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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE IN CHRIST’S RETURN”
First Thessalonians 5:1-11

☑ In the early to mid-1970s, End Times Fever swept the evangelical world. Hal Lindsay’s The Late, Great Planet Earth sold 9 million copies in 5 years. Christian hippies adopted the song “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” as their anthem. Pastors preached countless sermons on the prophetic books. Thousands of churches (including mine) screened the *Thief in the Night* movies.

📖 As for me, I devoured all the pre-tribulationist/pre-millennial books I could get my hands on. Confident that God had given the authors precise knowledge of the apocalypse [the end of the world] I memorized their charts and went so far as to make my own. I was also quick to correlate current events with biblical prophecy (with all the wisdom of a 7, 8, 9, 10 year old).

You might think my intellectual certainty would have provided me with a strong sense of personal assurance, yet I felt anything but secure. For example, Mom was usually home when I got out of school, but sometimes she was out. With racing heart and sweaty brow, I would consider the possibilities: maybe she is at the store; maybe she is having coffee with a neighbor; maybe the rapture happened and I’ve been left behind!

☑ For me, the fever broke in the late 1970s. Wearing by anxiety and disappointed that events were not unfolding as predicted I threw out my charts and quit reading the books. I had a bad case of Apocalyptic Apathy.

I still expected the Second Coming to happen, only far in the future. I continued to profess faith in the final judgment and all that entails. I always accepted the prophetic books as God’s inspired Word.

📖 Having said that, I presumed those texts were largely incomprehensible and impractical. I smugly supposed that anyone with a passionate interest in the End was either a naive yokel or wild-eyed fanatic. There was only the tiniest corner in my theology for eschatology (the study of last things), and it had very little impact on my daily life.

⊛ I might still be stuck there, if not for this: eschatological themes are everywhere in Scripture.

★ In the OT prophets you can hardly turn around without bumping into phrases like: {Is 13:6} **“the day of the LORD,”** {Zeph 1:14} **“the great day of the LORD,”** {Is 10:3} **“the day of reckoning,”** and {Ezek 7:19} **“the day of the LORD’s wrath.”** The same terminology pops up repeatedly in the NT: {2 Pe 3:10} **“the day of the Lord,”** {2 Pe 3:12} **“the day of God,”** {2 Co 1:14} **“the day of our Lord Jesus,”** {Php 1:10} **“the day of Christ,”** {Php 1:6} **“the day of Christ Jesus,”** {Jude 6} **“the great Day,”** {Ro 2:5} **“the day of God’s wrath,”** {Rev 6:17} **“the great day of...wrath,”** {Jn 6:39} **“the last day,”** {Mt 7:22; 2 Ti 4:8} **“that day,”** and simply {1 Co 3:13} **“the Day.”** Each refers to a one-of-a-kind event that will function as the hinge between time and eternity.

★ Taken in isolation, those phrases are persuasive; yet there is much more. The diverse elements of Jesus’ ministry: his teachings, miracles,

ground breaking relationships, sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection – all point to God’s kingdom, a new order that has already begun, but which can only reach completion with a decisive, cataclysmic intervention by the Almighty.

★ And of course there are chapters and larger sections of Scripture which don’t necessarily include dramatic catchphrases, but which are undeniably eschatological in imagery and content.

☆ The longer I studied God’s Word and the deeper I explored Jesus’ ministry, the more the Holy Spirit convicted me that the Last Things are absolutely integral to Christian faith, hope, and love.

I could not continue to disregard the doctrines of Christ’s Return, judgment, and eternity. To do so would be to ignore (even reject) essential parts of the Gospel.

Neither could I renew my childhood obsession. The assumptions and methods of the Hal Lindsay crowd generate more heat than light, more excitement than understanding, more anxiety than truth – and they, too, neglect essential parts of the Gospel.

☞ And so I went back to Scripture and committed myself to the work of drawing out God’s meaning from the text instead of reading my meaning into it. Sometimes, I fail – yet the Lord smiles on our feeble efforts at obedience. By his grace, I increasingly see and grasp Truth that has been there all along, but to which I used to be blind and brainless.

☐ Please turn with me to First Thessalonians 5.

■ Verses 1-2: **“Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”**

What does Paul mean, **“The day of the Lord”**?

● In 4:13-18 he explained that Jesus **“will come down from heaven.”** **“The dead in Christ will rise first”** and **“we who are still alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord.”** Accordingly, we are called not to **“grieve like the rest [of human beings], who have no hope,”** but to encourage each other with the promise of Christ’s Return.

Paul used some informative words in that passage.

⊕ In verse 15 he wrote: **“who are left till the coming”** (παρουσια) [*parousia*] **“of the Lord.”** {Wright, *Surprised by Hope*} First-century people used this word in two significant ways: 1st, they used *παρουσια* for the **“presence of a god,”** particularly as it was revealed in miraculous ways. **“People would suddenly be aware of a supernatural... presence, and the word for this was *παρουσια*.”** 2nd, they used it to describe an in-person visit by the king or emperor to a city or province under his authority.

⊕ After that, in verse 17, Paul said: **“we will be caught up together ... in the clouds to meet”** (απαντησεις) [*apanteeseis*] **“the Lord in the air.”** When a king made a *παρουσια* to his people, they would go greet him while he was still some distance away. Then, with the blowing of trumpets and the

shouting of praises they would escort him into the city.

This was the *απαντησεις*, “**the meeting.**”

So “**the day of the Lord**” is the time when Christ Jesus will reveal his royal presence, raise his dead, give all his followers glorified physical bodies, and lead us in procession to the new earth where “**we will be with the Lord forever,**” for by his power God will integrate the spiritual heavens and material earth into a seamless union.

The prophesied events of “**the day of the Lord**” imply what is, and what is not, a suitable response to biblical eschatology.

☹ 1st, Withdrawing to await escape from this sin-sick world, redefining the Gospel as a fire-insurance policy, and getting stuck in End Times speculation are unsuitable responses. Christians who do this are like people who chatter *ad nauseum* about a famous guest who will be coming to their home, but do nothing to get ready.

☹ 2nd, Identifying too closely with this sin-sick world so that we are sad to see it end, recasting the Gospel as a system of ethical dos and don'ts, and ignoring eschatology are equally unsuitable. Christians who do this are like people who, in a posture of disbelief or disinterest, take no notice of the announcement that a famous guest is coming.

☼ The one suitable response is true readiness.

■ The 2-fold key to this is revealed in 1 Thessalonians 5:6: “**So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.**”

☼ “**Awake**” is a metaphor for spiritual alertness. It evokes the image of a night watchman who is on the ball while others are oblivious.

This does not consist of chart-making, identifying the Anti-Christ, or living in anxiety. Paul hints at this in verse 1 when he instructs us not to worry “**about times and dates.**” Such activity is a futile distraction.

📖 Alertness is paying attention to what God is doing, responding in quick obedience and participating in his work of making his kingdom present here and now, and witnessing its completion at Christ's Return.

→ In the Parable of the Talents {Mt 25:14-30} alertness is embodied in good stewardship: the servants who are awake receive the resources the Master entrusted to them and put them to work on his behalf.

→ Likewise, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats {Mt 25:31-46} alertness is exemplified by those who perceive and seize the opportunity to love God by serving needy people in practical ways.

There is more to it than that, but that gives us a good idea as to what alertness looks like.

☼ The second key is sobriety: i.e., self-control.

Spiritual drunkenness is when we are influenced by {Ro 12:2} worldly thinking, {Jas 1:14} “**evil desire,**” or our {1 Ti 5:14-15} “**Enemy**” (**Satan**) so that sin compromises our thoughts, spiritual reflexes, and self-restraint.

■ In verse 5 Paul equates this to belonging to “**the darkness.**” Elsewhere, Scripture warns of a direct causal link between a darkened heart and {Ro 1:21-31} idolatry, sexual immorality, “**greed, depravity...envy, murder, strife, deceit... malice,**

[gossip, slander, God-hating, arrogance, infidelity, and the failure to love].”

Spiritual sobriety is when {Ro 12:2} our minds are renewed, {1 Th 4:4} we control our bodies in holiness and honor, and we {Jas 4:7} “**resist the devil.**” We bring our thought processes, spiritual reflexes, and self-restraint into submission to God.

■ In verse 5 Paul calls us “**children of the light.**” As such, we wear “**faith and love as a breastplate**” to guard our hearts, “**and the hope of salvation as a helmet**” to protect our minds (verse 8). Even better, “**we... live together with**” Jesus in unbreakable fellowship (verse 10).

That is self-control.

“**The day of the Lord**” is coming, perhaps soon, perhaps not for another thousand years (current events to the contrary). Regardless of the timing, “**the day of the Lord**” is on its way. Will we be ready?

End Times Fever is not the answer. Neither is Apocalyptic Apathy.

True readiness, readiness that pleases Christ and will prepare us for his return, is the cultivation of spiritual alertness and self-control. “**So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.**”

This is the Word of the Lord!