**How much longer?** 22/10/23dkm

Read: Matthew 24:29-44,1Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:1-7

Psalms: 25:1-7, 27:7-14, 6, 89:15-16

Have you ever had your house burgled? Many years ago while living in the inner city our rented house was burgled. I cannot recall what was stolen but I do recall the feeling of having my privacy violated, and regretting that I was not ready for the thief. We did not have security cameras back then, but if only I had been home ready for this thief. As I think back, I think I was actually upstairs sleeping! Whenever we went on holidays in India we had students stay in our house to watch out for thieves.

Burglars must have been around in the time of Jesus because he spoke about ‘thieves breaking in to steal your earthly treasures’ (Mat 6:19). He also spoke about the coming of the Lord being like the coming of a thief: ‘For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect’ (Mat 24:44). This ‘coming’ was his second coming, his return on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, the same ‘*parousia*’ about which Paul taught the Thessalonians.

The second coming of Jesus is an essential part of the gospel. The incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and the return of Jesus, are all included in the gospel, all features of the good news that we believe. The second coming of Jesus will not be good news however, if you do not believe; it will be bad news because at this time the wrath of God will be revealed in judgment upon everyone who has refused to humble themselves before the Lord.

The Thessalonians believed that Jesus was coming again, but were concerned about brethren who had died. In chapter 4 Paul assures them that those who have ‘fallen asleep’ in Jesus will ‘rise first’ to meet the Lord in the air. Here in chapter 5 he addresses their concern about ‘times and seasons’, or about when Jesus will return. The disciples asked Jesus this question when he spoke about his coming at the end of the age; they asked about a sign of his coming (Mat 24:3). These believers were asking the same question, and believers down through the ages to this very day ask the same question: ‘When will Jesus come again?’

If you are asking this question, and it is good that you do, then listen to the answer found in the Bible. Some Christians are not content with this answer, while others give little or no thought to this part of the gospel. We will look at the teaching of the apostle Paul under two subheadings: ‘When will Jesus return?’ and, ‘How shall we then live?’

**1. When will Jesus return?**

The simple answer to this question is, ‘No one knows, not even the angels or the Son’ (Mat 24:36). So it is futile for you or me to try to pinpoint this day- although people still try to do so. Sure, Jesus gave signs, signs for us to take note of but not to start predicting the time of his return. Just because we do not know the day when Jesus will return does not mean we can disregard this day. Quite the opposite- it means we must be ready all the time because Jesus will come like a thief in the night. He will come at a time we least expect, unless we are expecting him at any time.

Paul writes of ‘times and seasons’ (5:1). Both are markers of time, the first being time on the clock and the second the passage of seasons, a more qualitative measure; we have seasons of tribulation and seasons of rejoicing. He writes about this matter although he had no reason to do so because the Thessalonians knew perfectly well, or should have known, about the day of the Lord. Paul would have taught them what Jesus said on this matter even though the gospels were not yet written.

In the OT the prophets wrote extensively of the day of the Lord (Isa 13:6f, Amos 5:18f, Zech14). The day of the Lord was the day of God’s coming in judgment. While this was seen within the history of Israel, its ultimate reference is to the whole world and the end of the age, as indicated by Jesus (Mat 24:14, 35), by Peter (2Peter 3:10), and by Paul in this letter (5:2). Peter, like the prophets, refers to this as the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:9), and Paul refers to a day appointed by God in which Jesus will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

People who do not believe in Jesus, or listen to what Jesus says, are in for a great shock on this day of the Lord: ‘Sudden destruction will come upon them’ (5:3). Jesus warns of the wrath of God being poured out on this day, and to weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mat 24:51), and so does Paul when he writes, ‘Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come’ (1:10). Not believing in this day does not mean it will not come or that you will escape the wrath of God. No one, dead or alive, will miss this day, but those who know the grace of God in salvation will not suffer the wrath and destruction of this day.

Paul writes of people declaring, ‘Peace and safety!’ before destruction comes upon them (5:3). Is this where Neville Chamberlain got the words he famously spoke after meeting with Hitler in 1938? He returned to England declaring, ‘Peace in our time!’ After the War the United Nations was founded with the charter of international peace and security. Do we see the world at peace today? There are more wars and more refugees fleeing war zones than ever before. The UN has turned its attention to the climate emergency, a seemingly easier problem to solve- despite the fact that not a single person has died because of climate change! Computer models tell us the world will too hot to live in by 2050, and many who believe this so-called science rather than the Bible are paranoid. I saw some old men with a sign ‘climate emergency’ and banging on tin cans in the street the other day; I should have given them five dollars for a cup of coffee to calm their nerves!

People today are under an even greater delusion than Neville Chamberlain because they think they know when the world will end, and they think they can stop it ending. Please stop worrying about greenhouse gases and start fearing God, who alone knows when the world will end. God will bring this end suddenly and with greater disaster than the old men in the street ever imagined! To such people we say, ‘Do not fear but believe in Jesus and you will escape the fiery end when it comes’ (2Peter 3:10). Such an end will come on the day determined by almighty God.

As believers, ‘we will not fear even though the earth is removed and the mountains are carried into the midst of the sea’ (Ps 46:2). We do not fear because the Lord who created this world is in control. We have a responsibility to care for his creation of course, but are not demi-gods determining when the world will end! We do not fear the day of the Lord either, because although it is the day of divine wrath and the end of the world, it is the day of salvation for you who believe. When Jesus comes again he will gather the elect from all the nations to be with him forever (4:17).

To repeat what you have just heard, we will not slowly sizzle or slowly drown. A pregnant woman does not slowly get labour pains- so I am told! These pains come suddenly, day or night. She knows she will have a baby but despite all the benefits of modern medicine we still have women giving birth while on the way to hospital. The sudden onset of birth pains is an apt metaphor for the sudden destruction of this world, according to the apostle Paul (5:3). The signs are there, and there is no escape, but just when the end will come no one knows.

**2. How then shall we live?**

The day of the Lord or the end of the age will come like a thief in the night or like birth pains, and the ungodly will face sudden destruction- not annihilation but weeping and gnashing of teeth in hell. ‘But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief’ (5:4). Paul draws a strong contrast at this point between believers and unbelievers. If you believe in Jesus listen to Jesus when he says, ‘I will come again and receive you unto myself’ (John 14:3). Jesus tells us how he is coming- ‘on the clouds of heaven’- and he tells us what will happen when he comes- ‘he will gather his elect’- and destroy the wicked. What he has not told us is when this will be. What he tells us is to be ready at all times.

Jesus told a parable about the servant given duties to do while the master of the house was away. If this servant starts bullying others and getting drunk because he thinks the master will be a long time coming, he will get a terrible shock when the master suddenly shows up, and he will be severely dealt with by the master (Mat 24:45-51). I found that in visiting projects in India the people made everything look good for me. So I decided to visit unannounced to see what work was really going on. You may have noticed me doing the same in the church!

As believers we are not in darkness but in the light (5:4). There is a play on the word ‘day’; the day of the Lord is a certain day but ‘day’ also stands in contrast to night. As believers we are sons of the day and sons of the light (5:5). As a fellow believer with the Thessalonians, Paul includes himself when contrasting sons of the day and sons of the night in verse 5. Darkness symbolises evil because people seek the cover of darkness to hide their evil deeds 5:7, John 3:20). The thief usually comes at night, so we use lights to deter him- sensor lights are very effective. When the light suddenly comes on the thief runs away. Then owner on the other hand is pleased to have the light as he walks up his drive.

Many live in fear of light being shone upon their lives, which happens when emails, text messages, and phone calls are revealed. The person who turns away from evil does not fear this light. Daniel’s accusers looked high and low for evidence of evil in his life but found nothing. It was like this with our Lord and saviour of course. Is it like this with you?

Paul urges us to be watchful and sober. Sober is not in contrast to drunkenness, although this is included; drunkenness is sin. Sober has the wider sense of being temperate and self-controlled. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, a fruit that all believers should display. There will be ups and downs in the Christian life, times of struggle and times of rejoicing. But we should be trying to walk on a level path, a path of patient endurance, a path of watching and waiting upon the Lord and his coming. Our focus as believers will not be on the inflation rate or the stock market, not on what we can buy or where we can go. Our focus must be on the Lord, and on his coming again.

The Bible tells us not to ‘forsake the assembling of ourselves… so much the more as you see the day approaching’ (Heb 10:25). When you are not here in the assembly on the Lord’s Day, what are your thoughts? If you are out shopping, or at a party, or at the football, I doubt your thoughts will be on the Lord and his coming. Even as you are here worshipping, are your thoughts on the Lord and his coming? Are you ready to welcome your beloved Lord and saviour? The early church used the greeting, ‘O Lord, come!’ (1Cor 16:22). When you are preparing for marriage your thoughts will be on the one you love day and night. As a believer, a much greater marriage awaits you; what thought do you give to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9)?

We must stay awake day and night if we want to be ready for the coming of our Lord, or in this other picture, for our glorious husband. When Paul writes, ‘Let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober’ (5:6) he is referring to the way we live, not to natural sleep. Night and sleep symbolise darkness and evil. Day and watching symbolise light and life, life in Jesus Christ. We must be living every day looking to the Lord, looking to please our Lord in all we say and do, and looking for his return in glory.

Let us not begin to doubt and say, ‘All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation’ (2Peter 3:4). The Lord’s return will mean sudden destruction for worldly people, but salvation for you who believe and endure to the end. You will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and thus shall always be with the Lord. This is my great and glorious hope, the hope that gets me out of bed every morning- what about you?