

“Alert, Sober, and Faith-Filled”

OT: Psalm 123

NT: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

There are two main components of this text we can take away with us today.

The first is foundational to the Christian faith; the bedrock in which we stand in our belief of Jesus Christ as God incarnate and our Lord and Savior. We get it in verses 9-11:

“For God has destined us not for wrath (darkness) but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

I want to spend a minute here before we move on to the second main component, because there are so many good reminders packed in this text.

1. **God has destined us...** God is in tune with us. God cares enough about us to have a plan for us. A plan for today but even more specifically an eschatological plan. Every time I say the word, eschatological, Barrett likes to say, “God bless you” and tells me I just make that word up. But indeed, I didn’t. Eschatological refers to what is going to happen in the end. It looks at the end game for life. God has a plan for our end game for life.
2. What is the plan?
  - a. **Not for wrath.** Not to condemn. Not with acts of darkness.
  - b. God’s plan for us is for us to have and experience life everlasting. God has destined us **for obtaining salvation**. Go ahead and say it, “That’s awesome!”
3. How? God has destined us for obtaining salvation **through our Lord Jesus Christ**. For those who believe and love God, God has given us salvation. That is why God sent Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of hope in which our Christian faith stands.
4. Why Jesus Christ? In short, **Jesus died for us**. We also believe Jesus came to live for us, showing us the ultimate example of how to live a faithful life toward God, and that Jesus came to rise again, conquering death and giving us the ultimate hope of uniting with God in eternity.
5. **Whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him...** We are to do our best and give it our all, but we are not required to be perfect. Ready or not, God’s love and mercy given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will prevail. God’s love is stronger than any bond in the world and God wants nothing more than for us to live with him forever.
6. Because of this good news, **encourage one another and build up each other...** I love this charge. This is one of our most important tasks as Christians. We are to be in community with one another so that we can encourage one another, love one another, support one another, and make one another better.

7. **As indeed you are doing...** This phrase connects everything we just mentioned to the earlier verses in this text. Most specifically, Paul is congratulating the Thessalonians for encouraging and building each other up as he taught them. Paul uses the foundations of faith to affirm for the Thessalonians the way in which they are living. Because they believed in Christ and acted in this way, Paul declares them “children of the light or children of the day.” Good things happen during the day. Right things happened during the day. Our lives are to reflect that of light and day, not the things of darkness and night.

Having a bedrock in which to stand, we can now turn to the second main component to take away. This component is how we are to remain children of the light when darkness looms. The Thessalonians are believed to be relatively new Christians at this point in the text, and Paul is believed to be checking back in on their progress since their commitment. The reports Paul has received have been positive, but Paul wants to make sure the lives they are living stay faithful and strong.

To dig a little deeper, we must ask ourselves why Paul is writing? The answer is twofold.

- A. Paul, a convert himself, knows all too well how easy it can be to fall away. Temptations are real. Struggle is real. Darkness is real. Paul, from his own experience as well as from his witness of others, says, it is far too easy to fall victim to the dark and begin to lose track of your life. It is far too easy to be fearful, shut yourself off, hate others and begin to worry yourself out of hope. Therefore, here in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul is giving warning to work hard in staying children of the light and not give in to the dark. Paul essentially tells them, “When darkness comes, do what children of the light do? Go back to what you know is true! Go back to doing what you know to be right? Be alert. Be sober. Be faith-filled. Put on the breastplate of faith and love. Put on the hope of salvation as a helmet.”
- B. Paul’s point is to prepare them and inspire them. While they wait upon the return of the Lord, they are to hold on and live out their faith, love, and hope every day because the return of Jesus is coming soon. Paul says, “it will come like a thief in the night,” meaning we don’t know the exact time in which Christ is coming but as children of the light, we need to be prepared now and in every subsequent moment. “Live today as though it is your last.” My coach in college always inspired us by saying, “Play today’s game as though it will be your last. One day it will be, and you don’t want to look back and regret it.”

What might we glean from this message from Paul to the Thessalonians?

I believe there are some good comparisons to make between the Thessalonians and us today. I believe, through our belief and commitment to God, that we too are children of the light. We are children of God called to represent the light and all things God declares as good and right. I also believe, in a variety of ways, we work to encourage one another, and build up each other.

We are no more perfect than the Thessalonians in this endeavor, meaning we sometimes fall short, but I do believe our hearts and minds seek to encourage and build up each other through our love and support. We might sometimes disagree on the methods for how to best do that, but I trust our hearts are all in the right window of intention. Another comparison fair to make is in the presence of darkness in life and the honest role it plays in causing us a distraction. We too need to be prepared and inspired, ready at any moment.

Darkness. Do you know anything about darkness in your life? My best assumption is that we all do. For some of us it might be deep and wide. For some of us it might be spotty and unpredictable. For some of us it might be chronic working its way to acute. For some of us it might be a presence we have worked to manage. For some of us it might be a result of circumstances. Darkness is evil because it gets in the way of the good. Darkness is that which we do not want others to see, although there are times, we cannot control it. Darkness is... (you name your own).

As human beings, darkness is an unfortunate reality, and it is important for us to be prepared and equipped to stand up to darkness when it reveals itself.

Bob Stoess, a CEO, writer, and mentor gives insight on mental gymnastics to not giving in to the darkness as he writes:

*"Don't Give Up!" Are your tasks overwhelming you? Do you dread facing the day? Where is your courage? What do you fear? Where is your confidence? Have you not faced difficulty before?*

*Now is not the time to put your head down. It's not time to turn tail and run. It's not time to think "failure."*

*Don't dare give up. If you're knocked down, get up. The challenge is not over yet. Make yourself a "can do" person. Positive thinking can stretch your mind and your muscles. It can stretch your vision. It can enable you to see the impossible as possible. It can enable you to know the good from the bad. It can enable you to reach for the higher plain.*

*So, don't just sit there. Get up. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Prepare for what God has in store for you. Know that He gives strength and guidance, when you lean on Him. Don't fear today. Give it your best. Tackle the tough jobs first. Do it today. You'll be amazed at what you can achieve, when you extend your capabilities and just keep on trying.*

Maybe this is easier said than done but such is the reality of the mind. The inspiration and encouragement are real though and the results are too.

The mental gymnastics requires sometimes reminds me of the documentary about the making of the movie *Frozen 2* in which one of the songs Anna sings in a dark cave, worried about the future of her sister, and her home, and her life, was written from the experience of darkness and a way to work in and through it. In short, "Do the next right thing!" (Lyrics from Disney's *Frozen 2*)

*I've seen dark before, but not like this... This is cold, this is empty, this is numb  
The life I knew is over; the lights are out... Hello darkness: I'm ready to succumb*

*I follow you around (I always have)... But you've gone to a place I cannot find  
This grief has a gravity, it pulls me down... But a tiny voice whispers in my mind*

*You are lost, hope is gone... But you must go on... And do the next right thing*

*Can there be a day beyond this night... I don't know anymore what is true  
I can't find my direction; I'm all alone... The only star that guided me was you*

*How to rise from the floor... When it's not you I'm rising for*

*Just do the next right thing... Take a step, step again  
It is all that I can do... The next right thing*

*I won't look too far ahead... It's too much for me to take  
But break it down to this next breath, this next step  
This next choice is one that I can make*

*So I'll walk through this night... Stumbling blindly toward the light  
And do the next right thing... And with the dawn what comes then?  
When it's clear that everything will never be the same again  
Then I'll make the choice to hear that voice... And do the next right thing*

To never give up and to do the next right thing are in line with the tools Paul seeks to equip and prepare the Thessalonians with. Paul says, for children of the light, we are first to be awake and alert. To keep awake and be alert is to be attentive. It is active waiting and watching. Second, we are to be sober. To be sober is to not be influenced by folly or false encouragement. And thirdly, we are to be faith-filled. Another way to consider this is that we have three pieces of armor to protect us from the darkness. I want to briefly unpack these three pieces of armor and then we will wrap up.

The first two mentioned are protectors of our heart and the last a protector of our mind.

**Faith.** We are to wear a breastplate of faith on our chest. To have faith is to believe and live our life on the promises and blessings of God, whether we can see them or not. To have faith

is to trust in God to hold us and care for us and provide for us and bless us. To have faith is to live our life in conviction and confidence that God is active in leading our thoughts and actions. To live by faith is to believe in the good news of the gospel as the best manual for a life well lived. Living by faith is the exact opposite of living by fear. Faith is life giving. Faith is hopeful. Fear is life taking and crippling. Living by faith is not allowing everyday circumstances to paralyze the progress of your life just because something got hard or someone said or might say something in disagreement. Living by faith is coming together with others based on our common belief in God, and to be the body of Christ celebrating our many differences coming together in one beautiful tapestry. And just to be clear, faith is not an excuse for stupidity or laziness. Living by faith is not haphazard or reckless living testing God's ability to catch you if you jump off a building or follow a whim, or cover for you if you simply do nothing.

**Love.** Coupled with faith on the breastplate, love is also what protects our heart. Amid a discussion during men's bible study this past Thursday, Erik Koroneos suggested a practice to embody as a check point to living with the kind of love God calls us to. The practice is to look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you can insert your name in the place of "love" as it is written in 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians is Paul's letter to the Corinthians defining God's love, and that because God loves us this way, we too are called to love this way.

"\_\_\_\_\_ is patient; \_\_\_\_\_ is kind; \_\_\_\_\_ is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. \_\_\_\_\_ does not insist on his own way; \_\_\_\_\_ is not irritable or resentful; \_\_\_\_\_ does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. \_\_\_\_\_ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

A love like this, will surely keep our focus on God and keep darkness at bay.

**Hope of salvation.** Lastly, Paul suggests wearing the hope of salvation as our helmet. Hope protects our mind. The hope of salvation has an eschatological focus with a present reality. Rooted in God's promises of love and mercy prevailing for us despite our shortcomings, the hope of salvation provides a light at the end of the tunnel guiding our path. No matter how challenging or difficult life may be at certain times, the hope of salvation provides assurance of a greater reality yet to come. The hope of salvation, which describes the ultimate end game conclusion for us, provides for us a peace that surpasses all understanding, reason, rationale, and logic. The hope of salvation, built on God's promises, is to be the north star of our mind.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, be alert, be sober, and be faith-filled armored with faith, love, and hope. "For God has destined us not for wrath (darkness) but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Let all God's people say... Amen.