

THE ULTIMATE BLACK SWAN

12th in a series on 1 Thessalonians called, "Alien Race"

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

A few years ago Laurie and I had a little getaway to Disneyland and stayed in a really nice hotel not far from the park. Around 3 in the morning we were awakened and only gradually became aware that we were hearing a voice making some sort of announcement.

Groggily I figured out it was coming over a PA system that the hotel had in all the rooms. The voice was saying something about if we chose to evacuate we should go to the nearest stairway and make our way to the ground floor. "Evacuate" is a word that never, ever means something good is happening. Well, I guess there could be an exception.

When I was a boy at school if we had been told to evacuate the classroom I would have been happy. Fire drills were great because it meant no more sitting at your desk. However, hearing the word evacuate when you are at a hotel is always bad news. But we missed the first part of the message and didn't know what was going on. We were not fully awake and alert so we couldn't seem to make sense of the message. We reasoned that we had heard no fire alarm and the voice was not ordering us to evacuate the hotel, just instructing us what we should do if we chose to leave, so it couldn't be that urgent. We decided to wait for a repeat or follow up. There was none so we went back to sleep.

It later occurred to me that probably wasn't the wisest thing we could have done. It would have been smart to at least pick up the phone in the room and call to find out what was going on. But awakened out of a fast sleep in the middle of the night we just weren't prepared to operate efficiently enough to figure out a wise course of action. We were fortunate that apparently there was no threat to us because we slept the rest of the night unharmed and undisturbed. We never did learn what that was all about. So in the end no harm no foul I guess. However, the incident suggests that we don't want to go through this world asleep and unprepared for an unexpected event, especially because just such an event is coming. We will learn something about that event and how to be prepared for it from the passage we are going to consider today, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

THERE IS GOING TO BE A BIG SURPRISE

At the end of chapter 4 Paul explained that the Thessalonians did not need to worry about some of their brothers and sisters who had died. He reminded them that the risen Lord Jesus would return and take us all, including those who have already died, to live with him forever. He knew their response would be, “When? When is Jesus coming back?”

Followers of Jesus have been asking the same question ever since. In verse 1 Paul said, “About the times and dates we do not need to write to you.” They wanted to know how long they were going to have to wait. But Paul essentially said, “We don’t need to ask that question.” Did Paul not have to write them because he’d already told them when? No, that wasn’t it at all.

In verse 2 Paul explained why he had no need to write to them about when Jesus would come back. He said it was because they knew very well that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. First, let’s think about what Paul meant by the expression the Day of the Lord. That phrase shows up often in the Old Testament. It most frequently is depicted as a time of judgment. Joel 1:15 says, “Alas for the day! For the Day of the Lord is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty.” Isaiah 13:9 says, “Behold, the Day of the Lord is coming. Cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation.”

We tend to think of the Day of the Lord as a single event like Jesus suddenly showing up here on the earth. However, remember that the expression “the day” can be used not to refer to one particular day, or even one particular event, but to a period of time. Years ago when I coached my son’s high school hockey team there was a kid on the team who was very good. He wasn’t as good as he thought he was, but he was one of the better players. He was only a sophomore the first year I coached him and he was unusually immature, even for a sophomore. One day he was all upset because he didn’t think he got the notice and respect that several older players who were clearly the team leaders got, and he thought he should. I told him if he just kept a good attitude, played his hardest and continued to develop his skills, his day would come. I did not mean that suddenly everyone would respect him for that day. I meant that there would come a time when he would be respected over a period of time, encompassing many events.

That's what the Day of the Lord is like as well. It is a particular period of time that is called the Day of the Lord because it's the time when he acts. It is his day to show up. It is the time when he acts to set right all the things that are wrong. There have been a number of days of the Lord. For instance, I quoted Isaiah 13:9 saying the Day of the Lord is coming to make the land desolate. But Isaiah 13:1 says that that chapter is a prophecy against Babylon that Isaiah saw. That Day of the Lord came 2600 years ago when Babylon was wiped out. Amos 5:18-20 says the Day of the Lord would come as a terrible judgment on Israel. That also happened a long time ago. Any time God intervenes decisively in history it is a Day of the Lord. All of them foreshadow the ultimate Day of the Lord, the last time God acts to bring human history to a close.

In that Day of the Lord there will be a number of events. We learned about them at the end of chapter 4. There will be a period of great trial and judgment on the earth, there will be a time when believers in Jesus are taken up into heaven, there will be a time when Jesus physically returns to the earth, there will be a period of time when he rules physically here on earth, and there will be a time when he judges all human beings.

As I pointed out last week, scholars debate the exact order of those events. There are a number of explanations of what the scenario will be. My question is, "Why are there a number of scenarios that are suggested?" The very fact that there is so much disagreement among intelligent and godly people should tell us that no one has the definitive answer. No matter which theory you happen to believe, it is flawed. That's true of every single one of them. And that suggests to me that we don't know the full answer of how this is all going to turn out. We know that Jesus Christ will come back to this world. But the exact order of events is not as plain as day. It leaves us with too many questions. So we must not be dogmatic about our system or theory of the Day of the Lord.

People can argue and give great evidence for why their particular theory is correct. But that reminds me of listening to people back in January arguing over which team was going to win the Super Bowl. Would it be the Carolina Panthers or the Denver Broncos? Based on my own reading of the quality of each team and on the arguments that I heard I was convinced that the Denver Broncos didn't even need to show up for the game because they were going to lose. The thing about those arguments over which team is best is that you won't know until the game is played. Even when it seems like a slam dunk, you won't really know until the game is played. No matter how certain someone might have been that Carolina

would win and how strong their arguments, in the end they were wrong. And no matter which theory you happen to hold about the Day of the Lord, and no matter how cogent your arguments may seem to be, you aren't going to know until the events occur. None of us will.

What we do know is that the Day of the Lord will come, it will involve Jesus returning to earth, and when it comes it's going to be a big shock. Paul says it's going to be like a thief coming in the night. Have you ever had a thief visit your home? It's happened to me twice. Neither time did the thief have the courtesy to give us advance warning. Both times it was a complete surprise. There was no sign we could have seen to tip us off. How dumb would a thief have to be to give notice that he would be providing service to a particular house at a particular time? The point here is that just as a thief showing up always comes as a surprise, so will the arrival of the Day of the Lord be a big surprise.

Paul says that people are going to be saying "peace and safety." The Romans had propaganda that featured the phrase *pax et securitas*. That's Latin for peace and security. They didn't want conquered peoples to focus on the fact that they were living under the heel of Rome and being taxed by the Romans who used their taxes to fund their occupation of the conquered lands. They wanted people to think how wonderful it was the Romans brought peace and security. They made life safe and peaceful. They knew that's what people want. They didn't use the expression "heavy taxation and oppression" as their propaganda motto because no one wants that. So the point here is that Paul is saying that people are going to be focusing on what they always focus on. It's going to be life as usual. They're going to be busily caught up in wanting peace and security for themselves and to make life as comfortable as it can be. They will be pre-occupied with their normal pursuits, expecting nothing out of the ordinary to happen. In the midst of that they're going to be shocked because the Day of the Lord is going to arrive as Jesus shows up. It will be the ultimate Black Swan event. The Roman poet Juvenal wrote of the black swan as a *rara avis*, a rare bird. In fact, in his day they were unknown. Author Nassim Taleb popularized the expression to refer to an event that cannot be anticipated that is of colossal proportions. 9/11 was a black swan event. The Day of the Lord will be the ultimate black swan. It will be a total shock and it will literally change everything.

We cannot anticipate when the Day of the Lord is going to arrive. No one knows when it is going to happen. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus said, "About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father."

There are churches and ministries today whose major focus is on the signs of the times. They spend a great deal of time and energy focusing on convincing people that we can look around and see the signs that we clearly are in the last days, meaning the Day of the Lord is about to come. He's coming in our lifetime. Surely it will be soon. David Ridges has a book titled, *65 Signs of the Times Leading Up To The Second Coming*. Kenneth Hagan has a book titled, *The Signs of the Times*, as does Greg Laurie. Then there's a book entitled *Prophecy And End Times Signs* that is subtitled *Biblical Signs That Show Us When Jesus Will Come*. Yet another book is *The Signs Of The Second Coming: 11 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return In Our Lifetime* by Britt Gillett.

Back in the early 2000's I used to receive letters from a woman who lived in our area who believed she was a prophet. She claimed that God gave her messages to send to people, especially pastors. Most of them had a sort of generic Christian message with warning tenor to them. But I remember in particular the one I received on July 31, 2003. She said that God told her to say, "It is true that no man knows the day or hour, but to my faithful ones it is given to know the season, month and year of my coming. I have given it to my servant" (meaning herself) "to announce my coming. The trumpet blast shall go forth from the heavens during the season of Tabernacles in October, 2003." We can't know the day or the hour but God told her the month of Jesus coming was October 2003. Apparently we missed it. Oh no! We've been Left Behind!

I first became aware of the persistent obsession among Christians with the end times back in 1967. That year, Israel was attacked by its neighbors and defeated them all in what is known as the Six-Day War. The Israelis crushed their Arab enemies and, for the first time in two millennia, gained possession of the city of Jerusalem. That ignited a firestorm of prophetic fervor. Surely this meant that we were in the last days and that Jesus was about to come back because we were seeing prophecy fulfilled before our very eyes.

A few years after the Six-Day War, Hal Lindsay wrote a best seller called *The Late, Great Planet Earth* that made it seem the coming of Jesus was absolutely imminent. It didn't state it outright, but sort of implied that Jesus would come by 1988. Since then there have been many predictions about the date Jesus would return, all wrong. There are still lots of ministries that are all about looking for the signs. I'll just ask this: Do you look for signs that a thief is about to come in the night? No, you prepare for it, but you don't ever know when a thief might show up. So we prepare for Jesus, but admit we cannot know when he is going to come.

In Acts 1:6 the disciples asked resurrected Jesus if now he was going to set up his kingdom. Is the Day of the Lord coming now? He answered in verse 7, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” The Myatt Perversion of that is, “That’s none of your business.” Do you think he meant they couldn’t know, but we can? I sure don’t.

I make a point of this because there are so many people who understand that they can get an audience, they can sell books by stirring up people’s hearts with the idea that Jesus is going to come back within the next few years, and they can know the signs, even though Jesus himself denied that more than once. For whatever reason, people are always fascinated with the idea of knowing the future. They want to know about the signs of the times. If you talk about that you will always get a hearing and audience.

The problem is, at some point this is going to create a credibility issue. Anyone with marginally functioning brain cells eventually is going to notice that people keep saying, “This is about to happen! This is about to happen!” - and it doesn’t happen. They’re going to notice that the signs of the times seem to keep changing. I’m alright with calling into question the credibility of the people doing the speaking, but this approach has potential for calling into question the credibility of the Christian faith. The biblical instruction about the Day of the Lord and the coming of Jesus was never intended to be an exercise in tickling people’s ears. We will see in this passage what the point of it was and it has nothing to do with figuring out the signs of the times.

Someone might say, but wait, look at what Paul says in verse 4. He says, “You are not in darkness so that this Day should surprise you like a thief.” Isn’t he saying that the Day of the Lord won’t come like a thief in the night for those who are not in the darkness? In other words, believers in Jesus won’t be surprised by this because they will know the day?

That is not his point. He was not telling the Thessalonians they should be looking around trying to figure out who the antichrist is, which countries are Gog and Magog, and looking for any indication that the government is secretly creating a system to make everybody have the number 666 stamped on them somewhere. To the question of, “Are these things about to happen now?” Paul answered just as Jesus did. That’s none of your business. You know he’s coming; you don’t know when, so be ready at all times.

WE SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED

At the end of verse 5 Paul makes the key statement, we do not belong to the night or to the darkness. In verse 7 he says that at night people sleep and get drunk. That's a generalization about what normally goes on in people's lives at that time. The wiser ones are getting their sleep in preparation for the next day, the others are preparing a hangover for the next day. Either way they are not real in tune with what's going on. They are not aware that Jesus could come at any moment. His point is that as followers of Jesus we are not of the night. We are part of the kingdom of light, and as such we are to be awake and aware of what is happening in this world. We are to be prepared for what could happen at any time.

Verse 8 tells us that since we belong to the day we should be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. The world, which is under the control of the evil one, is designed to put us to sleep. Paul says that the world is not of the day and they're doing the things that people do at night, getting drunk and going to sleep. The world wants to push us into its mold. It wants us to become unconscious, unaware of the reality of life.

The reality of life is that the spiritual realm is very real, Jesus is alive, and he could come back at any moment. The world is specifically designed to distract us from those realities. It wants us to believe that the spiritual realm doesn't exist at all, that Jesus is not alive and he most certainly is not coming back. So the world tries to convince us that the only thing we should be thinking about is feathering our nest here on earth because this is all that matters. In fact, it is all we have.

The world tries to accomplish that in several ways. If the spiritual realm is not real, and if there is no life after death - if God does not exist - then ultimately our lives have exactly zero meaning and they are totally empty. That is a reality that any thinking person is going to become aware of. And so the world will tell us that the only way to get through life is to try to numb yourself to the pain of that emptiness. And that's what the world does.

The idea is just go to sleep. Party like crazy, pursue all the pleasure that you can to try to help you to forget the reality of life. Or it could be just distract yourself from it. Keep yourself from being overwhelmed by fear by so frantically busy you won't see the fears. Get so wrapped up in the pursuit of success or money or fame that you never think about the point of it all. Numb yourself with entertainment and trivial pursuits so you don't have to think about the larger issues of life. It is all

designed to put us to sleep. It is designed to keep us from being aware of the reality that the spiritual realm, in the form of Jesus coming back to this world, could break in on us at any moment.

In question here is the very nature of reality. If there is no spiritual realm, if God isn't real, if Jesus isn't coming back, reality is very different than if the spiritual realm is quite real, if God is for real and Jesus is coming back. Those realities will have massive impact on how we live. Our priorities will be completely changed, as will our values and our morality. It will have a huge impact on what we perceive the meaning of our lives to be, on what we should fear, on whether we can be confident and joyful, on how we use our resources.

I'd like you to do a thought experiment. Think about a person who works for a major corporation, perhaps Qualcomm. What would happen if this person somehow began to believe that he actually owned that corporation? How would that affect him? If some guy claiming to be his manager told him what to do, he would feel offended and would ignore that person's orders. He would start ordering people around. He might use company resources for his own desires because, after all, they belong to him. He might decide to just leave the office on a whim to go play golf whenever he felt like it. He's living by his reality, but he's causing conflict and he's setting himself up for a huge and painful fall. Our world is trying to convince us that what is real is not real, and is putting us in that person's position.

We are not to be like that. We are to be watchful and alert. The Greek word translated, “watchful,” is the word *gregoreo* from which we get the name Gregory. It was used in the military context of being alert while on guard duty. Why do we need to be alert? We certainly don't need to be alert to make sure that we can guard our salvation for fear of losing it. In verse 9 Paul wrote, “...for God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice that he says God has appointed us to this.

The elementary school that I attended was not air-conditioned. This was in Bakersfield. Do you know what it is like in Bakersfield for several months of the year? It's a shade cooler than the surface of the sun, but not by much. And we had to go to school and sit in a classroom with no air-conditioning. Talk about cruel and unusual punishment! Along one wall of the classroom there were tall banks of old-style windows. They had a round ring at the top of the frame. The windows were opened using a long tool that had a hook on the end. You insert the hook in

that ring and then pull the window open from the top. We thought opening those windows was really cool. It was fun to get to use that tool to reach way up there, stick that hook into those rings and pull the windows open. But not just anyone was allowed to do that. The teacher appointed someone in the class to be the Window Monitor. The Window Monitor had the privilege of opening all those windows while the other kids looked on enviously. Only the Window Monitor had that privilege. Oh, how I longed to be the Window Monitor. I was never given that great honor. But one of my friends was. Once he had been appointed, that was his job. It belonged to him. There was no question about whether or not he was the Window Monitor. He did not have to earn it or fight for it. It was his job because he had been so appointed by the teacher. God has appointed us for salvation. That means that we have that salvation. There is no more question about it.

Ephesians 1:4 says of God, “He chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world.” God chose us. He did it before this world even existed. Nothing is going to threaten that or thwart God’s decision. Jesus said of believers in him in John 10:28-29, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” Could he be any more clear? Nobody takes what is God’s away from him. So no one and nothing can rip us away from our heavenly Father.

So what we are protecting ourselves against is failing to live in light of reality and thus wasting our lives. Last year we had the joy of going on a great vacation trip to Maui with all our kids. While we were there three different hurricanes passed by. None hit the islands directly, so it didn’t ruin the trip. It affected the weather, mostly by blocking the trade winds and making it hotter. But one effect they had was to produce some strong surf. At the end of one particular day, we were at the beach where there was a just a beach break, but it was pretty big. Toby and Michael dove in to play in the waves. Not wanting to be left out, I joined them. I ignored the fact that they are half my age and in great shape. I’m at that place in life where people say, “You’re in good shape...for your age.” It was astounding how powerful those waves were. I got ruined by one of those waves. It threw me around like I was a rag doll until it was done with me. After that I was very much on the alert, carefully watching those waves, not wanting to get hammered and repeat that less-than-delightful experience.

This passage warns us that it is easy to stand out in heavy surf looking at the beach, totally clueless that we’re about to get destroyed by a huge wave. That huge wave

is not what Jesus will do to us when he returns, it is what the world around us is doing to us. There are only two truth alternatives: One is that the spiritual realm isn't real, Jesus isn't alive and he isn't coming back. The other is that the spiritual realm is real and eternal, Jesus is alive, and he is coming back. If that latter is true then it is crucial that we live like it or we will be put to sleep. We will waste our lives. Ephesians 5:15-16 says, "Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil." If you get lulled to sleep it will be like that wave wiping you out, for it will waste your life. You'll live by the world's ways, putting self first, holding grudges and getting even with those who hurt you, evaluating everyone and everything from a worldly perspective, living for things that are going to prove to be illusions, chasing mirages in the desert. The days are evil, meaning the tide of this world will naturally move you in that direction. So wake up and be alert!

CONCLUSION

PUT ON THE ARMOR

Paul tells us to put on some armor. What a great image for a context where he has been talking about guarding and being on the alert. What soldier goes into battle with no equipment or weapons? A dead one. I think about my son, who is a hockey goalie. Before he steps onto the ice for a game he puts on his armor. He puts on padded pants, knee pads, a chest and arm protector, padded skates, a helmet and big padded gloves. He'd be crazy not to wear that stuff.

Paul tells us what our armor is. It's a familiar trio. It's faith, hope and love. We see this trio in 1 Corinthians 13:13 where Paul said, "Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." The same three are present in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 where Paul wrote, "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope." Why faith, hope and love? To wake up we need faith to see that God is alive, that he is present with us, that he is at work in the world around us and wants us to be a part of it. We need faith to believe that Jesus could come back and that it could happen at any moment. We need that faith to open our eyes to the spiritual reality. We need hope to give us the motivation to persevere instead of just giving up and going to sleep. We need love because our natural bent and the pressure of the world around us will push us to live for self. Love urges us to not live for ourselves but to serve and bless others.

Imagine that one day you are walking on a beach on some idyllic tropical island and you see a spectacular mansion that is right on the beach. The house is beautiful and huge, and the grounds are gorgeously landscaped. You wonder who owns such

a majestic estate. As you are walking by, you encounter a man just leaving it to go for a swim in the ocean. You ask him if he owns the place. He says, “No, it is owned by a wealthy man who lives on the mainland. I manage this place and take care of it for him.” You ask if the owner comes very often. He says, “No, he hasn’t been here in more than 10 years.” You ask if he’s coming soon. He says, “I don’t know. He doesn’t tell me when he’s going to come. When he comes he just shows up.” You say, “It looks to me like you’re doing a great job of caring for it. It looks immaculate. It looks like you could be expecting him to come next week.” He answers, “No, I expect him to come today. I expect him to come every day. That’s the only way I can be sure it will be ready for him if he does come.” And that’s the only way we can be ready for Jesus when he comes. Be alert. Put on the armor of faith, hope and love, and make the most of this season on earth.

BE A BUILDER

Paul gives us a specific way we can be ready, a way we can love others. It is by encouraging our brothers and sisters. We need to build them up and help them be stronger.

We’ve been watching shows on television that are about people renovating houses. When they do that, they always start with demolition. They tear parts of the houses down in order to rebuild them. I’ve noticed that on one of the shows they involve the owners in the demolition. They usually express some glee at smashing stuff and ripping it out. But what’s left after demolition is a big, depressing mess and a useless shell of a house. It requires skilled builders to come in and make something beautiful and useful out of the mess.

Sadly, we humans have a natural gift and penchant for demolishing things. We often go at the job with gusto. We are all too adept at using our words and our expressions to highlight the shortcomings of others. We are way too good at tearing them down. But in our wake we leave a mess that is only a shell of what it could be. Wouldn’t you rather be a builder who creates something beautiful and useful in others? Wouldn’t it be great to be a craftsman who does beautiful work? I assure you that this world and our enemy are doing all the demolition work on people that they will ever need. What they need now is someone to build in them with love, grace, affirmation and encouragement.

I have the incredible privilege of living with the Queen of Encouragement. I get encouragement from her on a daily basis. She tells me how much she respects me,

she quotes things I've said in a sermon and talks about how they have impacted her, she tells me I'm her hero, she says how thankful she is for me. Do you know what that does to me? What do you think the effect would be if she was quick to point out every mistake I made, if she looked for errors in everything I said and did, if she constantly harangued me to be a better husband and to fix stuff around the house, berating me for my inabilities? It might cause me to try harder at some things, but mostly it would produce resentment and defensiveness and it would deeply discourage me and cause me to want to avoid her. Instead, her encouragement inspires me; it makes me want desperately to live up to the image she has of me. Let's inspire people with our encouragement!