

A CONFIDENT ENGAGEMENT

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

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About two years ago our only son was going off to college, so we were preparing for the empty nest. We planned a family vacation in Mexico in early September before Christopher was to leave. We flew to Mexico on Monday and got settled into our hotel, looking forward to a great week of vacation. We got up Tuesday morning, and I flipped on the television to see what was going on in the world. The screen was filled with images of people panicking and smoke pouring out of buildings. The cable in the resort hotel was getting a feed from San Francisco news stations, and I thought that maybe something big had happened in San Francisco. I was riveted to the TV. All of a sudden the story began to unfold, and there were pictures from New York of the World Trade Center being hit by airplanes. Shortly after I turned it on the towers collapsed.

That particular day, 9-11, was an incredible, history-changing day for our country. On September 10 when our family was on a plane headed for vacation, everything looked cool. The world wasn't all I wanted it to be, and the economic downturn had begun to set in, so some people were a little nervous, but there was a sense among people in our country that things were okay. We felt immune to most danger. And then, wham! In one cataclysmic moment everything changed. We were not at all prepared for what happened on that day.

In this message we are going to look at a much more important, potentially devastating, and history-altering event than 9-11. Paul's exhortation to us through the Thessalonians is to examine where God is going with history and to ask ourselves whether we are prepared for it.

We are doing more or less an overview of 1 Thessalonians in this series, which I have entitled *Seven Characteristics of a Healthy, Growing Church*. We're getting a little depth, but obviously the book has many rich nuggets of information that we're not mining out. Our focus is asking God to show us what it is about the Thessalonian church that was special, that made it such an incredibly good, strong church even when it was new. We've been examining the things Paul commends the Thessalonians for and encourages them toward to identify the seven characteristics of a healthy, growing church.

Paul evidently had been teaching the Thessalonians about the coming of the Lord, and they had at least some basic understanding of it, but there was some confusion about two issues. One was that they had fully expected to live until the day Christ returned, so they were very disconcerted and upset when some of the believers died. In the passage we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4862) Paul addressed that issue in order to dispel their fear and confusion and direct their attention toward the hope of Christ's return, their reunion with him, the communion of the saints, and fellowship with Christ forevermore.

The other issue that arose, it seems, was that some, in anticipation of the coming of the Lord, had quit their jobs and completely disengaged themselves from normal life, and from the calling of the church. Paul now has some specific encouragement on the issue of how they were to live in anticipation of Christ's coming without disengaging themselves inappropriately, as some had done. Let's read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11:

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come

just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

Let me make some broad observations about this passage. First, having taught the Thessalonians about the second coming of Christ, Paul assumes they had some basic understanding. We don't have detailed information about how much instruction Paul had given them, but he begins by saying, “Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.” Within the framework they already had he wants to clarify the areas where they were confused.

Second, he refers to the second coming as “the day of the Lord.” This expression appears in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament it often appears in the prophetic writings and looks forward to the day when God will bring his purposes to fruition. There is often a strong element of judgment associated with it, and a separation of those who are following God from those who are under his hand of judgment. In the New Testament this expression speaks of the larger scheme of events associated with Christ's return.

Notice the use of plurals: “the times and the epochs,” which implies that there is not just a single event. “The day of the Lord” is a term that encompasses all of the events and activities that are associated with Christ's coming again, everything from his appearing to his entrance, with his people, into his eternal kingdom. The events that make up “the day of the Lord” are more fully explained in other passages of Scripture, e.g. Matthew 24 and Luke 17. Paul specifically talks about its beginning and its suddenness, which we will look at in a moment.

Third, Paul draws a decided contrast between “us” and “them.” All the way through this passage he talks about “you,” meaning the believers in Thessalonica, and eventually includes himself, in contrast to those who are outside the faith, “them.” He describes how each group reacts to the day of the Lord. He speaks of those of the light and of the day, meaning believers, and those who are in darkness, meaning those who are outside the faith. Let's examine the characteristics of each of these groups, those who are of the darkness and those who are of the light.

Those who live in darkness

Paul says a number of things about those who are in darkness. First of all, they think things are going pretty well. Verse 3: “They are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’” I don't think he is assuming that everybody is necessarily prospering. Certainly they have struggles. But generally speaking people in darkness would say life is proceeding normally, with its ups and downs. It's similar to the state we had lulled ourselves into before 9-11. They have a sense of overall peace and safety.

Second, they are described as being both asleep and drunk in verse 7: “For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.” This is a picture of how they are reacting

to the reality that Christ is going to return. Now, in chapter 4 Paul used the term “asleep” (*koimao*) to refer to believers who had died, and he actually does so again at the end of this passage. But here he uses a different word, *katheudo*, to make a different point about those in darkness. What he is saying is that when they ought to be awake, paying attention to what is going on, they are asleep, although things are happening around them that matter. Then he characterizes them as being drunk. Drunkenness impairs judgment, the ability to think things through to make wise decisions, to act according to reality, because it distorts reality. If we were to translate all this into modern vernacular, we would say these folks are clueless. They don't understand the larger realities that are going on around them in a world ruled by a sovereign God. He invites them into the light, but they are unaware of it.

Third, they are going to be caught in their drunkenness and sleep. Verse 3: “While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.” The day of the Lord will come on them unawares. When a woman is in childbirth, the birth pangs start suddenly. (God in his sovereignty did not allow men to be the bearer of children, or the human race would have already ended, I am sure.) I watched my wife when was pregnant, and there was that moment that we had known was going to come, but when it started it was very sudden. Outside of the medical technology of inducing labor, you can't say, “I think I'd like to start labor on Thursday at ten o'clock.” It just comes upon you without warning. For these people who are walking in darkness, that is how Christ will return. They are going to be caught unawares. Destruction will come, and it will be too late. There will be no escape.

One of the things this picture reminds me of, besides the events of 9-11, is the story of the Titanic, the ship that “couldn't be sunk.” Even after it hit the iceberg no one believed it would really go down. The band played on, as the story goes. People were caught totally unawares. In this passage Paul is talking about that same kind of complacency, almost personal arrogance and pride that life is going on normally and they are in control.

This is a very dark picture for people who are outside the faith. But Paul wants the Thessalonians to understand that this is a cataclysmic event. The coming of the Lord is the beginning of the day of the Lord, the time when God will begin setting all things right, preparing for his eternal kingdom.

Now in contrast, Paul says, “You are not like them. You are children of the light, children of the day.” He gives a number of characteristics of believers.

Living in the light

First he talks about our perspective. Verse 4: “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief....” We don't know the exact moment or hour when Christ will come, but we are aware of it, looking forward to his return. We aren't going to be shocked, thrown off kilter, or caught totally unprepared when he shows up. The establishment of his kingdom, the wonder and glory of Christ's coming again, and our being forever in his presence is what we long for and live for. We are children of the light. Christ's coming has been promised to us, and we are welcoming it.

Second, Paul describes the position we are to have in this life while we wait. Verse 6: “So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.” These words are in direct contrast to the description of the people of darkness.

Alertness simply means paying attention to what is going on. We are anticipating Christ's return. We understand that God is at work in our world, and we want to participate in what he is doing. We are alert to the larger realities of life. It's not simply human history, but God's history. I don't think, however,

that Paul is advocating that extreme in which people watch every day's news trying to see what prophetic events are unfolding. You can lose your way if you get entangled in that kind of thing. What I think Paul is advocating is simply being aware of God at work, participating in it, moving toward the day of Christ's coming.

Our dear friends Ralph and Myrna Alexander amaze me. They wanted a new adventure in life, so they moved to Moscow in their sixties, when most people would be retiring. They started learning Russian and ministering there. Myrna and Ralph were visiting here last November, and Myrna was telling about their early days in Moscow, two or three years ago. The first time Ralph went off on a ministry trip, she was alone in the city. She had to go out to the market and so on. Moscow is a pretty dangerous city these days, and she said it was rather intimidating. But she said, "As I walked out the door to head into the street, I prayed, 'God, show me where you are working and let me be a part of that.'" God answered that prayer. On the subway that day she ran into a woman and started a conversation that months later came to fruition in ministry opportunities.

That's what it means to be alert and awake. God is at work in our world and we are to prayerfully ask, "God, show us where you are working" and enter into that.

Sobriety, as opposed to drunkenness, has to do with the gravity of life. There are things in life that matter. There's something going on here that has eternal consequences, that is life-changing. We can't just revel in the drunkenness of everyday life. We have to be sober. That doesn't mean going around burdened down by guilt or something. It's just having a sense of things related to God and to the eternal destiny of people.

Paul goes on to talk about our preparation for this position.

The armor of faith, love, and hope

He speaks in verse 8 of "having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation." Now, Paul loves battle imagery. He uses it a number of times in his letters. There is a fuller description of the armor of warfare in Ephesians 6, although it doesn't exactly line up with what he says here. He is implying here that we are entering into a battle, and we need to get ready. Notice the words he chooses here: faith, love, and hope. Remember, at the beginning of this book he commended the Thessalonians for these three things.

Implicit in this imagery are a couple of realities. First, as I said, life is a battle. If we are going to live in light of the Lord's return and fully engage ourselves in this world for his sake, then we have to recognize that and be prepared. So we put on our armor. We get ready to go. This is going to be an active spiritual war as we live to God's glory. Second, it is a direct engagement. Look back for a moment at these three virtues in 1:3: "Constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope...." All of these speak of engagement. We are not sitting idly by, we are entering into this battle. The work of faith, the labor of love, and the steadfastness of hope all are pictures of believers fully engaged in the world. There is a reason for this. Paul doesn't give us these categories of light and darkness just so we can congratulate ourselves that we are in the light, unlike these others who are in the darkness, who are going to get theirs. Paul's purpose is to invite us to engage that dark world with the light, to push back the borders of darkness, to bring others into the kingdom of light. It will be a battle, and we will have to be prepared to engage in it. So we put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation.

We move out into battle with this sure foundation: we are God's people, loved by him. Verses 9-10:

“For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.” We need not fear entering the battle. There is nothing this world can do to stop us, because of the sure foundation of our salvation in Christ. Even if we lose our mortal life, we will be with him forever. We are grounded in the reality that is larger than things that the human eye can see. So we are set free to fully engage in the battle that is before us, seeking to drive the darkness back and bring people into the light of the gospel of hope that we have found.

Paul now concludes this section as he did in the previous one, by giving them an exhortation to apply this truth. Verse 11: “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another . . .” As I’ve said many times, living out our faith is a communal thing. We are part of the body of Christ. When we push back the darkness and invite people into the light, we do that as the family of faith. We enter into that battle side by side, encouraging each other to remember the Lord’s return and the hope of our salvation, building one another up in the strength of God’s word and the encouragement of the Spirit. What a beautiful picture!

Let me suggest some applications.

Rallying around Jesus

First of all, alertness and sobriety will look different in different places. The kinds of things that would lull you and me to sleep and drunkenness might be different from those that would affect a believer in another part of the world, who is grappling with different circumstances of life. Satan can use all kinds of things. But at the heart of it the call to alertness and sobriety is a call to honor, worship, and live for the glory of the coming King.

Second, there is both a personal and a corporate sphere of application for this. I have to get up every day and engage myself in what God has called me to do and to be. I have to live my personal life honoring God, seeking to be alert and sober in my world. But there is also a sense in which collectively, as the body of Christ, we have to do that. Because we seek as the community of faith to be light in the darkness, it is necessary for us to ask how we as a community are being alert and sober in the world. All of us have to ask day by day, how am I participating in this body and encouraging this body to live as light in this dark world?

Finally, what matters most has to be Jesus. I’m fascinated by two stories that have come out in the popular Christian culture of America lately. The first one concerns the governor of Alabama, a professing believer, Southern Baptist, and Republican. Recently he has come out and said to the people of Alabama that their state has the most regressive tax system in the United States, and it is an unethical tax structure because it oppresses the poor of the state. As a Christian before God he needs to change that. So there is a statewide referendum on the matter. It has caused all kinds of interesting reactions, the most fascinating of which are those of some of the Christian groups. His restructuring proposal lifts some of the tax burden from the poor and shifts it to some of those who have more money. I saw a quote from the leader of the Christian Coalition for Alabama, who was stumbling all over himself, having been asked what he thought about it, because the faith of so many Christians in our country has been wedded to a political agenda. They can’t talk positively about raising taxes for anybody—that would be political death—but on the other hand, how can they criticize a governor who is saying, “It is flowing out of my love for God that we make this right”?

The second story that fascinates me is this: Pat Robertson has recently called on believers across the country to fast and pray that three Supreme Court justices will resign, of course with the hope that they

will be replaced by more conservative justices, thereby shifting Supreme Court decisions toward more conservative goals. Now, I don't know what kind of Supreme Court I really want, to be honest with you. I would probably say I prefer a more conservative than liberal one in terms of social agenda, although I wrestle with some of that. But I do know this: if we do change the Supreme Court justices, it's not going to make America a more spiritual or moral place.

When we get distracted from making Jesus the center of our focus and start wedding our faith to political agendas, personal agendas, or whatever, the whole thing gets muddy. We are very easily lulled to sleep about what really matters, which is advancing the kingdom of God.

Ginger and I just had a wonderful reunion with some old friends, Mark and Priscilla Young. Mark is a professor in the Missions Department at Dallas Theological Seminary, and a former colleague with whom I served overseas. He was speaking this past week at Mount Hermon during their Dallas Seminary Days. So Ginger and I went down yesterday morning, and we got there in time to hear Mark speak. He had a wonderful message on the Old Testament names of God. He was preaching about Yahweh Nissi, "the Lord Our Banner." The banner was lifted as the rallying point for the troops, and now Christ is our rallying point. He was talking about how we so easily make other things our rallying point: a theology, a methodology of ministry, a worship style, a political agenda. He said if you go to some of the oppressed peoples of the world, they are not quibbling about these things. They are rallying to the banner of Jesus, because he's all they've got. It's not that any style of worship or political agenda or theological emphasis or methodology of ministry is necessarily bad in itself, but it is so easy to make those things the point, and then Jesus is no longer the point.

Paul is calling us to break out of that. That is a way of being lulled to sleep and into a stupor of drunkenness away from what really matters. Jesus has to be our rallying point, our banner, as we anticipate his coming, drive back the darkness, and live as people of light.

Let's review our characteristics of a healthy, growing church:

1. We will have a vital connection to the living God.
2. We will have a deep reliance on the word of God.
3. We will persevere in the face of all obstacles as God matures us.
4. We will have an ever-deepening obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.
5. We will live in the liberating hope of the Lord's return.

This text has now taught us another characteristic of a healthy, growing church:

6. We will be alert to the times and seasons, and we will authentically engage this world to the glory of Christ our Lord.

Being aware of what God is doing and entering into that is what it means to live as children of the day, as we wait for Christ's coming.

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