

Six ways to stand firm: prepare for Christ's return

1 Thess 5.1-11

To begin today I'm going to share a personal detail: sometimes when I get stressed, I have a recurring dream, a dream I've had probably about 5-6 times in my adult life. I find myself back at university, and I arrive on campus in the early morning sunlight, and I greet my friends, only to have them ask me "Are you ready for the exam?" To which I reply "What exam?" And they say "The Maths exam!" And I reply "I didn't even know that I was enrolled!" And they say "Yes, you've been enrolled all semester, and we've wondered why you haven't turned up to any lectures!"

The next thing I know, I'm sitting in the examination room with the paper is before me (for some reason it's always printed on yellow paper). I'm looking at the questions and I've got no idea; if it was an essay based exam I might be able to wing it, but you can't fake maths. And then as I'm slowly resign myself to the upcoming failure, and as I'm asking myself "Why did I enroll in maths?" I suddenly wake up, and the blessed relief that you feel realizing that it's all a dream! Almost makes the horror worth it, doesn't it? Perhaps not.

Now I shared this dream with a friend who happens to work as a counselor. "Perhaps", she suggested, "you're anxious about not being prepared?" Maybe that's true, certainly in this dream I feel the terror of being unaware and unprepared.

It's a terrible feeling being unprepared: when you just can't answer that exam question; when you get the interview question from left of field; when kids or family members lean on you for something unexpected or when they bring something into your life you're not prepared for. It's a terrible feeling to be left scrambling. Now I suspect that the Holy Spirit knows that such moments are best avoided, because through the pen of the Apostle Paul he has left us this passage in 1 Thessalonians which is all about not getting caught out by the biggest test of all.

The theme which bridges last week's passage and this week's passage is one of the most central Christian doctrines that we have in the church. Of all the themes we can cover as we open the Bible, the topic of the return of Christ is one of the biggest. As we've said in the Apostle's creed: "we believe that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead". Christ is coming to test us, to judge us, to mark us, and so Christ's return is something we need to prepare for.

The first step in preparing ourselves is to have a clear understanding of what it is that lies ahead of us. The smart student makes an effort to know what the final exam will involve; they'll study some past papers and listen for some clues from the teacher, they'll prepare themselves so that there are no surprises come exam period. In vs 1-3 of our passage, Paul is feeding us some vital information, and he has three things to share about what Christ's return will be like.

First of all Paul says that this event will be unpredictable: Verse 2 the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Thieves are not in the habit of emailing you ahead of time, are they? You don't get a polite note, asking that, if you wouldn't mind, could you not be at home between the hours of 9 and 11, and if it isn't too much trouble, could you leave the doors unlocked so they can rifle through your precious belongings unhindered. You don't know you've been robbed until after it's happened. And so it will be with the return of Christ. By the time you realize what's going on it will be too late to prepare and equip yourself; Christ's return will be unpredictable.

Of course, this biblical teaching flies in the face of those so-called prophets who try and predict when Christ will come again. A recent example came from this man [picture]. Harold Camping hosted a religious radio show in the US. He predicted that Christ would return on May 21st 2011. Christ would make his appearance in NYC (of course) and then work his way around the world from there. Jas and I were actually in NY at the time. It would have made for a very memorable holiday if the prediction was true, but of course it didn't happen.

Harold Camping then recalculated and came up with a new date in October, and then when date came and went he finally admitted that he was wrong. They spent a lot of money in light of this prediction [picture]. Many of his followers sold possessions to fund an advertising campaign. I remember riding the subway and seeing the advertisements telling people to get ready for the end. What a folly that spending turned out to be. The Bible's message is clear: No one knows the hour. Christ's return will be unpredictable.

And a consequence of this unpredictability the wise thing to do is to make preparations well in advance. You don't know when the thief will arrive so you take early precautions; you get the locks on the windows, you get the alarm installed. You need to be prepared for Christ to come at anytime.

But while Christ's return will be unpredictable, it will nevertheless be unavoidable. Verse 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. If the image of the thief is meant to illustrate unpredictability, the image of the pregnant woman in labor is illustrating inevitability. Once the contractions start and you find yourself on the way to the hospital, it's absolutely pointless saying "You know, I've had a change of mind. Let's not do this, let's just go back home and rent a video or clean up the laundry or something." You might wish you could say something like that, but the reality is that baby is coming out one way or another. Once the bun is in the oven and the timer goes off, you will not escape!

So friends even if we don't know the time, the inevitable *fact* is that Christ will return one day. Even if, as a species, we manage to make ourselves extinct, he'll still come and just raise us all from the dead and judge us that way. So don't make the mistake of the people mentioned here who go around saying "Oh, everything is peaceful, everything is safe. There's nothing to worry about" Just because we haven't

been given a time doesn't mean that God hasn't made up his mind. Just because he's been slow in coming doesn't mean he's forgotten.

Christ will come back, and for the unprepared it will be a day of utter catastrophe. Look at verse 3 again, destruction will come on them suddenly. The composite picture that the Bible forms of God's judgment is not pleasant. In the book of Revelation there is a lake of burning sulfur which is a place of fire and of torment. Here in 1 Thessalonians we have the language of destruction. I'll admit that when thinking about judgment, when thinking about hell, it's a little hard to work out what exactly is literal and what is metaphorical. But, we need to let the language do its work and to have its effect. It's meant to be scary, because this much I do believe to be true: God's judgment will be real, it will be forever, it will be horrible.

And in the words of Revelation 21:8, this will be the future for all the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars. Basically everyone who has sinned against God.

That's not pleasant to hear, but it is an important message. I see the Bible's teaching about hell as being similar to those ads that warn us about smoking. All the uncomfortable pictures of aortas filled with gunk and lungs filled up with tar, they ruin your viewing experience but they are meant to jolt you into action. They use the horrible truth as a means to get you to do something, and they show you what will happen if you don't.

So what can we do in light of this shocking warning that the Bible has issued? Well, Paul tells us how we can prepare from verse 4 when he speaks about moving from darkness to light. This is a metaphor that works on a couple of different levels. On one hand it refers to the darkness of ignorance and the light of knowledge. The Thessalonians are not in the dark about what it is that lies ahead, as they look into the future, they know how the world is going to end. And so like the Thessalonians as we take heed of Paul's warnings we too are moving from darkness to light.

But we can also move from darkness to light in terms of our behavior. Those who remain in the dark about Christ's return will persist in their sin, while those who've had the lights switched on will see that because of what's coming, certain behaviors ought to stop.

When you know the storm is coming you get active don't you? If you had advanced warning about the 'hornado' of a couple of years back you would have taken measures to protect your property. I only have a vague recollection of this event because I was living elsewhere but there was a severe tornado-like storm that hit our area a few years back (put *Hornsby* and *tornado* together and you get 'hornado'). When you know the storm is coming you park the car under shelter, you bring the loose outdoor furniture inside; a fair warning leads to behavioral change. Look at verse 6: So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake ... and sober. ⁷For

those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober.

One particular change is that they started giving the bottle a rest. It wasn't the only change they would have adopted and it's not the only thing that Paul could have mentioned here, but it's true that drunkenness is not part of God's plan for our lives and so it's not something he wants to find when reviewing how we have lived. So these Thessalonians, they are living in a way that shows they know something: they know the great day of inspection is coming.

But do you think that's enough? Is it enough to just tidy up your life so that when Christ returns he'll give us a pass? Anyone who has a pulse knows how hard it is live an obedient life. If this is the only way of preparing—improving our behavior—then I'm not sure we'll be able to face Christ's return with much confidence. How will we know whether we've been good enough?

Well, Paul has something more to say about our preparation. He points to an even more foundational way to get ready. We see it in v9: ⁹For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. There's a bunch of things in these 2 verses to unpack. First: God doesn't want us to be destroyed, he did not appoint us to suffer wrath, rather, his purpose for believing people is salvation. That's the goal. Second: this salvation is not something we earn through righteous living, rather it's a gift, a gift that we ... what's the word Paul uses? A gift we *receive*. Thirdly: This gift is ours because of the work Jesus achieved on the cross. He died for us so that we might live with him. God knows that we can't prepare on our own, and he knows that if he doesn't intervene then we are set to fail that final test and suffer the consequences. And so at the cross, Christ suffers the consequences of our failure. The anger of God at human sin is turned aside by Christ's death for us.

And then, it's as if Christ enters the examination room with us. For the Christian, the nature of that examination changes dramatically. Christ is next to us feeding us what we need to pass: his forgiveness, his Holy Spirit, his righteousness.

I saw a great illustration of this just this week teaching school scripture. I'd asked one child to read a section of the Bible, and he was reading pretty well but then I realized that his friend next to him was reading along with him under his breath, feeding him each word and line, both difficult and easy. Now who was really doing the reading? Well, the answer is both! If the child I called upon was incapable then someone had to step in. And so it is with our incapability before God. Someone needs to step in, and that person is Jesus; he'll be the reason why we'll pass the test.

And so, as frightening as it is, the Day of Judgment need not scare us. With our trust in Christ, it can be a day to look forward to. A day to receive all those things Isaiah spoke about in our first reading: a day of a new earth where weeping and crying will be heard no more; where never again will there be infants who live but a few days

or old men who fail to live out their years; a place where our days will be like the days of a tree. And this future can belong to anyone who turns to Christ and says "Yes Jesus, I trust that my only hope is in your death, and I ask you to step in on my behalf to bring me through on that final day."

And so to finish I'm going to pray, acknowledging our belief in Christ's return and also of our need to have him step in to secure our salvation. You're welcome to pray along in your own minds and hearts and to receive the sure salvation which can be yours.

Let us pray. Our gracious heavenly Father, we see clearly that Christ will come again, and we want to be ready. We know that he will inspect our lives, and we know that we have no hope of being adequately prepared. But we also believe that Christ has died so that your anger over our sin might be turned aside, and we ask that he might step into our lives so that on that day his work for us and in us might be evident as you judge us. Thank you for this gift that is our in Christ Jesus, Amen.