

“Enough Already”
I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
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The Woodside Church

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We waited for him to appear. People from across the nation and around the world gathered to hear his message. There was a sense of expectation, anticipation. Someone stood up and prepared us for his advent. There were clear and careful instructions on what is allowed and what is not allowed, what is permitted and not permitted.

Then, at the appointed hour, he arrived: James Earl Carter, Jr., winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and 39th President of the United States. Last Sunday, while you worshiped here at Woodside, Lisa and I occupied a pew in the small sanctuary of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia to hear a Sunday School lesson taught by former President Jimmy Carter. Almost every Sunday, President Carter teaches God’s word in this tiny Baptist church of about 30 members. He’s taught Sunday School before, during and after his time in the White House. As a speaker and a Bible teacher he was warm, friendly, engaging and knowledgeable. After the Sunday School class we stayed for the worship service. After the worship service they were gracious enough to allow us a picture with the Carters. I know you think this is photoshop but it’s real.

President Carter even asked if there were any pastors or missionaries in the sanctuary. There were three of us. When I told him I was a Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania, he shared a story of how, after a fishing trip in Pennsylvania he and Mrs. Carter attended a Presbyterian church. When the minister discovered that the President was sitting in one of his pews he was so shocked he could not speak. They played three hymns, two choir anthems, a few prayers and still the minister could not regain his composure. So the service ended without a sermon. I wanted to invite him to come to

Woodside during the Democratic Convention this summer and I would give him two Presbyterian sermons to make up for the one he missed.

It was a the moment of a lifetime for me since I have always admired President Carter, I recently finished an autobiography narrated by him, and Lisa and I visited his Presidential library the day before. Imagine how surreal it is to tour a museum about the history of his presidency and then to meet that President in person in a tiny Baptist church in a tiny Georgia town.

Now please understand: I do not for a minute consider him to be the Messiah. I know he has many critics who consider him to be anything but that. Yet the experience caused me to reflect on what it will be like when I finally meet the Man I've followed all my life. I've studied, preached, taught about Jesus for decades. I've worshipped, prayed, and served Him. What will it be like when I actually see Him? For two thousand years, we've waited for Jesus to return. And like the no-nonsense school disciplinarian who told us what we can and cannot do before President Carter appeared, there are preacher, prophets, and parishioners who tell us when Jesus will arrive and what is allowed and forbidden by those who follow Him. One thing is safe to say, when Jesus comes there will be no secret service telling you to empty you pockets and open your bags.

When I ask you to share with me sermon topics you would like to hear, the Second Coming of Jesus is s frequent theme. As we race deeper into the twenty-first century, there are two extremes in dealing with this question.

First, there is intense speculation about when and how Jesus will return. This is nothing new. William Miller predicted that Jesus would return between 1842 and 1843. His followers, the Millerites, waited with fervent anticipation. But when the year passed,

their hope began to flag and followers left the fold. Then another prediction forecast that the Second Coming was due between October 20-22, 1844. More fervently than ever, the Millerites set out to warn the world. A store window in Philadelphia displayed the following sign: “This shop is closed in honor of the King of kings who will appear about the 20th of October. Get ready, friends, to crown Him Lord of all.” A group of 200 people fled the city as Lot left Sodom. Millerites quit their jobs. Farmers left their crops in the fields. October 22nd came ... but Jesus didn’t. It became known as “The Great Disappointment.” William Miller eventually gave up his speculations and his church gave birth to the Seventh Day Adventists.

Yet the predictions have not stopped. The Jehovah’s Witnesses occasionally stop at my door and leave pamphlets. Their smiling faces are very sweet but their writings are frightening. One tract states, “Today’s growing problems are clear evidence that the end of things is near, including the end of wickedness and those responsible for it. Soon God will intervene and see to it that all of today’s problems are completely solved.”¹ It then goes on to say that you and I are part of one of the false religions that “contribute to the shocking moral breakdown.”

On the other hand, after the failure of all these predictions and the passing of two thousand years, there is complete rejection of the idea Jesus will ever return. The Communists did not believe in God or in a coming Kingdom. Their mission was to build a paradise on earth through their own efforts. Even some Christians believe that Christ expects them to bring heaven on earth. They certainly have good intentions. Yet it was Karl Marx who quoted the phrase, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Every time humanity tries to build God’s kingdom for Him, disaster is the result. You

need look no further than the Crusades, the Inquisitions, Hitler's empire and Stalin's "paradise" to see humanity's attempts at heaven on earth.

Most of us fall somewhere between these two extremes. We don't deny that Jesus is coming again. We're just indifferent about it. For those of us living in Lower Bucks County, things seem fine the way they are. But that's not how God sees the world. The Lord is not satisfied that millions live and die in the waste lands of starvation, poverty, drug use, warfare and refugee camps. Those are not God's intention for this world.

Brothers and sisters, God's Kingdom will come whether we want it or not, whether we believe it or not. There are 300 references to the return of Jesus in the New Testament – that's one out of every 30 verses. Nearly all the books of the New Testament discuss the subject. It is a central part of Jesus' preaching, the Apostles' message and the creeds of the church. They never say, 'If the Lord returns...' but '**When** the Lord returns.'

So when will the Lord return? My official, pastoral and theological answer is: I don't know. But that's okay, because I'm in good company. Paul didn't know. He told the Thessalonians,

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (I Thessalonians 5:1-2).

In other words, it will come unexpectedly. Jesus told the disciples,

"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

And even Jesus said,

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

¹ "Why Is Life So Full of Problems?" Watch Tower Bible Tract Society of Pennsylvania, c. 1995.

After many false predictions, even William Miller of the Millerites learned his lesson. His tombstone reads, “At the appointed time, the end will come.”

So what’s taking so long? Even a few decades after the Resurrection, the first believers asked that question. The Apostle Peter replied,

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:8-9).

Jesus will come when He is ready. So what should we do while we are waiting?

We must wake up. It’s not our job to worry about the timing of Jesus’ entrance or to ignore His return and go about our business. It’s our job to hear His wake up call and get in the game. In the 1987 NCAA Regional Basketball Finals, LSU was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. With victory almost assured, the TV announcer noticed that LSU began watching the clock rather than wholeheartedly playing the game. During those last few minutes, Indiana closed the gap, won the game by one point and eventually went on to become NCAA champions. As we await Jesus’ return, it’s better to get our head and our heart in the game instead of hanging back to watch the clock. So how do you get in the game?

First, be **Ready**: have your bags packed and your affairs in order. Paul reminded the Thessalonians,

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. (I Thessalonians 5:4-6).

Some people are ruled by the thoughts and worries in their minds, some by the passions or desires of their bodies and some by the demands of their world. Instead, place your mind, body and spirit in God’s care. Wake up your spirit, be alert, keep yourself tuned to

God through prayer and the Bible. And keep short accounts with God and others. Before Lisa and I left on vacation, we raced around the house paying bills and making everything spotless. I guess we want the house to look nice in case a thief breaks in. But at least, when we leave on our trip, we are relieved to know that the house is in good order and we haven't left any loose ends. If you want to be ready for Jesus to come, ask God to forgive your debts and make sure to forgive your debtors every day. Keep the house of your life clean because you never know when the "thief" will visit. Be ready.

Second, get **Set** – Set your feet firmly on the Rock of Jesus Christ. Stand firm on your faith in Christ Jesus. Paul told the Thessalonians,

Put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:8-9).

There are two frightening moments in this passage: a Thief in the night and a Judge at the bench. If you are "asleep", if you do not believe in Jesus, then His return to this earth will seem frightening, like a thief breaking into your house in the dark of night. But if you are "awake", if you trust in Him, then when He arrives it will feel more like the return of your Mom or Dad after a long business trip away from home. My Dad was in Japan for three months when I was ten years old. Now, forty years later, I can still remember the celebration we had the night he walked in the door.

Jesus will come as a Judge the second time. It's scary to go before the bench and realize that your life is in the hands of another. But if you believe in Christ then you have the confidence that when you look into the eyes of this Judge you will see pardon and love. The hand that holds the gavel is nail-pierced for you. The feet at which you will kneel bear the marks of love. "Do not be afraid little flock," Jesus says, "It is your

Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Be Ready, Set, and finally...

Go – Go into the world. Teach others, make disciples, confront and correct injustice, challenge evil, tell the Good News. It is not our job to judge who is or is not saved. Jesus says very clearly that we must not judge others. That is His job alone. But He also very clearly commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations, teach them everything He commands, bring others with us into the Kingdom. He commands us to go and feed the poor, clothe the naked, care for the sick, welcome strangers and visit the imprisoned. And His promise is that we will see Him in the faces of the ones we serve. He will be with us always wherever we go. On our trip we visited the boyhood homes of Billy Graham and Martin Luther King, Jr. In these two men of God we see Jesus' two commands to tell Good News and practice Good Deeds, to love God, love neighbor and make disciples.

Ready, set, go. That's what we must do until the day "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (I Thessalonians 4:16).

"What will He say when He shouts?" The question surprised Gregory Fisher, a missionary who was teaching at West African Bible College. His students asked the most penetrating questions about minute details of Scripture. "Reverend," the student asked raising his hand, "I Thessalonians 4:16 says that Christ will descend from heaven with a loud command. I would like to know what that command will be."

Gregory Fisher wanted to say, "I don't know." But his mind wandered to his encounter, earlier in the day, with a refugee from the Liberian civil war. The man, a high

school principal, told how he was apprehended by a two-man death squad. After several hours of terror, during which the men described how they would torture and kill him, he narrowly escaped. After hiding out for two days, he was able to find his family and escape to a neighboring country. The escape cost him dearly: two of his children lost their lives. The stark cruelty unleashed on an unsuspecting, undeserving population touched Greg deeply. He saw flashbacks of the beggars he passed each morning on his way to the office. Every day he saw how poverty destroys dignity, robs men of the best of what it means to be human and treats them like animals. Greg was haunted by the vacant eyes of people who have lost all hope.

“Reverend, you have not given me an answer. What will he shout?” The question hadn’t gone away. “Enough” Greg replied, “Jesus will shout, ‘Enough!’ when He returns.” A look of surprise appeared on the face of the student. “What do you mean, ‘enough’?” “Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough death. Enough indignity. Enough lives trapped in hopelessness. Enough sickness and disease. Enough!”

Friends, have you had “enough”? Are you ready? Are you set? Will you go?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

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.

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.

15 According to the Lord's own word,

we tell you that we who are still alive,

who are left till the coming of the Lord,

will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven,

with a loud command,

with the voice of the archangel and

with the trumpet call of God,

and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 After that, we who are still alive and are left

will be caught up together with them in the clouds

to meet the Lord in the air.

And so we will be with the Lord forever.

18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

1 Now, brothers,

about times and dates we do not need to write to you,

2 for you know very well that

the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety,"

destruction will come on them suddenly,

as labor pains on a pregnant woman,

and they will not escape.

4 But you, brothers,

are not in darkness

so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

5 You are all sons of the light and sons of the day.

We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

6 So then,

let us not be like others, who are asleep,

but let us be alert and self-controlled.

7 For 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 self-controlled,

putting on faith and love as a breastplate,

and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath

but to receive 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 in fact you are doing.