

This Mortal Coil

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-end | Psalm 90:1-12 | 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 | Matthew 25:14-30

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

¹ Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written 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 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! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But 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. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

INTRODUCTION

Corona time. I don't know how you've experienced these last 35 weeks, these weeks of varying levels of lockdown and mandatory quarantining. It's been a strange eight months, with time seeming to stand still at points, and yet speeding by at others. Corona time is a strange phenomenon. Some have hypothesized that because each day varies less—we go fewer places, there are far fewer special events, holidays and festivals and sporting events and concerts were cancelled, time seems to pass more slowly, in a kind of tedium. And yet, because so much more time passes between what few events there are, even between trips to Billa, between family gatherings, months seem to pass very quickly.¹ Our normal markers of time are not there. A thousand years is but a day says the Psalmist. Time is both slower and faster, our perception muddled.

Now, what do we do with this corona time? Some have taken the opportunity to learn a new language or a new skill. Perhaps you've heard the term 'pandemic baking,' where people throw themselves into the creation of strange and wonderful treats. Others have gone for even more aspirational ventures, like watching *all* of Netflix. Some, forced by loss of work, are finding new ways to save money and cut costs. Others, and I cannot commend this enough, are taking the time to think about their environmental footprint and making adjustments. And yet others, of course, have determined to stockpile a lifetime's worth of the toilet paper. What have you been doing with this time? Has it been useful? Should it be? The readings, I would suggest, have something to say about this very thing. How do we spending our time while we wait for life to return to normal? What are we doing while we wait?

1. HOW WE SPEND THIS TIME MATTERS

Following from Patrick's sermon last week, where the point of the Matthean parable was that we *must* be prepared while we wait, this week's parable has a similarly simple subject.² What

¹ For example, see Lila Maclellan, "Why you're experiencing time as fast and slow," in *Quartz at Work*, April 24, 2020. See qz.com/work/1839344/why-time-feels-fast-and-slow-during-a-pandemic-quarantine/.

² See Matt 25:1-13.

you do while you wait—not for death so much as the return of Christ, a true kind of Advent message—what you do while you wait, matters. Whether it is turning ten talents into twenty or five into ten, the agenda of the parable is clear. We need not get bogged down in allegorizing every detail—for parables rarely work like that, most details don't matter much—but see the main point for what it is. What we do, while we wait, matters. How we make use of this time—not just this pandemic time—but this time we have in this world, while the earth rotates the sun for the four score years or however many God gives us, while we have breath—how we spend this time matters very much to God. Are we being productive with this time he's given us? And I don't mean in the capitalistic or Protestant work-ethic sense.³ I mean: Are we stewarding these lives we've been given to his end? Are we returning on God's provision? Or are we simply letting slip by this one shot or one opportunity?⁴

2. HOW SHOULD WE SPEND THIS TIME?

How should we spend this time? This is where the reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians actually answers the question.⁵ You might have noticed in the first few verses, it picks up language very similar to that in the Gospel of Matthew to identify the issue: *"For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."*⁶ We don't know the day or hour of the end—whether the end be our own death or the return of the Lord—how much time we have left is a mystery. And so, Paul, picking up this theme, draws the same conclusion as Jesus: How we spend that time matters very much. And for Paul, it falls into two categories.

2.1. Spiritual Condition

In verses 4-10, he addresses our spiritual condition. He begins with a light/dark metaphor. But unlike John's Gospel, where light tends to figuratively refer to life and have a moral dimension, for Paul, light tends to refer to knowledge.⁷ And so, I would argue here, Paul is referring to the light of knowledge of the ultimate things—that time is limited—and so we must be aware and committed to living in the light of that awareness. This culminates in verse 8 where he speaks of the breastplate of faith and the helmet of the hope of salvation.⁸ This is basic Christianity in its simplest terms. Faith. Hope. Salvation. This is the foundation, expressed in the gospel. Notice how he concludes: *"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."*⁹

This is what we need to know while we wait. I'm not imagining that everyone who hears me say these words believes this gospel. And even if you do, perhaps the cares of the world have pressed you to move, mentally, on to other things. But while we wait for the Lord to return,

³ These ideas are interestingly tied together and used as explanation in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1905).

⁴ These words are an allusion to the prologue of Eminem, "Lose Yourself," *8 Mile* (2002).

⁵ It is worth noting at this point that scholarship tends to assume that Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica is probably his earliest letter—having been composed in the early 50s, though Galatians might have been earlier. See F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 27-29

⁶ 1 Thess 5:2. Cf. Matt 24:43.

⁷ For example, see 2 Cor 4:4, or 2 Tim 1:10. Cf. John 1:4-9, 3:19-21.

⁸ Paul seems to use an early version of the grand armour metaphor he will later use in Eph 6:1-10.

⁹ 1 Thess 5:9-10.

while we have this moment in time called our lives, Paul wants us to know this foundational thing: Our ultimate hope of salvation comes through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not in the legacy we build through success. It is not even in the relationships we obtain. It is not in the security of good health. It is not in political leaders or manoeuvres—the US is more than enough proof of that. It isn't any of those. Dead or alive, awake or asleep, already enlightened or still in the dark, our ultimate hope is only in Christ Jesus.

Maybe, brothers and sisters, this is the time to give that some thought? Human beings are very predictable. It's at major turning points in life and especially moments of grave consequence that people stop to consider the deeper things. And so, whether it was the terror of a terrorist attack a couple weeks ago, the ongoing anxieties of such a vicious disease as the coronavirus, the birth of a loved one or death—maybe now is the time for you to consider what it all means, what it is you're doing here while you wait for the end to draw close. And as we head into even stricter lockdowns, maybe you can finally bring yourself to take the time to really think about, learn about, and perhaps even come to believe in this spiritual reality of the gospel? Maybe it's time to get baptized, or confirmed, or received? Maybe it's time to take that plunge and pray for the first time, or the first time in a long time. Paul's first concern, his weightiest concern for those who are wondering how to spend their time, is this most basic aspect of our faith. Our hope is in the Lord

2.2. Ecclesiological Condition

Interestingly, though, he doesn't stop there. He can't help but draw a second conclusion. "Therefore," he begins in that last verse, "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."¹⁰ For Paul, the deep wrestling with the gospel he's just commended to those who are waiting—which is all of us—this wrestling does not happen in a vacuum. There's always a communal dimension to it.¹¹ This wrestling with the faith, with ultimate things while we wait—whether in the isolation of a pandemic or in the sobriety of this life in general—need not be endured alone. This pandemical time is the time for Christians to do that which is always a part of our waiting lives, that which is intrinsic to our faith and community, and that is to care for one another. Never has it been so important for us to edify one another, to not neglect gathering together—or as Paul puts it, to encourage one another and build each other up.¹² Whatever your struggle in the faith or in life, at whatever point you are along your faith journey, whatever reservations you have with these foundational things or anything else, you should find care and support in this church community. I know your clergy welcome these conversations. And as time passes, as we wait, we must continue to be here for one another, to love one another, as Christ first loved us.¹³

CONCLUSION

I want to finish with a little poetry, perhaps one of the most famous speeches of all the written word. "To be or not to be..." a soliloquy by the nearly suicidal Hamlet in Shakespeare's tragic play of the same name. The speech includes these lines:

¹⁰ 1 Thess 5:11.

¹¹ For example, see Eph 4:1-16 or Col 3:13-14, or Rom 12:4-5. There are many other places we could look.

¹² See Hebrews 10:24-25: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

¹³ See John 13:34.

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause—there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life.¹⁴

The mortal coil is an interesting metaphor. The idiom of *coil* in 16th century English means tumults and troubles of life, but finds its literal usage where we might expect, rings and spirals, anything that tightly compresses complexity, like a world of turmoil and strife. Arthur Schopenhauer, a 19th century German philosopher hypothesized that it was a typesetter's error in printing the original handwritten text of the speech, that this phrase *shuffled off this mortal coil*, which is an odd metaphor even for the time, was actually meant to be *shuttled off this mortal coil*.¹⁵ A shuttle is part of a weavers loom, if I understand it correctly—and to be fair, there's a really good chance I don't—the shuttle is part of the contraption that unspools the thread—making the metaphor in Shakespeare a little more coherent. Hamlet, who holds off on suicide for uncertainty about what lies beyond death, contemplates the winding down of life as a shuttle unspools the thread of a mortal coil. And that, it seems to me, is a perfect picture of this moment in time. This year, 2020, has been relentless. Personally. Publicly. In every way. Even the high points seem fleeting and dull. The coil continues to unspool. And time seems to pass, slowly or quickly, or both at the same time.

But, we have no need of uncertainty as to what comes next. We have no need to be paralyzed by fear and dread like Hamlet in that moment. We need not waste time or mispend it while the thread unwinds. As you spend this time in interminable waiting, know this: Our hope is in the Lord.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, may we be found waiting for you in hope of salvation, building up one another in faith, and comforted by the truth of the Psalm, that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."*¹⁶ *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.67-70.

¹⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Volume 2, §232a.

¹⁶ Psalm 30:5b.