

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

For a man who claims that he does not know much about the coming day of the Lord, Paul has certainly written us a vivid description of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks with authority when he says that when the day of the Lord comes, those who are dead and in the grave will be awakened by the trumpets of the angels and they will rise up and meet the Lord first. Those who are still alive when this happens will have to wait until all the dead are welcomed before they get to enter into the joy of the victorious kingdom of God. And that vision of the coming of the day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, is supposed to comfort us. It is a vision of the coming of the Lord that is supposed to comfort the faithful who have been waiting for the coming of the Lord and yet some of their members have begun to die off and those remaining have been worried that because they died before the coming of the day of the Lord in victory, those who died would not have a chance to celebrate the victory.

Of course, the next question is one that we are always trying to figure out. When is all of this going to happen? After knowing so much about what will happen, Paul suddenly takes a dramatic turn and says, "I really don't need to say anything about the timing of this event, because everybody knows that nobody knows. Everybody knows that it will come when nobody expects it." Notice, Paul says the most likely time for this event will be a time when everything is going well. When the stock market is humming, and there are no wars, and we as human beings are beginning to think that we have mastered this old game of life, then the coming of the Lord will happen. Paul thinks it is likely to happen when things are going very well. Jesus, who also claimed not to know the day or the hour of this Second Coming, suggests that it is most likely to come when strange events are in the sky. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says when evil omens and portents are in the sun and moon, when wars and insurrections, earthquakes, epidemics, and famine are happening, when things are shaking and it seems that there is nothing anyone can do and all sorts of hopelessness abound, then look up, for your redemption draws nigh in the coming of the Lord. Jesus suggests that the Second Coming will happen when all hell breaks loose. Paul says when things are going well; Jesus says when things are chaotic. But they agree that it will come suddenly and unexpectedly. The Second Coming of the Lord will involve a cosmic upheaval in which the whole of creation is shaken to its very foundations. The shaking will be a time of judgment when all that is not built on a firm foundation will crumble and that which is built on solid ground, "on Christ the solid rock," will be affirmed.

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will come suddenly and unexpectedly, but it must not find us unprepared. Jim Moore, who is the Pastor of St. Luke Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, reminds us that in our day-to-day lives we discover kairos moments in the midst of our chronos time. But when Paul says, "I cannot write to you about the chronos (time) or the kairos (date) of this event," he is affirming that this Second Coming is an event that is outside categories of time and space. It is God given. This Second Coming of the Lord is an event that takes up and includes and completes both chronos and kairos.

But Paul says what we have already received is enough light to keep us awake. What we have already been given by God's mercy and by the preaching of the good news is enough to keep us alert and awake, as those who are living and working during the daylight. We are not like those groping in the dark, unable to see, afraid to move, unsure of the next step. We are to be people who are alive, alert, awake, and aware. We need to stay that way. This promise of the Second Coming of the Lord is not an invitation to laziness. It is not an excuse for idleness. The promise of Christ's return is not excuse for indifference. It is the promise of his coming that makes us much more eager to share the good news and to encourage and support each other in faith.

We are the children of the light and people of the wakening hours, and we are to protect and support each other in our work and faith. Robert Farrar Capon likes to suggest as the image of God's

providence and mercy an iceberg. For, like the mighty expanse of ice from the polar caps the ice extends out into the ocean in all directions, and the sailors of those areas have to be on guard and alert for the tip of the icebergs where the grace of God makes a brief revelation of its power, light, and love. The iceberg seen is not all there is and someday when the ocean is drained we may see the full extent of the ice, but for the time being all we see, if we are alert, are the iceberg tips. Those who are a part of the people of the light have to keep watch for the icebergs so that they might continue to know and to see the nature and purpose of God. They are to encourage each other with stories and testimonies about the icebergs. We might talk as well about the water table that is underneath the earth. And yet at various places the land dips and the water table becomes a lake or a stream. In the desert those places become oasis and the survival of the journey depends upon the people keeping watch out for the oases so that they may fill the canteens, bathe, and renew themselves. The children of the light, the people of the day, need to be alert for the signs, marks, places of God's revelation, so that they can encourage each other to continue to wait and to hope for the Second Coming of the Lord. "When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the water covers the sea."

Paul was convinced that the Second Coming of the Lord would happen before all the people in Thessalonica died. "I can tell you this directly from the Lord: that we who are still living when the Lord returns will not rise to meet him ahead of those who are in their graves." Paul expected it in his lifetime. Others have expected it in their lifetime, and now we are not so sure what we are to do with it. We still have, from time to time, a faith community who thinks that they have figured out the day and the time and the place and they go out to be among the first to be greeted by the Lord.

There are always some faithful people who believe they have outsmarted God and Jesus, or by special gift of the Holy Spirit, they have broken the code and now know the hour and the place. There are others who will tell you that we are all always living in the last days, that this Second Coming of Jesus is always just a moment away from each of us as we go through life with death just a car accident away, just a Heimlich maneuver removed, just an aneurysm erupted. So the day of judgment, the rising to meet the risen Lord, may happen to any of us at any time.

But maybe this passage from Paul is talking to people like us, who aren't interested or worried about when the Second Coming of the Lord will take place. For those who are talking about it, Paul says they should simply continue to be faithful, supportive disciples of the light, to look for the icebergs and the oasis and to continue on the journey of faith. So if we are seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ in what we do and how we live, the date and the time of the Second Coming will not change much of how we live. And the promise of the Second Coming is not a fearful thing for those who now live by faith. Most of the people one hears talking about the Second Coming of Jesus are Christians who are fearful and apprehensive about it, and yet Paul says, "God does not intend to punish us, but to have our Lord Jesus Christ save us." The Second Coming for us is a day of completion and fulfillment. It is a day of judgment and punishment to those who have refused to accept the gift, but for those who have lived and labored in obedience to the light of God's grace, it is the completion of a long journey, not a fearful, destructive moment.

So it seems that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is an event that for many Christians is far in the background. It is not a high priority item. It is not a doctrine of immediate significance. It will come when it will come, in God's own sweet time, and there is no sense worrying about it. Yet, it is an absolutely essential last chapter to the biblical story. If there was no expectation of the moment when God brings forth his kingdom in fullness, in completion, when God does come to shake and to sort and to judge the powers and principalities of this earth, then we should of all people be the most to be pitied. The Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the symbol doctrine for the completion of the story of God's love. It is the promise which brings together all our journey in faith.

Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked that it makes all of the difference in the world whether the end of history is just the finish of history or is its fulfillment. Does history just fade out when the sun burns up or is it brought to fulfillment when the Son comes again? The promise of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the affirmation that history is brought to completion in the will of God. History is moving toward a purpose and a goal, and that history comes to the moment when that purpose is

realized. The Second Coming of Jesus links that goal of history to the revelation of God's character and love in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light by which history will be measured. The acknowledgment that when the Second Coming of Christ takes place there will be a judging and purifying of history affirms what we all believe: that there is a difference between good and evil, that some things are worth doing, and that some things are destructive and evil. It is not all culturally relative. The Second Coming of Jesus declares that the purpose and goal of history is to be found in the conclusion of history given to it by God. We do not know the end of the story until God brings it to an end, and the end is not necessarily included in the story. "There are no achievements or partial realizations in history, no fulfillment of meaning or achievement of virtue by which man can escape the final judgment. The idea of the 'last' judgment expresses the biblical story's repudiation of all conceptions of history by which history believes it can redeem itself, or evolve to the place where it is complete in itself."¹ The fulfillment of history is a gift of God according to the love he has shown in Jesus Christ.

The time, the place, and the possibility of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ does not occupy a prominent place in my daily thinking. It is not the fear of the coming of the Lord on high that motivates my waking hours. But the images, the pictures, the Lord on a cloud, blowing a trumpet to awake the dead, the promise that God will return in Jesus Christ to bring all history to his promised glory is an essential part of the Christian story, for it affirms that history will not come to a conclusion with either a whimper or a bang, nor will it come to a conclusion simply by some human act of destruction. Human history will come to a conclusion by the will and intervention of God. And at that moment when history is fulfilled, the Jesus who was crucified will stand as the one who is Lord and Redeemer.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951).