

March 2023/ Central Baptist
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Message #7
LIVING AT THE END OF TIME

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE LIKE A BELIEVER
By Tom Cowan

(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 01 as Tom walks up) Perhaps the most decisive and crucial aspect of living like a believer at the end of time is that it involves us as believers living between two ages – straddling two different worlds – living in two radically different realms or kingdoms at the same time.

One of the words used in the NT to describe Christ's coming is the word EPIPHANY -- The first coming is his incarnation – his coming to the world in flesh – the first epiphany – the second epiphany is his coming again in glory.

We see these two epiphanies in **(SHOW SLIDE 02)** Titus 2:11-13.

11. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared [epiphany] to all men.

12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

13 while we wait for the blessed hope— the glorious appearing [epiphany] of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

One of the most serious distortions in the study of prophecy is the separation of eschatological speculations from the concrete realities of human life and daily existence.

The basic purpose of prophecy is always ethical and redemptive. The primary emphasis of epiphany – the Lord's return – is ethical – moral.

The Christian is not someone who simply wishes to go to heaven one day – but in the meantime has to make do with this world as it is – hoping to get by. Not at all. The anticipation of the age to come do not solve the problems of living today – nor do they make them go away – in fact they make what may face more acute and more serious as we look at life through the lens of Scripture.

Being a Christian and living between two ages demonstrates how radical and drastic a transformation is needed. It does not make things unclear and nebulous – if anything it makes the problems we face sharper and even more acute.

So how are we to live like believers as we live between two ages?

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-3. **(SHOW SLIDE 03)**

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.

I continue to be amazed at those who specialize in teaching prophecy by the way in which they predict with great certainty and absolute conviction the exact date for the return of Jesus – when Jesus himself said – Mark 13:32 **(SHOW SLIDE 04)**

32 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

The point of his two illustrations – the robber who comes at night and the woman who finds herself going into labour is simple – he is reflecting on the suddenness of something coming. It is unexpected and catches us off guard. The problem with burglars is that they do not tell you when they are coming! Sometimes babies don't either!

In contrast to living in the dark – which means not knowing – we are the sons of the light and the daughters of the day – remember that in the Scriptures – light and darkness are not external – they are qualities that are internal. It is the state of our heart whether or not we live in the light or live in the darkness.

The light or darkness that is within us colors or shades everything else we see. If there is light within us – we will see things through the lens of light – if there is darkness within us – that darkness will color and darken everything and everyone we see.

We often say that how we see people and things depends on our inner attitude – that is true to a very large extent – but this inner attitude is really whether or not we live with light within us or darkness within us. And we do not create this light – it is simply a reflection of how we live in relationship to the truth of God.

1st John 1 **(SHOW SLIDE 05)**

5. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the

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darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

So if we have this light – and walk in the light as sons of the light and daughters of the day – Paul has two words for us since we cannot know the exact time – two words about how to live like believers as we stand between two worlds.

(SHOW SLIDE 06) BE ALERT – I suggest to you that this means being aware of the world outside us – it is like teaching children how to cross the road and watch for cars – or not talk to strangers – women are told as they walk to their cars to be aware of their surroundings – who may be getting too close to them. We should also teach Christians how to live in a dangerous world.

So I suggest- be alert - addresses what is external.

(SHOW SLIDE 07) BE SELF-CONTROLLED – this is different from all the selfish ways we want to do our own thing. Ideas and themes such as Self-love, self-expression, self-confidence, self-fulfillment are not in the teaching of Scripture. What Scripture calls us to are – self-surrender, self-sacrifice, self-denial and self-control.

The old translation was the word SOBER – not in the area of drunkenness – but in terms of our inner life. So as ALERT speaks to the world outside of us – I suggest to you that SELF-CONTROL speaks to the world within us.

We will look at each in turn.

(SHOW SLIDE 08) Be ALERT – Be Aware – Be AWAKE,

It is more than simply staying awake at church. Let me seek to unpack this for us.

Remember the incident just before the cross – Jesus went on to pray with his disciples – he moves on to be by himself – he agonized in prayer knowing all that was ahead of him – then he came back – and how did he find them – he found them sleeping – why are you sleeping he asked?

What does it mean for us to be alert in our world?

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Here are several suggestions –

(SHOW SLIDE 09) ARE WE ALERT TO THE SHIFTING WINDS OF OUR CULTURE?

Many of us became Christians and grew up in church in the days of modernism. That shaped our worship and our discipleship – we studied the Bible for information – transformation often meant knowing more Bible answers.

Today is a different day and time – our culture has changed – and changed dramatically. How people think has changed – what they think about has changed – how they learn has changed – and we need to be aware of this and alert to this if we want to share the Gospel with today’s people.

Our culture no longer accepts the church the way it used to – often we are not a player at the table in public life – in fact our culture can be downright hostile to the presence of the church. We see this at times in a city like Victoria.

Our culture is hungry for genuine wine of spirituality – but it is looking for spirituality in all kinds of places. Are we alert to that? Do we understand that for the most part absolutes have vanished – they have gone.

Do we know the difference between what must be changeless and what must be changing?

We are no longer living in the same world in which many of us grew up – our church culture is over. Are we aware of that and alert to this reality? If so, what will we do about it? What are new wineskins for the wine of the Gospel? The way forward perhaps lies in going backwards – it involves a rebooting of our primary mission – a radical obedience to an ancient command – a loss of self rather than our usual self-preoccupation – concern about service and sacrifice rather than about style.

Are we aware of our mission which is to join God in his redemptive work in the world – people all around us are in darkness- are we aware of that – they are going to a lost eternity unless we find new ways to share the old, old story?

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I love the one-line description of a group we know in Chronicles only as the sons of Issachar – it says -- they understood the times in which they lived. What does it mean for Central Baptist Church to say that we understand the times in which we live?

(SHOW SLIDE 10) ARE WE ALERT TO THE REALITY OF PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS?

One thought/idea -- Churches can perhaps learn much from how business operates in our culture – better structures – more efficient organization – job descriptions – the importance of mission and vision – how to get more people involved – better equipment – I am not opposed to any of that – but we need to ask ourselves some deeper questions.

Are we alert to the seductive strategies of Satan behind some of this – can we recognize where his power manipulates us – are we aware of what seems harmless – but in fact beneath its innocent surface – danger lurks -- and do we know enough to resist being swept up by the values and powers of our cultural milieu? The real power and authority of a church does not lie in its structures or having a really sharp mission statement. It lies in the power of the Spirit.

Every time we embrace something that our culture declares as a value – having significance – a better way to do something -- we may also be embracing the power that silently lurks within it. We will not control it – it will control us.

Are we aware of that?

Jesus understood that when he faced Satan in the wilderness – Satan invited him – teased him – tried to provoke him to turn stones into bread – or to throw himself down and trust God to save him – it was not about bread or doing magic tricks – it was all about power.

Jesus was aware of the power of Satan – he was also intensely alert to the truth of God.

To live personally and corporately as Christians – is more than just doing Christian things – it is being alert to and aware of the powers that lie behind the actions.

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It means that the essential qualities in a church are not cultural success – but truth – people who wear righteousness – they wear shoes that make them ready to share the gospel of peace – in Paul’s day only soldiers had shoes so that they could march over every kind of territory – they had a shield of faith – some Roman shields interlocked – so that the soldiers could form an unbroken line of defense – their minds were protected with salvation – God’s people know how to handle God’s word – and they know how to pray.

These are the powers that we need to be alert to – these are the powers that lie behind successful ministry.

Marva Dawn – ask some penetrating questions – she asks -

Why do we train pastors to be successful church CEO’s instead of training them to be shepherds –

Why do we search for pastors who are handsome, sophisticated and charismatic – (that’s not me!) rather than look for ones who have been broken?

Why do our churches adopt practices of business life and its achievement models?

Why do we resort to gimmicks or what Jacques Ellul called technique rather than an unadulterated handling of the Word? I will always remember Jim Houstons phrase – technique is the Trojan horse in the city of God.

What do we need to be alert to as a church as we look at the world in which we live?

(SHOW SLIDE 11) BE SELF-CONTROLLED.

Then Paul goes on with what we must do – this picture about putting on the armour of God.

Also used by Paul in Ephesians 6 – with a different purpose or focus.

In Ephesians 6 – the main idea is for conflict with evil.

In Thessalonians – main idea is for being on guard duty until the Lord’s return.

1 Thessalonians 5:6-9 **(SHOW SLIDE 12)**

So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. 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 sober, putting on faith and

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love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am fascinated by words – love words.

Question for you – how has Paul already in this letter used the word – sleep – what did he mean by it?

Answer: It described Christians who sleep – meaning who die in the Lord.

Again he says – (verse 6,7) let us not be like others who are asleep. Different word for sleep! Here it means unbelievers who are sleep in the sense of moral carelessness – they are asleep rather than being morally awake.

As I said – this speaks to our inner life – what goes on within us.

Paul gives us three ideas – he is fond of this triad – faith love and hope - and uses it in other places and in other ways – he gets a lot of mileage out of these words. We will add another idea to each one.

(SHOW SLIDE 13) We will be controlled by faith rather than by fear.

Beneath the surface of our lives- I think many people today are controlled by fear. Our vision of coming disaster today lies in environmental issues – climate change – and also in last few weeks – also economic failure – recent bank collapses in U.S. Fear can easily and quickly paralyse us – people suffer from panic attacks – unable to move ahead.

Fear lies in – the economy – environment – health – what will happen to our family – fear of commitment – we do not know what lies ahead of us – so why commit – the answer actually lies in making promises – we harness the unknown and the unseen when we make promises. (that's another message!)

The antidote to fear is faith – we still do not know what lies ahead –we still cannot see the future – but we decide to be controlled by faith – by faith in God who knows and who sees the future. He is the promise-making – promise-keeping God who says – follow me and I will be with you.

You may not know what is going to happen – in fact – one of God's great gifts to us is that he does not let us see what lies just around the corner – we could not handle the inner pain of being unable to change what is to come – but he says – walk with me – and I will be there – I will be with you.

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That is faith.

I have mentioned before to you – the writing of Os Guinness – he talks about suspended judgment – we do not always know why – but we know why we trust in God who knows why – and that’s what makes the difference.

(SHOW SLIDE 14) We will be controlled by love rather than by apathy. In his metaphor love is a breastplate.

People often assume that the opposite of love is hate – but hate is a strong emotion. I suggest that the opposite of love is apathy – who cares?

We know the truth – Jesus lived and walked in the love of the Father – and he says to his disciples – as the Father has loved me – so I love you – he goes on – love one another.

What do you allow to control your emotions – especially at those times and moments when things happen quickly?

Can we ask God to control us in love?

(SHOW SLIDE 15) We will be controlled by hope rather than discouragement. Hope is our salvation and we wear it as a helmet.

Dante wrote above the gates to hell – abandon hope all ye who enter here.

When we give up hope – we effectively give up life at that moment – when we cannot see the way ahead – internally we stop – it is as though we die – and we cannot move forward. We become controlled by despair – victims of discouragement. Perhaps you have been there at one time or another.

The only antidote to that is hope -- we see a tiny shaft of light in our darkness – and it urges us forward – it offers us hope.

Romans 5:3-5 **(SHOW SLIDE 16)**
we know that suffering produces perseverance;

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4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.

5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Pause with me for a moment – is there something that this past week has discouraged you – started to eclipse the light of God in your life – started to stuff hope out – do not let that control you – This morning - take a fresh breath of the hope of God – and be controlled by that – it will not disappoint you.

Hope always urges us forward – to get out of the rut we are in internally –

Romans 15

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminds us – verse 10 – that whether we are awake or sleep – we may live together with Christ.

A closing encouragement – verse 11 **(SHOW SLIDE 17)**

11. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Two words – **encourage – build up**. In grammar they are what are called present imperatives. It means we do not do them just once – we do them again and again. We keep on doing them – we keep encouraging one another – we keep on building one another up.

Folks – we are not intended to get through these days struggling on our own – we will get through these days as we work together – encouraging and building each other up!

Hebrews 12 – a great picture

We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses – let us throw off everything that hinders – and the sin that so easily entangles – and let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us – let us fix our eyes on Jesus...

I know the great spiritual picture that is – an unseen crowd of angels watching us in the stands -- but can I make the idea more human – put some flesh and blood to us.

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The church is to be the cheering section for each of us – every time a person is baptized – we need to be there to cheer them on – when a person comes to faith – the most life-changing decision they can make – can we cheer them on – when a person resists some addictive temptation and allows Jesus to be in control – will we hug them and affirm them – when a person gets through a tough spot in life – perhaps we cheer them on with a card – phone call – a text.

I am sure that for many of you - there has been someone on your mind this past week – you have been thinking about them – meaning to write a note – to send a card – to text them – just to encourage them -- this week JUST DO IT!

I know we are reserved Canadians – and I am not asking that we get silly – but we need each other to encourage and build each other up – we are the cheering section for one another as we live between two worlds – waiting for the coming of our Lord.