

STANDING FIRM

VIII. “Be Alert”

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1 Thess. 5:1-11

INTRODUCTION

There is a legend that Satan once called a high level meeting of some of his top demons in hell. Too many people were becoming Christians and he wanted a new campaign to stem the tide. He asked for ideas. One demon stepped forward and volunteered to lead the campaign. Satan asked him what he would do. He said, “I will tell them there is no heaven.” Satan said, “No, that won’t work, for there is a little bit of heaven in every human heart. In the end, everyone knows that right and good must have the final victory. You may not go.”

Then another demon came forward and offered his plan. Satan asked him what he would do. He said, “I will tell them there is no hell.” Satan responded, “Oh no, they will not believe you, for in every human heart there is a thing called conscience, and inner voice that testifies to the truth. It tells them that not only will good be triumphant, but evil will be defeated. You may not go.”

Then, one last creature came slinking out of one of the darkest, foulest places of hell. Satan asked him, “If I send you, what will you say to men and women to aid in the destruction of their souls?”

He said, “I will tell them there is no hurry.” And Satan said, “Go!”

“There is no hurry,” remains one of Satan’s most effective strategies in not only destroying our souls, but in stunting our spiritual growth and obedience in following Jesus. It is subtle because it never feels like we’re saying “no”—just not right now. Maybe tomorrow or next week. This is not a good time, but when things slow down, when the kids leave home, when I retire, when I.... In fact, it feels a lot like we’re saying “yes,” and we can feel quite noble in our resolve to make the needed changes. Plans and our resolve to quit this and do that deceive us into thinking we’ve actually done something. But, what is the end result? Most often, we keep putting off the needed changes, ad infinitum. Sadly, as a pastor, I’ve too often heard people say about making a commitment to Christ, “I’m just not ready yet. I’ll do it later.” They are saying, in essence, “I still have some things to do that I know aren’t consistent with following Him. But, I’ll get right with the Lord before its too late.” They have believed the lie, “There is no hurry.”

As Christians, we can be far too comfortable in mediocrity and complacency. One of the ways Christians have maintained focus, discipline, and tautness in their spiritual lives is in keeping the immanent, sudden, without warning return of Christ before them. It was a strong emphasis in the early church, and in these two letters to the Thessalonians, it forms a major theme. And, one of the best things it can do for us is give us an urgency in doing the Lord’s work.

READ: 1 Thess. 5:1-11

THE DAY OF THE LORD

“The Day of the Lord” is a stock phrase in the Bible used to refer to the second coming of Jesus in power and glory. It is a synonym for what Paul has just been talking about in the preceding verses regarding the sounding of the trumpet, the rapture of believers, the resurrection of the bodies, and return of Christ to destroy evil and reign in power and glory.

Paul uses two important Greek words here for time, *chronos* and *kairos*, translated “times and dates.” *Chronos* is more the measure of sequential time– the word from which we get “chronology.” *Kairos*, on the other hand, is as in breaking, as an invasion, into the sequential time– a specific moment– more like calling a timeout in the middle of game. The team captain suddenly, without warning calls, “Time!” while signaling a “T” with his hands and sequential time stops in the game.

This *kairos* moment is how the coming of Christ will be. Suddenly, the curtain of history will be rung down, and it will be all over– eternity has begun. The end of the world will not come as a result of evolved human perfection finally solving all our problems, ushering in the kingdom of God. It will be God saying, “the end.” Suffering, evil, and all the attending problems have gone on long enough. In the words of Revelation,

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Rev 11:15)

Paul reminds these Thessalonians that he has taught them well about this, emphasizing again the need to be ready with two illustrations, a thief in the night and labor pains of childbirth. One is negative (the thief) and one positive (birth). It points out the two dimensions of the Lord’s return. It will be negative for those who are not prepared, ready, trusting in Christ. It will then be too late. But, it will usher in a new, glorious era for those who are in Christ.– something we anticipate as in the birth of a child.

He warns them to not buy into the “peace and safety” movement. I can think of this in two ways. When things get easy, we can be lulled into complacency, which may be what Paul is referring to. But then, I remember that these Thessalonians didn’t have it easy. They were facing persecution. So then, I interpret that as, “Don’t make waves, blend in with the culture. Don’t be too radical in your Christian expression or witness.” Either way, peace and safety can indeed be our enemies in living faithfully for Christ.

So, the surprise nature of the coming of Christ is an incentive for us to not put things off. As the author of Hebrews urges, “*Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts*” (Heb. 4:7). And, in Jesus’ extensive teaching about His return (Mtt. 24-25), while He gives signs to be alert to, over half of the space is given to parables of the “be ready” kind– *So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him* (Mtt. 24:44). These include the parable of the ten virgins and the talents. Clearly, the unknown-ness of this *Kairos* moment is to motivate us to not put off until tomorrow what God says to do today.

While I hated pop quizzes in school, it was probably the most effective motivation in daily preparation. We had a physics teacher in high school that was notorious for pulling this nasty trick. Our hearts would sink when he’d announce, “Okay, pull out a piece of paper, we’re having a pop quiz.” But, if you came prepared, it was not panic time. They were quite simple if you’d

done the homework. I think we all know the all-night cram session before finals is not the best way to learn. Daily faithfulness beats that anytime.

God doesn't promise a chance to cram for our final exam. We must live each day as if it were our last— ready at any and every moment, faithful to His call. The story is told of St. Francis that he was once asked what he would do if he knew Christ was returning tomorrow. His reply was, "I'd finish hoeing my garden." Is your daily life such that it would not change even if you knew Christ was returning tomorrow? If you are doing the Lord's will, there is no need to change anything.

Now, Paul gives us some practical helps in being vigilant, in not falling asleep at the wheel.

BE ALERT

Paul now calls us to three things to keep us alert and ready.

First, realize who you are.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. (1 Thess 5:4-6)

The people of this world are in darkness. They do not see where we are headed. They do not recognize the consequences of immorality. Adultery is dressed up and called, "an affair." It sounds nice, innocent, no big deal. They don't see the long term consequences in two destroyed marriages and hurt and destruction in the children's lives. "Getting even" is masked as "standing up for my rights," which sounds strong and noble. But the soul-consequences the anger and bitterness nurtured are hidden in the darkness.

In contrast, we are all children of light. Jesus is the Light of the World. His ways are always right and will bear no bitter fruit. There is nothing hidden that will come back to bite us later— no bitter aftertaste. Model your life on Jesus and His teachings. It is a high calling, but we are indeed children of God (1 Jn. 3:1). Hold your head high and refuse to muck around in the filthiness of this world.

Today we hear a lot about the importance of good self-esteem, and we know it is important in enabling us to live well. Our self-image becomes a filter in how we process things and approach life. Well, what Scripture teaches us about who we are when we receive Christ as our Lord and Savior catapults us way beyond a healthy self-image. We belong to the King, we are children of the heavenly Father, He has proved His love for us in sending His only Son to die for us so we could be adopted into His family. When you get a hold of that, it changes the way you look at life and the way you live. We are Jesus' representatives with His power and authority in our world. Stand tall, don't be intimidated by anything. We know what's really going on and are on the winning team.

Second, be self-controlled. “Self-controlled” is used twice: once for being alert, staying awake (6) and then as being necessary for putting on our armor (8). Christian self-control is more than just marshaling all our inner strength to deny our sensual appetites so we maintain a healthy lifestyle, keep a tight reign on our tongue, keep promises, manage our finances well, and carefully discipline our thinking. Often here we emphasize the self– thinking we need to come up with the power to do these things. It can become like the saying, trying to lift ourselves by our bootstraps. For the believer, it is quite different. Self-control is more akin to relinquishing ourselves to Christ’s-control. Then, in His power we make the necessary changes. Where we sometimes redouble our efforts to be self-controlled, we need to instead redouble our letting go to Christ’s control. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit– produced by living in and walking with Christ.

In this sense, a lot of being self-controlled involves paying attention. Be alert to those weaknesses of your soul, those things that are making you vulnerable to temptation. What is it that hinders your progress and growth in Christ? Take each of these seriously and make them a matter of seeking the Lord’s help and transformation. Of course, it involves our doing something, but it is in cooperation with the Spirit working within. I like that phrase from the hymn, “Soldiers of Christ, Arise” that we’ll sing in a few moments:

“Leave no unguarded place,
no weakness of the soul...”

Self-control means we don’t count on spiritual cram sessions when the crunch comes. We’re ready. We’ve learned to deal with the little irritations with God’s strength so we’re ready for the truly major problems. The patience and trust we’ve learned in the daily grind have schooled us to be ready for the catastrophic event. The self-controlled person realizes everything in our lives is there to help us prepare, to be ready for what the Lord has in mind for us. It takes self-control not to skip some of the smaller lessons, naively thinking we’ll hunker down when we meet the big stuff.

Third, put on your armor.

...let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. (1 Thess 5:8)

Here we have Paul’s favorite triad of faith, hope, and love that he used in his opening prayer (1:3). Later, Paul will rework this armor into a fuller expression in Eph. 6. But this is Paul’s first letter, so we see the beginnings of this formulation thinking of a soldier’s armor. The breastplate covers the heart. In the spiritual use, the heart becomes our will, volition, and feeling. So, faith, trusting in God, along with love belong there. They are good protection. Faith keeps our wills surrendered to God’s purposes alone. Love guides, and guards our hearts– protecting against the anger and hate that comes our way as well as motivating us to show forth the love of Christ.

The *hope of salvation as a helmet* is the same helmet Paul uses in Eph. 6. I remind you here, that hope is not used in Scripture as wishful thinking, but a certain anticipation of God’s promise. So, there is no uncertainty regarding our salvation. It is looking forward to the full expression of it at

the return of Christ in glory. Thinking of that as protecting our heads, our minds, it is most appropriate. It means knowing the full picture of what God is about, and where all the events are ultimately taking us. It keeps us from being shaken by evil in this world. We know Satan is ultimately doomed according to God's own Word.

In the meantime, the battle is real. We do well to heed Paul's words in Eph. 6:13,
Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

CONCLUSION

Rick Rescorla was a decorated Vietnam War hero. But, his greatest act of heroism happened years later on 9-11. He was head of security for Morgan Stanley, one of the largest employers in the Twin Towers. After the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, he became concerned about another terrorist attack, thinking it could come from the air. He began regular evacuation drills for Stanley's 2,700 employees. Their offices occupied the 44th to the 74th floors of Tower Two. When the plane hit Tower One on Sept. 11, there seemed no reason to get out of Tower Two. In fact, the official message being broadcast through the speakers in Tower Two was, "Please do not leave the building. This area is secure." But Rick didn't buy that and countermanded that order for Morgan Stanley. He immediately began his evacuation procedures getting his people heading down stairwells. Sixteen minutes later when Tower Two was hit, Rick was knocked to the floor. Grabbing his bullhorn, he continued directing panicked colleagues to the stairwells. With the tower burning out of control, he went floor to floor making sure everyone was out. One of the last ones out was a Morgan Stanley executive who said, "Rick, you have to get out too." His answer was, "I will, John, as soon as we get everyone out." Rick died that day in the collapse of Tower Two, but only after saving 2,700 people. Incredibly, because of Rick's careful planning, only six Morgan Stanley employees lost their lives that day.

Rick Rescorla lived alert, prepared, and ready. He was aware of the dangers of complacency. He carried out his drills, in spite of what I expect was resistance on the part of employees having their days interrupted with something they probably considered silly. He stands as a model of readiness.

Our text concludes with, *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing* (11). Our staying alert, vigilant, not putting off the growth we need to make spiritually, feeds the community of faith. Thus, appropriately, Paul ends these warnings with an admonition to encourage each other and build each other up. Stay connected with believers. Isolated, we can get careless, naive, or not pick up on our spiritual slippage. We need cheerleaders and teachers to keep us moving, growing deeper, and prepared.