

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
July 4, 2010

God's Cosmic Plan

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Key verse: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

"Preaching in the evening at Spitalfields on 'Prepare to Meet thy God,' I largely showed the utter absurdity of the supposition that the world was to end that night. But notwithstanding all I could say, many were afraid to go to bed, and some wandered about in the fields, being persuaded that, if the world did not end, at least London would be swallowed up by an earthquake. I went to bed at my usual time, and was asleep by ten o'clock."

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote these words in his journal. He had encountered a group caught up with the view that the world was sure to end immediately.

Wesley's response is not an indication that he was unconcerned or unconvinced about the second coming of Christ. He believed and preached this doctrine. However, Wesley believed that specific *dates* and detailed predictions were not very helpful. He believed, instead, that the main point of the New Testament's teaching on Christ's return is to motivate us to hopeful, expectant, and faithful living now.

The Book of Thessalonians deals with Christ's return in the context of a concern of the Christians in Thessalonica. They had mistakenly come to believe that all Christians would live until the return of Christ. When some of their fellow Christians died, a concern arose about their future in God's plans. Thessalonians 4:14 reassured those believers in Thessalonica that: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 presents three central truths about the second coming of Christ:

1. Christ's return is certain. "For you yourselves know that the day of the Lord will come...." (v.2a).

Jesus said that "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). So, like Wesley, wise Christians through the ages have avoided being overly dogmatic about when and how the end times will unfold. But that Christ will return to set up God's kingdom—

that is a truth that the church has always held with great conviction. In fact, many United Methodists regularly affirm the certainty of Christ's return, reciting these words from The Apostles' Creed: "He shall come to judge the quick [meaning the living] and the dead."

2. We should be prepared for Christ's return. Paul writes that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night"(v.2). With these words Paul echoes the words of Jesus: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:42-44).

"Like a thief in the night" (v.2) and like "labor pains come upon a pregnant woman" (v.3), Christ's coming will be unexpected, unannounced, sudden and inevitable. So, we must be prepared. We prepare by keeping "awake and sober" (v.6) and by putting on "the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (v.7).

Robby Robins was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After completing his 300th mission, Robby was surprised when he was granted permission to return home immediately. He and his crew flew across the ocean to the U.S., then drove all night to get to their homes.

Just after sun-up, Robby arrived at his house in western Pennsylvania. Since he hadn't told his family he was coming home, Robby was surprised to see across the garage a big banner that read, "Welcome Home Dad!"

Robby recalls, "When I walked into the house, the kids, about half dressed for school, screamed 'Daddy!' Susan came running down the hall. She looked terrific—hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp yellow dress.

"How did you know?" Robby asked.

"I didn't," she answered through tears of joy. "Once we knew the war was winding down, we knew you'd be home one of these days. We knew you'd try to surprise us, so we were ready every day." (from a sermon by Lee Eclov)

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul stresses three central truths about the second coming of Christ: 1.Christ's return is certain, 2.We should be prepared for Christ's return, and...

3. We should be encouraged by the certainty of Christ's return. This passage concludes with these words: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing" (v.11).

For the Christian, the certainty of Christ's return is not only motivation to be prepared but also *encouragement* to live faithfully. We know that this short life is not all there is. Whether we meet Christ through death or as part of the generation that lives to see His return, we have a glorious future!

In a sermon about Christ's return, Mark Mitchell told about his daughter's wedding day. He said, "When my oldest daughter got married, we had a big floral arrangement in the middle of the lobby. Right before I walked her down the aisle, the two of us hid behind that arrangement because she didn't want to be seen by the groom. When they swung the doors open, and we stepped out from behind the flowers, both bride and groom locked eyes on each other. She was ready, dressed in white. When Christ returns as our bridegroom, we'll gaze on him as longingly as any bride has ever looked upon her groom."

Paul wrote to clarify the Thessalonians' understanding of the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. And in chapter 5, verses 1-11, Paul presents these central truths about Christ's return: 1.Christ's return is certain. 2.We should be prepared for Christ's return. 3.We should be encouraged by the certainty of Christ's return.

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