

## Encourage One Another...

### 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

The billboard shouts at cars passing on the highway: "Jesus is coming, are you ready?" The prophet Amos warns ([Amos 5:18](#)), "Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!" Theologian Jürgen Moltmann declares that the coming of God should make believers "impatient" with the way the world is today. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself declares, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into" ([Matt. 24:42-43](#)). These images are so firmly embedded in our minds and hearts from years of Advent sermons that it is easy to anticipate the kind of message such a text might convey on a Sunday morning. After all, the Bible is so replete with allusions to the coming of the "day of the Lord" and God's coming kingdom.

However, this is not an Advent lectionary text. Paul's argument has a lot more to do with sustenance and perseverance long after the urgency of Christ's return seems to have worn out. While Paul and the believers in Thessalonica appear to be anticipating Christ's return in their lifetimes ([4:13-18](#)), they are at least a generation removed from Jesus' ascension. Consequently, it is much more likely that Paul's admonition has less to do with the *fact* of Christ's return than it does with weariness with its delay and misunderstanding about its purpose for believers racked with uncertainty and fear. In other words, unlike the billboards that dot our American landscape, here Paul raises these issues more for encouragement than for some mountaintop revelation or scared-straight faith commitment.

So the reference to Christ coming becomes more of an encouragement to stay the course, since the sudden arrival of Christ and its consequences are unavoidable. While the "signs of the time" might challenge us to rededicate our commitment to discipleship, hardship in life does not threaten our assurance of salvation. There is no need for believers to respond as advised by the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus is coming—act busy!" Paul reassures them, "Of course you will be prepared. You already know. You live in the light, faith, and life of the resurrection." In a sense, it is as though the day of the Lord has already arrived for those who have received the gift of faith; and for us today, who often still struggle to hold the assurance of eternal salvation amid worldly calamity. It is as if Paul is echoing the words of the psalmist: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). Believers should trust in the promises of God and be at peace.

To drive this understanding home, Paul describes the Thessalonians as "children of light and children of the day" (v. 5). Paul's purpose here is to put the Thessalonians at peace with the fact that they belong to a new day, much as Martin Luther reassured himself with his famous daily reminder, "I am baptized."

Whether when this letter was written or today, as long as Christians exist in the world, they will live with plenty of anxiety. Paul wants the saints of the church to know that we have received a great gift in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: our awakening to faith; the privilege of living as God's called-out people in the light; and expectation of God's redemption of all creation. We live in constant preparedness, because the day of the Lord has already come to us through our faith and calling in Jesus Christ. When trouble comes, it is the saving love of Jesus Christ, not some distorted works-righteousness, that will sustain us and allow us to engage in lives of love and service.

Even more reassuring are Paul's concluding words, which remind us that we are not alone. "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed

you are doing." The best evidence believers have of the assurance of God's forgiveness and salvation is each other. The promise of Christ's return sustains and builds up the church in whatever circumstance it finds itself. God has given us two great gifts for sustaining our faith in the midst of hardship: the promise of Christ's return and the mutual encouragement of the community of faith. According to Paul, we can step out into eternity on these two realities. **John E. Cole**

A story is told by Paula Kirk in the book *Stories for the Heart*.

This had been a miserable Easter vacation. As I walked through the airport my heart was heavy at the devastation in my daughter's life. Her husband of one year had left her and she was almost immobilized by shock and sorrow. Because she is an air traffic controller, she was now terribly worried about her ability to stay focused.

I stopped to buy souvenirs for my grandchildren back home. While the credit card processed, the smiling clerk asked how I liked her home state.

"It's beautiful," I replied, "but I say that about nearly every place I visit."

"Yes," she nodded, "God has made a beautiful world for us to enjoy. So much variety. What did you see on your vacation?"

Immediately the tears welled up. The grief was raw and close to the surface. "It wasn't a vacation. Just a serious family problem, and my daughter is having an extremely hard time. I hate to leave her," I stammered.

"Oh, but God is good. He will work on your daughter's behalf."

"I know," I whispered back through tears that now flowed freely. From that counter I took away more than my small purchases. I took

away a touch of Christ's resurrection power – the power of God's love to reach out and touch a hurting heart.

Paul reminds us to encourage one another. We are: citizens of God's coming realm here and now. Christ's life, death, and resurrection inaugurated the realm of God that he proclaimed. While there may well be a future fullness to that realm, it is present in the world now. The ethical side points to how Christians are to live: as citizens of God's realm, in concrete relationships here and now. No need to wait for the Return of Christ to live lives of love, justice, care, and peace; that is the everyday life of faith now.

Paul outfits believers with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation (v. 8). Encouraging Christians to look to the present resources God has provided, rather than a future intervention, strengthens people to live faithfully now. The Thessalonians, nor we, have no knowledge of when the Day of the Lord will occur, they and we can live as citizens of that coming day in the present.

Christians can thus encourage one another. Persecution is temporary. The flagrant acts of those who live in the shadows will end. Death is not final. "When is the end?" is the wrong question. "What do we do in the meantime?" is the important question. Paul answers it by admonishing us to live out the virtues of the regular Christian life: be at peace with one another, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all things (5:14-21). Whether the Lord hastens or tarries, this is how citizens of God's coming realm should live. **Mark B. Lee**

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