

In the early 1800s, a man named William Miller and his bride Lucy moved across the border from Vermont to New York and established a farm. Miller had already seen a great deal of danger fighting in the War of 1812, but he would soon embark on an adventure of another kind. Miller was also a lay minister who became obsessed with knowing when exactly Jesus would return, and was convinced that the Bible could be decoded in such a way as to produce the precise date.

By the 1830s, he was lecturing throughout New England, explaining his viewpoint, and was met with both intense opposition and great enthusiasm. Finally, when Miller was pressed by his growing number of followers, he revealed the date on which to expect Jesus’ return: October 22, 1844. So, the preparations began. Some Millerites sold their possessions, others made long white garments they called ascension robes, others climbed rooftops, trees, or mountain ridges, and then, they waited. They waited until October 23<sup>rd</sup>, after which, you can imagine, there was a lot to process, so much so that Millerites themselves referred to the date in retrospect as “The Great Disappointment.” It’s estimated that before October 22<sup>nd</sup>, there had been as many as 100,000 Millerites, scattered mainly throughout the Northeast. After October 23<sup>rd</sup>, things predictably took a nosedive, although Miller continued to lecture and preach and insist that the end was near, up to his death in 1849.

On one hand, it is a struggle to understand how students of the Bible can get caught up in date setting. We have clear passages like today’s Epistle lesson, which says, “Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” We also have the words of Jesus Himself, saying, “...no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.” These words are definitive and clear and would seem to be a final word on the subject.

On the other hand, we human beings are inquisitive creatures. We don’t like not knowing things. The first temptation to sin was based on the premise that God was not telling Adam and Eve the whole story of their creation, calling his clear words into question. That has been a major problem ever since. You can see how that applies to the setting of dates for Jesus’ second coming. “No one knows the day or the hour” is as straightforward as it gets, but did God really say that it can’t be figured out? Human imagination rushes in to fill what God has not said, and ignores what he has.

But what’s also at work here is that things having to do with the end times are scary, and dramatic and they command attention. Many Christians are well aware of Jesus’ list of end times signs: nation rising against nation; famines, earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, false prophets, persecution of Christians. When events like this take place in our lifetimes, and some have taken place over the past month, Jesus’ words come back with force. We can conclude, we are living in the time He talked about, and be correct. That’s a sobering thought. And what do you know—it is the language of sobriety that Paul uses to talk about the Christian mindset in the

face of scary end times topics. In other words, the Bible does not tell us when the end will be, but who we should be with the end in sight. The Bible does not tell us when the end will be, but who we should be with the end in sight.

Here's how Paul says it in 1 Thessalonians: "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 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. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 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. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 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. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

When you are bothered by the frightening end times signs, Paul writes, remember who you are. You are a child of light. You are a child of the day. And he says, very memorably, since we belong to the day, let us be sober. Paul's doing an interesting thing here to make a contrast. He names two categories, darkness and light; night and day. These stand for two different ways of being in the world. To be in darkness is to not deal with reality. It takes courage to look at how bad things really are. It's easier to not think about it. If you're asleep, you're not thinking about it, right? When you're asleep, you don't have to face your fears. Same thing with getting drunk. That's another way to not think about things. And Paul says, those are things that you do in the dark. Do you see? The avoidance of the issue, the avoidance of the truth that Jesus really is coming back someday, avoiding it is spiritual darkness. Paul says to the Christian, "that's not who you are."

Paul says to the Christian, because you know Jesus, you are awake and sober. And let's push into that description just a little bit. What does it mean to be sober? Not only does it mean you are awake, but to be sober is to be clear-headed. To be sober is to be sharp. Firing on all cylinders. For Paul, the Christian can have the most realistic view possible, neither denying that there are horrifying things happening, nor being overwhelmed with fear. We can be sober, and sharp, how? By putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation. I know, there is more poetic language to sift through here, but it's beautiful, and truly encouraging. Take a look.

The picture here is of the Christian as soldier. I think that's appropriate, given what we know about the state of the world and the evil of our satanic enemy. So Paul advises us to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. And so right away, please notice, this is defensive armor. A breastplate protects the heart, right? A helmet protects the brain, or the mind, let's say. So Paul is talking about cultivating, nurturing, accessing a heart and mind connection to Jesus. Growing your relationship with Jesus is the best possible response to the things that threaten you.

So put on the breastplate of faith and love. Your heart will be guarded as you dwell on what Jesus truly did to purchase you and bring you out of darkness into the light. Jesus assumed your sin debt and paid it off by dying the death that debt deserved. In your place. As your substitute. That is perfect love, and as Scripture reminds us, perfect love casts out fear. Even the fear of life in a world hostile to God. Faith hangs onto the actions of Jesus and considers them stronger than any threat.

Put on the helmet of the hope of salvation. Your mind will be guarded as you dwell on what Jesus' actions mean. The Apostle Paul gives you something amazing to insert into your thinking. Here it is in verses 9 and 10: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him." Do you understand what a treasure this is for our minds? When people think about the end times, the last day, the book of Revelation, they get upset and bothered, because it sounds like judgment and fire and brimstone, and make no mistake, those things are real. But they are not punishment for the Christian. Again: "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ..." All of the scary signs mean we are closer to Jesus than we've ever been. Paul says, "Put that helmet on! Don't just react to the latest headline; think! Think through what's happening in light of Jesus' death and resurrection for His people. Once more, this enables us to be realistic, to deal with history, as it unfolds, with both tears and truth.

The Bible does not tell us when the end will be, but who we should be with the end in sight. And who should we be? We are children of the day, with hearts and minds defended by our living Savior Jesus. With faith, love, and hope, we encourage each other, we put courage into each other, by reminding each other, "God has destined us to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

*"Bold shall we stand in that great day/Cleansed and redeemed, no debt to pay."*