

## Living in Readiness

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When I lived in Nepal, my family had to prepare for chronic water shortages. With no running water system in Nepal, houses in Kathmandu relied on large underground water tanks. Water trucks were called in periodically to fill them up. However, during the dry season, obtaining water in a timely manner was challenging. Therefore, having the contact numbers of several water truck drivers and calling them at the right time to fill up the tanks was essential for maintaining a “civilized life.”

Additionally, during periods of tension between Nepal and India, India would occasionally halt gasoline exports, resulting in shortages that could persist for a month or more. To mitigate this, we proactively stored gasoline in oil barrels. When shortages arose, we tapped into our reserves. However, once these reserves were depleted, I had to endure hours of waiting to secure the limited supply of gasoline.

When I first arrived in the US, I marveled at the abundance of resources. The big-box stores here surpassed anything I had seen in Nepal, with items consistently stocked in large quantities. Consequently, I assumed, 'Well, I don't have to work as hard to prepare for a 'civilized life' here.' This belief held true until 2020, when I found myself struggling to locate toilet paper. I vividly recall a particular day when only two rolls remained, prompting a desperate visit to the grocery store. Fortunately, I was able to secure toilet paper, but it made me realize that I still live a life in readiness.

In the intricate tapestry of life, we often find ourselves navigating the rhythm of preparedness and unpredictability. The story of my experiences in Nepal reveals the significance of readiness in our lives. Life in our world demands that we remain vigilant and prepared for the unexpected. But, we often ignore the significance of readiness for our spiritual life. In today's lessons, the authors explore the hearts of the people who are waiting for the coming of the Lord and give us the wise guidance needed to navigate through the Christian life.

Paul had been fervently evangelizing and establishing local churches, anticipating that the missionary endeavors of the church would be fulfilled within his lifetime. Consequently, the Christians who received his teachings held the expectation that Jesus would imminently return. As the Thessalonians witnessed the passing of fellow believers before the anticipated return of Jesus, they sought assurance regarding their participation in the glory of the resurrection, and some of them also wanted to know the timing of the Second Coming of the Lord.

In this letter, Paul provides clear instructions to the Thessalonians regarding the preparation for the return of Jesus Christ. Through his teachings, Paul highlights two erroneous attitudes toward it and reveals the type of heart and mindset Christians should cultivate to prepare and eagerly await the arrival of Jesus.

First, Paul cautions against wanting to know the exact date or time of the Second Coming. Paul told them that he would not specify the exact time of the Lord's return. He underscores that he had previously instructed them that the day would come like a thief—unexpected and without warning. Although the Thessalonians were diligently awaiting the Lord's return, some among them misunderstood the timing, abstaining from work and solely focusing on waiting. They refrained from daily activities to the extent that they even avoided using the bathroom and slept fully clothed.

People are undeniably curious about the timing of the Lord's return. Interestingly, this curiosity is not new; even Jesus' disciples inquired about it at the moment of His ascension. However, Jesus didn't answer the question, saying, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:7-8). His response redirects the focus from specific timing to a period of preparation. The Holy Spirit, promised to believers and the Church, imparts the power and grace necessary for sanctifying both themselves and the world.

These words were not only spoken to the disciples at the ascension but are applicable to all living in the present and future generations. Even today, some individuals deceive others by predicting a specific date for the end of the world. In South Korea, a sect asserted that Jesus would return on October 29, 1992, causing a significant uproar. Many individuals were misled by this false prophecy and willingly gave away their entire fortunes to the sect, fervently spreading the end-time message to others. They sacrificed everything in a misguided attempt to secure a limited seat at the table of salvation, falsely proclaimed to be reserved for a select few. However, when the anticipated day arrived, nothing occurred. The leaders of this sect, driven by their own greed, exploited the wealth of the deceived followers. The convergence of two misguided desires led many down the wrong path. Therefore, our preoccupation should not be with pinpointing the exact timing. Instead, our concern should center on living as those who have been saved and holding the unwavering conviction that Jesus will undoubtedly return.

The second erroneous attitude people may have toward the Second Coming of Jesus is indifference or disbelief. Paul emphasizes this by stating, “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them” (v. 4). God’s judgment will swiftly descend upon those who seek peace and security solely for their own well-being, disregarding God’s concern for the world. The stories of Noah’s flood, the death of the firstborn in Egypt, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah all illustrate the inevitable and devastating consequences for the inhabitants of those lands. Unprepared for the day of doom, they could only face their cursed fate with fear and despair.

For our brothers and sisters in faith, however, the return of the Lord will be an entirely different experience. Paul tells us that because we are not in darkness, the day of the Lord will not take us by surprise, even if it comes suddenly. The difference comes from the fact that we are children of light, so we can be well-prepared for what to expect when it comes.

Thieves love the dark. Sure, there are those who steal other people’s things in the daylight, but they try to do it secretly, away from the prying eyes of others. So the best thing you can do to prevent thieves is to keep the paths they might take well-lit or install alarms and closed-circuit cameras to keep tabs on their activities. No matter how suddenly a thief comes, if the place is prepared to reveal its secrecy, that sudden visit poses no threat.

Rather, the coming of the Lord signifies a joyful and blessed time for those who are well-prepared, like a visit from a bridegroom. The wise five of the ten young women who waited for the bridegroom in Matthew 25 were able to participate in the wedding feast and fully enjoy its joy and rejoicing. They, too, were preparing their lamps to light the way of the bridegroom’s coming. So while we may not know the exact time, if we are alert and properly prepared, the coming of the Lord will be an unimaginably great gift to us.

Then, how can we prepare for the unexpected coming of the Lord? In what way can we light up the way of the Lord? Paul tells us to put on a special kind of outfit. He talks about wearing faith and love like a breastplate over our hearts and a helmet of hope for our heads (v. 8). The special costume from Our God helps us engage the good works for the world boldly. We can be the best version of ourselves in the divine armor. It’s like we’re dancing with God, making good choices, and helping others. A partnership where we and God work together makes lights in ourselves as well as in the world.

Then, in verse 11, Paul urges believers to “encourage one another and build each other up” (v. 11). It’s like being part of a team where everyone encourages one another. Living in readiness is not a solo mission; our journey towards readiness is not meant to be walked alone. It is a communal effort, as we uplift and edify each other in love. So, we should not forget we need each other. Even though our own lights are small and dim, we can light up the darkness of the world when we are together!

Paul’s guidance to the Thessalonians echoes through the ages, cautioning against fixating on the exact timing of the Lord’s return and urging us to avoid indifference or disbelief. Instead, we are encouraged to be children of light, well-prepared and eagerly anticipating the coming of the Lord, much like the wise bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom.

During the pandemic, we heard news that some people fought for toilet paper, a struggle to maintain their ‘civilized life.’ People are diligent in living their lives in readiness for unexpected threats in the world. However, our Lord appoints us to a glorious fight to enhance the ‘spirit-filled life.’ In this fight, we don’t have to overtake others. We must first mingle with our God and then cooperate in communion as the body of Christ. The Triune God first makes us ready with faith, hope, and love, and then helps us prepare for the return of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. In this season of reflection, we are reminded to give thanks to God for His guidance, protection, and the assurance of eternal hope. As we express our gratitude, may our hearts be ever-ready, our faith unwavering, and our love boundless, all in anticipation of the blessed return of our Lord and Savior. Amen.