

Advent: Longing to live with Jesus

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[0 : 00] So the reading is from the first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5, we're reading verses 1 to 11.

Now concerning the times and seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman and they will not escape.

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day.

We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then, let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

[1 : 01] For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But 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.

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. Good morning, I'm Jake, part of the church family here, and a ministry trainee.

And as we come to 1 Thessalonians 5, let's pray together. Our Father, we're talking and thinking about things this morning that we cannot see.

And so we pray, please, that you would help us to understand, to see with spiritual eyes what is reality.

[2 : 16] And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. As Bruce hinted at, we tend to think of Advent as counting down to Christmas.

One little piece of chocolate after another, and then, ah, Christmas Day is here, baby Jesus. But, as he said, traditionally, the purpose of Advent is to help us connect Jesus' first coming at Christmas with his second coming on the day that he returns.

And if we stop and think about it, we can see why the Advent season is so needed. The world around us thinks the idea of Jesus' return is laughable at best, deluded, ridiculous, insane at worst. And sometimes, maybe we feel similarly. Is he really going to come again? And so we get weary of waiting.

And the danger is, other things come along and promise us so much excitement and certainty and hope that we get distracted by our careers, our house renovations, our children's educations, the possibility of a vaccine.

[3 : 31] And then Christmas comes and it's full of promise and excitement too. There's all sorts of festive joys coming. There's time with family, time off work, new toys, gadgets, yummy food.

And before we know it, we're drunk on all the festivities. And the idea of Jesus' return isn't just a distant possibility. It's not even on our minds at all. So we need Advent.

We need Advent to remind us of the one thing that is totally certain in our uncertain world. Jesus will return. But the trouble is, left to myself, I'm more likely to use the run-up to Christmas to gorge on chocolate and just spend it wishing for turkey and ham sandwiches with loads of butter and gravy. Much more likely to think of those things than I am to pause and think carefully about the return of Jesus. And so I need Advent, but I also need you to help me remember what Advent is actually about.

That's where the message of 1 Thessalonians 5 lands. Paul and his friends, Timothy and Silvanus, they write to this new church. It's a church full of hope and promise as they wait for Jesus.

[4 : 45] But Paul and co, they're nervous that the Thessalonian church could drift as they're pressured by those around them to ignore Jesus.

As the excitement of the world distracts them. The danger is they forget Jesus is coming and live like it's not going to happen. So as they wait under pressure and in danger, Paul's letter is a wake-up call to them.

And his plea is for them to consistently encourage each other to be alert for Jesus' return. The whole letter is clothed in Paul's deep affection for these people.

He longs for them to grow as Christians every day until Jesus returns. And particularly in these verses in chapter 5, he wants to encourage them.

It's like an arm around the shoulder and a glass of water to the face. Much needed. And so to help us lift our eyes to Jesus on this run-up to Christmas, we're going to consider Paul's pep talk.

[5 : 53] See what he says to them and what he would say to us. Something like this. Brothers and sisters, Jesus will return all of a sudden.

So stay awake. Because it's going to be wonderful. Jesus will return all of a sudden. So stay awake. Stay on your toes. Because it's going to be wonderful.

Let's have a look at verses 1 to 5. Paul says Jesus will return all of a sudden. At the end of chapter 4, Paul has been talking about Jesus' return.

When he'll come and wrap up history as we know it. And bring a new creation. And at that point, he says, Christians who have died will rise. And they'll meet Jesus face to face.

And then Christians who are still alive will rise too for a grand reunion. But nobody knows when except the Lord. That said, Paul and the Thessalonians are not totally in the dark about it.

[6 : 55] Verse 1. Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. Why? For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

When? Not quite sure. But what they do know is that the day Jesus returns will come like a thief comes in the night. Nobody plans to be broken into, do they?

And no thief pops along and pops a note through your door like the royal mail and says, oh, we'll be around tomorrow. No, a thief comes in the night, totally unannounced. It's all quiet in the house. Everyone's asleep. And then boom, Jesus comes. He'll come all of a sudden. An unpredictable moment.

Verse 3. While people are saying, oh, there's peace and security. Then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman.

[8 : 04] And they will not escape. Jesus will return. Like a thief in the night. But also like labor pains coming on a pregnant woman.

You know it's coming. You don't know exactly when. But it is inevitable. Now, if you need a tooth pulled out, you can put off that trip to the dentist for as long as you can bear it.

But if you're pregnant, you cannot put off labor. It is coming. And Jesus will come all of a sudden. There's no way to avoid it.

It's an inevitable reality. A guaranteed day. And notice, for some, it will be an awful day. The unaware will be taken totally by surprise.

All across the world. We go out there lives. Business as usual. Saying, like verse 3. Look, we're enjoying peace and security. Christmas is coming. There's a vaccine on the way. Here's to 2021.

[9 : 09] Imagine it. One Saturday morning. Get up. Take the kids to pick up the Christmas tree. You're just deciding which one. And boom.

Jesus returns just like that. And for those in the dark about it. Those not expecting it. Jesus' return will have awful consequences.

Verse 3. The day he returns will lead to sudden destruction. And they will not escape. It's a stark reality.

As Jesus comes, he'll bring God's right judgment on the world. He'll banish wickedness and evil and sin. And then remake a perfect world.

The problem is, if he's going to banish evil and sin, then that includes all of us. The only way to escape is to copy the Thessalonians.

[10 : 09] To do what they did. In chapter 1, we hear how they turned from living for themselves in their sin. Turned to serve God. And wait for Jesus, who saves them through his death at the cross.

Jesus will return all of a sudden. And it will be an awful shock for everyone not trusting him. But verse 4.

It won't surprise the Thessalonians. Because they are not in the dark. Rather, verse 5. They are children of light.

Children of the day. When the day comes, when Jesus returns, they will be gathered in to safety. I suppose, if you're not trusting Jesus this morning, not waiting for his return, it might just seem a laughable idea.

But Jesus really did rise. Really did die. And he really did rise. As he said he would. And he has promised to return. He is not in the habit of breaking promises.

[11 : 20] And so the question we really need to wrestle with is, am I totally convinced Jesus isn't coming back? Because if you're in any doubt that he might return, perhaps this Christmas is the perfect time to examine the claim.

Why not ask someone you know who's a Christian why they're so convinced he will come back? I guess it might be some of us think Jesus will return sometime.

But we've got lots of living to do before then. And so we're going to wait until later in life to do something about it. Maybe your parents are trusting Jesus and that's nice for them.

And you get it, but you're going to wait till you're older like them. But can you see the danger of that, if that's you? What if he comes all of a sudden before you've turned to him for safety?

It'll be too late. I guess many of us will be trusting Jesus here this morning, waiting for him to come.

Well, however long we've been doing that, a few weeks or years and years and years, let's take Paul's reminder in these verses about Jesus' sudden return and pin it to the front of our minds and help each other to do the same.

[12 : 45] So that moment by moment we're living in anticipation of it. That's where Paul goes next. Jesus will return all of a sudden. So stay on your toes.

Jesus will return all of a sudden. So stay on your toes. We've said the danger is that we drift off, that we live as if Jesus isn't coming. But verse 5, we're not in the dark.

We know the day is coming. So Paul's call is verse 6. So then, let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober. Now, Paul isn't blanket banning sleep and a glass of wine.

But he is saying, you know the day is coming. So don't live like the rest of the world. Don't be spiritually asleep, switching off, taking a sabbatical from living for Jesus.

[13 : 49] And don't be spiritually drunk, intoxicated by all that the world has to offer. It can happen so easily. The house move, the new job, the prospect of promotion, the school place, the precious holiday plans, the attraction of that unwise relationship.

So many things. Some of them good gifts from God. Some of them sinful desires. They divert our attention away from Jesus. Bit by bit, we drift.

Not overnight, but slowly, so that we barely notice. And before we know it, Jesus is miles from our minds and our lives.

So Paul says, no. Verse 6, let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

Awake spiritually, eyes open, alert and clear-headed to the pull of the world, focused on Jesus' return.

And Paul's strategy is for us to be limber and on our toes, like I was yesterday, as the whistle blew for the start of my hockey match. And verse 8, Paul uses the picture of a soldier ready for battle.

[15 : 03] Dressed for action. Dressed for action. Wearing the right kit. Paul would have us put on faith and love as a breastplate. And the hope of salvation as a helmet.

All through his letter, Paul has been praising the Thessalonians for their faith in Christ. Their love for one another. And their confident hope of Jesus' return. So if we're going to be alert and ready, we want to get our spiritual armor on too.

Growing in our grasp of God's goodness so our faith is strengthened. Loving one another. Helping each other to look to Jesus and setting our hope on the glory of our future.

Many of you remember John and Helen Reed, members of the church family, before they moved a couple of years ago. Helen had a little laminated note by their kettle.

Just in her eyeline, so that every time she went to boil the water, she saw it. And it just said, perhaps today. It was a frequent reminder to her, Jesus is coming.

[16:18] Maybe today. It helped to keep her on her toes. And Paul wants us to be doing everything we can to stay on our toes, ready. This world screams distractions at us.

That push Jesus from our minds. I wonder what most distracts us from Jesus at the moment. And maybe something material has got our attention.

It could be the intoxicating pull of career or success or sex. It might just be the endless fog of sickness and suffering.

Perhaps it's all the uncertainty around COVID. All the talk of lockdowns and bubbles and vaccines and tears. We're consumed by it. We're consumed by it.

But Paul says, whatever threatens our alertness to Jesus' return. We need our eyes open. We need to be aware.

[17:17] So we stay on our toes. So we're ready for Jesus' return rather than drifting away from him. It's possible that even now as we think about it, the Holy Spirit is prompting you to think about a particular area of life that needs attention.

Why not chat to a friend about that later? Help each other to be alert, to process that and fix your eyes on the return of Jesus.

Maybe some of us are realizing as we sit here and listen online, we've been drifting, eyes shut, asleep for months. If that's us, we need to wake up, pour ourselves a big mug of Jesus' coming coffee and sober up.

I guess as we reflect on all this, it's possible we might just have a feeling of, I'm weary of waiting. I'm tired, I'm struggling, I'm suffering, it's hard.

And we are often faint-hearted, just like the Thessalonians. There's so much else that's exciting, seems more pressing. And Paul knows that and he knows how we feel, so he wants to make sure we have the final destination in view.

[18:39] Jesus is coming, so stay on your toes. Because it's going to be wonderful. This is not aimless waiting. And knowing what's coming makes all the difference.

So what is the goal? What is going to happen when Jesus returns? What's the aim of waiting?

Verse 9. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

On the day Jesus returns, those trusting him will be saved from God's just anger because of Jesus' death at the cross.

And whether we die before he returns or it happens while we're still living, the goal, the end is the same. It is all so that we might live with him.

That we might live with Jesus, the one who is the source of life and light and love. We'll get to be with him forever.

[19:55] We set our alarms to go off in the morning. And what is coming determines how we respond to the beeps. I don't know anyone who jumps out of bed to get to a finance meeting, though looking around, perhaps one or two of you.

But if it's a joyful thing, a joyful day, a celebratory occasion, or maybe it's getting up to get to the airport for a flight, our enthusiasm shifts.

And even more so, if whatever is coming includes time with our favorite people. So we're on our toes waiting for Jesus' return because we'll get to live with him.

Separation from family and friends has marked this year, hasn't it, because of COVID. And separation from Jesus is a mark of life in this world now. But then we'll live with him, no longer separated.

And notice, it's not tenants in the same building. It's not a kind of glance across the playground. It's personal. It's intimate.

[21:06] It's close. It's living with Jesus. I wonder if sometimes we imagine Jesus' return bringing in a world like this one, but just a little bit better, less gray, more sunshine.

Or we explain it, something like this. You know, just imagine a place that is, it's got all the good stuff in this world and none of the bad stuff.

Imagine that. And that'll be good. And that's true. But you can take all of that good stuff that this world can offer us.

And without Jesus, it will be no good at all. Because the Christian hope is not this life with added vaccines or this life with no more COVID.

Not even a better world with endless joy. No, the heart of Christian hope is Jesus. The end goal of his return, if we've put our trust in him, we'll get to be with him.

[22 : 08] That's what all the waiting on our toes is for. And it will be wonderful. I had a brilliant godmother, Mary.

When I became a Christian at 18, she was delighted. She said, I've been praying for this all my life, all of your life. And when I would come home from university, I'd go and see her.

And we'd have a cup of tea together and we'd chat and we'd pray. And at some point during the conversation, almost every time I saw her, she'd say, Jake, Jake, I'm so looking forward to seeing him.

And I naively thought that she was talking about her husband who died a few years ago. But she quickly corrected me. No, I can't wait to go and live with Jesus.

She was old, but she was on her toes, longing for Jesus' return. Day by day, she would faithfully help others to be on their toes too.

[23 : 09] Her waiting for Jesus was infectious because she knew it was going to be wonderful. Jesus is coming. So stay on your toes.

You'll get to live with him. And to that end, verse 11. Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing.

Can we see how this helps the Thessalonians in their weariness, under pressure, amidst the danger of drifting off? They need to be adventing each other.

As they wait, they're to be encouraging one another with the reminder, Jesus is coming. Stay on your toes. It's going to be wonderful. So these words from Paul, and then shared by the Thessalonians amongst each other day by day.

They wake up those who are about to doze off. It's a cold glass of water to the face. And it's a re-energizing hug for the weary. Brothers and sisters, stay alert.

[24 : 15] But Jesus is coming, Paul says. And so as we head into Christmas, into a whirlwind of festivities, into all the highs and lows, the likely joys and certainly potential sorrows, let us be adventing each other, calling each other, texting each other.

Jesus is coming. As we go for walks in the park, give each other a socially distanced nudge. Hey, he's coming. Perhaps given the way we've been meeting as a church, there are people you haven't seen for months and months.

This afternoon or later this week, why not scroll through your phone book, find some of those people, and send them a text, encouraging them with the prospect of Jesus' return and living with him.

It might just be the wake-up they need. It might help them in their weariness. It's the advent. It's a season that wants to help us long for the day that we'll live with Jesus.

So might the prospect of his sudden return keep us awake? Might the promise of living with Jesus revive our weariness and cause us to rise onto our tiptoes in anticipation?

[25 : 39] It's going to be wonderful. Stay on your toes. Let's pray. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

Our Father, we praise you, our great God, for the prospect of living with Jesus.

Please, would that certain reality for those who are trusting Jesus encourage us, spur us on, keep us awake?

And Father, we pray, please, that this Christmas, as we go into all the festivities, please would you help us to be reflecting on him and his certain return.

And Father, please help us, each of us, to be encouraging one another that it's coming, building each other up in light of his return. Amen. We ask that in his name.

[26 : 51] Amen. Amen.