

## **GOOD NEWS ABOUT DEATH: How Many Shopping Days Left?**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

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I.

Friends, the shopping countdown is on. The big shopping kick-off is less than a week away. Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday. It has been suggested that the Wednesday after these consumer holidays should be called Weeping Wednesday, the day you add up the bills.

My favorite Black Friday story involves two former youth group members, Hannah and Hillary Enloe, sisters who grew up in this church, daughters of Keith and Janet Enloe. Best Buy, the consumer electronics retailer, had not been open long in town and was a popular place for Black Friday shopping. Hannah and Hillary thought camping overnight with other Black Friday shoppers was a fun idea. So, as high schoolers, they set up their little princess tent in front of the store and camped out all night long. When the doors opened bright and early in the morning, Hannah and Hillary packed up their tent, gave their early riser coupon to a random stranger, and went home. They were never interested in shopping. They just wanted to enjoy the fun and the moment in community with others. Or perhaps they didn't want to get crushed in the chaos of the opening. Either way, I still think it is the best Black Friday shopping story I've ever heard.

Many of us are beginning to feel the pressure of holiday shopping. There is something threatening about the countdown to Christmas, where the world constantly reminds us of what little time we have left to complete our preparations and purchases. (It's 36 days.) Knowing that we only have a certain amount of time brings a sense of urgency to what otherwise would be ordinary days.

II.

Perhaps the same would be true if we knew how many days we had left to live. That could bring a sense of urgency to what otherwise would be ordinary days. The older we get, the faster the days and years go. The most recent data suggests that the average life span for an American citizen is a little over seventy-eight years. 78.56 years, to be exact. That seems like forever to some of you. For others, it is sobering. For some of you, you are defying the odds with each day, living on borrowed time. Women still live longer than men, and obviously, that is an average, but let's say most of us get seventy-eight years and some change to walk this earth. That's around 942 months or 28,650 days to spend being alive, to spend however we wish.<sup>1</sup> Standing in line, waiting in traffic, scrolling on phones, camping outside Best Buy for the delight, not the discounts.

It might be motivating to wake up every morning and see a giant digital countdown letting us know how many days we have left to work with. Or it might be the worst way to start your day, focusing on the scarcity of time versus the gift of the present.

Is there a way to hold both the urgency of time and the mystery of time together? This is the question posed in our text today.

III.

Last Sunday, the issue we discussed in Chapter 4 was the nature of death. Paul assured the believers in Thessalonica that those in Christ who had died before Jesus returned are still in Christ. They are not forgotten. Whether we go to Jesus or Jesus comes to us, we remain in Christ. Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again, and thus, we do not grieve as those with no hope.

In Chapter 5 of this same letter, the question now appears to be, when? When will Christ come again? How many shopping days do we have left, Paul? Like in chapter four, it is not that the Thessalonians need new information regarding their faith. Instead, Paul reminds them of what they already know, and that is this: you know that you don't know the time of Christ's return.

"For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." (v2). While the day of the Lord is unknown, as Jesus said himself, the believers know it will come when least expected, and they must be awake and prepared.

Paul's concern is less about those overly worried about the timing. He is concerned about those who appear to give it no thought at all. Paul's focus is not on what they should believe about Christ's return but on how they should behave in the present, knowing Christ will return.

Paul uses multiple metaphors to help emphasize this truth. Much of the vivid, apocalyptic imagery used (the thief in the night, the woman in labor, the armor of God) is drawn from the prophets. Such prophetic speech was used to adjust people's interpretation of current events and their moral responses to those events. It gives people new lenses to see what is happening around them so they can figure out how to respond to it and behave in the present as the faithful people of God.

In verse 2, Paul employs the idea of a thief in the night. In verse (3), he compares the day of the Lord to labor pains. When a woman is pregnant, she knows her hour will eventually come, but she doesn't know when her labor will begin. So, she prepares. She sees the doctor regularly. She engages in prenatal care. She tends to her health. She nests, making sure her home is ready for this new arrival. The last days of her pregnancy are full of waiting and watching, packed bags and false alarms, and a million questions from all awaiting the birth. There is a sense of the urgency of time and the mystery of time. A sense of something we cannot predict or escape but something beautiful yet to be.

IV.

Before his novels promoted author John Grisham to the status of "commercial supernova," as Newsweek magazine called him, he was an unknown, small-town lawyer. Today, with all the fame, Grisham intentionally focuses on things that have lasting meaning, including his faith in God. Grisham remembers, as a young law student, the remarkable advice of a friend, saying:

*"One of my best friends in college died when he was 25, just a few years after we graduated from Mississippi State University. I was in law school, and he called me one day and wanted to get together. So, we had lunch, and he told me he had cancer. I couldn't believe it.*

*"What do you do when you realize you are about to die?" I asked.*

*"It's real simple," he said. "You get things right with God, and you spend as much time with those you love as you can. Then you settle up with everybody else."*

*Finally, he said, "You know you ought to live every day like you have only a few more days to live."*

V.

Paul views the coming of Christ as a source of hope. He also looks to the coming of Christ as a moment of accountability, for at that moment, we must face God and ourselves honestly about how we live our lives. So, Paul says, don't go to sleep. Stay awake and alert.

In seminary, one of my professors had a sign hanging up outside their office that said, "Jesus is coming. Look busy." While that sign helped us relax and laugh amid tests and intense theological discussions, I confess it rarely created a sense of urgency among us about Christ's imminent return. "Jesus is coming, look busy" probably had a bit more urgency to it in Paul's day. As I mentioned last Sunday, Paul and many early Christians appear to have believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. But Jesus didn't come. And, in case you're worried you missed something, Jesus hasn't arrived yet. And as time marches on, many of us aren't holding our breath for the day of the Lord, even though we believe it is true. Many have predicted the day and the hour of Christ's return only to look the fool when it didn't happen, and so we've learned what Paul says we know – that we don't know the hour. Don't be worried about that, Paul instructs. Instead, focus on how you live in the present. Be vigilant to stay awake and alert, not in fear, but in faithfulness.

My life verse is 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 which instructs us to "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." Paul repeats in a letter to the Corinthian believers what he wrote to the Thessalonians just a few years earlier. Watchfulness, steadfastness, courage, strength, and love are the approaches to Christian living that Paul advocates for believers as they await what is certain and promised, even if the day or the hour is not.

VI.

A pastor remarked, “Whether Jesus comes to us, or we go to him, we will, one day, stand before Jesus.” On that day, we must face God and give an account of how we spent this one wild and precious life. And how should we spend whatever shopping days we have left?

Just like Paul, we can look to the prophets and Jesus for this answer. In the prophet Amos’s day, people were trying to prepare for the Day of the Lord by going through half-hearted motions of worship, but the Lord wanted nothing to do with it. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.” (Amos 5:21-23) The people were asleep, going through religious motions, keeping the pews warm. They were checking religious boxes while missing what God truly wanted.

We can do that, too, can’t we? If we were honest, some of us have been looking busy for a long time. It is easy to get comfortable, to worship, and to give offerings while asleep to what truly pleases the Lord. But God says, “I hate that! I hate the noise of empty worship, and I refuse to accept your offerings. If you want to know what pleases me, it is this: “But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it? He criticized half-hearted worship and empty rituals but was passionate about justice and righteousness. He called people to leave everything and follow him, helping him bring heaven to earth. Pastor Jim Somerville says to bring heaven to earth is to look around for anything that doesn’t look like heaven and then roll up your sleeves and get to work. That’s justice. It is also to look inside for anything that doesn’t look like heaven and then roll up your sleeves and get to work. That’s righteousness. If your life is full of justice and righteousness, then whether Jesus comes to you or you go to him, you will have nothing to fear.<sup>ii</sup> It sounds like an excellent way to spend whatever shopping days we have left.

## VI.

Our culture is uncomfortable with death. We don't talk well about it or talk about it at all. Millions of dollars are spent each year by individuals trying to avoid one of the few things we all have in common: our mortality. But, as pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote, the truth about our mortality is only offensive if it's heard as an insult and not a promise.<sup>iii</sup> The fact that we do not live forever is what makes life so precious. None of us have been promised another day. We have the gift of this day only. But we have been promised that death is not the final word for those in Christ.

As we’ve proclaimed each week in this series, the good news about death is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we sit before the mystery of death and see the light of eternity. In Christ, we live with hope and purpose that come with the confidence of salvation. In Christ, we face the uncertainties of life and death with faith, knowing we are children of light destined for eternal glory in the presence of God. In Christ, we hold both the urgency of time and the mystery of time in both hands with joy, not fear, knowing we are the beloved children of God.

In 1 John 3, we read, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are... Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.* (1 John 3:1-2)

It has not been revealed. But it will be.

Until then, let's set up our princess tents right here and now and bring heaven to earth with whatever shopping days we have left. Because when the night is over and morning comes, when we leave our earthly tents and receive new bodies, whether Jesus comes to us or we go to Jesus, we have nothing to fear. But until then, stay awake. Let us not just look busy, holding the pews down like dead weights. Let us be watchful, steadfast, courageous, and strong, and let all we do be done in love. Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Let us bring heaven to earth. Life is a precious gift, friends. No matter how many shopping days we have left, let us spend them wisely.

Melissa Hatfield © 2023

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, 2016, 78.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://fbcrichmond.libsyn.com/jesus-taught-what-jesus-learned-caught-in-the-act-of-being-faithful>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/youre-going-to-die>