

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Romans 13:11-14)

Do You Understand What Time it Is?

I have a new project at home: I'm scanning all our old family photos into the computer. In the old days before I had a digital camera, I took lots of film photos. For years, I've wanted to convert them into digital format so that I can have them on the computer with all the pictures I've taken since moving into the digital age. I've made a pretty good start. I'm into the period when we started to have children. I'm getting to see again all these cute pictures of babies and their smiles and discovery and it reminds me of all the things that make it fun to have young children.

But you know what? There's a danger in getting too caught up in the past. It was wonderful to have small children and I miss those days. But God still loves my family and what's going on now is wonderful, too. If I get too caught up in reminiscing about those days that are past, I could fail to appreciate the blessings God is giving us right now. I need to know where we are now just as much as where we've been. That's true about our spiritual life, too. We will always want to treasure the blessings of the past. But we need to understand what's happening right now. This evening, St. Paul tells us to understand the present time. Do we do that? My friends, **do you understand what time it is?**

I.

St. Paul says, **“And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”** Tonight, many people will stay awake until midnight to welcome the new year. When I was a child, my parents used to let us do that. But when we were young, it was hard. If you stopped moving for just a little bit, you could drift off to sleep and they wouldn't wake you when midnight came. Paul uses that picture of sleepiness to get us to look at where we are today in our spiritual lives. **Do you understand what time it is? It's time to wake up!**

Why do we need to wake up spiritually? Because **“our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”** What does that mean? Sometimes, when we say “salvation” we mean faith. We were saved on the day that God gave us faith. That's not what Paul is talking about here. Rather, he's talking about getting what God promised us on the day we first believed. The gospel is a promise. God commits himself to forgiving our sins and to declaring us righteous on Judgment Day. He swears to take us to heaven when we die and to raise us from the dead and give us a new world in which we will be free from all sorrow and hurt forever. Paul is talking about the day when God will keep that promise.

That day is closer now than when we first believed. The New Testament treats Judgment Day as if it is just around the corner, because from God's perspective it is. And the early church had a healthy sense of expectation – even of urgency – about the coming judgment. Christians expected to see Christ return in their lifetime. But after two thousand years, we've lost that sense of urgency. Would we say that we expect to see Christ return in our lifetimes? Or would we say something less urgent, like we believe that Christ could come in our lifetime? Certainly, there are passages in the Bible that indicate that it could be a long time before Jesus comes and I can't make a prediction that he will come in our lifetime. But God wants us to live in expectation. And the danger of losing that expectation is that it wanes to the point where we don't even seriously expect that he *could* come in our lifetime. We live each day as if nothing is ever going to change. We'll have kids. We'll raise them and they'll have kids. We'll retire and enjoy our grandchildren and if we're really lucky, we'll dance at their weddings and live to see our great-grandchildren.

Now, what's wrong with that? In one sense, nothing. I do hope one day to have grandchildren and if God wills, to dance with my wife at their weddings and see their children. But that's not what life is about. If God lets us do those things, that's a wonderful gift. But our salvation is about something even greater. Jesus is

coming back. And the life that he promises us will be better than any life that we can imagine here. The truth is, the best that we can imagine here probably won't happen. How many of us expect that those grandchildren might die or become drug addicts or fall away from the church? At its best, this life is full of pain and sorrow and it quickly flies away. God calls his people to focus on a new and better life to come.

Every day that passes here carries us closer to that life to come, closer to Jesus coming back and ending all the pain and sorrow of this life, closer to him giving us what he's been promising for nearly two thousand years. It's time for us to wake up and smell the coffee. It's time for us to realize how close Jesus really is – without denying the truth that God counts time differently than we do and we may live to be very old and then die without seeing our Lord appear. But every day, we are closer to him.

Even if he does not appear in our lifetime, every day carries us closer to that moment when we will leave this life and enter glory with him. We need to realize that, not in a morbid “we're all gonna die” sense, not in a depressed, “woe is me sense,” but in a realistic sense. God calls us to watch and pray and to not be engrossed in this world. God calls us to put our spiritual life and our eternal life first. He calls us to stop treating our faith like it's a low priority or something that we can deal with later when the kids are older and our retirement is secure and we have time for stuff like that. Being awake means that our faith and the faith of our families comes first. Knowing that we are closer now to the end than on that day when we first came to faith reminds us to have a sense of urgency about our faith.

II.

What happens when we don't? Well, doesn't our whole society show us? Tonight is New Year's Eve and what does this night mean today? This has become a night to drink and party and wipe away all memory of the previous year in an alcoholic fog. And what does our society worry about? Whether we drink and drive. There's no concern about the sinfulness of getting drunk, just the practical results. That's even true when you include the healthy concerns for alcohol addiction. It's still not saying that sleeping around and drunkenness are wrong. All that reminds us to take stock of where we are. **Do you understand what time it is? It's time to live your faith.**

Paul says, **“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”** How do you want to meet Jesus? Drunk? In bed with someone who isn't your spouse? Obviously not. But if you're here tonight for church, chances are you're not going to some wild New Year's Eve party. But do you have that urgency about your faith and about your family's faith that causes you to watch and pray and avoid the traps of the devil? That causes you to put aside the deeds of darkness and to put on the armor of light, which means it causes you to come and hear the word and fill up with the power of God?

Paul says, **“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”** My guess is that orgies are not something I need to warn you about. But even Christians drink too much sometimes. Even Christians get themselves into situations that destroy their marriages sometimes. And Paul warns against dissension – arguing – and jealousy. What do all those things have in common? Focusing on me. I want the pleasures of this life. I'm jealous of those who have more money, of those who are more popular, of those individuals who people love and respect and listen to. And I can't help but fight with those people. Does that sound at all familiar? All that is the devil working. His goal is to cheat you out of what Christ promised you. He would love to see the pursuit of pleasure rob you of your faith and then send you to hell.

If all that makes you feel guilty and anxious, then you're waking up. But the key to being awake and staying awake is not the threat of the devil. It's the promise of the salvation that is nearer now than when we first believed. My friends, that salvation is ours. Jesus won it for us. He alone of all the people who ever lived was a perfect Christian. His faith never fell asleep. He never lost sight of the urgency of faith. He never let anything take the place of his spiritual life or of ours. He loved the Lord and trusted the Lord perfectly and always put him first. And he did that for you and me. He did that to give us credit for a perfect life of faith.

And then he died. He died for all the times we failed to take our own faith seriously. He died for our lack of urgency for his return and even for our lack of interest in that return. He died for all the times our sinful hearts played into the hands of the devil and we went along with his temptation to get drunk, to lust, to argue, to be jealous – to do whatever it is that threatens your faith. Jesus died on the cross and he paid for all the sins of

the whole world. He paid for you. Then he rose and declared that your sin is gone forever. He rose and declared that you will live with him.

And then he came to you and he gave you faith in that promise. Through that promise of eternal life, he planted a believer in your heart who always has a sense of urgency about your faith. That believer fights against the sin in your heart every single day. Sometimes, it feels like he's losing. But our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Help is on the way. Jesus is coming soon to deliver that believer from the devil and from the sinner inside us that fights to drag us down to hell and from this unbelieving society that tries to convince us that we have an inalienable right to sin as much as we want to. Jesus is coming back to save us from all those threats to our faith.

Until he does, he comes to us in the gospel, in the message of his love and forgiveness, and he strengthens that new man to fight against all that sin. Paul says, **“Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”** The Christian life is a new way of thinking. It totally rearranges the priorities of our lives. We don't sit around thinking about how we can gratify our sinful desires. They are there and they will be there until we see the Lord. Thinking about them can only cause us to sin. But we fight them by clothing ourselves with Christ. We dig deep into his word, we hear what he tells us, we bury that message of God's eternal love deep in our hearts so that we live for him while we wait for Jesus.

We are waiting for Jesus. That's what time it is. This age is the time when the Church waits for the Lord to appear. Understand that time and have a sense of urgency about maintaining and living your faith. Amen