

## **The Day of the Lord 1 & 2 Thessalonians**

This morning, we are between sermon series, and I wanted to take a Sunday to look into some biblical teaching about the Return of Christ. With war erupting in Israel at the beginning of October, there is a lot of attention right now on that region and many Christians are wondering if these things could be the fulfillment of biblical prophecies having to do with Christ's return. Could this be the beginning of the end?

I don't know if you've been wondering about that or asking these questions, but we should be, especially when it comes to war in Israel. God uses wars and rumors of wars and other calamities to wake us up to the fact that a Day of Judgment is coming. Many people are wondering about what's going on and there's a lot of worry, fear, and confusion. So I wanted to take some time to help clarify some things that Scripture teaches us about the Second Coming of Christ so that we know what to look for and how to prepare.

We are living in the final season of redemptive history before Christ's return. That means, the next big thing that's going to happen in God's plan of redemption is Christ's return. One day he is going to physically come back to conclude this stage of history and establish his eternal kingdom in a new heaven and earth. That's what we're waiting for – it's called "The Day of the Lord." What's that day going to be like? When is it going to happen? How will we know when it's going to happen? These are things we need to know, especially when there's something happening like war in Israel. And the Bible has a lot to say about these things. There's a huge amount of teaching, so what I've decided to do for our time today is to focus on two books in the NT – two letters that Paul wrote to some new believers in the city of Thessalonica.

Paul planted a church there and had only been with them for a few months before getting run out of town, so they still had a lot to learn about Jesus and the Gospel, including things about his Second Coming and Paul gives a lot of attention to that topic in these letters. I think he did so because the Christians in Thessalonica were facing a lot of opposition and persecution for their faith, and Paul wanted them to be clear about what would happen when Christ returned so

they didn't lose heart and give up. He wanted to give them hope – to know that Christ was coming back and at that time, they would be vindicated.

So we're going to see some basic teaching about the Day of the Lord that answers 5 questions:

1. What's going to happen on that day?
2. When is it going to happen?
3. How can we avoid being surprised by it?
4. What's the purpose for it?
5. What are the warnings we should look for?

These questions are in order based on how Paul wrote in these letters, so we'll just answer them in that order. The answers will be very sobering as we think about the future of this earth and the people on it, but my hope is that they will prepare us for those days and bring clarity and peace right now in these troubling times, giving us a biblical grounding about what to look for as we wait for the Day of the Lord.

Question 1: What's going to happen? (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

One of the things that was troubling the Thessalonian believers was that some of the people in the church were dying and they didn't know what was going to happen to them. They hadn't learned that part of the gospel yet. In their former worldview they believed that when people died they went to Hades, or the underworld, which was a cold, damp and dark realm guarded by the god "Hades." Would that still happen to their Christian friends? These verses were written to teach them the good news of the Gospel.

Read 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the*

*Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* <sup>18</sup> *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

So in answering their concerns about their deceased loved ones, Paul teaches them about what's going to happen when Christ returns, and we see that in verses 16-17. There's a popular view of Christ's return in books like the Left Behind series where this idea of believers being caught up together with Christ in the clouds will happen quietly and secretly, and they'll all of a sudden just vanish. I'm not anti-Left Behind or anything, but you have to realize that perspective and those books are based on a particular stream of theology that, from what I understand, came out of Dallas Theological Seminary for decades and it's called "Dispensationalism." It's quite popular among Evangelical Christians and I just don't think it's accurate, and this passage is one of the reasons why.

There is nothing secret or hidden about what's going to happen when Christians are taken up or "Raptured" when Christ returns. Paul says before the Rapture there's going to be the booming command of an archangel and the deafening blast of the trumpet of God. That sounds to me like it's going to be really loud and noticeable, like everyone on the planet is going to hear it loud and clear. And when people look up they are going to see the brilliant glory of the Lord descending from the heavens. That happens first, and then it will be followed by what we call the Rapture – everyone who has died in Christ will rise from the dead and be joined by the Christians who are still alive, and together they will ascend to meet Christ in the clouds.

Now we'll get to more details about that day later on this morning, but this gives you a pretty good idea of what's going to happen – not a secret rapture, but a very loud and visible one. That brings us to the next question and answer, which is: "When is that going to happen?"

When is it going to happen?

Read 1 Thess. 5:1-5.

*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup> For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come*

*upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.*

So, when will it happen? Paul says, we don't know. We would like to know the time and the season, but we don't. Paul didn't know. Jesus even said, "*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*" (Matt. 24:36). We don't know.

But Paul also says that believers will not be surprised by it. Many people will be surprised – for them it will be like a thief in the night that they didn't expect, or like the sudden onset of labor pains, but that's not the way it will be for Christians. Paul says we are children of light, or of the day. We can see and know what's going on. We don't know the day or the hour, but we won't be caught unaware. We will know before it happens. It won't surprise us. And that brings us to our next question...

How can we avoid being surprised by it? Paul continues...

Read 1 Thess. 5:6-11.

*So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup> For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup> who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

He doesn't give specific instructions here, but he gives a contrast between two kinds of people: those who sleep and get drunk and those who keep awake and are sober. This is a metaphor to describe the difference between believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers are spiritually asleep and drunk. They are not awake and alert to the things of God but intoxicated and blinded by all the things of this world. They will pay no attention to spiritual things because they are not awake to them. They don't believe them, they don't live in that reality. They only have eyes for this world and what they're doing in it.

Believers, on the other hand, are spiritually awake and sober. Since we have been fitted with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation, we are sober – aware and alert to the things of God. And though we live in the world and are involved in the things of it, we are not intoxicated by it. By diligent prayer and encouragement in the Scriptures and with fellow believers in Christ, we are paying attention to spiritual realities. We have been born again and made spiritually alive, so we believe the teachings of Scripture and seek to live according to it. That's who we are and that's who we must be. That's why we won't be surprised by the Day of the Lord while everyone else is. We will know it's coming and looking for it when it happens.

That's as far as Paul goes in his first letter, but he picks things up right away in his second letter, which was written not long after the first and brings us to our fourth question about the Day of the Lord...

What's the purpose for it?

Read 2 Thess. 1:5-10.

*<sup>5</sup> This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— <sup>6</sup> since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup> and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, <sup>10</sup> when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

I was reading in Jeremiah this week about the persecution of faithful believers in Jerusalem and I could see that it was happening in part because God was showing mercy and patience to the wicked, allowing them time to repent. So God showed mercy and patience to the wicked while his faithful obedient ones suffered at their hands. We see that often in Scripture, and there is an injustice in it at the time. It's not right that the righteous suffer because God is showing mercy to the wicked. That was also happening to the believers in Thessalonica. They were suffering because God was being merciful to their abusers.

But in this passage, Paul tells us how God will bring justice on the Day of the Lord. He tells of a two-fold purpose on that day. For those who harm God's people and whose sins are not atoned for by the blood of Christ, Jesus will come to inflict God's holy vengeance upon them. Try to imagine a vast army of flaming angelic warriors. These powerful beings have fought terrifying demonic beasts that we read about in the book of Revelation and won. Only now they're not coming to fight dragons; they're coming to slaughter wicked humans who have been abusing their Commander's children. It will be a day of vengeance that will lead to an eternity of suffering, punishment and destruction.

But for believers it will be the totally opposite experience. We already saw in 1 Thessalonians that they will be caught up together with Christ in the clouds. Here Paul adds that on that day, Jesus will come *"to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed."* It will be a day of inexpressible joy. All this tension, all this suffering, all this pain and the heaviness that we bear because of wickedness and sin and all its consequences will be immediately broken on the Day of the Lord. Sorrow and grief will be lifted. Wickedness and evil will be vanquished. Pain and suffering removed. And the doors to our souls will be wide open to experiencing greater joy than any of us has ever known. Our Savior will be ours forever. And it won't be just a season of joy and blessing, it will be an eternity – eternal joy, rejoicing, celebration, life.

That's the dual purpose for the Day of the Lord, which brings us to the final question that's answered in these letters...

What are the warning signs we should look for?

No, we don't know the day or the hour, but there will be very obvious signs to look for so that we will be prepared and aware in advance that Christ's Return is knocking on the door.

Read 1 Thess. 2:1-12.

*Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,<sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.<sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of*

*lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,<sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.<sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?<sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.<sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.<sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.<sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,<sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.<sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false,<sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

These are some of the verses I keep in mind when I'm wondering if we're on the brink of Christ's return. The people Paul was writing to were getting reports that Christ had already returned and they were alarmed that they were missing it, but Paul reassures them they weren't. That day will not come unless two things happen. First is the rebellion, second is the revelation of the man of lawlessness, and Paul describes them in these verses.

The rebellion is a time of universal delusion sent by God – all who are perishing (all unbelievers) will be deceived. They will refuse to believe the truth about Jesus and believe what is false instead. But even more than that, Paul indicates that this will happen through the revelation of the man of lawlessness. So God will send a delusion upon all who are perishing at the same time as the man of lawlessness is revealed so that they will all be deceived by him. He's the delusion sent by God.

There's conjecture about who or what the man of lawlessness will be. I think this will be an actual person of some kind, though someone like the world has never seen before. Paul says he will come by the power of Satan and perform false signs and wonders, and he will convince the whole world, despite all the different nations, cultures, and religions, to serve him.

We have seen powerful, wicked rulers before who have ruled over vast empires, but none have been able to command global allegiance and I think that's what

will set this ruler apart. Anyone who doesn't bow to him will be persecuted and probably killed. I believe there will be universal persecution of Christians as every government and nation is deceived into following him. A time of great suffering for Christians while the rest of the world is mesmerized by this supernatural man who proclaims himself to be God.

Unbelievers will think there is peace a security under his rule, but then heaven will break open and Christ will return. He will utterly destroy the man of lawlessness, and then the dead in Christ will rise. They, along with Christians who are still alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. And then Christ and his mighty angels will begin to pour out vengeance on the nations. I don't know how long it will be between the rise of the man of lawlessness and Christ's return, but Revelation 13 talks about a period of 42 months (or 3½ years), so that's what I'm thinking, though that could just be symbolic. In either case, it will be limited time where Christians are called to endure.

So when I see what's going on in Israel right now, it brings me to a place of heightened awareness to be watching for these things to take place because things could transpire among the nations that lead to them. But according to Paul, the Day of the Lord will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed. Maybe that will happen in conjunction with the current war in Israel. Maybe not. The war between Isaac and Ishmael and their descendants has been going on for 4,000 years and it won't end until the return of Christ. But one of these times will be the last, so we need to be watching.

This is a heavy and sobering message, and we need to ask ourselves what do we need to do in light of it? The Bible repeatedly tells us to be watchful, alert, and prepared. Not so that we can jump on some bandwagon of insanity, sell all our possessions and camp out on a mountain somewhere. But so the coming of our Lord doesn't surprise us like a thief in the night.

Think of being alert and watchful as you would be if you were expecting a life-ending thunderstorm at some point in your life. If you were told that at some point in your lifetime you would face a life-ending thunderstorm, you would be watching for it. But that doesn't mean you'd stop everything you're doing to sit and stare at the western horizon for 75 years. No, you still go about your day, your life. You live, you engage in family, work, ministry. But you are alert to the



weather forecast. You check the radar. When black storm clouds roll in you look up at the sky and keep an eye on them. You have a plan of where to go to for shelter in case this is the big one. On sunny days you aren't on high alert, but you're still aware, still ready.

And so it is with the Day of the Lord. Don't be asleep, don't be drunk. Be awake, be sober. We live in a world of ultimate distraction. Smart phones, social media, YouTube, dominate our attention. I was driving through a neighborhood the other evening and it hit me how in almost every home there was a TV on and people watching, and I can only imagine that most were on their phones as well. I'm not against TV or Smart phones, and honestly, I spend a lot of time on them myself. But it did make me think about how so many people are already in a drunken stupor when it comes to spiritual things and to the Day of the Lord and I think as Christians we need to wake up and choose a different path.

And I think that needs to be our lifestyle right now. Don't wait for these signs to occur. We should be seeking to live for Christ right now – to become more like him and carry out his mission. That's the Christian life and that's how we need to be living right now – reading Scripture, constant in prayer, gathering together for encouragement, sharing the faith. There shouldn't be a big change when these signs appear, or we're not living the kind of life Christ has called us to live. We should be living in such a way right now that we're always ready for his return, that we won't be surprised.

Are you watching? Are you ready? As we move into a time of reflection and worship, use it as a time for confession and repentance if needed. Jesus is coming soon, and we must be ready.