

The day of the Lord is coming, Christians. The Last Day will soon be here. The Bible tells us many things about that day. It tells us that it will be a day of judgment, the day when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead for everything that they have done. The Bible tells us that it will be the day when Christ will return for the second time, and he will bring an end to all things. The Bible tells us that it will be a day when this world and all this creation will be destroyed, when it will be remade into a new heavens and a new earth. That day is coming, Christians, and it will soon be here. It will come like a thief in the night.

But are we ready for it? Are we ready for that day? Are we ready, awake, and watching, so that we will greet that day with joy? Or are we asleep so that that day will catch us by surprise? Well, how do we know? How do we know the difference? How do we know if we are awake or if we are asleep? Paul shows us in our reading for today from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5.

Because in this passage, Paul mixes together lots of different ideas to talk about the coming of that day. He says it's like a thief in the night. He says it's like a woman in labor, light and dark, a soldier putting on armor, drunk and sober, awake and asleep. And he mixes all of these together into one picture to show what that day will be like. But that's kind of confusing, because all of those things together, they don't always seem to fit together. So what is Paul trying to say? Well to understand that, let's focus on just one of these pictures: the picture of a soldier putting on his armor. Verse 8 of our reading says: "Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." So putting on a breastplate, putting on a helmet, this is a picture of a soldier who's getting ready for the day. And since we know that Paul calls us to be watchful, we can assume that this soldier is a watchman.

And a watchman in those times, Christians, was not like a policeman, going through the streets trying to catch criminals. A watchman was supposed to pay attention, to pay attention to make sure that no enemies were coming against the city or against the camp. And he had a very important job to do, because if he didn't pay attention, someone might come up unexpectedly and take the city by surprise. And then everyone in the city would be destroyed. There wouldn't be enough time for them to react to do something about it. So if a watchman didn't do his job, people would die. And that's why in those times, if a watchman didn't do his job, if he fell asleep at his watch, he'd be put to death. Because he didn't make just a simple little mistake by falling asleep. He made a life-threatening failure that could have threatened the whole city. And so it's a very important job that he has to carry out. And the picture that Paul presents us is of someone being just as serious, to carry out his watching with all the seriousness that it deserves.

But I want you to picture, then, two different watchmen. On the one hand, a watchman who is not doing his job, who doesn't take it very seriously. And on the other hand, a watchman who does, a watchman who's paying attention, who's being vigilant. The first watchman doesn't take his job seriously because he's convinced that there is no danger. He's convinced that he doesn't need to watch. He's been out here for months on end watching, and nothing has happened. Nothing is going to happen, he thinks. There is no need for him to pay attention, because no one is coming against the city. Since he is not paying attention, he starts to pay attention to other things. Maybe he's watching something else. Maybe he's talking too much on the job. Maybe he gets drunk, and he passes out, and that's the only way he feels that he can kill time. And in that way, Christians, he fails at his job. He is totally unaware when an enemy comes against the city,

and they are taken by surprise as a result. There is no time for them to react. No time to raise the alarm. It's simply too late. The watchman who didn't pay attention has failed. His time of judgment has come.

But Christians, how do we become like that watchman? How do we fall into that way of thinking? We do that when we think that there will always be more time. More time for me before I need to do the right thing. More time before I feel like I need to give up on this sin. More time before I need to pay attention. More time before I need to do anything at all. I think everything is just fine. There is peace and security, because there is always more time. I can get to it tomorrow. I don't need to worry about it today. And when we think that there is always more time, Christians, we become convinced that there is no danger. That there is no need for us to turn away from our sins right now. There is no need for us to turn towards God, because we can always do that later. It's just like the false prophets of Jeremiah 23, where it says: "They say continually to those who despise the Word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you,' and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'" But disaster is at the door, Christians. The time is coming quickly. Disaster will soon be upon us. Just like the rich man of Luke 12, who says: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things that you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

Christians, if we live this way, the Last Day will catch us by surprise. Because instead of waiting for our Master to come home, instead of waiting for our Master to return, we become convinced that he is never going to. And yet when he does return, if we live this way, we will receive our due judgment. It will be no more than we deserve. But are we living this way, Christians? Are we living like the sleeping watchman? Do we neglect God's Word? Do we neglect worship? Do we neglect the sacraments? Do we live for the pleasures of this world, to always live in the pleasures of this moment? Do we let our need to be busy, our need to be constantly doing something, get in the way of the things of God? Do we hold grudges? Do we refuse to forgive? Or do we even just say that our sins aren't really that bad? That I can get right with God later. There is always more time. Christians, if we live this way, it's just like being drunk. We are unable to think clearly. And just like the watchman who gets drunk and passes out is not able to do his job, so the one who is drunk on sin is not aware of what is happening spiritually. And he will not be ready for the Lord. But the Lord will come, and he will wake him up--to his everlasting shame! So may we not be like that sleeping watchman, Christians, to be caught by surprise on that day.

But that other watchman, the one who does his job, he's paying attention. He is always vigilant. He is always watching the horizon to make sure that no one is coming, that there is no threat. He is not distracted by pleasure. He's not getting drunk on the job to pass the time. And even though the hours are long, even though the days pass into weeks pass into months, he is always careful to do his duty. As a result, he will not be caught by surprise. He will be able to raise the alarm in time, because he has done what was required of him. And he knows that something may happen at any time. Blessed indeed is that watchman who is ready for whatever will come! Because when the Master returns, he will give that watchman his eternal reward.

So how do we become like him, Christians? How do we live like the watchman who's paying attention? We do it when we know the times. When we recognize that the time is short, when we recognize that Christ may come back at any moment. It may be tomorrow. It may be many days from now. We don't know. But we do know that he will return, and therefore we need to be watchful for his coming, to live each day as if it were the last. And I don't mean live each day as if it were the last in a sentimental sense, like "make the most of life" or something like that. And I don't mean live each day as if it were the last in a worldly sense, like "live it up because this is the only life that we get." No I say living each day as if it were the last because we know that Christ may return tomorrow. And when he comes, we will be ready for him by doing what he wants us to do, by being the Christians we are called to be. Being faithful to our Lord in all things. When we do that, Christians, our Master will say to us when he returns: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

Because when we live like that watchman, Christians, the Last Day will not be a surprise, but rather a long-expected joy, a cause for celebration. Our Master has finally come. How exciting that will be! So let us be watchful for his coming, always paying attention, always being ready for our Lord's return. Let us be constantly in the Word of God. Let us constantly be in worship. Let us constantly be in prayer and in the sacraments. Let us ignore the pleasures of this world, not living for the moment, but living for eternity. Let us set God first in everything. Let us forgive each other as Christ first forgave us. Let us confess our sins and turn away from those sins to the Lord. When we do these things, Christians, we will put on our armor like good soldiers of Christ, like good watchmen waiting for their Master. The armor of faith, hope, and love. And we will know that our watching is not pointless, but as Paul says in verses 9 and 10: "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him." That's what's waiting for us. That's the reward for our watchfulness.

So let us pay attention. Let us keep watch. Let us encourage one another and build one another up, all the more since the Day is coming quickly. And in that Day, we will greet that day with joy, because Christ is coming soon. Let us be ready for him, because he will soon be here.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have promised that your Son, Jesus Christ, will come on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. Help us to be ready for that Day, that we may greet him with joy, for he comes to save us. In his name we pray. Amen.