

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

TWO KINDS OF RELATIVISM-ONE DEADLY, ONE SAVING

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1Now 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 suddenly destruction will come upon them, as labor 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; 5you 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 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.

DIAGNOSIS: The World's Deadly Relativism-Destined...for Wrath (v. 9)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – “Peace and Security” (v. 3)

“Peace and security” (cf. v. 3) is a wonderful thing, but it can also be a blinder that conceals clear and present dangers. Who knows what “wrath” (v. 9) lurks beyond our present “peace and security”? Who knows what we may fail to see as we rest assured (“sleep,” v. 6) in the relative “peace and security” of the dominant culture: A terrorist attack, a sniper, a financial crisis, persecution, sickness, sudden death? Many of these calamities had invaded the relative “peace and security” of the Thessalonian community, like they have our own present Christian communities. The truth is, any “peace and security” we have now is only relative. Unfortunately, some in the Thessalonian congregation were forgetting that. Have we? They had hoped, as Paul had preached, that the day of the Lord would come soon, meaning, before the loss of their present “peace and security.” But in light of the Lord’s delay, Paul’s apparent error in timing, that prospect waned. For the more they identified with Christ and his values, the more they were risking the wrath of the dominant gentile culture and losing their relative peace and security within it. Paul and his suffering for the gospel was proof enough (3:1-5)! Consequently, they were “more and more” (cf. 4:1, 10) tempted to forsake the way of the Lord in order to preserve what relative “peace and security” they had. Rather than risk the loss of their “peace and security” through acts of suffering, love for the Christian community and those in need—which for Paul is the clear and present will of God (thus relativizing it, 4:1-8), they began to absolutize their present “peace and security” with the dominant culture at the expense of

those in need, relativizing the sufferings of others and justifying their inaction for the needy.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Not Knowing When . . . As Not Believing He's Lord*

By the time Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, it was becoming clear that Paul's expectation of the imminent coming of the Lord was not going to be fulfilled. Indeed, the operative message with regard to the coming of the Lord became not "soon," but rather, "don't know when." The Lord would come, says Paul now, "like a thief in the night" (5:2), a message that all the later Gospel writers would also emphasize as having been Jesus' own understanding. Unfortunately, for some of the Thessalonian Christians not to know "when" was not good enough. For Paul, however, not knowing "when" was not a real issue. It was consistent with his basic message of living by faith in Christ (v. 8; see also 1:3, 8 and 4:14, etc.). Living by faith, after all, presupposes no time constraints. But for some of the Thessalonians there were time constraints. Live by faith? "Yes," they said, "but only as long (time-wise) as that faith (i.e., the waiting) does not jeopardize the 'peace and security' we enjoy with the dominant culture." But such a relativization of faith-faith with time constraints-is not really faith at all. It might be faith in the dominant culture but it is not faith in the Lord. For to doubt the Lord's timing is to disbelieve that he is really "our Lord" (v. 9)-NOW OR EVER.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *"Destined . . . for Wrath" (v. 9)*

To place such faith and importance in the relative "peace and security" of the dominant culture might ward off the clear and present danger of the wrath of the gentiles, what Paul calls "persecution" for the sake of the gospel (3:1-5). But that relative "peace and security" leaves them not only vulnerable to other would-be worldly "thieves in the night," but it also

leaves them “destined for the wrath of God” that is coming upon them (1:10; 2:16; 4:6; 5:9). The moment they say, “There is peace and security,” and do so by contrasting it with the persecutions of those “who labor [for the gospel] among you” (5:12)-THAT, says Paul, is the moment they have entered into “sudden destruction” (v. 3). Of course, they-and we-who live by such time-conditioned faith cannot see that. Not because evidence is lacking, but because they/we are in the dark about God and God’s dealings with the world-both with regard to judgment and to the Christ. Nor will we ever get a definitive, satisfactory answer to the question, “When will the destruction occur?” Only hindsight is 20/20 with regard to these matters. But in this case hindsight is too late.

PROGNOSIS: Christ’s Saving Relativism: Destined for Salvation

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *“Obtaining Salvation through Our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9)*

As the diagnosis suggests, the most pressing question with regard to “peace and security,” that is, “the destiny,” of all people-including us Christians-is not “WHEN will the Lord come again?” but “WHO ALONE can save us from the wrath of God to come?” (cf. 1:10; 5:9). Fortunately, we do not need to wait until the end of time to receive the answer to that question. Indeed, the end of time would be too late. Rather, the answer has already come in person and work of the “Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9). Truth be told, the only reason we Christians know-or better, believe-this dark diagnosis about God’s wrath is because we get it from Jesus, who is the answer. He is our “enlightenment” on these matters, especially on God’s wrath because he has engaged that wrath in hand-to-hand combat. In order to be the answer to that question, “Who alone can save us from the wrath to come,” Jesus Christ himself comes into our world not just to reveal the truth about God and us-namely, that

we are “destined for wrath”-but to change that truth. As Paul says, he came to “rescue” (1:10) us from the dark truth about God’s wrath, to changing our “destiny,” to establish a new relation between the world and God-as new and different as “night” and “day” (cf. 5:4-5). This he did by engaging wrath head on in an incredible dual on the cross. On the cross Christ confronted the truth of God’s wrath on the world and absorbed it into his body, the way a “breastplate” (v. 8) absorbs the blows of an enemy. True, in this great battle he is knocked down, but it is God’s wrath that is therein ultimately extinguished. Of course, at first sight that is not obvious. For the Lord Jesus Christ is knocked down dead in the flesh. He dies our human death at the hands of God’s wrath. But then, God makes a most powerful declaration. God raises Jesus from the dead. In the resurrection, we see that, in this dual on the cross, it is not the Christ who is ultimately defeated but wrath and death. Here, in history, God in Christ comes to the rescue of people destined for wrath, bringing forth a new day, a new reality, “salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9).

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) – *“Putting on the Breastplate of . . . Faith” (v. 8)*

Paul is painfully aware that what Christ has accomplished can be lost on the world and us, if we don’t make constant use of it for our constant protection. Christ is like a great breastplate (v. 8) that in principle is able to absorb and overcome the arrows of God’s wrath on sinful humanity. Therefore, Paul urges the Thessalonians-and us-to “put on the breastplate of faith.” Faith not only knows Christ as the one who has conquered wrath, sin and death, but establishes him as “OUR Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9). That is to say, faith places us under the possession of Christ and his victory. And to be so under his possession by faith is, in turn, to possess for ourselves-already in the here and now-all the protection we will ever need from the wrath to

come. In that sense, faith is the ultimate “peace and security.” Who knows “when” the final day of wrath will come? To that question there is no answer. But that doesn’t matter. That question has been relativized by faith in Christ. Whenever that day comes, it will be defeated because of our faith in the One who has defeated it already on the cross and in the resurrection. Indeed, faith relativizes our whole experience of the world. It is neither the relative “peace and security” of the dominant culture nor the relative persecutions and opposition of that culture that determines either our final destiny or our present stance on life. Faith in Christ determines that destiny. For faith is to be under the reign of the absolute “peace of God” (5:23) won through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) – “Put on the Breastplate... of Love”

To put on the breastplate of faith not only gives us our Lord’s victory over death and God’s wrath but it also equips us to lead a life of love. By faith our present lives have been relativized. As Paul puts it “whether we are awake [alive] or asleep [dead]” is relative, because either way “we live with him” (v. 10). Nothing can change the faith-based reality that “we will be with the Lord forever” (4:18). Nothing, that is, except unbelief, which is the reason why Paul is writing in the first place and is so willing to suffer persecution for them: “I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you [away from faith] and that our labor had been in vain” (2:5). But this relativism of faith doesn’t mean that our lives and what we do with them doesn’t matter. What it means is that they matter in a new way: for the sake of “encouraging one another and building up one another” (v. 11). Because of faith we become “more and more” (4:1, 10) aware of the needs and struggles of people around us because we now live in the “day” and are not “asleep”

to what is around us. Because of faith we live “soberly” (v. 8), ready to do the bidding of the Lord for the sake of one another.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

26th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

1Now 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 labor 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 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.

DIAGNOSIS: An Unanticipated Break-in

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Apathy in the*

Face of Persecution and Death

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul addresses the worries expressed to him by the community of Christians in Thessalonica. Two of the experiences they were dealing with were the death of some of the people in their church community; and the strong resistance they were facing from their wider society, which did not share their faith. From Paul's response it seems that the reaction of some of the Thessalonian Christians had been escapism, disengagement from their world and its people and events, in drunkenness, idleness and irresponsible sex. They had stopped struggling with difficult issues in order to feel that they had peace and security.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Paralysis of Hopelessness*

Paul recognizes in this response a crisis of faith that could be expressed like this: Since there is no continual life for those who believe in Jesus nor is there a reign of love and peace around the church, therefore, Jesus has really made no difference in the world. God's salvation seems ineffective. If the Word of God's acceptance of people in Jesus meets with nothing but resistance, and the few who believe it do nothing but die eventually, then why bother living as if salvation were true and God really reigned? Instead of investing your life living out, actualizing and cultivating God's reign (like the servant with the five talents in Matthew 25:14-30), why not just bury your life and God's reign since neither lives long anyway, and faith does not change things (like the servant with the one talent in Matthew 25:14-30)? We turn to small gods of temporary relief if we believe in no big salvation.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Sudden Appearance of God*

But if we do not believe that God is a Savior in any real way, then, Paul warns, when God does come to us, it will be as

unexpected and unwelcome as the coming of a thief in the night who steals our meager comforts. When our small gods fall, what will we have? Only the real God, and this God will appear as one who consumes us in anger and judges us for our indiscriminate faith (Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 and Psalm 90:1-12). To those who believe that God does not save, God cannot be experienced as a Savior.

PROGNOSIS: A Season Already Begun

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Advance News Release of God's Coming*

Paul reminds the Thessalonians, however, that they do not need to be surprised or afraid because the dawn of God's day has already reached them. Jesus has already come as God's Messiah, the one chosen to save the world. Jesus is the word of God that describes God as the Savior and not the Destroyer of the world. We know what this salvation is like from the way Jesus lived, died and rose "for our sake" (1 Thessalonians 5:10).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *The Expectation of God's Salvation*

Precisely because God's salvation is in Jesus' life, death and opposition from the power-structures of this world should not come as a surprise to Christians. Both happened to Jesus. God's reign comes in the rising out of these things, in the new life that comes painfully. God has not put us in possession of a generic salvation, but of "salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9), which does not merely alter our circumstances, but alters us who "live together with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Faith makes this link between Jesus' life and ours. We do not need combat gear to meet God because we are instead dressed in faith, love and hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Life Lived Alertly and Soberly*

It is with these words of assurance that Paul urges the Thessalonians to continue to comfort one another and build each other up, to strengthen the community for the cross, not with words of hate and vengeance but with love. This shared life of Christ is a life of active engagement that does not avoid pain or conflict. Even the dead are together with Christ and will remain with him in the resurrection.