1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

[1]Concerning the times and dates, brothers, there is no need to write to you, [2]for you yourselves
know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. [3]When people are saying,
"Peace and security," destruction will suddenly come on them, like labor pains on a pregnant
woman, and they will certainly not escape. [4]But you, brothers, are not in the dark so that this day
takes you by surprise like a thief, [5]for you are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not
belong to the night or the darkness. [6]So then let us not sleep like everyone else, but rather let us
remain alert and sober.

[7]To be sure, 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 love as a breastplate, and the hope
of salvation as a helmet. [9]You see, God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation
through our Lord Jesus Christ. [10]He died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may
live together with him. [11]Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as you are
also doing.

Awake or Asleep

I.

Most of you use your phone now, not a clock like the one you see in the title slide on the screen, but the concept is still the same. The alarm goes off and you know what you're supposed to do. But there's a little button on the screen—or on the top of the clock, if you still use one of those. It's the snooze button. It promises you just a little bit more time, so you hit it. The alarm goes off again—and you hit the button again. You know that you should get up. You know what needs to be done that day; but you keep hitting snooze.

The world has been hitting snooze on the end of the world for a very long time.

"The end is near!" That phrase has been used as long as any of us can remember: someone holding a sign on a street corner; a prediction that came and went; a date on a calendar that passed without incident.

People have heard it so often that when a Christian says it, it gets the same response as the car alarm in a parking lot: it's loud and annoying, but it's really not about them.

They have a point, don't they? Christians *have* been saying "the end is near." Paul said it in today's text. John said it, and not just in Revelation. In one of his letters he said: "Dear children, it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18, EHV). Peter said it: "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7, EHV). James said it: "The coming of the Lord is near" (James 5:8, EHV). Jesus himself talked about the signs of the end, signs that have been around from the time he walked the earth onward. Today's Gospel closed by Jesus saying: "Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Matthew 25:13, EHV).

For 2,000 years Christians have been saying it. But in the meantime, the sun kept coming up, every day. Seasons keep turning. Life goes on. As far as the world is concerned, nothing has changed and nothing will. Peter once said: "In the last days scoffers will come with their mocking… [4]They will say, 'Where is this promised coming of his? For from the time that our fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they have from the beginning of the creation'" (2 Peter 3:3-4, EHV). Moses tells us in today's Psalm of the Day why it feels so long to us: "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day, like yesterday that has gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Psalm 90:4, EHV).

Paul says: "When people are saying, 'Peace and security,' destruction will suddenly come on them" (1 Thessalonians 5:3, EHV). That's exactly the way the world sees things. Peace and security or, as Peter put it, "all things continue as they have from the beginning of creation." But destruction is coming.

How foolish it is to keep hitting snooze when the Lord is coming! How foolish to sleep through the alarm.

II.

Near the end of today's reading Paul says: "…whether we are awake or asleep…" (1 Thessalonians 5:10, EHV). Which are you? Awake, or asleep?

Today's Gospel was Jesus' parable of the Ten Virgins. All were bridesmaids. They all knew the bridegroom was coming. They all had their lamps. The bridegroom was delayed, for some reason. What happened? "They all became drowsy and fell asleep" (Matthew 25:5, EHV). *All* of them. Not just those Jesus said were foolish; those who were wise slept, too.

That's unsettling. If the line ran between those who were awake and those who were asleep, what Jesus said would be easier to take. Then his point might be that you would just make sure you stay awake. All ten dozed off. If we're honest, we would have to admit that you and I sometimes hit snooze, too, in our Christian walk of life.

I hit it when the Bible app only gets opened long enough in the morning to do my devotions; my prayers run on autopilot and I couldn't tell you what I prayed for 5 minutes later. I hit it when a sin needs to be confessed, but I decide my confession can wait til later.

Your snooze button may come at similar times and similar ways. Maybe we even parrot the words of John in Revelation and say: "Come, Lord Jesus!" but quietly hope he waits until after the kids' graduation, or after the upcoming big trip, or after retirement.

The voice that says: "peace and security; everything's fine, there's plenty of time" isn't just the person out there in the world. It's in you and me.

Moses says in the Psalm: "You have laid out our guilty deeds in front of you. Our hidden sins are revealed in the light of your face" (Psalm 90:8, EHV). God knows our deepest, darkest sins—the ones we've hidden from everyone.

If being ready for the Day of the Lord, as Paul calls Judgment Day, means that we never hit the snooze button, never let the lamps of Jesus' parable burn low, and never nod off, then who is ready? Not the world, surely. Not one of us.

III.

So are we doomed?

"But you, brothers, are not in the dark so that this day takes you by surprise like a thief…" (1 Thessalonians 5:4, EHV). "But you." Paul had just described the destruction that comes to those who say "peace and security," but now he turned to the Christians in Thessolonica. They were sleepy and weak, just as we are. But you, he says, are *not* in darkness, "…for you are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5, EHV). This is who they *are*. He doesn't say that they have stayed awake perfectly.

"You see, God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9, EHV). Think again of the ten bridesmaids in Jesus' parable. What was the difference between the foolish and the wise? Both fell asleep. It wasn't those who stayed awake, it was those who brought extra oil. The oil is the faith that the Word of God creates and keeps burning. When the cry came at midnight, the wise didn't have to work themselves into a state of readiness, they were prepared. The foolish watched the door close.

We are not saved by how vigilant we are. We are saved by who knows us—by the One who brought salvation to us. "He died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:10, EHV). Whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with him. How can Paul say that?

IV.

Because the Watchman never sleeps.

Jesus told the parable of the Ten Virgins in today's Gospel on his last journey to Jerusalem. He knew what was soon to come. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before he died, Jesus took his closest disciples with him and asked them to keep watch with him. When he came back, they were sleeping. He asked: "So, were you not able to stay awake with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40, EHV).

Jesus' three closest disciples had the same trouble as the bridesmaids; the same problem every one of us has. Jesus did not give up on them. He went back and prayed again. *He* watched through the night they couldn't. He walked out of the Garden and into his trials, the beatings, and the cross. He stayed awake for us when we couldn't.

At noon, the sky went dark over Golgotha. Darkness covered the whole land. Out of the darkness he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, EHV). Every drowsy prayer, every ignored worship service, every secret sin—all were placed on him. God's Son, our Savior, suffered all the anger of God *we* should have faced.

That's what Isaiah was talking about in the First Reading when he said: "This is what the LORD says. You were sold for nothing, and you will be redeemed without money" (Isaiah 52:3, EHV). We sold ourselves for nothing—for a few more minutes of sleep and a handful of empty promises. Jesus bought us back. Not with silver or gold, but with his holy, precious blood, and his innocent sufferings and death.

When Isaiah cries: "Wake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength" (Isaiah 52:1, EHV), he isn't asking you to produce what you don't have. This is the voice of the One who has already won the battle. You were clothed in your baptism: "Indeed, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ" (Galatians 3:27, EHV). Paul says in today's text: "Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (1 Thessalonians 5:8, EHV). This isn't equipment we have earned, but things our Lord Jesus has given us.

Psalm 121 says: "He who watches over Israel will not slumber. He will not sleep" (Psalm 121:4, EHV). He who watches over *you*. He didn't slumber or sleep in Gethsemane, or on the cross, or even when he lay in the tomb—he was there only so he could rise on the third day. And he will call you out of the grave on the Last Day.

V.

So what do we do until then?

Moses said: "Teach us to number our days in such a way that we bring a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12, EHV). Don't number your days in fear, as if a bomb were ticking down to zero, but in faith, because you know whose days those are.

Keep the oil topped off. Come back, again and again to the places where Jesus has promised he will be. Keep using God's Word at the kitchen table, in your easy chair as you read your devotions, in the pew as you listen and read the word of God and sing his praises.

At times you will doze off. Don't hide from him in shame, but run back in confession. You will hear him say: "I know you. You are mine."

Paul says: "Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as you are also doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11, EHV). Look at the person beside you, or in front of you, or behind you. They hit snooze, too. Be the one who nudges them gently. Call the person who you haven't seen in church. Sit with the one who is grieving the loss of a loved one who died in Jesus; remind them that those who have died in Christ will rise at the Last Day.

When the world scoffs—and it will—don't be surprised. You have been there yourself. Don't shout at them from a street corner like a car alarm. Speak to them as one who was asleep and has woken up. Tell them where the oil comes from. Tell them there's a watchman who doesn't sleep. Tell them there still is time.

The end *is* near. It has been for 2,000 years. It's closer today than it was yesterday.

Are you awake or asleep? Yes. In this life, you will be both. But because Christ died for you, you will live together with him, awake or asleep. Amen.