

How will the world end? Will an asteroid come from outer space and destroy life on earth? Will aliens land and over run us and annihilate all human life? Will we start a nuclear war and the fallout from the bombs mean that nothing will survive? Or will it be an ecological disaster, something like global warming, that finishes us all off?

Hollywood have been making movies about the end of the world for a long time now. And each of these threats have been put forward as a possible cause. But I wonder how *will the world really end?* And yet that just leads to another question, if I am alive, what will happen to me when the world ends? Is there something beyond life? Something beyond this world?

These are good questions, really good questions for us to ask. But rather than just speculate the answers to such important questions, rather than guess or make up our answers, why don't we see if God has anything to say about these issues. For when Jesus was on earth, God's Son talked about the end of the world. And one of his apostle's Paul, writing under God's inspiration, addresses these issues in his letter to Thessalonians.

And so this evening as we find ourselves in 1 Thessalonians 4, we see Paul talking about what will happen when we die and what will happen when the world dies. But, but he won't answer all our questions, he won't give us all the information that we desire, for obviously there are some things God doesn't want us to know as yet. Instead, with the end of the world as a backdrop he writes and gives us 4 warnings....

**1. Don't Be Ignorant.** Let look at v 13 *"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."*

It is easy to be ignorant when we are faced with such important questions. For many will get it wrong. Others will look in the wrong direction for clues. And if you get the wrong answers it may make you grieve or rob you of your hope. So it is important that we are well taught, because wrong teaching may affect our future hope..

And like the answers to most questions, Paul says the key to this question is Jesus. He is the one who helped create the world in the beginning. He has been there all along watching the human race. And at just the right time, he came to this world, and taught us and displayed his power and most importantly came back from the dead. So if anyone is to know about what is beyond the grave, if anyone has access to God's ear, it is Jesus.

And Jesus says that death is like falling asleep. Now how is death like sleep? Well just like we sleep after the labours of the day, so we sleep after the labour of our life. In both cases the body is still. And after a time, there is an awakening, in life to start a new day and in death, we are resurrected to our eternal destiny.

So sleep is an appropriate metaphor for death. For both are temporary conditions that lead to the dawning of a new day. Now some people, especially the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists and the JW's have taken this picture literally and believe that our soul actually sleeps in some heavenly dormitory until the end of the world. But there they are confusing the sleeping of the body to the sleeping of the soul. What Paul is saying is that we don't need to grieve or lose hope, because death is like going to sleep.

Paul also says that death leads to resurrection. Look at verse 14, “*We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*” In the same way that Jesus died and then rose again, those who have given their lives to Jesus when they die will also be risen to life.

So what Paul is saying is not just pie in the sky when you die, it is based on a historical event, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This then makes it better than idle speculation or wishful thinking, it means our hope rests on the strong shoulders of Jesus.

Which leads to Paul’s next point, death then leads us to Christ. For the gist of what he is saying is this, if we die with Christ, as per verse 14, then we will sleep with him as per verse 16. We will then rise with him as per verse 14 and we will come with him, also verse 14 when he comes again. Thus Christ will stay with us throughout life and death, for our relationship with him can never be broken. And that is why according to verse 17 we will be with the Lord forever.

So it is important that we Christians are not ignorant about what happens to the Christian in death. Now this does not mean that every one will be resurrected with Christ, or that everyone will be with the Lord forever. No, only those who have a real relationship with him in life, will stay with him in death and in eternity. Elsewhere in the Bible it makes it clear that those who reject Jesus kingship and do their own thing, will have that separation formalised for all eternity, hence they will end up in the only place where Christ cannot be, in hell.

So friends when Christians die, we are allowed to grieve, but we shouldn’t grieve as if we are like the rest of men. It will hurt us. For as one preacher once said, “*when you love deeply, you hurt deeply.*” But at that time we have to remind ourselves of the hope of the Christian faith. This life has not ended, it is just that our loved one now lies asleep. If they were believers we will see them again, we just have to work hard to bring our emotions and our faith together.

Martin Luther King expressed it well when he preached the sermon at the funeral of four young girls killed by a racist’s bomb in Birmingham Alabama, in 1963. He said, “*I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity’s affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible sunrise, be your sustaining power during these trying days.*” So Paul starts off by saying, don’t be ignorant.

**2.** And then he says, **don’t be complacent.** Because this Jesus will come again, the same way that he left. But according to 5:2, he will come like a thief in the night. Now as most of us know, the trouble with burglars is that they don’t tell us in advance when they are coming. It is not in their habit to send us a warning postcard. For if they were to do that, we would be there ready for them, or we might even have a security guard or a police officer with us. And so they would be caught.

So, we can’t afford to be complacent. We need to be prepared just in case the thief is going to come today. And in the same way, we need to be prepared for our death or indeed for Jesus to come again because it too will strike like a thief in the night. For when we feel safe and secure, then wow, then we are at our most vulnerable.

But also according to v 3, the day of Jesus coming will also be like the advent of labour pains on a pregnant woman. Now let me assure you, I am no expert on labour pains. But Kaylene and I were very, very, very lucky when Jemma decided to arrive, because we weren’t ready for her to come

so quickly and at one time we thought she would be delivered in the hospital car park from the front seat of our car.

Now by making these 2 comparisons (thief/labour pains) Paul is saying that there is an obvious similarity between the 2 for both will be sudden. But there is also a difference.

Sudden & unexpected, like a thief in the night....

Sudden and unavoidable, like labour pains...

In the first place there is no warning and in the second place there is no escape....

And because of this suddenness, it will find some people asleep and others drunk. It will find some people unready, unprepared, and that will have disastrous consequences. For these people will not receive God's wonderful salvation, they will instead endure his horrible wrath. As one poet has put it,

'Twas the night before Jesus came and all through the house  
not a creature was praying, not one in the house.  
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care  
In hopes that Jesus would not come there.

The children were dressing to crawl into bed,  
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.  
And Mum in her rocker with baby on her lap  
was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.

When out of the East there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window, I flew like a flash,  
tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!

When what to my wondering eyes should appear  
but angels proclaiming that Jesus was here.  
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray,  
I knew in a moment that this must be The Day! ....

I fell to my knees, but it was too late;  
I had waited too long and this sealed my fate.  
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight;  
Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.

In the words of this poem, the meaning is clear;  
the coming of Jesus is drawing near.  
There's only one life and when comes the last call  
we'll find that the Bible was true after all!

So don't be ignorant and don't be complacent instead on the flip side

**3. Be Ready.** But as Paul warns us, being ready doesn't mean we know the time, the date or the year that Jesus will return.

Unfortunately so many religious groups have trawled the Bible for clues, or pictures, or timetables and have finally found locked in some obscure verse or other the clue that tells them

when Jesus is going to come back. And everyone who has put forward a date has been wrong. No we can't be ready by knowing the time, even Jesus when he was on earth said, that he didn't know the day he would return. So if he doesn't know, what hope will we have?

But being ready, means being prepared for Jesus to return, no matter what day he decides to come. Whether it be today, or in another thousand years, we should be prepared. In the same way we get ready for our next holidays, or for Christmas Day or for how we are going to spend our next pay cheque, we need to get ready for the end of the world. So how do we do that?

Paul says by being awake. We are not to be asleep when Jesus comes. For we will be awake, alert, scanning the horizon, aware of what God is doing in his world and aware that Jesus may come at any time.

There's an old story about St Francis of Assisi. He was a Franciscan monk. And he spent time each day reading his Bible and praying. One afternoon, he took some time to work on his vegetable garden. And a guy came up to him and said, "Hey, Francis. What would you do if I told you that Jesus was coming back tomorrow?" And Francis thought about for a second. And then he said, "I think I would probably turn around and go back to working in my garden."

What he meant by this, is that he had so ordered his life, that if Jesus was coming back tomorrow, he wouldn't change a thing. He had his priorities right. He was ready, alert, prepared. We should be likewise. But Paul continues and says in verse 8 that that means we should be self controlled, putting on faith and love as a breast plate. Self controlled. We don't want to be doing something silly when Jesus returns. We want not just our priorities right, we want to be able to control our actions so that they match our priorities. We want to be people whose faith and love show up in all we do.

The early Church understood this and one time an epidemic broke out in a nearby city and most of the citizens fled to the countryside in fear. But many Christians stayed and ministered to the sick, and not just to their friends and relatives. They knew that death was not the end. They knew that God had their life in His hands and so they were able to show God's love in action. Being prepared and self controlled might mean that we were willing to risk something that is dear to us in order to show God's love to the people around us.

And finally we need to be men and women of hope. People who live today in the light of what we believe will happen in the future. If we were to live for the now, we might think that pleasure is the best thing to chase. But if we are hopeful people we will want better returns than just a moment of pleasure, we will be thinking about enjoying our eternity. And that will make us people who serve not speculate. Who anticipate not who are apprehensive. Who are hopeful not hopeless.

**4. Don't be ignorant, don't be complacent, instead be ready and be an encourager.** Build others up just as you have been doing. Life isn't easy, that is why we need one another's encouragement.

So how do we become an encourager? Well it starts with simple things - a smile, a hug, a card or a note, a squeeze of the hand, or maybe listening to that story one more time. But Paul says encourage one another *with these words*. So it is also reminding people of what lies ahead. Pointing people to the fact that God is working in this world and he will continue to work in this world.

Encourage them to see their purpose in life, to help them hold onto what Jesus is doing, to show

them Christian love and faith in action. At times we all will be tempted to give up and that is why God has put us in Churches so that we can give and receive the encouragement we need.

Let me end with a story, Chuck Swindoll tells of a man, who in 1938, ordered an expensive, extremely sensitive barometer from a very respected company. When it arrived, he was disappointed to discover that the needle was stuck on the dial marked “hurricane.” After shaking his new gauge several times to no avail, he decided to write a scathing letter to the manufacturer. He mailed the letter the next day on his way to the office. That evening he returned home to find that his barometer was missing – along with his house, that had been hurtled away by a hurricane!

In the same way, the Bible alerts us today of what will happen in the future. There is not a hurricane on the horizon, but nothing short of the end of the world. Jesus is coming back to this planet. He will find some asleep and others alert. Some drunk and others self controlled. Some being selfish and others giving of self. And this evening he has sent us a spiritual barometer, warning us to be ready and to be an encourager.

Let us hope that we will take this warning, because our eternity rests on it.

# Expecting the Expected

**Theme:** Be prepared to meet Jesus

**Scripture:** Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. Matthew 25:13  
(NIV)

Put up your hand if you go to school or preschool?  
Now keep up your hand if your school ever has a fire drill?  
What do you have to do at school if there is a fire?

If there is a fire at school or a home, it is important you are prepared.

**1. BE INFORMED.** Knowing what to do during an emergency is an important part of being prepared.

**2. HAVE A PLAN** Where we will go if disaster strikes. And how will we get there quick.

**3. KNOW WHAT TO TAKE.** Will you grab your school bag, or the photos, or your favourite toy? What will you take?

These are all good things for us to remember. It is wise to be prepared, isn't it? But the Bible says that we don't just have to be prepared for a fire, or a flood or a tsunami. It says that one day Jesus is going to come back and when he comes back we will have the chance to meet God. Imagine that? Meeting God.

And he says you need to be ready for that. Be prepared. And to do that it is a bit like a fire at school.

**1. Be Informed.** Jesus is coming. One day you will meet God, you just don't know when. So you had better be ready.

**2. Have a plan.** We must make Jesus the boss. When we do that, we are ready!

**3. Know what to take.** What do we need to take to please God?

A midweekchurch song sheet?

A cross?

Lots of money?

No all you need is faith, a trust in Jesus.

So be prepared, for you don't know when you will meet God. Each day trust in Jesus and then when it comes we all will be ready.

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It's funny, even with modern technology, they can't tell you when your baby will come. I mean they can try. They can give you a rough guess. They gave Cathy and I about four rough guesses for Liam. But you can't tell when it will come. All you know is that it's inevitable **at some stage**.

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Keep awake, the time to sleep is when you're dead

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A new preacher had just begun his sermon. He was a little nervous, and about ten minutes into the talk his mind went blank. He remember what they had taught him in seminary to do when a situation like this would arise- repeat your last point. Often this would help you remember what was coming next. So he thought he would give it a try. "Behold, I come quickly," he said. Still his mind was blank. He thought he would try it again, "Behold I come quickly." Still nothing. He tried it one more time with such force that he fell forward, knocking the pulpit to one side, tripping over a flowerpot, and falling into the lap of a little old lady in the front row. The young preacher apologized and tried to explain what happened. "That's alright, young man," said the little old lady. "It was my fault. I should have gotten out of the way. You told me three times that you were coming."

Jesus Christ is coming! And we have been told a whole lot more than 3 times in the bible that He is. Therefore, the responsibility for being ready rests with us.

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Paul in telling us how to prepare, first tells us the wrong way to prepare....

AND THE WRONG WAY TO PREPARE IS TO TRY TO FIGURE OUT THE TIME AND DATE OF JESUS' RETURN

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Think of an aircraft standing on an airport runway. It weighs many tons and is firmly clamped to the ground by the force of gravity. It can't possibly fly! That is until the power of the jet engines are turned on and the laws of aerodynamics come into their own, proving that there is a force which can overcome gravity. So it was with the Lord Jesus. Just as death and the grave could not hold him when His Father raised Him from the dead in a glorified body, so the Earth could not hold Him when the time came for Him to return to His Father.

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There was an old, black, blind woman named Fanny Crosby. Perhaps you have heard of her as she wrote more than 1000 hymns in her lifetime. One day someone said to her, "How are you, an old blind woman, going to know Jesus when you come into His presence should He come back?" Then Fanny went into her room and sat down to write, and wrote that beautiful hymn, "I shall know Him."

It went like this:

I shall know Him, I shall know Him,  
And redeemed by His side I shall stand.  
I shall know Him, I shall know Him,  
By the print of the nails in His hand.

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The May 1984 National Geographic showed through color photos and drawings the swift and

terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman Cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in A.D. 79. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden, the residents were killed while in their routine: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. It takes little imagination to picture the panic of that terrible day. The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writers record--weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. Even an ominous plume of smoke was clearly visible from the mountain days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to Vesuvius's warning! There are similar "rumblings" in our world: warfare, earthquakes, the nuclear threat, economic woes, breakdown of the family and moral standards. While not exactly new, these things do point to a coming day of Judgment (Matt. 24). People need not be caught unprepared. God warns and provides an escape to those who will heed the rumblings.

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In some religious traditions, Good Friday is observed as if the "rest of the story" wasn't known, in order to grasp the grief felt by Jesus' disciples. But from our perspective, that's hard to do. An elderly minister from Philadelphia decided he just couldn't do that, so the title of his Good Friday sermon was "It's Friday...but Sunday's Coming." On the day Jesus died, it looked like the forces of evil had won over the forces of good. Even Jesus' followers felt despair as all their hopes died that day—so they thought. The disciples who lived through both days—Good Friday and Easter Sunday—never doubted God again.

Our problem is that we're living on Saturday, wondering if Sunday will ever come. We're living in the middle. We know when God created the world, He declared it was good. We know that when Jesus returns, all the wrongs of the world will be made right, and all our tears will be wiped away. But in the meantime, we're living in the middle, trying to trust God as we turn the next page, living with uncertainty because we're trusting in the Author and Finisher of our faith.

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There's an old story told about a Scottish fishing village. One day the fleet was coming back home on their prearranged day after many days on the ocean. As the boat neared the wharf, the men would squint their eyes toward the dock to catch a glimpse of their loved ones. The skipper looking through his glass would say, "I see Jock's Hannah, and there is Hamish' Mary. And yep that Lachlan's Beth."

But one man was very anxious because his wife wasn't there. He left the boat with a heavy heart and walked up the hill to where he lived and he saw a light on in his cottage. As he opened the door, his wife ran to meet him, saying "*I have been waiting for you!*" But he replied, "*Yes but the other men's wives were watching for them.*"

In some ways it is hard enough to wait for Jesus to come, isn't it?

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