**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11** November 8, 2020

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*1 Thessalonians 5:1Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

*4But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 7For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**I.** It was part of the rhythm of our lives. During the second week of December and again the second week of May every year, we students would huddle so thick around the high school academic bulletin board that the professors coming out of the faculty lounge couldn’t pass us in the hall. The semester test schedules had just been posted. For most, it was like a horror show; they didn’t want to look, but they just couldn’t take their eyes off it. Faces went pale. Others walked away stunned. It was a day of high drama. “The tests are coming! We are doomed!”

Of course, some students, those who learn like fish swim—you could see the triumph in their eyes. It was a challenge they already knew they would overcome. It was a hurdle their long academic legs would easily clear. Their only concern was whether they would place first, second or third in the class on a given test. (I don’t know what schools do now, but back in those days, test results were later posted on the same academic board. Teachers tried to make it anonymous by using codes, but we could pretty well guess who owned the three or four highest and the three or four lowest grades.)

Anyway, I have gotten off the point. The point is that different students waited for those tests in radically different attitudes. For some it was fear and terror. For others it was a joyful vindication of study habits and God-given talents. There were more attitudes. There were those who didn’t care, and those who took it merely as a fact of life. Totally different attitudes to days of academic judgment.

Attitudes toward the Jesus’ Day of Judgment are even more extreme. But here is the big difference. While experience teaches students to have a pretty good idea of how they will fare on the tests, people’s attitudes toward Judgment Day are often, maybe even usually, way off mark.

What kinds of thoughts go through your mind about Judgment Day, the day our reading calls, ***“the day of the Lord”***?

Long ago, the Christian Church tried to make sure all Christians would melt in fear at the thought of Judgment Day. Maybe you have seen some of those medieval woodcuts and paintings where artists seem to take joy in painting terrifying and gory scenes. Now without reason. As in our Gospel reading, Jesus made it clear that, for some, Judgment Day will be the beginning of a terror never to end. About himself Jesus prophesied that on that Day he will say to unbelievers, *“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil”* (Mt 25:41). But does Jesus want his people, his believers, to fear Judgment Day? Hmmm.

There are those who don’t believe there will be a Judgment Day with real punishment to hell. “A loving God wouldn’t do that!” they declare. Jesus begs to differ—and if Jesus begs to differ, you should reconsider.

Others think that only a handful of the very worst will be lost. But that is sticking your head in the sand. Jesus said, *“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it”* (Mt 7:13).

There are other attitudes, too. I remember once being at a funeral where the church members sang the song, “What Then?” I don’t know if you know that one. It’s not a happy song. “*After the pulses shall cease to beat, When at the throne the Lord you meet, Waiting your doom at the judgment seat, Careless soul, what then?*” They sang it like an accusation, like they were singing it at one or two people who had darkened the doorsteps of far more taverns than churches. They sang it like those fire and brimstone preachers who seem to find just a little too much joy in preaching about hell. Is that the right way to think of Judgment Day? Just waiting for the heathen to get their due? No. (By the way, that hymn didn’t make the cut for our hymnal.)

So, how would God have the Christian feel about Judgment Day? I’m not talking about the facts of Judgment Day. There will be another time to spend 20 minutes on that worthy subject. But the question is, “How do you feel about Judgment Day?” Or better, “How does God want you to feel about Judgment Day?”

This reading teaches Christians how to measure Judgment Day. Now there is one thing to be perfectly clear about. I said that this is how *Christians* think of that day, and that is who the Apostle Paul is talking to in this letter.

It reminds me of an opinion I heard years ago. Someone suggested that people of other nations should get some sort of vote in the American election because American elections affect everyone else’s lives in the world. That’s flattering, but it doesn’t matter. It’s not their election, it’s ours. Again, there are things that happen in families, and families deal with those things. And frankly, when it comes down to it (as long as it isn’t criminal) how that family deals with things isn’t up for the neighbors to decide. And when First Thessalonians talks about Judgment Day, it is important to remember that this is the teaching for the family of Christ, for people who know Jesus Christ as their Savior from their sin. In this reading, Paul twice calls the hearers ***“brothers.”*** He calls them ***“children of the light.”*** He says that ***“God appointed us… to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

*Our* view of Judgment Day is completely changed in Christ Jesus. While Judgment day ***“will come like a thief in the night”*** – the New Testament’s favorite phrase to describe it – like a thief, it will only bring loss for those who aren’t prepared. For those who know their Savior, Judgment Day might be unexpected, but in a very different way. It will be a day of vindication, like the overachievers at the academic bulletin board. As Jesus said somewhere else, ***“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”*** (Lk 21:28). I love that. Like hostages when the special forces burst into the terrorist bunker. Lift up your heads! Cheer, be glad, think about going home to your family, the nightmare is over! That’s Judgment Day for you and me. What joy!

**II.** But here’s the thing. If you know the outcome in the future, what are you going to do now? If you as a Christian know that—in spite of the foreboding name, in spite of the morbid art—for you, Judgment Day holds no terror, what now? This is the thought that the Apostle Paul would have us gnaw on: **When you’ve got it made, you… You what?**What do you do?

Human nature, being what it is, makes knowing what is going to happen before it happens a bad thing. How many superior teams have lost because they didn’t take next week’s opponent seriously? How many of history’s great military upsets happened specifically because one side was so superior that they let it go to their heads? An assured outcome usually leads to bad things. It can happen with Christians. “I’m forgiven. Heaven is mine. Why sweat it? I already have eternal life, what more will church get me.” It’s the Christian who shows up just enough, schmoozes the pastor just enough to stay on the books and reserve the right to a Christian funeral. It’s the believer who never has a dime for the down and out, or even the minute to find out if they really need it. It’s the church-goer who knows that his children need a spiritual leader, but doesn’t have time for family devotions and prayer. “They know about their Savior. They’ll get to heaven. I can do more for them if I put my time in on my career.” Spiritual laziness is one possible reaction.

It’s the young person who drifts away, sampling all the world’s philosophical wares, imagining that even if they don’t have both hands tightly grasping Jesus, they at least have one hand touching the hem of his robe. Knowing the outcome leads us to deceive ourselves.

But there are uglier reactions to sure and certain blessings.

There was a man who knew that he would be married on the morrow. Everything was in place. Families were in town. Preacher had a sermon. Rehearsal went great. It can’t be called off now. And the night before it all he cheated on his very soon to be spouse. That’s called putting a nail in the coffin before there’s a body in it.

There are Christians who think that they can play both sides of the field. “I have heaven. Let me enjoy this world too!” It’s out there. The libertine who figures, “I’ll just ask forgiveness.” It emboldens them to grasp for more. If my uncle’s the police chief, why worry about the law? I’m 18, why worry about what my parents say? It’s ugly. It’s human nature’s reaction to God’s promise of eternal life. And we Christians do have to battle those sinful temptations. And even more, we need Christ’s blood-bought forgiveness for those attitudes.

Let me ask again, **When you’ve got it made, you… You what?**

Maybe that’s why the medieval church wanted their people to be frightened of Judgment Day. They knew that Christians, too, have this old sinful way inside them. They knew that Christians, too, are tempted to do all sorts of bad things with sure blessings. And so they thought that the only way to keep people from taking advantage of blessings in bad ways is to tell them that they don’t have those blessings! If they are shaking in their boots that God is going to let them have it, and for eternity, maybe we can preserve some sort of order and discipline.

But 1 Thessalonians would have us look at it all in a very different light.

Another preacher tried to explain why we do God-pleasing things with a picture from everyday life. Every mother will immediately understand this one: “You don’t put a ribbon in your girl’s hair to make her beautiful, you do it because she is beautiful.” (F. Craddock) And Christians don’t do good things to make it to heaven; Christians do good things because we are going to heaven. And if you don’t understand that, you don’t understand the first thing about acting like a Christian. If you don’t understand that, doing what God wants will always be a chore and a bore to you. But if you understand it, then every act that is according to God’s will is a joy, even if at first we don’t want to do it, it becomes a joy, because we know that a God who would offer his own Son on the altar for rebellious people is never going to tell us to do something that will be bad for us.

Our heavenly Father is not a manipulative God who motivates his people with fear. Instead he lets his loving blessings work its magic inside of us, ***“You, brothers… are all sons of the light and sons 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 alert and self-controlled… putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that… we may live together with him.”***

For the Christian, God would have Judgment Day not be a day of fear, terror or warning. He would have it be an inspiration to our lives in this world.

**When you’ve got it made, you… You what?**

First thing, we do have it made. We have it made in the shade, because of Jesus Christ. Second, when that the Day of Judgment, the Great Life End Examination holds no fear for us, we cannot help but thankfully live to God’s glory. Amen.