

*Romans 13:11 And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup>The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. <sup>13</sup>Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. <sup>14</sup>Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

### **READY, EVEN IF HE SHOULD SURPRISE US**

#### **I. His Arrival Will Be a Surprise**

The headline read, "Soldier surprises family on Thanksgiving Day." They had hoped that, God-willing, he would come back someday. But they didn't know the day, and he didn't tell them. It was a huge surprise to everyone around that Thanksgiving table. I imagine a few of you have done this over the years.

Watching the videos of similar surprises, you will see that every single surprise homecoming brings out a huge amount of emotion. This was the day all had been waiting for, and dare I say it, praying for. But in a most happy way, it caught them by surprise.

But here is an important part about these surprises: they only work if you have a strong relationship. If you have a weak relationship, the reasons or perceptions might not be a tearfully happy reunion. One returning soldier might surprise someone back home, hoping to find out "what is really going on." Or if there is a weak relationship, the one who is waiting back home might think, "I wonder why he surprised me. Is he checking up on me?"

Yet if the relationship is strong, oh, what joy! And here is another thing: If these people have a strong relationship, even if the wife back home doesn't expect her husband back for half a year, she will still be ready for him to come back at any time. Oh, maybe she won't get her hair done every day. But she will be always glad, always ready to see his face. In a strong relationship, the soldier, too, trusts and knows she will be waiting and glad to see him no matter what day he returns from deployment.

I start like this, because some people who claim the name of Christ seem to be indifferent about their relationship with Christ. He has gone. He has been gone for a very long time. And so they seem to think, "He's gone, far away. I don't know when he'll be back. He abandoned me. So, who cares?"

Yet Jesus will return. His return is 100% certain. Secondly, his *time* of returning is 100% uncertain. It will happen, but we have no idea when.

As the believers once waited thousands of years for the Savior to come and save them in his first coming at Christmas, we believers have been waiting another 2,000 years for Jesus to come a second time. We don't know if Jesus will come back in our lifetimes. Perhaps he will. But even if he doesn't, we should be ready at all times. Maybe we will meet him in our sleep at 99 years old. Maybe in a car accident at age 18. Maybe with a heart attack, age 47. Just because we don't know the time we meet Jesus doesn't give us the freedom to act like it doesn't matter.

When a soldier is deployed, if his marriage is strong, the spouse and children stateside will be living every day like he could come back at any time.

This is what we would expect. Then why do so many Christians who know that Jesus bled and died because of their sins, why is it that so many Christians waiting for Jesus' special coming whenever it might be, why is it that they could not care less? They live however they want to live. They are pretty

much indifferent about Jesus, other than a vague, “I try to do my best.” They seem to be ok with welcoming him back with a yawn. Do you know what this sounds like? It sounds like a broken relationship. It sounds like their Christian “faith” is just a marriage of convenience, something that really doesn’t matter, and that it would be ok if something else came along.

***“The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”*** (11). Every day lived on this earth is a day closer to when Christ and his people will be fully reunited. Then there will be no more long-distance phone calls, of staring at pictures full of memories. Christ himself will physically appear and be with us and sit with us at his table in heaven.

When Christ returns, his people will receive the final, full deliverance from all the results of sin. What if he made a surprise appearance? Are you ready for Christ to enter the door? Are you eagerly waiting for him? Or are you pretty much indifferent to the whole situation? ***“Wake up from your slumber.”***

Wake up, because it is possible for people who profess Christ to fall asleep and to fall from faith. Wake up, because we are surrounded by enemies. Those enemies cannot take us when we are spiritually watchful and remain in Jesus’ strong hands. But if we should get foolish and wander off, well one hymn-writer wrote,

*I walk in danger all the way; The thought shall never leave me  
That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting to deceive me.  
This foe with hidden snares May seize me unawares  
If e'er I fail to watch and pray; I walk in danger all the way. (431:1)*

Shake off the sleep, wake up!

## **II. Putting Off the Shameful Clothes**

Our text extends the picture of waking from sleep, ***“Wake up from your slumber... The night is nearly over... So let us put aside the deeds of darkness... Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”*** Wake up! Leave the darkness. Stop acting like it is night.

Once in a while, after a dreadful crime, the reporters interview the neighbors, and you hear people say, “I just never thought he could have done something like that!” You know what? This criminal succeeded in doing what the sinful nature in each of us tries to do.

Each of us has a sinful nature that is trying to get away with whatever it can, without other people finding out. We each have our own sins and faults that we do everything we can to hide. It can be outright immorality, it can be hidden pride, it can be lies or greed or laziness. Our sinful nature, having had its hand slapped enough times, is very good at letting temptation lie dormant until it knows that there are no watchful eyes. And as soon as the eyes are off, it races into sin. Our sinful nature loves sin. And it loves to hide sin.

But no sin can be hidden from God. And even if we think Jesus doesn’t know because he is far away, he does. Living in any sin while Christ waits to come a second time is an act of betrayal. It is like one spouse zeroing out the bank account while the other is deployed. It pushes the entire relationship to the brink, perhaps even over the brink.

Paul wants these Christians to remain in their faith in spite of the spiritual warfare all around them, so he warns about sin: drunkenness, immorality, arguments. And while we might look at this list and think, “Well I am not a drunkard, and I don’t cheat on my spouse,” remember that Paul spoke these words to people who had grown up pagans, only to become Christians late in life. For them, these rather crass sins had been their lifestyle. They had been living like this, and so these were real temptations to them. And maybe that is where you are.

But you, if you had strong Christian parents and maybe a Christian grade school education, perhaps this list of sins that Paul writes is a bit shocking to you. But you know that even though your sins may not make for shocking headlines, there is still a spiritual war inside of you. You know that if you

should, by God's help, overcome temptations to commit the biggest and boldest of sins, the sinful nature goes underground and finds other, more secret ways to war against your soul.

And if we should outgrow any temptations, our sinful nature always finds new temptations. For the very young, the greatest temptation is to break out from under the authority of parents and others. Through the young adult years, the most common sins are associated with wild living. As we age, the desire for wild living may decrease, but now the sins of indifference to spiritual matters and pursuit of worldly treasures come to the fore. A few more years down the line we find that worry and lovelessness, and maybe even pride, are the enemies on the battlefield of our heart.

Paul's last word of verse 14 reminds us that these battles will persist as long as we live on this earth. ***"Do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."*** Paul, talks about overcoming "the desires of the sinful nature," but he never hints at eliminating them. This is a lifelong spiritual fight, like medication that we must take, not for a week or a month, but medication that the doctor tells us, "You will have to take this for the rest of your life." Those are hard words. There is something very haunting when I know I must take a certain medicine "for the rest of my life." It is a reminder of our mortality.

And so is the reminder that we must fight sinful desires for our entire lives. We will never be free from them. And if we do manage to defeat and eradicate one sinful desire, like weeds others will pop up in its place.

Which makes Paul's assurance in the first verse all the better: ***"Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."*** While we will fight temptation for our entire lives, we will not fight temptation forever. Our Savior Jesus has secured our place in heaven, a place where there is no temptation. It is not achieved by a perfect battle record on our part, but by the battle he won for us. It is ours, and we are only waiting for the day of our hero returns.

### **III. Putting on Jesus' Armor of Light**

As we draw nearer to the goal. Paul's focus is not on failure, but on success. It is an assurance that each night, as we lay our heads down to sleep, committing our souls to God, our salvation is one day closer.

This is not only a salvation from the guilt of our sins. It also speaks of a future salvation from the temptations to sin. Jesus came the first time, that first Christmas, to remove the punishment of sin. But the second time he will come to remove any residue of sin. Gone will be the temptations to put God in the backseat. Gone will be the temptations to bend other people to serve what we want whether physically or emotionally.

In the meanwhile, we fight temptation, not with our own strength because we know that will never be enough. But our reading tells us, ***"So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ."*** We arm ourselves with the armor and weapons that God himself provides. The power to defend ourselves from all temptation, and the power to go on offense and accomplish God's will. We simply let God's weapons work with their own strength.

We not only conquer sin, but we also live positively. In place of drunkenness, by God's strength we strive for sobriety and moderation. In place of immorality and debauchery, we strive for self-control. In place of in-fighting and envy, we seek to serve other people.

When our last moment on this earth comes, whether through Jesus' coming to this world or our departure to another, may his surprise appearance at our doorstep find you prepared. May the end of your life of battling the deeds of darkness in Jesus' name, be the entry to a permanent reunion with your Savior. Amen.