

Children of the Day – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Tell Me When!

“When?” Sometimes we just want to know, “when?” Recently, my son had to be put on a technology ban, which meant that he could not use any of his devices. If it had a screen, then he was banned from it unless it was being used for school work. But the thing that annoyed my son the most, was the fact that we did not give him a date for when the ban would be over. This frustrated him greatly and he desperately wanted to know how long the ban was going to be. “Why can’t you just tell me when?” he would say. “Because we don’t have to!” would come the reply. But why was it so important for him to know when his ban would be over? Was it a negotiating tactic? If he knew how long the ban would be then he might be able to shorten that time through negotiation or manipulation. Maybe it was to fulfil a need for control. By knowing how long the ban would be he could work out how long he needed to be good for, how long he needed to control his behaviour. Maybe it helped him plan ahead. By knowing how long the ban would be he could plan out what he was going to do once the ban was over. There could be all kinds of reasons why my son needed to know “when”, but he had to learn the difficulty of living without knowing when.

Follow Up Question – When?

Last week, we started a new section in 1 Thessalonians. Paul answered a question of whether people would miss out on being in the Kingdom of God if they had died before Jesus’ second coming. We saw how Paul told them that no one would miss out on being in the Kingdom if they trust Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. That all of us, who are Jesus’ people, will be with him in the clouds – will be part of his eternal Kingdom. Today, we get to see Paul answer a follow up question though I do not think it was a question the Thessalonian’s actually asked. I think it was a question that Paul assumed they would be thinking of when they read his answer to their initial question. The Thessalonians were waiting expectantly, living as if Jesus was going to return today. That was why they were so worried about those who had already died before Jesus’ return. So, as the days, months and years passed by, they may have wondered when Jesus was going to return. Paul wrote an answer to this follow up possible question...

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Thieves do not tell you when they are going to come. They do not make an appointment so you can place it in your calendar. That is why our church building now has CCTV cameras on the outside of the building and an alarm on the inside. Because we do not know when the thieves are coming, we need to prepare the church property to be ready each and every night for the possibility of thieves coming that night. Paul is saying that it is the same with Jesus. We do not know when he will be coming. Now, one of the most important things I can tell you about the issue of when Jesus will return is that the Bible is clear that none of us know. Even Jesus said...

Matthew 24:36 "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Any religious leader who prophesies when Jesus will return, giving you some kind of date, should not be listened to! They are a false prophet, or at least a false teacher, and you should run as far away from them as

possible. For, if the Bible does not tell us when, if the angels do not know when, if Jesus did not even know when, then why should we believe anyone who says that they know better than Jesus? We have to get used to living without knowing when.

One Day...

The problem is that many of us live as if Jesus is not coming today. Sure, we believe that he will come someday, but he did not come yesterday, or the day before that. In fact, he has not come for 2000 years, why would I expect him to come today of all days?

1 Thessalonians 5:3 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.

My dad grew up in the country town of Glenn Innes. They always kept their front door locked, but never their back door. I don't believe they ever got robbed and so for them, life was all about "peace and safety". They had nothing to worry about. But if a violent thief had come in the back door, then they would have been unprepared and destruction of life and property would have come on them suddenly. This is when Paul suddenly changed his metaphor. He moves from not knowing when the thief will come to the labour pains of a pregnant woman. You see, not everyone experiences the pain and horror of a violent thief coming into their home. But a pregnant woman knows that if everything goes normally then she can expect to experience the pain of childbirth. It will happen and she cannot escape it, even though we have far better medications and methods today to help pregnant women deal with the pain of labour. But the point is this. Just as a pregnant woman cannot deny that one day she will experience the pain of childbirth, so too can we not deny that Jesus will come again. We may not know when, but he will come again, so we need to be ready.

Night and Day

So, what does it look like to be ready for Jesus' return? Does it really change the way that we live? Paul tells us that it does. Paul spends the next few verses comparing those who live in the dark with those who live in the light. He says...

1 Thessalonians 5:4-7 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

Before the invention of modern lighting, people generally did not do much at night. People cannot see well in the dark and so generally people went to bed when the sun went down and got up in the morning when the sun came up. So, what kind of things did people do in the darkness of night? Sometimes they got up to no good, using the darkness of night to hide their bad actions. That is why Paul talked about the thief coming at night. It is not that thieves cannot come in the day. Clive told me that they were once robbed during the day, when they were at home, though no one saw it happening. But the point is that normally, thieves like the cover of darkness to hide what they are doing. Sometimes people get drunk at night. Now, once again, it is not that people do not get drunk during the day, but generally people are more likely to do their drinking once the day is done. They have clocked off from work and responsibilities and so they relax and indulge in some intoxicating drink to

drown away their worries. And if you are really not going to be concentrating on the worries of the day, then you will spend the night sleeping. Actually, I find that the best night's sleep is after a hard day's work when you have completed all your responsibilities and your job is done. There is nothing more to think about. It is all complete and you can sleep peacefully. And I think that is Paul's point. It is not only that bad things are more likely to happen at night, it is also that we are not awake or alert with an active mind. We are less likely to be thinking clearly, possibly a little bit drunk, and most likely falling asleep. Whereas, during the day, we are more likely to be awake and alert, to be of sober mind and ready to think and work properly. People of the day are active in mind and body.

So, what does that mean for how we live? I think that Paul is telling us to not become complacent, unworried, and unprepared for Jesus' return. Those who do not believe that Jesus will return, who do not believe in Judgement Day, live like it does not matter. They are sleepy, self-indulgent, and cannot be bothered living for Jesus. The sad thing is that sometimes it is hard to see the difference between those who call themselves Christian and those who do not. There are Christian people who do not live like Jesus is coming today. As Keith Green sang years ago, they are asleep in the light. And so, they are ineffectual Christians. But those who are expecting Jesus to come today live active Christian lives. If you wake up in the morning and believe that Jesus may come by that afternoon, then you will be making the most of the day that you have been given. You will not be wasting time and falling asleep in your Christian life, you will be actively serving the Lord while you can.

Armour That Saves

The next problem is that some people may start to think that their active Christian life will be the thing that will save them. They become so anxious about doing things that they place all their hope in what they have done for Jesus. But notice that Paul does not want us to be this way...

1 Thessalonians 5:8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

We could get so worried about being robbed that we buy extra deadbolts to lock the doors of our house and then hide away in the home, but Paul says that deadbolts are not the things that are going to save you on Judgement Day, not even doing lots of good works are going to save you, only Jesus saves you. Belonging to the day means that we go out into the day and work. Yes, we are to be of sober mind, but that does not mean that we can put our faith in our own abilities. Just as good quality armour could save the soldier, so too will the armour of God prove to be our salvation. Faith just means trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour and love talks about how we love others as Christ has loved us. Paul tells us to put on faith and love as a breastplate, which protects our vital organs. Hope of salvation is not a vain hope, a hope where we do not know the outcome. It is an assured hope. A hope that we look forward to, knowing it will happen in due time. As children of the light, we go out into the day as active followers of Jesus. A soldier does not put armour on and then hide in the house behind a deadbolted door. No, we go out into the world, not relying on our own abilities, but on the armour of God, as we are active Christians in that armour. Ultimately, it is the armour that saves us and

knowing that the armour saves us should embolden us to go out into the world as active Christians. Paul goes on...

Condemnation or Salvation

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

For so many people, Judgement Day is all about God coming to judge and condemn them. It is a day of dread, it is a day to be feared and we should worry about it. But too many people are wandering around in the darkness, acting like thieves and drunkards, or are so complacent in their unbelief they do not think there is anything to be feared and so they are simply asleep – not waiting expectantly for Jesus’ return. It will be a day of condemnation for those who do not fear God or trust in Jesus. But for those who are actively waiting for Jesus, then Judgement Day will not be a day of condemnation, it will be the fulfilment of our salvation. Yes, Jesus has already saved us through his death and resurrection, but Judgement Day is the day when God will not condemn us to an eternity in hell, rather we will be brought together with Jesus by the Father’s side. We are saved from condemnation and hell to an eternal relationship with God.

Asleep or Awake

Now, as we have already seen, Paul sometimes like to change analogies or metaphors regularly and we could be confused by what Paul meant in verse 10 if we do not recognise that Paul has changed his analogy once more. Paul had just been comparing those who sleep at night to those who are awake in the day and much of this talk has been explaining this comparison. But now at the end of this passage, Paul says that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. How can those sleeping be saved, if the last few verses were about those who are asleep being condemned? To understand this, we must remember how Paul started this section of 1 Thessalonians. He started by talking about those Christians who had “fallen asleep” or had died before Jesus returned.¹ Last week we heard about how all active followers of Jesus will be caught up in the clouds of heaven, no matter whether we are alive in the body or dead. Paul now finishes off this section by returning to those ideas and saying that whether we are awake or asleep, in other words, whether we are alive or dead, Jesus will save those who have trusted in him for their salvation.

Living with Not Knowing

It is not wrong to ask the question, “When? When will Jesus return?” But sometimes, asking that question can reveal the motivation behind the question. Maybe people ask that question so that they can negotiate with God. They want to know how long they have, to live a life of rebellion before they cover that up with some kind of confession, hoping to be saved. But we are not told when! So, we have to learn how to live with not knowing when Jesus will return. In fact, we must learn how to actively live with the idea that Jesus could return today. That way we are far more likely to be alert and will make the most of each day that God gives us.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13