

## Comfort one another with these words

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Every year for the Sundays of November the texts are about the end times as we approach the end of the church year: Christ the King Sunday, which this year is November 26<sup>th</sup>. The text for this Sunday in November is an end-times text from 1 Thessalonians.

As we have noted before, scholars are pretty sure this is the first of the letters Paul wrote, and it was written about 50-51 A.D., shortly after he became a Christian and only twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is important to realize that in those twenty years some Christians had died. Those who were still alive couldn't quite understand this. After all there was the resurrection and then the Lord was coming again. In fact, Paul himself thought the end was coming in his own generation. He was convinced of that. But because of the delay in Christ's coming, an argument arose among the Christians in Thessalonica: When Jesus comes, are those who are still alive have an advantage over those who had died because those who are alive would get to meet the Lord first at his second coming? Paul writes: "No, we who are alive shall not precede those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess 4:15). Rather, the dead in Christ will arise first; then we who are alive who are left, shall be caught up together with them "so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:18). This Bible passage about the end and we "who are left" is a key verse for the series of books about the end times called *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye, a series which has sold millions of copies.

When Paul talks about where people are after death, he says that people are asleep until the final judgment. Then he pivots to saying "**But.**" His point is really important as we come to the end of the church year. He writes: **But** as to the time or the seasons, we don't know. It's like the thief in the night.

This is important for us because of volatility of the world today and the likelihood that there are people in our families, neighborhoods, or at work who say: "Ah ha, see that the end is coming now. Look at the signs!"

What do we say in response? What do you say to your children about books like *Left Behind*? Or what do you say in a neighborhood Bible study where this subject comes up? Lately there has been a TV commercial by a pastor named David Jeremiah, promoting his book: *The Great Disappearance. Thirty-One Ways to be Rapture Ready*. What is the appeal of these books like *The Great Disappearance* and *Left Behind*? It is "Ah ha! We can figure this out. We can see and we can know."

But Paul reminds us that the end comes like the thief in the night. It is not only Paul who says this. In the New Testament there are five places (Matt 24:43, 1 Thess 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10,

Rev 3:3, 16:15) where this same image of a thief in the night is used. And what's the point about the thief in the night? If you knew the thief was coming, you would be ready. But how can you be? It's both hidden and a surprise.

Paul also uses other imagery for the end. He says one day there is peace and security, then suddenly an invasion and war. Or it's like a mother-to-be who goes into labor early, prematurely. Or it's like the snare in Luke 21:34, which reads: "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you like a snare." A snare is a hidden trap for catching birds or animals. You step into the snare and you're caught. The end is like that.

We struggle with the fact that there is no warning and we do not know. Life is fragile and who knows what is going to happen at any time? If you have ever been robbed, you know how awful that feels. It happened unexpectedly, and there wasn't anything you could do about it. Or you're driving a car when all of a sudden someone hits you. Your world is turned upside down.

We don't know when the end is coming. We recall what Mark 13:32 about these things: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

What do we say to this? We know we're going to die. We all know there is judgment, and yet it seems most people live life like the cow chewing its cud, just going on and on and on. It's called denying death. Yes, death is coming, but not to me. Or: Later, I'll deal with it, but now I can put that off.

Yet more serious than the general question of life and death is the question of how one is in relation to God. Many people think: "After I die, I must get a second chance. Yes, I believe there is a God, but I'll deal with that later. For now, I am going to live one world at a time."

There is also the idea that we can plea bargain with God. We think we can plead: "Lord, I wasn't fully informed. I didn't really realize. I was really busy. I wasn't as bad as you know who." People say: "There must be a time after death when I can get a second chance."

We wonder what people are thinking of because, like a thief in the night, there is the wrath to come. The wrath is, of course, his judgment on sin and evil. No question about it.

This prompts us to ask ourselves: "What about us? Are we ready? Are we really ready? Ready enough? Do I believe correctly? Have I done enough good?" These are all the wrong questions.

Paul then has this striking statement (paraphrase): "**But** we belong to him." He says: We have been destined, we have been predestined, we have been chosen. It doesn't depend

on us. It doesn't depend on all these false religions we cook up about whether we're good enough or think rightly. Rather, it's because he has chosen us. He has made us his own.

Then Paul starts to talk about darkness and light and being asleep and awake. He writes (paraphrase): We're not of the night or of darkness, we're sons and daughters of the light and of the day. We're not sleeping; we're awake.

A pastor once asked Luther Seminary professor Gerhard Forde what was the relationship between sanctification and justification? Forde always had a kind of poker face. He stopped and thought and said: "Well, sanctification is waking up to the fact of justification."

That's the ends times message for us today: Wake up to the fact that you belong to him, as Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians 3:12 ". . . because he has made me his own." To be ready for the end is to wake up to the fact that we are his, we are children of the light and of the day.

Beginning again with the word **but**, Paul writes: "**But** since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (I Thessalonians 5:8). So too for us. Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. That's what it's all about.

What happens to all the others? What happens to all those people who are denying death and avoiding the reality of what it's all about? That's the Lord's problem, not ours. We truly do not know, and it's not up to us to answer that or solve that.

But it doesn't mean that we live in terror or live in fear saying: "What about me?" He is our Father, and he has made us his own by adoption. Therefore, we can live in true hope and confidence. Amen