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Watching for Christ's Return
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Dear radio friends,

In our last broadcast we considered the comfort that we have in connection with Christ's second coming. We considered then the order of events that will take place on that day when Christ returns. We even considered, in connection with that, the resurrection of God's people at the end of time.

But more needs to be said concerning that coming of Jesus Christ. When does He come? That is a question that confronts God's people, too. And the apostle Paul addresses that in I Thessalonians 5:1-6. There we read: "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not es-

cape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."

When does Christ return? That really is at the heart of these verses that we have before us today. Christ comes again as He has promised. But when will Christ come? And that is a pertinent question. Paul had just told the saints of Thessalonica about their being alive and remaining when Christ came. Did this mean that Christ was coming in their lifetime? Obviously not. Can we say that Christ is coming in *our* lifetime? Can we say that Christ is coming in the lifetime of our children or their children? "Of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." With this, Paul, in the verses

of this passage, proceeds to give us instruction concerning the time of Christ's appearance, and with it, he gives practical instruction concerning our need to watch for that coming of Christ right now.

The goodman of the house and his wife are ready to lay themselves down to sleep. It is evening. It is dark outside. And they must rise again at daybreak to begin anew their day's labors. The goodman routinely checks the doors of the house to see that they are all bolted tight and, confident that the house is secure for the night, he retires. He is assured that his house is safe, he lays himself down thinking to himself, "Peace and safety," and he falls into a deep, deep sleep. But sometime in the night, while the goodman and his wife lay soundly asleep, a thief breaks into the man's house and steals away all the goodman's possessions. This thief knew his profession well. He came swiftly, unexpectedly, and suddenly. Who would have thought it was his intent that very night to rob and plunder the goodman's house? Certainly, what Jesus tells us in Matthew 24:43 is true. "But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have

suffered his house to be broken up."

But who was to know that the thief was coming? And who was to know what watch of the night he was coming in? So the goodman was caught unawares. He was not watching. He was not prepared. He was sleeping, and he lost everything that he had. Such is the coming of the thief. He depends on the element of surprise, he comes when no one is expecting him, he descends upon the house suddenly and swiftly. The goodman of the house is simply not prepared to keep him from robbing him. The thief is foiled in his attempts only when the goodman is forewarned and prepared.

Now everywhere the Bible uses this same figure to describe the coming of Jesus Christ. Thus the passage we consider today does too. Verse 2 reads: "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." And throughout these verses, the same figure is used to instruct us concerning Christ's return. His coming is as a thief.

Let us apply this figure to the coming of Christ. The obvious meaning here is: Christ's coming at the end of time is going to be swift, sudden, and unexpected. This is true, first of all, from the point

of view of the wicked world itself. This world will have fallen asleep, just like the goodman of the house. Jesus tells us that, just as in the days of Noah, so also at the end of time, men will be going on with life as if this world will never end, willingly ignorant of the coming of Christ. They will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Life will be going on as usual. From the spiritual point of view, therefore, this world will have fallen asleep, calmly and confidently. They will say to themselves, "Peace and safety." And, being soundly asleep from a spiritual point of view, this world will *not* be prepared for, or even expecting, the coming of Jesus Christ. This is why Christ's coming will be swift and unexpected.

As far as the exact moment of Christ's coming is concerned, we can say that He comes at a time when, as far as the world is concerned, He is least expected.

This idea is supported by another picture that Paul uses in verse 3: "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction

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cometh upon them, *as travail upon a woman with child*; and they shall not escape." We find there a woman in travail, a woman who is about to be delivered of a baby. And the idea is that suddenly, without a clue, that first hard labor pain strikes.

The woman has been expecting to have her baby all along. She knows it is close. But she does not know exactly when the moment will hit that will bring about the birth of her baby. It comes suddenly and unexpectedly.

So will be the coming of Christ. He comes when this world believes that they have "found their way," that they have found the answer to all the ills and the problems of society. Christ comes when the kingdom of man in this world is convinced that it is on the verge of establishing itself, and that, without God. At a time that no man can figure out, at a time that no man will be able to determine or predict, Christ will come. And that coming will not be quietly, in rapture. It will be a coming with shouts and trumpets unto the destruction of the wicked of this world.

Now it is important for us to realize why Paul makes this

point before moving on. There was an error about Christ's coming that prevailed in this church of Thessalonica. Some of the saints there believed that Christ would come in their lifetime. In fact, some of them had even quit working and were idly waiting for Christ to return. The instruction here is meant to combat the error of those who thought they knew when Christ would return. Notice how Paul begins this chapter: "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." Paul says, I really have no need to write to you about the time of Christ's return because you know about it perfectly. And what you know from my preaching, and through the preaching of the other apostles, and through the words of Christ Himself, is that that day comes as a thief in the night. There is no man who knows when that day is going to come. You cannot sit here and speculate about a particular time when Christ returns. You cannot predict that Christ is going to come this year or next year or even in our lifetime. You cannot sit idly by and make a prediction that it might

be in a matter of weeks or a few months and Christ will be here. It is not your job to predict that time. He comes as a thief. That is all that Christ Himself reveals to you. No man knows the time of Christ's return, just as no man knows of the hour in which a thief will come to rob his house, and as no woman knows when that first labor pain will strike to bring forth her baby. Make no assumptions, make no calculations, listen to no predictions of a man. Christ tells us that we will not know when He comes. He will strike as a thief in the night.

But, having established this fact, Paul goes on to say in verse 4: "But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief." Now that is striking. Paul tells us, after saying Christ comes as a thief, that the coming of Christ ought not to overtake us as a thief in the night. No contradiction is found here. Christ does come in an hour

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no man knows. At the same time, however, we are those who must be prepared for His coming. We know that He is coming. We may not know exactly when. We may not

know in what watch of the night He will come. But, nevertheless, we know He's coming. And, because we know, we will be ready for Him, even if that means that we are going to sit awake and watch the whole night long, which, really, we are called to do. We may not know in what watch of the night the thief comes, but

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he comes. And we are not as the wicked world who sleeps in its unbelief. We will be sitting there awake and watching for Christ, that He might not catch us unprepared.

And all this is true because we know perfectly of Christ's coming. We ought not to overlook the perfect knowledge we have of Christ's coming that Paul speaks of here in verse 2. It is not just the knowledge about some facts of Christ's coming. It is not some kind of human deduction we have made for ourselves that Christ comes again. It is a perfect knowledge. It is a knowledge of faith, a knowledge of Christ's coming that the people of this world do not have. When the wicked man

is warned and instructed concerning the swift and sudden return of Christ, he does not believe. His reasoning is blinded by unbelief. He knows and yet he does not know that

Christ comes again. He knows about it but he does not believe it. And for that reason, too, Christ will come upon that unbelieving man suddenly and unexpectedly. Then Christ's coming will overtake

him with sudden destruction.

But you and I have been given a perfect knowledge that Christ is coming. We know He comes soon and suddenly. And we, by all means, believe it. We may, at times, grow weary. We may, at times, be not so alert. But we know perfectly that Christ is coming and that we must watch.

That blessed truth Paul emphasizes in verse 5: "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness." We are children of the light. Oh, we were at one time children of the darkness, lost in our unbelief. It is true, sin had hold of our hearts. Our hearts and minds were darkened to this truth. We

lived in the night of sin. We could not know, neither did we even desire to know, about God and about the things of the kingdom of heaven. Of the times and the seasons we could not know because God had not revealed them to us. That is true of countless throngs of people today. Our world is lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief. These are the children of the night to which our text refers, those still stumbling about in their unbelief.

But God has been gracious, has He not? He proves in the hearts and lives of people yet today that He is a gracious God, because He graciously has poured out into our hearts the light of salvation. He has laid the burden of sin and unbelief on the shoulders of Christ. And Christ carried away the burden of our sin on the cross. He earned there, for God's people, the gift of faith. Included in that faith is a certain knowledge that Christ returns as a thief in the night. And we watch for Him. We know that the time of Christ's return is getting very, very close. We are tense, we are anxious, in our anticipation that pretty soon the thief will appear, and we must not allow ourselves to be unprepared when our home is broken into.

How can we say that

Christ's coming is very close? Because we know the times and the seasons. God has revealed to us the times and the seasons. The times—the Greek term translated “times” here in verse 1 is the word that we use for chronology or chronological. When we use that term, in our own language, it refers to a sequence or succession of events that take place in time. When we put something in chronological order, for example, we are putting it in the sequence of events in which it occurred. What our text here means, therefore, is that we are given to know perfectly the sequence of events that take place in the history and development of this world. We have been given a knowledge and understanding of the order of events that take place in history. We know that all of history is ordered by God from eternity. We know that God has ordered all things in such a way that, through them, the salvation of the church will be accomplished and God will glorify His name. He created all things for that reason. Man fell into sin for that reason. Christ has come for that reason. The church is defended, guided, and preserved for that reason. And the end of the world will come for that reason. Every event in creation and history leads to that per-

fect end. We are given to know the times.

And we are given to know the seasons. That term refers to a certain fixed period of time. We know the various periods of fixed times in this world. We know of the time of the prediluvian world, that is, the world before the Flood. We know the time from the Flood to the establishment of that nation and the kingdom of Israel. We know of the period of time from the establishment of Israel to the coming of Jesus Christ. We know of the time or the period in history of the new dispensation, that is, when Christ ascended into heaven and when He comes again at the end of time. And we know as well what indicates the close of that final period of time. We will be watching the signs that indicate that this period of time on God's chronological time clock is coming to a close.

The Bible everywhere gives the signs that point us to the imminent return of Christ. We are given to know what will transpire in history before Christ returns. The Bible reveals those signs to us. We see those signs in creation. We see those signs in the development of the nations. We see those signs in the church. God's Word indicates to you and to me what

will happen. And we watch these signs as they develop in creation and in the nations in order that we might be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ.

In this regard, let us not forget the command that we also receive in verse 6: "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober." That command is based upon the knowledge that we have of Christ's coming. It is based on the fact that we know He comes suddenly and unexpectedly, at a time when no man knows. And that command is this: "Do not sleep and do not be drunken, but watch and be sober. Always be prepared, for we do not know the watch of the night in which the thief will appear. Sit and watch. Every hour of the night."

Oh, that very error of those who wish to predict a certain hour in which Christ comes is exposed in these verses. If I knew that the thief was going to come at 4:00 in the morning, then I need not worry for the rest of the night, just so I am ready at that particular time for him. If I knew exactly when the birth of my baby was going to take place, as some do today of course, then I need not worry about the labor pains until that particular time. If I knew exactly the

year, month, day, and hour that Christ will return, then I would have no reason to watch right now. All I would have to do is sit and wait until that time, and then, rather hurriedly and quickly, prepare myself so I am ready. There would be no need to ready myself right now, every day. That is why Christ does not reveal, anywhere, the exact time of His coming. He does not want us to know. And He does not want us to know, so that right now, today, and tomorrow, and every day of our lives, we might prepare ourselves for His coming. He

wants us to live every day of our lives as if Christ is coming tomorrow. Always we must be prepared. Always we must be anticipating His return—and that, in order that we might walk a holy life in this world.

We must be sober, not drunken with the delights of this world and the pleasures of this world. Our minds must be clear and bright. Our spiri-

tual senses must be honed so that we watch the signs around us and read them correctly, in order to understand the coming of Christ. Our lives must

be filled with spiritual concerns. Every day we must busy ourselves in the study of God's Word. We must busy ourselves in worship and in prayer. All of that equips us to be sober and makes our eyesight clear. Then we will watch. We will stand in these last times with our eyes wide open, and we will be waiting every day, all day.

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The thief comes. Are you prepared to meet him when he comes? If the goodman is prepared, the thief will not catch him unawares. Are you prepared for Christ's coming? Can He come tomorrow and will you be ready to meet your Lord? Watch. He comes. Prepare. Then we will be ready when Jesus comes.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee that Thou dost reveal to us the times and the seasons, and that we can see by the signs around us that Christ comes. We do not know when. We pray therefore that Thou wilt teach us to be diligent in preparing ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Savior,

living the life of holiness before Thee. Where we falter and fail along life's pathway and grow weary of watching, we pray, forgive. But equip us by Thy Spirit and grace, so that we might look for the return of Christ. In His name we pray, Amen.