

Encourage One Another!
1 Thessalonians 5:2-11
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I was watching the news about the rioting in Seattle this summer and they were showing two women who were trying to calm things down by trying to witness to the protestors. They seemed to know their Bibles well and were quoting scripture about the second coming of the Lord. One of the protestors starting yelling at them and I heard him say “And how long have you been waiting”?

Do you believe that Jesus will one day come back? Do you believe that there is actually going to be a point of time in our future, when God will intervene in a way that will have a cosmic impact? Do you believe that Jesus could return during your lifetime—anywhere between today and some years from now? Which of you believes that we could witness the second coming of Jesus while we are still alive?

If you believe that Jesus is coming back, and that it could be any time soon, how does that affect your feelings and emotions; your stress levels; your choices and your behavior; the way you use your time, your money, and your resources? Does the thought of Jesus coming back soon have any impact on your life as you live it today? How long will you keep believing and waiting for Him?

Well, I do not know what your answers are to these questions. What I do know is that Christians react very differently to the idea of Jesus’ second coming. There have always been people with a strong sense of urgency about this. Many revival movements throughout the history of the church have brought this urgency to the surface. There seems to have always been people who have predicted when Jesus will come and none of them have been right.

That urgency has led them to change the way they live. It has led some to leave everything behind and go on a mission to the ends of the world to proclaim the Gospel while it was still possible.

Back in the 1950’s when Dr. Bill Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ, his motto was this: “To reach the whole world with the gospel of Jesus within our lifetime.” His vision was that within one generation everybody living on this globe should have a chance to hear the Gospel and respond to it. And that vision inspired many young students and professionals so much that, within forty years,

Campus Crusade for Christ was one of the largest Christian organization in the world. And it operated in more countries than the United Nations. It was that sense of urgency that made students and professionals alike give up their careers in order to win people over for Christ before his return.

But I have read that the majority of the more than two billion Christians in the world do not believe or expect that Jesus would come again any time soon, or during their lifetime. I guess that a large portion of them are not quite sure whether Jesus will ever come again. They like to think of the prophecies concerning the end times and the return of Jesus as figurative. They do not take them literally. Some even suggest that Jesus came back in his Spirit on the feast of Pentecost.

The Apostle Paul calls the Church the “body of Christ.” So, in a sense, it is not so far-fetched for them to think that Jesus’ return has already happened, and that Jesus lives among us and in us through the Holy Spirit. And so, what they expect is that, when their life is over, their body will be buried or cremated, and their soul will go to heaven to be with God where the final judgment will take place.

When the Bible speaks about the end times and about Jesus coming again, there is always that tremendous sense of urgency. Jesus says that he will come “like a thief in the night [...] at an hour when we do not expect him.” Paul echoes that view in almost exactly the same wording: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” So, the question arises, “How can we be prepared for that moment?”

Jesus’ advice is to “keep watch.” Earlier on in the Gospel of Matthew, he spoke about the signs of the end times that would be visible to those who look for them. But in the same breath, he said that these are only the beginnings. Seeing the signs does not mean that we can somehow calculate or predict the date and time of his return. They are just a reminder that we live in the end times.

The fact is that, ever since Jesus was taken up into heaven, forty days after he rose from the dead, we have lived in the end times and need to expect his return. The various signs that Jesus speaks about are just signposts, reminders that He has not abandoned us—that the project has not been cancelled. But they do not give us any clue as to how close we are. Just as John the Baptist said that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” so it is at hand today.

So, keeping watch is not about looking for signs and trying to make predictions. It is about making sure that we are ready, even though we have no clue when to expect him. It is about observing a 24/7 vigilance.

I believe that most of us do not really expect burglars to raid our homes. We know it is possible, but we do not want to think of it. So what do we do? We take precautions. When we leave our home, we lock the doors and make sure that it is not easy to get in. Perhaps we install an alarm system. At night, before going to sleep, again, we lock the doors. We do not expect thieves, but we are always prepared.

That may sound to you like an obsession. In fact, it is an obsession only, if you are always in fear that something bad will happen. Someone recently told me, that when she was on a short holiday, she was constantly afraid that something might happen to her home. So she asked the neighbors to check the place every day. And the last night of her holiday, she had a sleepless night thinking about what might be awaiting her upon her return. She could not sleep; she could not eat. Fear and panic had her in its grip.

When Jesus tells us to keep watch, he does not tell us to have sleepless nights, in fear or panic that He might come back tonight. He tells us to make sure that our lives are ready to receive Him when He comes. "You must be ready," He says in the verses of today's Gospel reading. Of course, we should be ready to meet our Lord at any time. Even if Jesus were not to return today, we might not survive today for any of a variety of reasons. We must be ready for our encounter with Christ, who is both our King and our Judge.

But the truth is that many of us procrastinate. We easily become sloppy in the way we conduct our lives. We know that there are things in our lives that God is most certainly not happy about. Things we do or fail to do. Relations that have gone sour and need mending and healing. Decisions that we postpone because we dread the effort, they will demand from us or the change that they will bring to our lives. There is a word for that: "tomorrow!" Tomorrow I will start going to the gym. Tomorrow I will

start losing weight. Tomorrow I will go and talk to that difficult friend of mine. Tomorrow I will pick up my Bible reading habit again. Tomorrow! Let me enjoy my messy life for today. Tomorrow I will repent and get my act together.

The problem is that tomorrow never comes. When you wake up after a good night's sleep, you will find that it is again "today." Look at how Jesus instructs His followers to live. Think about it - more than two billion people on earth claim to be His followers.

When you think about that, wouldn't you expect the world to be quite a different place? Why have the Christian faith and the Christian Church made so little impact on the world? Is it not because so many of us procrastinate when it comes to giving up our comfort and our self-serving ambitions? Is it not because we are so reluctant to get up on our feet and out of our comfort zone? We wait for the right moment. We wait for others to move first. We give it a try, but the force of gravity or the friction of inertia is too strong. And so, we never get moving. Tomorrow, not now.

If we know that there are things in our life that need corrective action, and we just wait for tomorrow to get it done, or for others to make the first move, we will never be ready. That is when the thought of Jesus coming again, or of us facing death any time soon, can send us occasionally into a fit of fear or panic. But we need not fear or panic. We can be at peace, if only we give the control of our lives over to God. If we do so, we can even look forward with a good conscience, and with joy and anticipation, at his return.

In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul echoes the message that Jesus delivers in Matthew 24: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night." And like Jesus, he tells us to be ready: to be awake and sober. "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly."

Who are those people? Those who do not lock their doors at night, because they do not believe that somebody could actually come to their house by force and rob them. In other words, those who do not believe that Jesus could come again, or that they could actually die suddenly. And they therefore see

no reason to set things right in their lives—just yet. Maybe tomorrow!

Somebody recently said to me that I am a control freak. When I come to think about it, there is some truth in it, although I do not think I am the worst control freak around. I like to have things organized. I want to be prepared for everything: not only for the things I expect, but also for a lot of things that I hope will never happen and that are quite unlikely to happen.

But the fact is that we cannot control our lives, or the time of our death. We cannot control when Jesus is coming back. Therefore, we need to live our lives so that we are ready to meet our Lord at any time without reason, fear or panic.

Paul tells us that we should not conform to the norms and practices of the world in which we live. On the contrary, we should stand out from the crowds.

In today's reading, Paul uses many pairs of words that express sharp contrasts, such as false security is contrasted with destruction, light and darkness, day and night, awake and asleep, sober and drunk, salvation and wrath, life and death.

What Paul is saying here is this: Do not go on living as if nothing happened to you when you accepted the Gospel and became a disciple of Jesus Christ. Do not imitate those who reject Jesus as Lord of their lives. Make a difference! Let Christ redeem you from your former ways of living. Let the Holy Spirit transform your lives to be pleasing in God's sight. Conduct your lives so that they can stand the light of day at any time, not just on Sundays. You are children of the light and children of the day. You should be an example to others. Your conduct and your integrity should make others jealous. They should make others want to have what you have—peace in Christ Jesus.

We all have our weaknesses. We all have areas in our lives that are not under God's rule. We have bad habits that we just do not want to give up. We have addictions that we are not strong enough to break loose from. We have desires that at times are stronger than our desire to follow Jesus. We need to take those seriously. We need to expose the darkness in our lives to God's penetrating light.

Paul does not try to cause panic when he talks about the day of the Lord coming as a thief in the

night. His approach is positive. It is an approach of encouragement. “Encourage one another and build each other up.”

It is easy to criticize one another and find fault with each other. I have seen Christians turn away from the faith, not because they were disappointed with Jesus, but because they were constantly criticized for not being good enough Christians—for not being worthy even of God’s grace. But that is not what we are instructed to do. On the contrary, we must be positive and encourage one another and build one another up instead of tearing one another down. How do we do this? Not by claiming that everything is fine. But by reminding one another that “our Lord Jesus Christ died for us so that we may live together with him.”

When people fail to live out their Christian faith—when they stumble, or when they tend to retreat into the darkness again—we are called to reach out to them with forgiveness and grace. We are called to help them to get back on their feet again and continue in their walk of faith. The Christian life is a journey. We are on that journey together.

Today, I may be strong and know the way, while you may feel weak and lost. Tomorrow, you may be strong, while I may be weak. We are a community of sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ. In that community, we can and must support one another, encourage one another, and build one another up. But we can only do that when we recognize and admit our own weakness and failure, our own blindness—and often, our own reluctance to change—to let God’s Spirit transform us.

When Jesus hung on the cross, a robber and murderer hanging beside him asked him: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” There was nothing this man could do to change his life, or to make up for what he had done wrong. There was only a last-minute change of heart, and the recognition that, if there could be a turn for the better, only Jesus could make that happen. And Jesus told the man, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”

It is not our spiritual success stories that encourage others. We do not help others by showing off. What truly brings encouragement, and what truly builds up, is the recognition that Jesus, in His mercy

and by His death, raises us from death to life, moves us from darkness to light. That should be our testimony. And in that awareness, not of our own superiority but of God's boundless mercy, we can face the prospect of meeting our Lord and Judge any time, whether it be after our death or when He comes back as He promised. And Jesus always-always keeps His promises.

I think that this past presidential campaign was one of the most divisive spectacles I have ever seen and has caused a lot of division, anger and separation of Americans regardless of political affiliation. And to that end, we are called to encourage one another rather than to incite fear and panic. We do not know when Jesus will come again, or whether we will die before that and go to meet our Savior. We do know that we should be wide awake and ready 24/7 for that encounter.

Live your life today in a manner that you would not have to change for Jesus' return. Live in peace and remember that tomorrow never comes.