

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 3, 2016

Peace and Security

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

This Fourth of July, images of our nation's capital will show up virtually every way you turn. The Washington Monument. The White House. The Capitol Dome. The Lincoln Memorial. All these, and many others, illuminated by holiday fireworks. But what if the explosions and fire weren't in the sky but in the buildings themselves? That's the way it's often happens in films that portray apocalyptic-like attacks on the capital city. Take for example, "White House Down," a movie that appeared a few years ago. Not far into the trailer for the film, the Capitol Dome is collapsing in a ball of fire and the whole city is in chaos. Missiles launch, helicopters skim traffic, the White House Explodes, and people run in every direction, screaming in terror. Then things calm down a bit when we meet the one man who can save us from certain doom—Channing Tatum. Tatum soon links up with the President, played by Jamie Foxx. The two of them manage to dodge a hail a bullets as Tatum shouts, "We gotta go! We gotta go! We gotta go!" Then the trailer ends.

In this morning's Scripture passage, Paul doesn't tell the Thessalonians, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through that hunky and heroic Channing Tatum." No, he says that the coming salvation will be "through the Lord Jesus Christ." At this point in Paul's letter, the promise of the Lord's coming, and the hope that it generates, is the main topic. More specifically, what the assurance of Christ's return means for believers, both the dead and the living. Paul has just finished reminding the Thessalonians that even though some in their fellowship have died before Jesus comes, these deceased brothers and sisters are still in Christ's care, and will be raised to salvation and reunion with God's people when Jesus comes.

As for the specific timing of the Lord's coming, that's in God's hands, says Paul. Maybe some in the Thessalonian church have been pressing him for more details on the chronology of the end. But Paul simply reminds them of what they've already been taught, namely, that when the time of judgment comes, it will be sudden. So the best way for believers to live is alertly and watchfully, laboring patiently and actively for God's reign, knowing that ultimately, the gospel itself is the only security they have.

Not that they don't have offers of security and promises of peace coming from other sources. Paul begins verse 3, "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly. . . ." Which people? Who are these folks declaring, "Peace and security"? In Paul's immediate context, we have a few options. He could be referring to false teachers who have persuaded some in the Thessalonian church to focus more on their relationships with each other than on God's coming triumph over sin and death. Or, Paul might be referring to one of the popular philosophical schools of his day where the stress was on personal, individual serenity and contentment. Another possibility is that Paul is drawing on a political slogan spread by Rome throughout its vast empire. After all, hadn't the Romans brought peace to more and more territory, ironically through the violence of military might and conquest. So maybe Paul is using this part of his letter as an opportunity to take a jab at the authorities by quoting a piece of their own government propaganda. In

other words, Paul wants to remind whoever will listen that if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not!

"Peace and security." Wherever this message is coming from, and whoever Paul has in mind, we know from our own experience that such words have enormous appeal. We too long for peace and security. And there are plenty of voices claiming that they can provide it. The muscular, deep-throated, intimidating man standing on the front lawn in the home security commercial, saying, "I am ADT. And I am always there." Or your 401(k) plan, promising steady returns and a serene retirement, until suddenly, Great Britain leaves the European Union and stocks tumble in value. Or your job, which looked like a sure bet for the long term, until it gets outsourced and moved overseas. Or your medical insurance, which sounded good at first, until you found out it has a huge deductible and won't cover a major procedure that you need. Or political candidates, promising to fix what's wrong with our country, economically, culturally, and militarily, so that you can sleep better at night. Peace and security.

Now it's true, there is some measure of peace and security in all the things I've mentioned. Your wireless alarm system, your retirement plan, your job, your medical coverage, your preferred party or candidate, can contribute to a degree of stability and flourishing in our lives and our society. But they can also feed into a state of illusion, where we shelter ourselves within personal worlds and individual kingdoms that are far more vulnerable and uncertain than we think or realize. The truth is, genuine peace, authentic security, and lasting justice can't be established by what we build from within, but only by what comes to us from beyond, through Christ. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (4:14). "The Lord himself will come down from heaven" (4:16). "We will be with the Lord forever" (4:17). "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (5:10). This is the peace and security that ultimately prevails.

Note carefully, though, that this kind of peace and security doesn't authorize us to flee from the world, as if the present state of affairs is just a pile of wreckage that God plans to toss aside. No, the world is still the arena of God's redemption. As Paul stresses in some of his other letters, God's ultimate purpose is a new creation in Christ, a world completely under his sovereignty and full of his glory. And according to Paul, bringing this new world into existence clearly involves God's final judgment upon evil and the sins in our lives, and the destruction of all things that reject the reign of God. That's why we Christians are apocalyptic people, people who believe in the end of the world, and the beginning of God's kingdom, God's new world, through Christ. We believe that God has, and will, intervene through Christ to bring his reign of life out of a world so hell-bent on death.

And because we see the future this way, we live alertly and labor diligently in the present. In contrast to those who don't have the hope of Christ, we want the way we spend our lives to reflect our heavenly destination. To turn an old phrase in a new direction, we want to be so heavenly-minded that we're of great earthly good.

Professor Todd Whitmore tells about moving into refugee camps in northern Uganda during a war that had already dragged on for more than twenty years. He moved into the camps because he wanted to hear the stories of the displaced Acholi people. He also observed the Christians who were working among the Acholi. According to Whitmore, these Christians were the most practical and helpful workers because they were the most heavenly-minded. He called them "reasonable apocalyptists," because they thought a lot about God's intervention at the end of history. They believed that only divine intervention, not mere human help, would ultimately make the difference for the Acholi people. In fact, one of the nuns said, "God is tired, and will intervene." And because they believed God would

intervene, they believed it was worthwhile to work for good, in the here and now.¹ I believe their faithful labor was also a testimony to the peace and security that can only come from above.

Even though your daily labor for the Lord doesn't take you into a Ugandan refugee camp, it does take you into your office cubicle, your military base, your hospital, your factory, your construction site, your school, your home, or many other places where you're called to live out your understanding of peace and security. And you're doing so in a culture that still gets into apocalyptic, at least if our movies and TV shows are any indication. At the beginning of my sermon, I mentioned 2013's "White House Down." Several days ago, "Independence Day: Resurgence" was released. And don't forget "X-Men: Apocalypse," which came out in late May. In many of these, the end comes upon humanity by divine forces that want to wipe us out and start all over again. But in some other films and shows, we human beings don't really need any outside intervention. We're perfectly capable of destroying ourselves. As one Christian film critic has put it,

. . . in modernity an interesting shift took place: gradually our stories about the end of the world stopped suggesting that our world would come to an end because God, or the gods, finally had enough of our nonsense; instead, we began to believe that we'd visit the end upon ourselves. We create a cure for disease, and it makes zombies. We make robots to serve us, and they start chasing us through the galaxy instead. We try to create peace through politics, and we end up sending our teenagers to the arena.²

There are many ways that each of us is working for the cause of God's kingdom, in order to promote as much peace and security as possible. Some in government, some in education, some in law enforcement, some in business, some in the military, some in science, some in the arts, and some in many other areas of our society. Because our eyes are on the future that God has promised through Christ, our hands are on the tasks of the present. But we live our lives and do our work knowing that peace and security, in the truest and deepest sense, comes only from the God who brings salvation. All our efforts are important, but none of them are ultimate. The things we do now are simply provisional.

In the end, peace and security won't be accomplished by our agencies, our politicians, our courts, our laws, our economies, our alliances, our weapons, our movie producers, or our technology, but by the coming of God in Christ. This divine intervention has already been launched through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and will arrive in finality and fullness when he comes again to judge.

Until then, we have already been given the kind of power and weaponry that's fitting for people who have placed their security in Christ alone. According to our text, we have "faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (v. 8). Faith means confidence in the gospel and turning to the living God. Love means embodying that faith through concrete attitudes and actions, within the life of the church and beyond it. And hope means a firm and fruitful expectation that Christ will come again to complete what God has started. Only then can it be truly said, "Peace and security."

¹ Whitmore's experience is summarized by Jason Byassee, "Eschatological Innovation," Faith & Leadership website. August 3, 2009. Accessed June 30, 2016 < <https://www.faithandleadership.com/eschatological-innovation> >.

² Alyssa Wilkinson, "Meet the New Apocalypse (Same As the Old One)." ChristianityToday.com. May 25, 2016. Accessed June 30, 2016 < <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/may-web-only/meet-new-apocalypse-same-as-old-one.html?start=2> >.