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Idol of Safety – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

This morning we are going to take a look at a passage in 1 Thessalonians. We will look at the beginning of chapter 5, which is primarily about the end of the world, particularly when Jesus will return again.

In the Bible we have two of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. They are written to a predominantly Gentile church of new converts. **Part of the purpose of 1 Thessalonians is to comfort and motivate the believers there with the truth of the Lord's sure return.** So the primary issue that Paul emphasis throughout is that of the second coming of Christ.

The city of Thessaloniki still exists today. In fact it is one of the few cities from the New Testament times that still exists. Thessalonica was a very important city in biblical times. Its main street was a part of the very road which linked Rome with the East. Trade poured into the city from east and west. It is impossible to overstress the importance of the arrival of Christianity in Thessalonica. If Christianity was established there, it was bound to spread east along the Egnatian Road until all Asia was conquered, and west until it stormed even the city of Rome.

One of the problems that Paul was facing when he wrote 1 Thessalonians was that the early Christians' teaching on the second coming of the Lord had produced an unhealthy situation in which people had stopped working and had abandoned all ordinary activities to await the second coming with a kind of hysterical expectancy.

1 Thessalonians affirms that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and urges watchfulness. But this produced the unhealthy situation where people did nothing but watch and wait. Paul writes to calm their hysteria and make them wait, no in excited idleness, but in patient and diligent attention to each day's work.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

For the Jews, all time was divided into two ages. There was the present age, which was wholly and incurably bad. There was the age to come, which would be the golden age of God. In between, there was the day of the Lord, which would be a terrible day. It would be a day in which one world was shattered and another was

born. The day of the Lord's main characteristics were: 1) it would come suddenly and unexpectedly, 2) it would involve a cosmic upheaval in which the universe was shaken to its very foundations, 3) it would be a time of judgment.

Some of the expectations for the day of the Lord were: a time of great judgment and wrath on all the nations and on Israel, the overthrow of God's enemies, the purging of the rebels from Israel, resulting in Israel's return to the Lord, and, after judgment, a time of great blessing as the Lord will reign with His people.

Some of the Thessalonians had heard that Jesus would return soon, and had decided to stop working and just hang around until He took them away with Him.

After telling the Thessalonians that they will not know when the day of the Lord will come Paul tells them that “while people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly.”

Paul is simply following in the footsteps of Jesus when he says to be watchful and ready. And he also mentions why some will not be ready. Paul describes these people as saying, “peace and safety.” The Message translation says it this way, “About the time everybody's walking around complacently, congratulating each other—“We've sure got it made! Now we can take it easy!”

Jesus and Paul's admonition to be alert still applies to us today as Jesus has not yet returned and I think there are **two reasons that we may not be ready.**

The first reason is likely the reason that Paul thought that some of Thessalonians were not prepared. They had already checked their heaven card. Their godly passport was stamped. They believed themselves to be Christians and that Jesus was returning very soon, so why spend any time doing productive things on earth. Just sit around looking up into the sky waiting for Jesus to come down.

When I was in college, I spent many summers going door-to-door with various politicians visiting with people. We saw some strange things, but one thing that every single town had was a handful of middle-aged men that would just sit on their porch all day drinking beer and watching people. They would just sit there for hours looking around.

That is what I picture this holy complacency looking like for the Thessalonians. They believed they had no purpose on earth, but were simply hanging out until the next phase. They have found “peace and safety” in their godly ways.

The second reason that people are not prepared for the 2nd coming of Jesus is that they have found “peace and safety” in their worldly lives. I fear there is a great deal of this in our world today. We are not in an era when our daily lives are affected by war. Our children are not threatened by starvation. We don't worry about whether we will be sleeping outside tonight. Worst comes to worst, we know of some friends that have the resources to help us. We have our insurance and our savings accounts and our locks on the doors and our airbags and seatbelts and helmets . . . we have our passwords and secrets . . . we are really good about building lives that are peaceful and safe. . .

But then there are those things in life that rock our boats in a sense and remind us of how unsafe we really are.

Just this week the news was filled with two stories that remind us of how fragile a ground we walk on.

At the end of April an offshore oil well exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. And thus far the best of America's technology has failed to stop massive amounts of oil from pouring into the water. At best 5,000 barrels of oil is flowing into the water each day. That is 210,000 gallons a day. Other countries have come to our aid with ideas and resources, but the oil keeps flowing. We don't expect to have problems of this magnitude and we definitely don't expect to not be able to fix them.

And the other story is downright bizarre. This past Thursday the U.S. Stock market dropped nearly 1000 points over a few minutes period. Stocks that we usually worth around \$50 were worth pennies for a few seconds. This is the same stock market that many of us rely upon for retirement and savings. And last Thursday it drastically tanked because of what many traders are suspecting was a “fat finger.” Someone hit the wrong button and traded 1 billion shares instead of 1 million. And once, whatever the trigger was – was pulled, everything went amok. And the safety and security of millions of people revealed that it was resting upon the thinnest of ice.

We have lots of experiences like these throughout our lives that hint at something that we really know down deep inside of us anyways . . . there is not safety and security this side of heaven. We know this when we see a loved one die unexpectedly . . . we know this when we see bombs placed in New York City or violent storms destroy neighborhoods and people . . . safety and security on this earth makes us feel better, but it is ultimately an illusion.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that it does no good to pretend. In fact, clinging to the illusion of safety and security will actually make you more vulnerable on the day when Jesus returns.

The last part of verse 3 compares the suddenness of Jesus' coming with labor pains on a pregnant woman. Paul's point is that the Lord's coming will be harsh for those unprepared and they will not know when that time will be.

No one will be excluded from the effects of Christ's coming. Everyone will be affected, but the difference will be that some will be prepared and others will not be. Some will have been in relationship with Jesus all along and others will have been ignoring him or waiting until it was really necessary. The consequences of these choices will thus determine whether Christ's coming is a good or bad thing.

The Bible paints a clear picture of the difference between those that are prepared and those that are not. And I think those two different understandings and lifestyles have implications not just on eternal life, but on how we live our lives today.

I believe many of us are more committed to safety than we are to God. And I believe this is sin. I believe our over-commitment to safety and security is sinful and inhibits our participation in the godly work that God wants to do through us.

I think we cling to all sorts of earthly safety nets refusing to fully trust in God and pursue his priorities. I believe if there is one clear lesson that we can learn from Jesus' life, it is that he did not pursue safety. Jesus regularly did and said things that were not in his best interest. And ultimately he chose to die by placing the eternal lives of others over his own life.

Ultimately, earthly safety and security are lies. Nothing can keep us safe and secure. The examples I shared earlier illustrate this. We can build bigger and safer cars, but people will still die. We can develop the greatest technology and most effective medicines, but people will still die. We can build the biggest military and have the most destructive weapons, but people will still die. Safety and security is an illusion.

Sometimes you can feel this tension. I have a tendency to be obsessive. **Every night when I go to bed and set my alarm, one of the mildly obsessive things that I do is check the alarm time 4 or 5 times.** I just check it one after another to be very safe and secure that it is set correctly. It drives Dana insane. And it is a little ridiculous, but it makes me feel better. But a few months ago, my alarm still did not go off and I showed up at the 6:30am Thursday Men's Bible study a half hour late. The truth is no matter how hard we try our safety and security is ultimately an illusion. We have no control.

I imagine it is like standing on a log in water. You have probably seen those log rolling contests. And we are standing on the log in the water with our eyes closed. And our footing and balance seem horribly off. We run one way and then the other frantically trying to stay atop the log as it moves. And we imagine the difficulty and frustration and maybe even pain and discomfort of falling off . . . and we probably imagine that the water is infested with sharks and lots and lots of danger . . . and then if you are a cataclysmic thinker as I am . . . you imagine that the sharks really like blue striped shirts, and because you are wearing a blue striped shirt you are certain to be attacked . . .

But the reality of the Christian life is that while the waters of our earthly lives may be shark infested . . . we don't stay in those waters. That is the illusion. When we open our lives to God's revelation we see that below the shark infested waters is a God that saves. The bible refers to this as a light amidst the darkness.

And because a God that saves exists we don't have to live fearful of the darkness, but can live pursuing the light.

Paul sets up a bunch of contrasts in this passage that I think are helpful. Darkness is ignorance, light is knowledge. Darkness is being surprised, light is expectancy. Darkness is being asleep, light being alert. Darkness is drunkenness, light is soberness.

And these are characterized by a radically different object of pursuit. People of darkness pursue safety and security, while people of the light pursue faith, hope and love.

What is the difference?

Let me give you an example from my life that I have been wrestling with God over through the years. I have always tended to be a people person that enjoys being with people and particularly enjoys making them happy. And so for the most part I have done that. I don't really have any enemies that I know of. And over time I have taken pride in this.

What I have learned over the years though is that I have raised my desire to not have people mad at me to an often ungodly level. I have committed myself to not making people mad. And I have committed to safety in this area of my life.

I found that I would often hold back saying something true, but hard for others to hear out of fear that it might make them angry, or upset, or mad at me for saying it. And so in conversations I would find myself obsessively processing what I would say in an effort to avoid saying something that might offend even if it was true and might ultimately prove beneficial to the other person.

This showed up a lot in my marriage. I rarely shared frustration with Dana or what I was really thinking if I believed there was a risk of it making her angry or upset.

If you go back to our log rolling example you can see what we do with safety in our hearts and minds. I was standing on the log of making no one mad at me with my eyes closed . . . and I was frantically trying to keep my balance, watching what I said and trying as hard as I could not to lose my balance and fall into the shark infested waters of having someone upset with me.

But in recent years I have been able to see and name my idol of safety. I have been worshipping it and serving it at the expense of God, to the detriment of faith, love and hope.

As God has shown me sin in other people's lives or called me to spur them on in areas where they have been lazy . . . I have clung to safety and withheld. But God is showing me a deeper purpose, or Paul would call it

“light,” that must be pursued. It may be o.k. and even better to upset someone or make them mad at you if you are moving them towards God.

I already knew this with my kids. When I sternly tell our girls that they should not bite one another . . . I am not concerned with whether they will be upset or mad at me because I am pursuing a more important goal, namely that they do not hurt one another.

To pursue the things of God is often not safe.

We see this when God is urging you to make a financial contribution that is not consistent with your financial plan. We see this when God is urging you to make a career move that isn't for the title or the money or the respect. We see this when God calls you to bring up a subject in conversation with someone that you usually wouldn't dare touch.

One of the best biblical examples is when Jesus calls Peter out of the boat to come to him. The apostles are in a boat and Jesus comes strolling across the water towards them. Peter is excited and asks Jesus to let him come to meet him on the water. For a split second, Peter is acting without fear, not concerned for his safety, but fully trusting in God. And for that split second he stands upon water and upon the power of God. But then the text says that he doubts . . . I imagine his mind catching up to what he has just done and where he is standing . . . and he looks for something to grab onto, he looks for some security and he begins to sink. He took his eyes off Jesus.

In our passage Paul makes it clear that those that will be prepared on the day of the Lord's returning will be those that have kept their eyes focused on the things of God.

Paul ends with “therefore encourage one another and build each other up.” The church exists to be an encouragement to one another in taking steps of faith. Our purpose is to help each other move beyond our commitments to safety and security and towards lives lived radically for God. When we do this, it will not feel good and we need the support of a community to help us to see we are doing what is good in the eyes of God.

Sources Consulted:

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