and living for the moment.

Expected and unexpected. Second contrast. Salvation and destruction. Salvation and destruction.

I was recently in a meeting with some of my ministerial colleagues where we were discussing how to present the truths of the gospel to this postmodern generation. I'm old enough to remember how important truth really is, but I think I'm young enough to relate to those who don't.

[12 : 58] The difference between the generations is summed up in this. The older generation, brought up as modernists, asked the question, what? What?

The younger generation, brought up largely as postmodernists, asked the question, so what? By and large, it's quite enough for the older generation to know something is true and for them both to believe it and for it to change the way they think and act.

But for the younger generation, the larger question isn't about truth, but about relevance. How does this affect me? Not so much what, but so what?

That's why you're speaking to, when you're speaking to many non-Christian young people about the Christian faith, they'll say to you, well, that's great for you. Fantastic that you found Christianity to be true and it makes you happy.

But I've got my own truths and they make me happy. And I believe they suit me far better. The difference you see is between what and so what.

[14 : 08] Relevance is the key for this generation and rightly so in many ways. Because if Christianity is to mean anything, it must be relevant. It must work in real life and not be presented as a set of abstract ideals.

The what of the second coming of Christ is that he is coming again. That the skies will be ripped apart.

He's going to appear at the head of heaven's armies in the glory of his father and the trumpet blast of an archangel will sound over the whole earth. The so what, the how will this affect me question, concerns salvation and destruction.

When Christ comes again, there shall be salvation for some and there shall be destruction for others. That's Paul's teaching. This destruction shall be most terrible.

A destruction qualified by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1 verse 9 by the word eternal. Eternal destruction. We destroy something.

[15 : 20] And it's destroyed. But the destruction of which Paul speaks is an eternal experience of being destroyed. That for as long as we experience being destroyed, we know there is still more destruction to endure.

In 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 9, Paul describes that destruction as being our experience of the wrath of God.

Many years ago at a Bible conference, I heard the great Christian evangelist John Blanchard speak about hell. I left the hall trembling for the fate of those who do not know Christ.

A five-minute vision of hell will do more than anything else to answer this so hot question post-modernists rightly raise against Christianity.

By contrast, there shall be salvation for others. A salvation so fixed and so secure that though at present they're on earth, they're real homes in heaven. These shall be days of reunion with those they have loved, but have gone before them into God's closer presence.

[16 : 34] We shall see them. We shall embrace them. We shall be with them forever. And of even more importance, we shall be with Christ forever.

He whom we have trusted and loved and longed for, we shall see him. We shall embrace him. And we shall be with him forever. However, Paul really puts it so succinctly and yet so beautifully in 1 Thessalonians 4, 17, we will always be with the Lord.

A five-minute vision of heaven, even more than a five-minute vision of hell, would do more than anything else to answer the so-what questions post-modernists rightly raise against Christianity.

Because on that day, the day that Christ comes again, our salvation or destruction will be fixed forever and our eternal destiny shall begin.

What Paul's telling us here transcends all questions of what and so what. For how can this truth not be relevant? If those scientists working hard to predict where and when earthquakes will happen predicted that Glasgow would be the centre of a massive earthquake a week from today, I suspect we wouldn't hear so many so-what objections.

[17 : 55] Rather, the first to leave the city would be the post-modernists, because they, above all others, would understand the seriousness and relevance of the threat. A day of salvation and destruction is coming, worse than any earthquake, such that Paul can save it in verse 3.

They will not escape. There'll be nowhere to get away from the universal appearance of Jesus Christ, the loving King of glory.

And then lastly, expected and unexpected, salvation and destruction. Lastly, encouragement and evangelism.

Encouragement and evangelism. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has answered the what question, that the Lord will come again, like a thief in the night, bearing both salvation and destruction, as our creed tells us, to judge the living and the dead.

Perhaps in the light of that, so what? Perhaps that's actually the best question, therefore, we can ask. What is this to mean, not just to us, but for us as Christians?

[19 : 15] And the answer is twofold, encouragement and evangelism. That's why it must never be said of this doctrine, that it is that of which we do not speak.

Because without this doctrine of the second coming of Christ, we have no motivation to encourage other Christians, nor any message with which to evangelize those who are not yet Christians.

In the first instance, as Christians, we are to encourage one another with these great and glorious truths of the second coming of our Lord.

In 1 Thessalonians 4.18 and 5.11, Paul says, therefore, encourage one another. The therefore pointing back to the truth of the second coming of our Lord.

And the encouragement rests on how we need to spur one another on to be ready for Christ to appear. In 1 Thessalonians 5.8, Paul writes, 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.

[20 : 24] Faith and hope and love, Paul says here in verse 8, the three greatest virtues in the Christian life, each a product of God's gracious gospel work in our lives, each a display of his powerful love for us, each a summary of what it means to love God and to love our neighbor as Christ did.

In other words, Paul is telling us that on the basis of Christ's second coming, we are to encourage one another as Christians to keep trusting in Christ, to keep loving Christ, to keep loving Christ's people, to keep your eyes fixed on that great and awesome day.

Don't give up. Keep going because you don't know it might be today the Lord chooses to return. Keep pursuing growth in grace and holiness.

Strive after godliness and self-discipline. Cling to faith, hope and love. Think of what state Christ shall find you when he returns. Not so much where you are, but in what state.

Think of it and pause for thought. When we're going through tough times of anxiety or of challenge or of temptation, it would seem that the easiest thing to do is to give up on our faith altogether.

[21 : 51] But Christ will come soon. Hold on for help. Keep clinging, even if it's by your fingernails to the grace of Christ, because he'll be here sooner than you think, and your faith in him, however weak it might be, will have its reward.

Never let it be said that in Glasgow City, the second coming of Christ is a truth of which we do not speak. Rather, let's encourage one another with its truth and with a sure and certain prospect of salvation.

But then in the second instance, as Christians, the second coming of Christ means that we are to redouble our efforts in evangelism, in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and making disciples for him.

The day of Christ will come. A day of terrifying and destiny-fixing terror. Than any earthquake measured on the Richter scale.

None will escape. And on that day, there shall be cries of despair from this passage. Millions and millions of people who in their hearts knew the gospel was true, but delayed in their response to it.

[23 : 10] They'll weep and wail because their opportunity for salvation is forever gone. Tell me, do you care? Do you care for them enough?

Suppose you're one of those scientists working on the prediction of where and when major earthquakes would occur. One day, as you're measuring seismic activity in the Clyde, you notice a significant anomaly in your readings.

An anomaly which can mean only one thing. There's going to be a huge earthquake in the next week which will cause the deaths of tens of thousands of your fellow Glaswegians.

You're that scientist who knows the truth. And in your hands lies the fate of all the inhabitants of the city of Glasgow. You magically think of your wife and your kids.

You want to warn them and get them to safety. Your friends also. Perhaps even your minister. In fact, as you think of all those in your home city, you want them all to survive.

[24 : 20] But knowing all these things, having taken all the readings and got your predictions right, knowing that tens of thousands, your loved ones among them, will die of ignorance because they don't know about this earthquake.

You don't tell anyone. You reason to yourself. Everyone will think I'm mad. I'll be ashamed at the reaction toward me.

They'll laugh at me and my scientific grants will be over. Well, for whatever reason, you keep the knowledge of Glasgow's destruction to yourself while all the time booking for yourself an immediate city break, you are not for anyone else to go to Australia for a week.

And so, after a long flight, you get to Australia the day before that devastating earthquake you know is going to hit the city of Glasgow. And you turn on your TV to watch the Scottish news.

And you see everyone going around their daily routines not knowing that in a matter of hours most of them will be dead. You phone your wife and your kids back home and you tell them that you love them but you don't tell them to leave the city.

[25 : 33] You keep the news channel on and just a couple of hours later reports are breaking of a devastating earthquake in the Scottish city of Glasgow. The BBC gets its cameras up to Glasgow as quick as it can and you watch from Australia the ruin of your home city.

Everything's been flattened. Tens of thousands were killed by falling buildings and tens of thousands more drowned by a huge tsunami. The BBC cameras in a helicopter hover above your house and there from your snug hotel room in Australia laid out in what was once your front garden you see your wife and your family all dead.

but you're okay. You're smug and satisfied in the land of sun and sea and sand. Selfish scientist.

why didn't he release his findings? Why didn't he bear the mockery and the shame just as long as he could get his message out?

And why, oh why did he not tell his wife who he told who he said he loved and his children about it? Why won't we tell our families and our friends about Jesus?

[26 : 58] So the day when he comes again we shall be together with him not apart from each other. Why are we sitting smugly thinking well I'm going to heaven be damned the rest of humanity.

What is wrong with us? He will come like a thief in the night. More is the reason for us to be prepared now and for us by the Holy Spirit to speak of that which at present is that of which we do not speak.

For even now can you not feel the first tremors of that earthquake? Let us pray. Our loving Heavenly Father these are serious and sober things of which we speak.

They are those things of which we do not speak because perhaps they are so painful for us. perhaps they elicit within us feelings of guilt and shame at how few we tell of this day for it will be a day of reunion when we shall be united with all those we have loved and lost in the Lord and united with Christ.

Fill us then with motivation to tell those we love the most in this world about the Jesus who loves them Jesus who died for them on the cross Jesus who is coming again for them shake us from our selfish slumber we ask help us not to be at ease in Zion but rather that Glasgow may know a day is coming when all eyes shall see him we ask these things in Jesus name Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen