Awake and Sober
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Last week we saw Paul writing to comfort these new Christians who were grieving the loss of loved ones. And we saw how he tells us, that because of Christ's resurrection and his coming again, we don't need to grieve as those without hope.

But then he opens this next passage with v1, 'Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers…' And he's not suddenly switched to talking about the weather, or how autumn turns into winter, has he? Instead, what's clearly concerning these guys is the question of *when* Jesus' is going to return. Because if they could just know the date, they could be ready for it.

So, it's not just their friends who have died that they're concerned about, is it? It's for themselves, as well. Am I ready to face the Lord?

Now, if we're honest, they're not the only one who worry about that kind of thing, are they? Maybe you don't think about it in terms of Christ's second coming, but what about death itself, and what lies beyond? If I were to die, am I good enough, do I believe enough, to get into heaven? And so they're not the only ones who worry about what will happen to them when they die, or when Jesus returns, are they? Will I be able to stand on that day?

And so if I could just have an idea of when that day was going to happen, if I knew the times and the seasons, I could get myself ready for it.

Well, Paul's answer to not being afraid on that day is very different. But first he tells them what won't help them.

A Dangerous Peace and an Unsafe Security
On Wednesday evening we sat and watched Death Comes to Pemberley. It's a film adaptation of PD James sequel to Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. And if you know either story, you'll know that two of the characters, Mrs Bennett, and her daughter Lydia, are total drama queens. So much so, that when death does come to Pemberley, they are hysterical and the local doctor has to give them both a calming draught – which was some kind of heavy sedative. And as a result, when all the action is going on, these two are now snoring away in their beds. Death is stalking the woodlands around Pemberley, and they're fast asleep.

Well, look at what Paul writes in v3: 'While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them.' So, there is a kind of peace, a kind of well-being, that acts like a calming draught, like a sedative, or an anaesthetic, and it gives you a false sense of security. It numbs you to the danger you're in, to the destruction that is heading your way.

You see, when Paul says people were saying, "Peace and Security", he is quoting Roman Empire propaganda. So just as today a politician might campaign under the banner, 'Law and Order', so Rome made a great play of having brought 'peace and security' to the Empire. Roman coins were minted with Pax, the goddess of peace on one side, and Securitas, the goddess of security on the other. So every time someone was tempted to ask, what has Rome ever done for me? They just

had to take a coin from their pocket. Answer: Peace and Security is what Rome has done for you.

It was Rome's way of saying, why would you want to rebel from our rule? We're the one who gives you what you really want. Because which of us don't want to live in peace and to feel secure.

Now, of course, you and I don't have Roman officials making those kind of claims, do we? And yet, we have plenty of other stuff that makes the same kind of claims, that tell us, 'this will give you that sense of wellbeing you're looking for. This is what will make your life comfortable, this is what will give you security.' And it might be money, or success, or a beautiful home, or some relationship, or the respect of the crowd. Have this and you'll feel good about yourself. Get this and you'll feel secure. Earn enough, possess enough, achieve enough, sleep with this person, mix with that person, and you'll be ok. And so interestingly, the voices around us are preaching the same message of peace and security that Rome did in Paul's day.

And yet, Paul is saying there is a peace and a security, there is a comfort and a lifestyle, that numbs you to the danger you're in. A peace and a security in this life, that threatens your peace and security in the next. You think all is well with the world, and yet destruction is speeding towards you like an express train.

The Day of the Lord: Sudden but not Surprising

And rather than be drawn into a debate about the timing of the Lord's return, Paul says, v1, 'you have no need to have anything written to you' because they already know that nobody knows when that day will be. Instead, Paul uses two images to show that Jesus will return suddenly.

And the first image he uses is that of a burglary: v2, 'For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.'

Now, over the last few weeks, Lukas and Naomi have been handing out their Save the Date cards so everyone knows when the party's going to be next year. But the burglar doesn't do that does he! Save the date works for weddings, but not for robberies! 'I'd just like to give you advance warning that I'll be coming in through the back window, with my crow bar, at such and such a time, on such and such a date, so that you can plan accordingly,' No! The problem with burglars is that they *don't* announce themselves before hand, they don't tell us when they're going to pitch up.

And in Paul's picture, the reason the thief can catch people unawares is that he comes at night. And it's dark at night, so you can't see him coming, and people sleep at night, or they're drunk at night, so they're not alert to his coming. And Christ's coming will be like that, Paul says – it will catch people asleep and unaware.

But the second image Paul uses is from the labour ward. Verse 3, 'While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come

upon them *as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman*, and they will not escape.' Now, imagine an expectant mum waddling around 9 months pregnant. There's a certain inevitability about what's going to happen, isn't there? She knows, and everyone knows, that at some point real soon, those contractions are going to start. She *knows* they're coming. So when they do come, she doesn't go, 'pain, I've got pain, what's happening to me?' Er, you're in labour. 'Labour? Pain? No one told me that!' No! You look at someone expecting, and everyone knows what's coming, there's zero surprise about it.

And yet, getting sucked into living for peace and security, and going for comfort, is like someone who sees a pregnant woman at 9 months and says, 'you've got nothing to worry about. Pain? Nah, it's all made up.' Jesus coming back? What do they know!

What do they know?! She's pregnant, there's going to be a baby, and before that there's going to be pain. And it's going to come suddenly and she won't be able to escape it. And Jesus' coming will be just like that, Paul says. That just as labour pains are inevitable and come suddenly, so will be the sudden destruction of Christ's coming. And people won't be able to escape it. In fact, to think you could escape it, would be like a moth thinking he can fly head-first into a raging forest fire, and come out the other side alive.

Now, of course today, we hear talk of judgment and destruction and we don't like it. We like the idea of a God of love coming to rescue people, we are much less keen on the idea of a God of wrath coming to condemn. And yet, deep down, we all want to see justice done, don't we? We listen to the news, or we look at history, and we think it profoundly unfair and unjust when the guilty get away with it. So deep down, we want to see justice done, we want there to be a day of reckoning, a day when wrongs are righted. We want that, provided that we, and those we love, are not caught up in it.

So, the reality is that we are ok with justice and judgment for those we think are worse than us, but for ourselves what we want is not justice, but mercy. The problem thought is that whilst we have this habit of setting the bar low enough so that we get in, God's bar of justice and righteousness is so high that none of us can get in. Which means that what we want, what we need, is for our judge to become our saviour.

And that, Paul says, is why the Day of the Lord does not need to terrify you. You see, whilst that Day will come suddenly, and you can't do or know anything about the timing, you can do something about whether you are awake or asleep when the burglar comes. And whilst all of us deserve to be caught up in the firestorm of God's wrath, amazingly it is God who rescues us from it.

No Fear of that Day

Look at v4-5: '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 Paul sets up this contrast, between darkness and night on the one hand, and light and day on the other. And whether Christ comes

in the night-time, or the daytime spiritually speaking, whether you are prepared for his coming or not, whether you are caught by surprise or not, whether you have anything to fear at his coming or not, depends entirely on which of those two realms you are living in: in the darkness or in the light, in the night or in the day.

But notice, Paul doesn't say, 'this all depends on what you *do'.* He says it depends on who you *are*: that you are children of light. And the reason these guys, or you and I, don't need to fear being overtaken as by a thief coming at night, is that if we're trusting Jesus, we're already children of the day.

Just listen to how Peter puts it, 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him *who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*' (1 Peter 2:9).

So to live without knowing Christ is to live as if never having known the sun to rise on you, never to have experienced its warmth upon your face. It's to have spent all your life in night-time. But to know Christ is to know rays of sunshine break into that darkness and flood your life with light. And if you're a Christian you're a child of light and a child of the day because Christ, the Light of the World, has shone on you.

So, because that's the realm you live in, when Christ returns it will be daytime for you. Will it be sudden? Sure it will. But it need not surprise you.

But the second reason Paul gives for why we don't need to fear that Day is in v9, 'For God has not destined us for wrath.' So whilst destruction is bearing down like an express train, whilst none of us can hope to save ourselves, destruction is not what God has set you apart for, Paul says. Instead, he has destined us, v9, 'to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

So imagine you're watching a film, and there's a scene where your character is caught in a house fire, and the tension is building - is the roof going to fall in on him or not? Will he be consumed by the flames, or suffocated by the smoke? Will he get out or not? Will he survive? And he does get out, he does survive! Now, the first time you watch that film, the suspense will be gripping, and you'll be on the edge of your seat and biting your nails. But the second or third time you watch that scene you'll be thinking, 'yeh, whatever', we know he gets out. It's still exciting, but you know how the story ends. You know how the scriptwriter has written it.

And Paul says that the Scriptwriter of your life, your Heavenly Father, has written the storyline and the plotline, and it doesn't end in wrath, it ends with you being saved. And how does he do it? He does it through our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says, who, v10, 'died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.'

So just listen to that: *Christ died for us*. Which means that wrath is not your destiny, because it was Jesus' destiny. He stepped in and took it for you. The

Scriptwriter, his Heavenly Father, had him killed that you might live, and Jesus willingly had it that way. In fact, he would have it no other way. He died your death, so that you might live his life.

So, rather than our eternal peace and security being built on the sinking sands of our performance, or our dodgy moral record, it's built on the bedrock of Jesus' death and God's destiny for us.

But whilst that Day need hold no fear for us if we trust in Jesus, it will absolutely change the way we live.

Living in the Light of Day

You see these guys probably thought that if they could just know the day Jesus would return, then they'd be ready. But Paul's solution is very different, isn't it. He says it's not knowing the date, but knowing you are a child of the light, and of the day, and knowing that Jesus died for you, that will cause you to live ready for his coming, whenever that comes.

Look at v5-6: '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.' *So then*, Paul says. *Because* we're children of the day, we're going to live like it. We're going to live like those who are awake.

I mean, what would you think of someone who yawned their way through life? Or someone who wore pyjamas to work? Or whenever an important meeting was called, came along carrying his mattress and duvet and as you got to the crucial point in the agenda, he gets up, spreads it all out, crawls under the duvet, and snuggles down to sleep? What would you think of such a man? Wake up! Get real! We don't sleep in the daytime! And Paul is saying, because we are children of the day, we don't sleep through life. We don't live as those morally disengaged. We're not spiritually passive. We don't live as those snoring through life, spiritually pushing up the zeds.

And yet, he says others will live like that: v6, 'Let us not sleep, *as others do'*. In other words, you're going to be surrounded by people who live as though the thief isn't coming. Who fill their lives with, and buy into the propaganda of, the Empire's peace and security and comfort. But that is not going to be what influences you. That's not going to be what shapes the way you see life, or relationships, or money, or success, or service. And though others might be happy to go to their slumber party, you won't. Because Christ has died for you, and set you apart for salvation, and opened your eyes and made you a child of the day, and that will forever change the way you see life and death and everything in between.

But he doesn't just say *stay awake*, does he? He also says, 'be sober' (v6,8). You see, when you're drunk, it affects your sight, it affects your thinking, and it affects your behaviour. So being sober means to see clearly, and think rightly, and behave godly. It's to live in the midst of affluence and comfort and peace and security and not let that intoxicate you. It's to live with an expectancy and an

intentionality. To ask yourself, how does what I am about to do, how I spend my time, or my money, or this job I'm considering, or this relationship I'm pursuing, how does this look in the light that Jesus will return? Would I do this knowing that I will give an account for it?

But of course to be sober also means not to sink in anxiety or run around in a fit of feverish excitement about Jesus' return. Instead Paul says, we'll arm ourselves with the armour of God like sentries standing guard: v8, 'Let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.' And if a sentry is anything he is awake and sober. And when your heart and your head are protected by Christian faith, love and hope, you'll stay awake and you'll stay sober, as you live with the understanding that this world and this life is not all there is.

And yet, Paul doesn't finish there, does he? He says all this is going to lead you to do something else as well as being awake and sober. Verse 11, 'Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.'

Now for Naomi's sports science entrance exam she had to run 3k in under a certain time. But she got her timing wrong, and she ran the first 2k much faster than she meant to, and that left her facing the last k with nothing in the tank to give. And just as she was thinking she'd totally screwed it up, Lukas appeared at the perimeter fence and started cheering her on, and then he began to run with her at the speed she needed to run at, except of course, he was outside the fence with all that more ground to cover.

What was he doing? Just when she felt she was going to fail, he was encouraging her. And there are times, aren't there, when you feel like you haven't got anymore left to give, when you need someone to cheer you on.

And Paul says this job of encouraging one another, and building one another up, is not the job of a few elite – it's for all of us to do: that when we feel weak and unworthy, when we feel fearful and afraid, when we feel slimed by sin, or discouraged by failure and on the verge of quitting the race, we can encourage one another: The King who is coming is the same king who gave his life for you. He will not let you go, he has not destined you for wrath. The Scriptwriter has written something much better for you. So lift up your head and see your King coming on the clouds of glory.