

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever noticed in your own life that when you set your sights too short, you make poor decisions and do stupid things? If you're too focused on the "now" and not enough focused on the bigger picture, you make foolish mistakes. Think of the college student who thinks classes are boring and partying is fun, so he spends his time partying. He's not thinking about the big picture, namely, that this 4 years of college "pain" will reap a life time of employment benefit.

Or how about when we make an impulse buy with money we know we don't have. We think about the immediate pleasure but we don't think about the long term consequences of having pay down the debt we very quickly accumulate.

These are examples of short sightedness and we're all guilty of it at various times in our lives. But have you considered that you may be short sighted about life itself? Is it possible that you are living out your whole life on earth with too short a view of the future?

Honestly, this is easy to do, because the "short view" of life is the world's view of life. We are accustomed to thinking of our lives as "birth to death." That's the context for our daily decisions, big or small. I was born, I will live for a few decades and then I will die. With that context, what will my daily decisions look like? But the Bible gives us a different view. The Bible says, we're born. We live a few decades. We die... at least our bodies do. But our soul lives on. When Jesus comes, our body and soul will be reunited. We're judged. And we continue to live for all eternity. This gives you a completely different context for your life, and totally influences the decisions you make! However old you may be, the truth is life for you has only just begun! Your life never will end.

So when you make decisions and choices, the context to keep in mind is not, "How will this affect my life now and a few decades from now?" But, "How will this affect my life now and forever?"

We must live our lives in view of this enormously important looming date: Judgment Day. This critically important date is the pivot point between life as you know it now and life as it will be forever. Everything we think and say and do right now are building up to and leading up to that one special day.

We're accustomed to looking at death as "the end." We're born. We live. We die. The end. But the Bible really describes death and then Judgment Day as just the beginning. That's when true life really begins!

Today's message is titled simply, "Ready... Set..." Because that's the context in which we should live out our lives in this world. Our whole life is a getting ready and being on the marks. This is how the Apostle Paul taught the believers that lived in Thessalonica while he was with them. Later he wrote a letter to them to remind them of these truths. It's a reminder we need to today as well. Let's listen:

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now, brothers, 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. 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.

4 But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all sons of the light and sons 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 alert and self-controlled. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at

night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 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. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

These words remind us that there are two dangerous extremes when it comes to Judgment Day. One is living your daily life with Judgment Day out of view... as if it's not a reality and will never come. That's the way the people of the world live. But there's an opposite extreme that's also dangerous, and that's thinking we know exactly when Jesus will come. You all know how Harold Camping predicted the end would come May 21. Then again, on October 21. Some people sold their possessions and spent all their money as they anticipated those dates. Those days came and went.

It turned many into scoffers who now claim Jesus is never returning, and we're foolish to think he will. But we know he is coming. But like a thief in the night, we don't know when. Paul tells us that unbelievers will not be prepared for Christ's return. Completely unaware of his coming, they will think they will have "**peace and safety.**" They will think, "We have nothing at all to worry about. We are in no danger." They are confident in themselves and satisfied with their life. But then "**destruction will come on them suddenly.**" Because they don't trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, Judgment Day will be a terrifying day for the unbeliever. Destruction will come on them. Paul is talking about the eternal fires of hell which await unbelievers.

In contrast, the believer is properly prepared. Paul wrote, "**But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.**"

How are we ready for Christ's coming? We don't know when that day will be any more than an unbeliever does. However, that doesn't mean we can't be prepared for that day. When we lived in Russia, we lived in a small industrial town with rampant poverty and unemployment. We understood that thieves might target us because we were Americans. So we prepared our apartment. We installed metal doors with good locks. We installed an alarm system which is connected to the police. I didn't know when a thief might come, but I knew that if he did, we were prepared.

So also, the believer doesn't know when Jesus will return, but we most certainly can be prepared! In fact, Paul tells us first **we already are prepared** because of who God has made us. We are not in darkness. In other words, we are not in the darkness of unbelief. We are sons of the light. Jesus said, "**I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life**" (John 8:12). As Sons of Light we are sons of Jesus, the light of the world. We follow him. We believe in him. As the children of Him who will return, we are certainly ready for his coming. Because we are made light by the One who is light, we have nothing to fear when he returns.

In this text, Paul also strongly encourages us to **remain prepared** for Christ's return. Although God has already prepared us, it is possible to lose what has been given us. It's possible to lose the eternal context of our lives and live as if this world were it. Therefore, Paul tells us to **act like children of the light**. We shouldn't have a false confidence that because we have heard about Jesus, we can go and sin all we want. Such behavior proves we aren't prepared for Christ's return. Such behavior proves we don't believe in Jesus, or follow him. Paul tells us it's impossible to claim to believe in Jesus and yet continue to live as if we didn't believe in him. We would be acting like those who belong to the darkness. But Paul says, "**So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and**

self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.”

We should be alert and self-controlled. In other words, **not** asleep and **not** drunk. Of course Paul is speaking figuratively here. To be **asleep** means to be indifferent about Christ's coming, to not think about it, or simply to not care about his judgment. To be **drunk** is to dull your senses and your conscience, and live a sinful life.

Paul encourages us to be alert, watchful, and in full control of our thought processes. Be ready for his return. Don't be lulled into a sinful life. Don't put Christ's Second Coming out of your mind. But live your life in anticipation of your Savior's return.

How can we be ready and stand firm until Christ returns? Paul says, “**But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.**” As he speaks of being alert and watchful, it seems Paul thought of a **watchman** standing guard over a city. He thought of the defensive armor we should wear as we keep watch for Christ's coming.

Put on **faith**. Paul encourages us to have a certain knowledge and trust in God and his promises. To put on faith means to be confident that our sins are forgiven for Jesus's sake.

Put on **love**. Love is faith in action. Paul encourages us to live our life in joy and thanks to God for his love to us.

Paul then says to put on the **hope** of salvation as a helmet. Look forward to the future with a certain confidence and assurance that heaven will be ours because of the salvation which Jesus won for us on the cross.

Armored in faith, love and hope, we are children of light, we are God's children. We are fully and properly equipped for Christ's judgment.

Next Paul expands on the reason we have a sure hope of salvation. He reminds us of what is ours through Christ. “**For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.**”

Our hope is certain because of God's love for us. Although sin demands God's wrath and punishment, God did not appoint us to suffer wrath. God loves us too much to see us condemned to hell. Instead, he wants us to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

To give us salvation, God appointed Jesus to suffer wrath in our place. As 2 Cor. 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus sacrificed himself for us. Jesus suffered and died for us. In Jesus, that is through faith in him, we are righteous before God. Trusting in Jesus we receive his perfect life as our own. Trusting in Jesus, our sins are fully forgiven because Jesus suffered the wrath of God which our sins deserved.

Knowing this, we are confident that, “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” Whether we are alive or dead at the Judgment, Christ's death ensures that we will live together with Jesus. This knowledge is finally what makes us prepared for Jesus' return.

Now, there's one more vitally important way to prepare... to be ready... and set. You see this isn't an exercise for just the individual. A proper preparation happens together as Christ's church. “**Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.**” Many people feel like their faith is a personal matter which is only between them and God. Therefore, they think, what they believe is no one's business but their own. Whether or not they come to church is their decision. Many feel they don't need fellowship with other believers. They think, “If I skip church, I'll just read the Bible by myself.” Paul doesn't agree with people who feel this way.

Christians who isolate themselves from others and walk alone are likely to grow *sleepy on the journey*. It's easy to fall asleep if you don't have others helping you to stay awake.

I can remember making many long road trips by myself when I was in college and seminary. The trip from Wisconsin to my home in Oklahoma was 11 or 12 hours. After a few hours, I would get sleepy. There was no one to talk to me or help me stay awake. Thank God I never got in an accident, but it could have happened. It was a dangerous situation.

That's why Paul asks us to encourage each other. We are to build one another up. When we see a fellow Christian getting weary, when we see him becoming indifferent about his sinful life, when we see his faith weakening, his love growing cold, or his hope diminishing, God asks us to encourage and build up that person. You greatly need fellow Christians to build you up in your faith! You are deeply needed to build up the faltering faith of other Christians. We understand why God says to us in the book of Hebrews, **“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”** [Hebrews 10:25].

1) Remind each other of who we are... children of light by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus. 2) Encourage one another to keep in the Word so we can keep growing in our Christian faith and life. 3) Sometimes we slip as we try to live as children of light. Encourage and correct such fallen brothers and sisters, and be willing to be corrected when you are the one falling. 4) Help one another to put on the armor of God - faith, love and hope. Finally, point one another to Jesus Christ, whose death assures us that we will have life.

Friends, Jesus is coming. Be ready! Think of a runner preparing for the start of a race. He's trained, he's in shape, he's dressed and ready to go. The man who starts the race is in position. He shouts out, “Get ready!” The runners position their feet. Their adrenalin pumps. “Get set!” The starting gun goes straight up in the air. The body is in position. The runners are perfectly still. Every one is intently watching the man holding the starting gun. They're waiting for that flash of light and smoke. They don't know the precise moment that gun will go off, but they know it will, and they know it's immanent. They are totally ready. Their body coiled up and completely prepared for the gun to fire.

What I just described is the believer waiting for the Judgment Day. We are poised. Ready. Waiting. We know the gun will fire. It's immanent. Jesus' return can happen at any moment. And then, we're off to a new life and perfect life lived at a full sprint in holiness with Jesus forever.

Stay just like that, ready and waiting. Help the people in church with you today to stay just that ready and eagerly waiting! Because Jesus says, “Yes, I am coming **soon**” (Rev. 22:20). Fully prepared and ready, may we all answer together with joy and eager expectation: “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” *Philippians 4:7*. AMEN.