

“Encouragement in the End Times”

1 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, **2** for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. **4** But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. **5** You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. **6** So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. **7** For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. **9** For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. **10** He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. **11** Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Here’s a quick quiz for the congregation:

Question 1: Who wrote the letter?” (Answer: Paul, Silas and Timothy)

Question 2: Who was it written to?” (the believers in the city of Thessalonica)

Question 3: Where is Thessalonica?” (Asia minor, Greece)

Question 4, and this one is a little harder: Why was the letter written?” (might not get any answers, sermon segue)

The main reason for this letter is that Paul had to leave Thessalonica rather quickly and wasn’t able to stick around and spend some real time teaching the congregation. In his absence, they were faced with some confusion. And Paul has to give them some encouragement and to help them to understand what’s going on, especially with the expectation that Jesus was coming back very soon and what they should be doing about it.

You see, for centuries, people have been expecting the end of the world to come some day. In recent history, we have Harold Camping with a prediction first for May 21st, 2011 and then for October 21st, 2011. Before that, Camping predicated in 1994 and 1995 several dates. Before that, were numerous accounts going back centuries. And it’s not just Christians, some of these predictions come from scientists, from politicians, and so forth. These predictions even predate

Christianity to the pre-Christian Romans and the Jews leading up to the time of Jesus.

The early church of the time of Thessalonica was no different. They believed that Jesus was returning within a few years. But as the years passed, they began to wonder and to worry about these end times. They had people within their congregation die and really started to worry. What was going to happen with these people who died before Christ returned?

If you look around us, it's pretty easy for us to start thinking about the end times and say, 'You know, perhaps Camping was only off by a few days.' We have earthquakes in Turkey, Oklahoma, Virginia, Oakland, Japan, and China. There are massive storms hitting Alaska, droughts all over the place, and we've had freak snow-storms here in the east coast. Most of the Middle East is on fire with some sort of war and there is civil un-rest in almost every nation of the European west, including the US. Economic collapse looms, poverty is on the increase along with greed and selfishness. Governments are on the verge of collapse and dictators are both rising to power and being taken out of power. People are doing what seems right in their own eyes, morality and ethics are being given a pass, and it's almost like it is as in the days of Noah. If this doesn't look like the end times, I'm not sure what does. This can be very discouraging.

So, how does this 1 Thessalonians passage then apply to us? I spent a lot of time pondering the scripture passage for today and trying to figure out how to present it. I could spend a lot of time talking about the Roman culture, talking about what the definitions of "awake" and "asleep" and "sober" and "drunk" are and how they relate to being children of the light and so on. That's a LOT of stuff to cover. But I only have 20 minutes."

So, what I came up with is my own paraphrase from a 21st century perspective. A bit of rewording to freshen it up, and I came up with the following:

Christianity is the alternative to the hopelessness of the world. The world says, "We'll give you peace and security." But we know better. We're awake and aware of the underlying self-interests and we're not deceived by the intoxication of the attraction of prosperity, power, and earthly "peace". We already know better. Keep it up! It's worth it in the end.

Let me break it down here.

First, the idea that Christianity is the alternative to the hopelessness of the world. If we look around us, we see any number of attempts to try and fix things. Every time I turn around, I hear someone else saying, 'Well, if only the administration would...' or 'What we need is a leader who will...'. And it is not limited just to politics. Turn on the TV and watch a half an hour TV show and you will be inundated with imagery that if you buy this product, go to this location, subscribe to this magazine, or support this cause, you'll change the world. Just send us money in easy monthly installments of \$19.99 and we'll send you this bonus gift, absolutely free, just pay shipping and handling. Peace in the world, security, justice, fairness...all these can be had if you just subscribe to the right plan.

To be honest, some of the things really sound like they could do some good. And some causes are good. Heather and I support a boy at the Sahara Children's Home and we also sponsor a Compassion International child because we believe that, out of our plenty, we should help and give to those who don't have enough. But, to be honest, I know that poverty will still be there,

that there are still going to be children dying daily of starvation and malnutrition and that no matter how many sponsors these organizations find, there will always be more children than sponsors because the world has not been redeemed yet.

This is where Christianity gives the alternative. We are **encouraged** that those things that we CAN do actually make a difference because we are engaged with God in his holy mission. The letter to the Thessalonians hints as such later in chapter 5 when the writers urge the readers to lift those up who are doing God's work. And earlier in the letter, in chapter 4, the writers say to continue to do good, to love each other, and to live a righteous life. Jesus even taught, as we heard from Matthew today, that we should not just sit on the gifts we are given but to actually use them, invest them, in the work of the Master so that he will be pleased with what we've done.

Now next, we are **encouraged** to be awake and aware. If we think about what is going on in the world, we can approach what we hear with wisdom. Behind these plans we can buy, behind these causes, behind these politicians and political campaigns, there are motivations that must be questioned. True Christian causes must be characterized as Jesus was; by complete and total selfless sacrifice. While there is some of that to some extent in the systems of the world, there are other motives. For some it is to gain power. If they can get more power, they can make the changes they want to make. All they need is more power and they can finally put all things right. There is a subtlety to power that can trap you by making you think that by getting power, whether it is through winning an election or whether it is through marketing your cause, you can fix everything.

For some it is to gain notoriety. If I can start this cause and really get it moving, then the history

will remember me as the person who did such-and-so. Our culture places a lot of value on making yourself known and becoming a household name. Everyone knows the name Paris Hilton. But not many people know the name of the Pottstown Bible Church pastor who feeds homeless people every Sunday.

It is intoxicating to get fame, to get power, to get notoriety. There's a reason that the term "drunk with power" describes it so well. We can so easily get carried away when we get that 15 minutes of fame that we spend our time milking it for all its worth and trying to make it last as long as possible. It can be an addiction where our whole life is characterized by trying to maintain that feeling of completeness that comes from having everyone pay attention to you and hang on your every word.

In contrast, the writers of this letter are **encouraging** their readers to not be asleep or drunk. Look around with your eyes wide open, consider these subtle motives, think about what goes on in the darkness behind your own eyes and think carefully about the messages the world is putting out there. We walk in the light, they walk in the dark. We can see what they cannot because we see it in ourselves. But we are **encouraged** that we are in the process of being changed so that we are no longer motivated by those things. Our faith and our love for God and for our fellow man protects us from those things, much like a piece of armor protects our body. We remember who it is we serve, as the Psalmist points out in Psalm 123, that we look to God first and we remember that it is from God that we receive true mercy. God alone can redeem us and redeem the world. And this is a promise we can bank on. It is our hope for the future, that God can change the world. And it guards our thoughts, like a helmet.

Finally, we are **encouraged** that while all around us we see hopelessness, it is a temporary

state of affairs. The peace and security that the world preaches will only last so long. The governments of this world, no matter how oppressive, will only be around for a short time. Poverty, starvation, famine, wars...all these things are so brief, so temporary. No matter how tempting, how good the worldly solutions sound, they are so brief. As the writer of Ecclesiastes points out over and over, everything is vanity, everything is temporary, it's all so much vapor and nothingness. Why waste time on any of that stuff? Someday, and this is a promise made in many places in both the Old and the New Testaments, all of this world will be gone, rather suddenly, and rather cataclysmically. And this is not something we can bring about on our own, but it is something that, in God's timing, it will happen. But even that is not something we should worry about.

I hear the writers of 1 Thessalonians reflect the end of Ecclesiastes when it points out that what has true permanence, what is really the most important thing, is to follow God's commandments and live righteously. This is what is important. It is something really so very simple. Do good to others. And really, that means you do good. As much as you can, don't depend upon others to do the good that you are equipped, empowered, and enabled to do. And don't listen to the voices that say, "Oh, well, that's not for you." Instead, listen to your brothers and sisters in Christ who are encouraging you, saying, "You can do it!" And we are called to do that to each other. This is the ultimate **encouragement** when the body of Christ bands together to build each other up, encourage each other to do more and greater and bigger things. God has gifted us all with talents, abilities, blessings, wealth, resources, homes and food that can all be used for the kingdom. Nothing is too small to be used by the Kingdom. You may think you don't have enough, but everything you have can be used for the Kingdom.

So, be **encouraged!** Whether the end of the world is today, tomorrow, or 10 years from

now, we have something that the rest of the world, despite their advertising blitzes, campaign slogans, political marches, and worthy causes, cannot offer. We have a reassurance that what we do, when we work for the Kingdom, will not be destroyed. What we do has eternal ramifications that, when that day finally does come, when the Master returns for us to give account, he can say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servants, well done." And that is the most encouraging thing of it all.