

# "*Toward the Smoke*"

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10

Grace, mercy and peace be multiplied to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Do you have any idea who Lenny Skutnik is? Probably not, since for the vast majority of his life he was just another nameless face in the crowd. He worked, at various times, as a house painter, at a meat-packing plant, at a furniture factory, stocked supermarket shelves, flipped burgers at Burger King, and finally as a distribution assistant at the Congressional Budget Office in Washington DC. Just another anonymous face in the teeming mass of the Washington Bureaucracy.

Right up until January 13, 1982 when Air Florida Flight 90 crashed into the icy Potomac River, actually first hitting part of the bridge Martin Leonard (Lenny) Skutnik was crossing on his way home from work. Of the 79 people on board the plane at the time of the crash, only five survived, clinging to the tail section of the plane in the frigid waters of the Potomac. Even when a helicopter came to their rescue, one passenger, Priscilla Tirado, was too weak to hold to the rescue line. With hundreds of bystanders on the bridge looking on in horror, one – Lenny Skutnik – stripped off his jacket and boots, jumped from the bridge into the ice-choked river, and pulled the stranger to safety.

Of the hundreds that watched from the bridge, only one was the sort of human being that "ran toward the smoke." A few days later, Mr. Skutnik was invited to sit in the Presidential box next to the First Lady and was honored by President Ronald Reagan during his State of the Union address.

So what sort of human being are you? Are you the sort that runs toward the smoke, or are you the sort that stands by – hoping that someone else will do what needs to be done? We would all like to imagine that we would do the right and brave thing if faced with such a situation, but the fact is we *are* faced with much greater, much more significant, and much more terrifying situations every single day – and few, if any, are actually running toward *that* smoke. Most stand idly by, hoping that someone else will have the courage to do what needs to be done to avert unimaginable calamity.

Our text for this morning outlines the situation for us, thereby reveals a very serious and current problem, and reminds us of the ever-present and immediate need for courage and resolve. Hear then those words of our text, found recorded in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Fifth Chapter:

**ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10** *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup> For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But 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. <sup>9</sup> For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup> who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.*

Here end the very words of God. Remind yourself each time you hear or read words from the Bible that these are *God's* words. Since God himself has told us, "**Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and treasure it!**" so also as we hear and study these words of our God we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.**" Amen.

Honest observers will readily admit that, as a nation, we are not in a particularly good place right now. All is not well. We don't need to devote a whole lot of our precious sermon time to a retelling of what you already know for yourselves: our country has problems. Big, serious problems. Our house of state is not only divided, it is on fire.

I assume all of you carry this to your God in prayer, especially these past weeks and months. Are things going the way you asked? Yet he obviously heard the prayers of so many of his children, and he could, just as obviously, effortlessly brush all evil aside and bring the godless to ruin. Is it, perhaps, God himself that is allowing or even orchestrating America's obvious decline? Maybe a better way to gain answers is to ask these two questions: "*What about our present society and its trends can we identify as God-pleasing?*" (In other words, why *wouldn't* God bring judgment on our country?) and "*What has the success of the past few years actually accomplished?*"

The real test of how far our society has fallen is the fact that most of our citizens couldn't care less about our moral and spiritual freefall as long as the financial and political stuff gets worked out.

Again, most of us are well aware of the problems, so why bring up something like this in the Sunday sermon? We are, after all, not all about social justice; we are all about the eternal salvation of souls. To explain why this is important, why it is relevant and an appropriate use of our precious sermon time, we need to ask another question: *What do you imagine the last days of earth will look like?* As Christians, we all believe that Jesus Christ will return one day. Given that fact, that absolute reality, how in your own mind do you envision life on earth when that moment finally arrives?

Interestingly enough, most of us mentally gather up the various Bible prophecies of that day and picture a world in utter chaos – wars, riots, open rebellion, poverty, rampant lawlessness and the like. Isn't that pretty much the picture you have formed in your own mind? Is that accurate? I wonder.

Compare that picture with what we read in our text for this morning: ***For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.***

History shows us that the Church tends to grow during hard times and decline during times of peace and prosperity. Few would be all that surprised if the world were to end in the midst of unprecedented international upheaval – in one final, rising crescendo of unprecedented debauchery, deceit, and violence. But that's not really how our supremely clever adversary operates, is it? Nor is that the picture painted by Paul in our text. The image there is one of sleepy contentment and complacency. It is of an end that comes when at least the godless inhabitants of earth *least* expect it. It is of a world sleeping contentedly in their sin and unbelief.

Certainly it is both understandable and healthy for Christians to be apprehensive concerning our present conditions. Would that the worldly problems could awaken all of us to the far greater spiritual crisis that foreshadows true, permanent, and calamitous destruction. Our national house is burning, and the majority of the occupants are sound asleep. Christians err dramatically if we focus our attention on fixing the temporal rather than the eternal. That would be like a fire-fighter rushing into a burning house and rescuing the cash and furniture while ignoring the sleeping occupants.

The question then for you and me this morning is therefore not just: "*Are we running to or from the smoke?*" but "*Are we running toward the right smoke, and for the right reason?*"

Listen again to how our text addresses our current situation: ***But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who***

**get drunk, are drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But 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."**

What does that mean exactly for you and me? The current national culture wars remind us just how important it is that we redouble our efforts to reach out to sinners, one at a time. *Roe v. Wade* is currently the perverse law of our land. That may well continue to be the law of our land, yet the underlying spiritual battle there is won one pregnant woman at a time, never through legislation. The current un-payable national debt ought to stand for us as a constant reminder of every single sinner's un-payable *spiritual* debt. Balancing the budget will not save one sinner. That's the job Christ gave to you and me in the Great Commission. In fact I suspect that God routinely identifies a certain spiritual complacency among Christians whenever outward circumstances seem to improve. We run toward the wrong smoke, only to rescue that which has no lasting value.

Remember Jesus' parable of the man who owed a debt that he could never hope to repay? Remember how his master simply forgave that debt? That is exactly what our God has done for every single man, woman, and child – in this country and around the world. Sin started that fire, and the smoke of unbelief fills every corner of our world, but Satan would love nothing better than to see confusion and lack of focus in God's Church concerning what can and cannot be saved – what we should and should not spend ourselves to rescue.

Jesus, of course, was different. He unwaveringly ran to the smoke, but he did so never once promising a life of ease or an end to human struggle. He came to rescue souls, not to make them comfortable while they burned. He knew that a life of ease for a true follower of Jesus Christ was simply not possible in a burning world. What he did come to offer was the kind of rescue, safety, and peace that the world could not comprehend, a peace between God and man. True Christians "get" this, and that, in turn, sets us apart from the world, which most certainly *doesn't* get it. Knowing that all is not well – especially during those times when the world believes differently – Christians can remain sober-minded and watchful, even while we are filled with joy and hope concerning our own eternal future. Again from our text: ***"But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him."***

We read words like this, and suddenly it dawns on us that even when all is not well with the world, all can still be well with the true children of God. Those whose lives are not measured in dollars and possessions, but in their relationship with Jesus Christ, can be spared both the fires of this life and of that which will follow. Earthly success, wealth and contentment are obvious warning signs that can never be allowed to make us apathetic or indifferent to the spiritual poverty we are called to address.

But they do, don't they? Good times give the illusion of spiritual health. Even Christians tend to fall for that ancient lie, though we certainly ought to know better. The harder times are then actually merciful kindnesses from our God, serving as necessary reminders of the rot that exists and the work that is therefore ours to carry out. That doesn't mean the hard times won't be bitter and frustrating, but those are the times when faith is put to the test and purified like gold. Those are the times to learn from our God, not question or doubt his wisdom.

And maybe the lesson we need to learn is that we have been tricked into running toward the wrong smoke – lulled into an unhealthy spiritual apathy by the illusion of an earthly prosperity that is distracting us from that other smoke – from that fire that is never quenched.

A small part of our calling is to use our voice and vote in our citizenship duties. Yet we are, above all, Christians - called to rescue sinners by introducing them to their Savior. God grant us the courage and love to run toward *that* smoke, *that* fire, and to save souls by pointing out the rescue that Jesus Christ has already provided. That's the sort of joy that can never be taken from God's children. Amen.