

When Will Jesus Return?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

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March 3, 2019

5Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved,* are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

So what are you doing on June 8th? June 8th is just 97 days from today and there are many things to do and prepare for. After all, June 8th will be the 151st running of the Belmont Stakes, the third stop of horse racing's Triple Crown. It also happens to be Kanye West's birthday and National Best Friends Day...and what better way to celebrate both Kanye and your best friend then by also marking the fact that June 8th is World Gin Day, National Rosé Day, and Jelly Filled Donut Day. Oh, and by the way, June 8th is also the day Christ will return.

Yes...June 8, 2019. That's the day Ronald Weinland believes Jesus Christ will make his return to earth. Weinland, a minister in The Church of God, Preparing for the Kingdom of God church, has determined that a countdown began in 1994 which provides very specific periods of time in which God has shown that His Son

can return. According to Weinland, God has revealed that Christ's return must fully align with the timing of certain annual Holy days. It just so happens that all of this aligns on the eve of Pentecost – June 8, 2019.

I would love to say that you can take that date to the bank...but I'm not sure that Weinland has a particularly good track record when it comes to predictions. After all, he previously predicted that Jesus would return on September 29, 2011....and then on May 27, 2012...and then on May 18, 2013. But this time, he's got it figured out. He recently wrote:

You can know if [June 8th] is the time Christ will once again stand upon the Mt. of Olives if a third world war has broken out by February or March of 2019 at the latest. If not, then the next possible return will be the Pentecost of 2020. Beyond that and there will be a space of more time...ⁱ

Yes, I think this time he may have it. Weinland is respectable when it comes to facts and figures. Those three and one-half years in federal prison for tax evasion show that he's pretty good with numbers...

As we all know, Weinland is not the first to predict the second coming of Christ...and not the first to be wrong. He joins Harold Camping, Jerry Falwell, Joseph Smith, Pope Sylvester II, and numerous others in incorrectly predicting when Jesus Christ would return. Even John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, at one time believed that 1836 was the year that Christ would return to usher in the new Millennium.ⁱⁱ

The fact is, we are wired to ask "when will" something happen. That kind of curiosity is seemingly part of our DNA. That's why we ask our kids, "When will you be home?" It's why we ask our doctors, "When will the results of the test be back?" It's why we ask our friends, "When will the Cowboys ever make it back to

the Super Bowl?” And it’s why we ask our *Frequently Asked Question* for this morning: “When will Jesus return?” We want to know...a lot like the Thessalonians did. Well...maybe not quite like the Thessalonians.

The early followers of Christ in Thessalonica were consumed by the notion of Christ’s return. If you remember from the *Frequently Asked Question* we asked a few weeks ago, *What Happens When We Die?*, the Thessalonians were very concerned with whether their dead loved ones would make it to heaven when Christ returned. But this concern was broader than just their dearly departed friends and family. They were very obsessed with what Christ’s return would mean for them...and they didn’t want to miss it. In fact some of them were so obsessed with the thought that Jesus’ return would be imminent – like any minute – that they had stopped working. They were sitting around staring at the sky waiting for Christ to return. Which meant that they didn’t feel the need to go to the office – to be farmers and potters and merchants and shopkeepers and fisherman and builders and moneychangers and metalsmiths and tentmakers and bankers and laundrymen. They were taking a sabbatical of sorts - an occupational break.

This became a big issue that Paul had to address. Earlier in chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, and even more clearly in Chapter 3 of 2 Thessalonians, Paul tells them to get back to work. They were giving Christians a bad reputation. Outsiders were looking at these Christians and thinking they were lazy, good-for-nothings. Although it was with the best of intentions, these Christ followers were so fixated on Christ’s return that they could hardly function.

The opposite is true today. We are so wrapped up in our work...and in the busyness of life that we have no expectation that Christ will return anytime soon. At best, we think of it as something that will happen someday but not in my day. So

we go about our lives, running kids to soccer practice, working overtime on a big project at work, meeting friends for dinner. And perhaps our low expectations give Christians a bad reputation in our day, too.

To both the Thessalonians and to us, Paul gives a reminder. Christ's return will come like a thief in the night. This was a well-known image to describe Christ's instructions on the matter.ⁱⁱⁱ Paul and the Thessalonians were familiar with what Jesus told his disciples. "No one knows the day or the hour...Stay awake. After all, if the master of the house knew when the thief was coming, he would stay awake." Therefore, Jesus said, you must also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:36-44)

Jesus reaffirmed this truth just before his ascension into heaven forty days after his resurrection. As his disciples crowded around him, asking if this was the time when he would restore Israel, Jesus told them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (Acts 1:6-7)

But just in case the thief imagery wasn't sufficient enough to describe Christ's return, Paul provides a second image. Christ's return will come on like labor pains.

Our daughter Abby was born on July 4. About 5:00 am that morning, Jodi woke with some strong contractions. Now, we had been to the hospital twice in the previous two weeks, only to be sent home. But these seemed to be different. Jodi thought we should probably go. So, while she made arrangements for someone to take care of Chelsea (since our pre-arranged caretakers were out of town for the holiday), I casually took a shower. Then I shaved. Then I took time to put on my Old Navy Fourth of July t-shirt. I was cool as a cucumber.

By 6:30 am, we had dropped Chelsea off with some friends, and were at the hospital by 6:45 am. And by the time we arrived, there was no doubt that Abby was on her way. There were very clear labor pains at that point.

The next two hours were a blur. Everything happened fast. They quickly moved us into a delivery room. Nurses and other medical professionals rushed in and out of our room making preparations. The anesthesiologist came in to start an epidural, but the progression of labor made that nearly moot. About 90 minutes later, with the help of the hospitalist, since Jodi's doctor was out of town for the holiday, and a fabulous team of nurses, we were the parents to a healthy 7 lb, 11 oz girl.

In three and one-half hours, we went from nothing to being new parents. It happened quickly. Abby came quickly. And Jodi deserves a lot of credit for suffering through the pain of childbirth...and putting up with me.

But while the delivery happened faster than we had planned, it wasn't unexpected. We had known for months that a new baby was on the way. We had made preparations – creating a nursery, assembling cribs and bassinets, purchasing a new car seat...and a new car for a larger family. We had dedicated time to thinking about a name, taking Chelsea to big sister classes, and imagining a future with another child. We didn't know exactly when Abby would arrive, but we knew she would soon make her appearance.

In much the same way, Paul told the Thessalonians this is how Christ's return will be. You know it's coming...but the exact hour is not for you to know. The best medical wisdom told us that Abby would arrive on July 7. But here she was on July 4. The best science...well, some kind of science...tells us Jesus will return on June 8. But is that timing right? How can we know?

This is the concept Paul was trying to impart to the Thessalonian believers at the beginning of our scripture lesson this morning. “Now concerning the times and seasons,” he wrote, “I don’t need to tell you anything else. You already know it.” What gets missed by our modern translations is what Paul was really saying about the “when” of Christ’s return. What he actually wrote was, “Now concerning the *chronos* and the *kairos* of Christ’s return...”

These two words, *chronos* and *kairos*, were the two words the ancient Greeks used for time. *Chronos* is still used to day in words like chronological and anachronism. It refers to clock time. Time that can be measured in seconds, minutes, hours, and years. It’s quantitative.

Kairos on the other hand is qualitative. It measures moments, not seconds. *Kairos* refers to the right moment. The opportune moment. The perfect moment.^{iv}

From a *chronos* perspective, Abby was to arrive on July 7. From a *Kairos* perspective, she arrived at the right time on July 4. And this was, and is, the same way to think about Christ’s return. It will happen. Perhaps we can’t boil it down to a specific time or date, but we do know it will happen in time...at the right time. So as I promised earlier this week, I would tell you this morning the time when Christ will return. And here’s my answer. Christ will return...at the right time.

We live today in that pregnant time period. We live with the anticipation that Christ will return without *chronos* clarity about when. So what do we do in the meantime?

In the eleven verses of our scripture for this morning, Paul reveals thoughts about the impact that Christ’s future return should have on believers in the present.^v He first suggests that we should live as people of light – as people who know that this is coming. Like a security guard who knows a thief is coming, stay awake. Like

expectant parents, make preparations...sobering preparations that reflect the responsibilities placed upon us. Our first task is to live lives that reflect this knowledge. Our friends and family and co-workers should know we are anxiously awaiting his return.

Paul then suggests that as people of light, and not darkness, we should have a defensive posture.^{vi} This serves as a proper check on our over-sharing about our desire to see Christ's return. We don't need to go on the attack, beating people over the head with our thoughts on Christ's return. But, we also need to be mindful of our surroundings, mindful of the possibility that Christ will appear in the blink of an eye, mindful of how we portray our belief in this. In other words, we need to be aware of who and what we surround ourselves with, and with what sort of attention we give to the fact that we believe what Christ said...that he would come and take us to himself, so that where he is, we may be also. (John 14:3) This is why Paul encourages the believers to put on breastplate of faith and love, and a helmet that is the hope of salvation. They should be garbed and ready to act...while at the same time, living out their beliefs before others. These should be the marks of the community of Christ-followers.

Ultimately, Paul's descriptions of Christ-followers who live in the light versus those who live in darkness, is not focused on heaven and eternal damnation. Instead, it is between sharing the life of God, made known in Christ, and dynamically present in the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and living according to the gods and priorities of greed and power, on the other.^{vii} That's why Paul's final word of advice to the Thessalonians was to encourage one another and to build up on another. To live in a way that the opposite what the world thinks – a world consumed with when and now. And that's why we need to encourage each other all

the more. Because the life we live is not towards an anticipated reward – we aren't living a particular way now to attract Jesus' attention when he returns. Instead, the way we live now is in response to an unanticipated gift^{viii} – the gift of eternal life already made possible by Jesus' death on the cross for you and for me.

Ninety-seven days isn't much time. Neither is 97 seconds or 97 minutes...or 97 months or 97 years. In the grand scheme of God's plan, Christ's return is imminent...and it will occur at the right time. And what makes expectancy, faith, love, hope, and mutual encouragement stand out is the evidence of holiness. Holiness is not just an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us.^{ix} How will you be holy? How will we be holy?

Here's a start...later this week, we will step into the season of Lent. Every year, we enter into this season of penitence and reflection with the recognition that only Christ can make a real and lasting difference. And so today, in the coming season of Lent, and in every day until Christ comes again, we join the early church in saying Maranatha. Come quickly Lord. Maranatha. At the right time, Lord, come quickly!

ⁱ Weinland, Ronald. "Is Christ About to Return?" June 9, 2018 (accessed March 1, 2019).

<http://www.ronaldweinland.com/2018/06/09/is-christ-about-to-return/>

ⁱⁱ *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Predictions and Claims for the Second Coming of Christ." (Accessed March 1, 2019).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predictions_and_claims_for_the_Second_Coming_of_Christ

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, Abraham. "First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol. XI*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

^{iv} Valentine, McKinley. *Chronos and Kairos*. (Accessed March 1, 2019) <https://mckinleyvalentine.com/kairos/>

^v Smith.

^{vi} Loader, William C. *First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary - Pentecost 23: 16 November 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11*. November 1, 2016. <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpPentecost23.htm>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Lewis, Karoline. "Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11" in *Working Preacher*. November 16, 2008.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=210

^{ix} Patterson, Jane Lancaster. "Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11" in *Working Preacher*. November 19, 2017.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3472