

True confession: I have a recurring nightmare about being unprepared for worship. Usually, it goes something like this: For some reason I’ve left my sermon until the last minute. And I sit down and try to write it, but one thing after another keeps me from doing it. Finally, it’s service time, so I head to worship with whatever notes I had scribbled down. I can’t find my gown – must have left it at home. So I start the service with just a shirt and tie. When it’s time to preach, I flounder, then try to look at my notes, but can’t see them – and suddenly realize I forgot my glasses.

Now, lest you think I’m crazy, turns out this is a nightmare a lot of other pastors have, too: Being unprepared. In fact, I bet you’ve had similar nightmares – just not about leading worship. Maybe in yours you get to work and realize today was the day you were supposed to give that presentation – only you didn’t prepare anything. Or you’re at school, and the teacher is handing out the test, and you’re looking at the questions and realizing you didn’t study well-enough for this.

It’s pretty clear: We want to be prepared. Nowhere is that truer than for the most important day in all of our futures: Judgment Day. Standing with all mankind before God the Judge as the books are opened...the thought of being unprepared for that day is worse than a nightmare. That’s why Paul’s words this morning are so important. Writing to believers like us about Judgment Day, he gives us words of comfort to calm our fears and words that keep us ready for it. Listen as Paul tells you You’re not in the dark anymore. 1) You’re ready for his coming. 2) Stay ready for his coming.

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

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

*I. You’re ready for his coming*

Paul had only spent about three weeks in Thessalonica before Jewish persecution drove him out of town. And so there were some things about Jesus’ return that the Thessalonians weren’t clear on. For example, seems like they thought that believers who would die before Jesus came back would miss out on eternal life. So Paul just got done reassuring them that wasn’t the case! That the first thing Jesus would do when he came back was raise dead believers, and draw us and them up in the air to be with him forever.

But, Paul says, they *were* clear on the timing of his return. **Now, brothers, about times and dates we don't need to write you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.** Seems like every year there's a new prediction out there about when the world will end. Paul says – and the Thessalonians knew – that's foolish. A thief doesn't usually knock on your door and say, "Hey, Thursday at 3:00am, I'm gonna come and steal your TV." In the same way, Jesus hasn't told us the day and time of his return – just that he's coming, and soon.

But when he does, it will catch a lot of people off guard. Paul says many will be saying, **"Peace! Safety!"** – living with a false sense of security about that day. Maybe they don't think there is a God to whom they are accountable for their every thought, word, and deed. A day of reckoning is laughable to them. Maybe these people do believe God exists, but that since he's a God of love, he'd never do something like punish them for their sins. Maybe they even believe judgment is coming, but are convinced they'll fare okay because they've tried hard to be good and are better than most. Whatever the case, they're not worried about any judgment. "Peace! Safety! We'll be fine!"

Yet Paul says they're in for a horrible surprise on that day. While they're saying, **"Peace and safety,"** **destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.** Birth pains come suddenly. And once they come, there's no turning back – birth is on its way. In the same way, on Judgment Day, destruction will come on these people suddenly. And there's no turning back; they will not escape.

But, Paul says, you're not in the dark anymore. **You, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.** You may not know the day or the hour, but you do know and believe that Judgment Day is coming. You say it every Sunday in the creed, don't you? "From there he will come again to judge the living and the dead." You know it's coming...but how can you be sure you're ready to stand before God? How can you know that day won't bring *you* destruction? How can you have real peace and real safety as you wait for Jesus to return?

Paul didn't leave the Thessalonians in the dark about that one, either. **For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.** Paul says when God brought you to faith in Jesus, he didn't do it just so that he could punish you on the Last Day. He did it so that you would receive salvation on that day! It's a salvation that's yours **through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

How can you be sure that when God opens that book Daniel described in the first lesson, the one that contains your life's story, he won't find any dirt to condemn you for? Because of Jesus. **He died for us,** Paul says. Jesus took your dark and dirty moments to the cross and paid for them there. Through faith in Jesus, they've been expunged from your record – the judge no longer sees them.

How can you be sure there will be no wrath for you to suffer on that day? Because of Jesus. **He died for us.** He suffered God's wrath for your sins in your place – all of it. He told you so, when he said, "It is finished." There is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

You're not in the dark anymore. So even if Jesus comes tonight in your sleep, you don't have to have nightmares about it. **He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we**

**may live together with him.** You can rest your head on your pillow in peace, because whether you're awake or asleep, in Jesus, you're ready for that day.

*II. Stay ready for that day*

But Paul's encouragement for you is: Stay ready for that day. It's interesting, isn't it? Paul starts this lesson saying, "Brothers, we don't need to write you about this." And then what does he do? He writes about it. Why? Could it be because, even though we know Jesus is coming again, we need to be reminded of it?

After all, it's easy to live forgetful of it. How many days do you wake up thinking, "Today might be the day when Jesus comes back?" And when we live forgetful of it, our lives can start to look like people who are still in the dark. God's call to repent loses some of its urgency. Instead of guarding against the sin in our lives, we can grow lax in the struggle, not as concerned about it. And being in God's Word to keep faith in your heart becomes less urgent, too, and with all the other things on our overfilled plates, it can quickly get dropped altogether. A dangerous recipe for spiritual drowsiness that can lead us to doze off altogether!

**Those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.** Yep, that's how people in darkness live: Drunk on this world, unconcerned about their sin or God's Word. But, Paul says, leave that to them! That's not you anymore. **We don't belong to the night or the darkness...we belong to the day!** At the price of his blood, Jesus rescued us from the darkness of sin and death and brought us into the bright daylight of his forgiveness and life. **You are sons of the light and sons of the day!**

You're not in the dark anymore! **So then,** Paul says, **let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.** Think again of the "thief in the night" illustration. If you know he's coming tonight, you just don't know at what time, you're not gonna doze off, are you? You're gonna put the coffee on and maybe keep your shotgun on your lap for protection.

Paul says that's how we wait for Jesus' return. Alert against the dangers of sin in us and around us. Self-controlled, keeping up the fight against sin so it doesn't take control again in our hearts and lives. Making regular use of God's Word, where he gives us protection for that fight far better than a shotgun: He gives us **faith and love** as a **breastplate** against temptation by growing our faith in Jesus and our love for him and others. He gives us the **the hope of salvation** as a **helmet**, guarding our minds from getting too caught up in this world by leading us to long for perfect life with Jesus in the next.

**Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.** Do you know one way some early Christians did that? Instead of greeting each other with the standard Jewish, "Shalom," they started greeting each other with a different word: "Maranatha!" Do you know what it means? "He's coming!" Maybe we won't change our greeting, but we would do well to continue to encourage each other with this truth, here and in our homes.

Because it is encouraging! It's not the stuff of nightmares; no, when he comes, Jesus will give you a life so good it's beyond your wildest dreams. Because, by God's grace, you're not in the dark anymore. Jesus has prepared you for his return. Stay ready until he comes with the light of eternity's glorious day! Amen.

