

Children of the Day

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

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The story is told that some wise guy had some T-shirts printed up. At the top of the shirts he wrote, “Jesus is coming back!” Then below that he put, “Everyone act busy!” That’s funny. I can certainly relate to trying to look busy when the floor manager came through the men’s department where I worked. The deeper truth is that the return of Jesus puts some pressure on his church. He says to us, “What are you doing with the salvation I won for you and the mission I gave you?” Jesus will return. That’s encouraging, even exhilarating news. That’s also a reminder about what really matters.

Paul writes that this Day of the Lord will come suddenly. Christ’s return will surprise many people who thought it would never happen. The world is always scheming to create a life of prosperity, security and peace without having to worship God or submit to his will for us. We dream of life on our own without anyone over us. But Scripture warns us that just when you think you’ve got it all figured out how to live your life without God, his reality will burst in upon you. Just when you think you’re all set and everything is arranged the way you want it, your soul will be required of you (Lk. 12: 20).

Jesus will return. People will be shocked. It could be any time. So people get ready, there’s a train a coming. And that’s all we can know for certain. I’ve studied all the theories that have words about rapture, tribulation and the millennium, but none of them stick with me. I can’t keep the theories straight because I can’t find the energy to be concerned about it. What matters is the fact of Jesus’ return and the call to stay awake and vigilant, living our lives with hope while we enact his mission. That seems to me the point of our passage today, as once again we highlight just three aspects from these verses.



1) You are all children of light. Paul writes, “But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. [But] we are not of the night or of the darkness.” Paul sets up the ancient, deep contrast between night and day, light and dark. We know this difference in our very bones. It’s in the night that you wake up and worry as your whole life seems like such

a total disaster. In the dark, ordinary sounds scare us. We can't see but only imagine what monsters there might be.

Darkness of emotions can swallow us. Everything seems bleak. The dark night of the soul numbs us. Will we ever feel God or know love or laugh aloud again? Inky midnight muffles our rational thoughts. The dark drags us under like a slow, unstoppable tide toward the vast chaos of the ocean. The dark can feel like a great pressure pressing us down. I cannot rise from this chair because the weight of darkness keeps pinned to inaction. Ancient prisons were places without light, and the night-time in our hearts can be stronger than iron bars. Dark thoughts can be deathly thoughts. They intrude. They take over. They whisper that no dawn will ever come. Scripture expressed this for us:

- “Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Ps. 107: 10).
- I may say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’” (Ps. 139: 11).

The sum total of our hope can be that even daylight gets polluted with the darkness my thoughts and deeds. Dawn seems but an illusion. Scripture understands the dark we feel, yet offers a flame of hope lit right in the vacant face of all that night:

- “Yet, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Ps. 139: 11-12).
- “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwell in the land of deep darkness, on them light has shined” (Is. 9: 2).

The promise of God's presence was a light to give hope. The promise of God's arrival in person lit a bonfire of expectation:

- The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it...For the true light, which enlightens every man, was coming into the world” (Jn. 1: 5, 9).

So Jesus would declare:

- *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life” (Jn. 8: 12).*

Some time ago, I talked with a woman who went through a life threatening depression. Her darkness stubbornly held onto her for many months. I asked her when the turn came. She said, “There came a moment when I risked believing it might be worth it leaving the comfort of that dark to move into the light. For so long the darkness that smothered me also cradled me. But as I saw the light shining, faintly, outside of me, I found that I could choose to move toward it. Little by little I pushed away from the gravitational pull of the night until the pull of the day became stronger. Life returned. I know now that it was Christ the light who lured me and led me all the way.”

Dark night prisons can be habits we can't break, addictions we can't shake, shame that sends us scurrying away from honest interactions, overwhelming guilt for things we have done, or things that have been done to us, paralyzing fear of failure or rejection. The many shades of night are all dark. But the dynamic is all the same. We're trapped and can hardly believe there ever was a day or ever could be a dawn. We need the news that the light of the world has shined in the darkness, and that the darkness cannot overcome Christ, nor Christ in us. We need to hear that we are children of the light and of the day. We crave to hear him call us again and again out of the darkness and into his marvelous light.

2) Let us come awake and stay awake. Paul writes “Let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober...” Having reminded the church of their identity as children of light and of the day, he calls them to live it out. I love how Paul's letter to the Ephesian church echoes some of these same themes. Paul links some Scriptures together and writes to them,

Awake O sleeper,
And arise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.



The awakening happens once for all when we pass from darkness to light by coming to faith in Christ as Savior and submitting to him as Lord. We go from dead to alive, from night to day. This same dynamic, though, occurs all through our life in Christ. He sends his Spirit to shine light in our hearts again and again. Because those joined to Jesus can slip back into patterns and habits of darkness. We can get stuck in the night.

We can despair of dawn. And we need to hear his loving wake up call again and again.

Charles Wesley wrote so powerfully of light in the darkness in his glorious hymn “And Can it Be?”

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.
I woke--the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free.
I rose, went forth and followed thee.
Amazing love, how can it be,
That thou my God shouldst die for me!

The world around us belches out darkness. The tumult of life fogs over the clear truth. We forget where real life is. We forget the true Reality of Christ. But in his faithful love, God sends the searchlight Spirit into our hearts. “Wake up!” he says. Rise from the dead. Christ is shining on you.

That leads to Paul's teaching about how to live day by day and hour by hour. He told the Ephesians,

- “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light... Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:8,15).

And to our Thessalonians he said,

- “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.”

Christ the light of the world gives us the identity of being light in him. We are sent to be the light of the world shining forth the news and the love of Christ the true light. That means a life that is awake and aware of what truly matters. We are not drunk with the delusions of momentary wealth, or immorality, or intoxications, or political power or social advancement. We view the world soberly. This world is full of darkness. This world is the world Christ died for. He sends us to live and to speak the light into the world that Christ might shine through us.



Long, long ago, a mystic named Macarius made connections between the events of Jesus' dying and rising and our spiritual rebirth from darkness to light. He wrote that "The thoughts of the soul lie imprisoned in darkness...your own heart is a tomb...the Lord comes into the deep of the heart-hell, and there lays his command upon death, saying, 'Bring out the imprisoned souls!' So he breaks through the heavy stones that lie on the soul, opens the tombs, raises up the man that is dead indeed and brings out of the dark jail the imprisoned soul."¹

Jesus came and got us out of the deepest darkness in the land of the shadow of death. Why? Because the Triune God has a vision for us. He has set his heart upon us. He wants us with him. This is Paul's conclusion. Jesus died and rose for us so that *we might live together with him*. The Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit to go get us. Jesus defeated evil, atoned for sin and filled the darkness of death with his light. So that. So that, he could offer you and me back to his Father as a love gift. Look Father, I have redeemed them. Your Spirit has awakened them. They have come out of death and into life. So that we can all be together. All of

them with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in everlasting communion and life.

Remember today, dear ones, who you are. If you have entrusted yourself to Christ the light, you are children of the light and of the day. He has awakened you. Perhaps he is calling you awake this very moment. Calling you back from darkness. Calling you out of the night. The dungeon doors are open. Light is shining. Won't you get up and go to him? Trust that it is worth it to leave the smothering dark and fly into his arms. Fly to him today as you come to the table. Eat the bread of life that is his body. Drink the cup of light that is his blood shed for you. Take up anew the call to live awake and engaged as children of the light. Get up and come to Christ the light of the world.

¹ Quoted in Gerrit Dawson, *Raising Adam: Why Jesus Descended into Hell*, pp. 104-5