

Excel Still More

Let's pray:

Lord, we are ever grateful for all Your goodness and mercy to us. Lord, thank You just for that fresh reminder as we opened today of the unimaginable, unspeakable agony and choice of all that You went through. But we are thankful, Lord, that out of a heart of love, You did see that joy set before You. You knew Your Father's heart, You knew His purpose, and You knew what it was all about. Even though You gave your life, we can behold You today. You looked upon it as not about You, but about the Father's will. And Lord, we today want to give ourselves to You, that it not be about us, but it be about You and all that You have for us, all that You desire to speak. We commit the time into Your hands, thankfully declaring that You are Lord and King over this time. In Thy name we pray. Amen.

Living in the Light of the Lord's Return

I want to start with two familiar passages, and what you will notice is a similarity between these two passages. And that is what we want to start off by considering. The first one is out of I Thessalonians 5:8-11, and I have highlighted some key phrases here. Paul is talking about the coming of the Lord here.

He says, "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."

Hebrews 10:22-25: This will show us a little parallel here: "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Now, we are going to read them again and look at the similarities between them. Notice that in both passages, you see faith, hope, and love.

I Thessalonians 5:8-11 says, "But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love (that is guarding our hearts), and as a helmet, the hope of salvation (guarding our minds, praise God). For God has not destined us for wrath (that is what we have remembered this morning), 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." There is the encouragement of the relationship we have, one with another, and the responsibility we have for one another.

Then we see the similarity as we come to Hebrews 10 which is a wonderful set of encouraging verses, but we are just looking at a couple of the verses, and we are thankful because of all that the Lord has done.

Hebrews 10:22-25 says, “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (He encourages us because of that position we have in Christ and all He has done for us.) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; (In the days that we are living in, holding fast the confession of our hope without wavering is getting challenged; particularly in these end days we do not want to be those that faint. We do not want to be those letting go and losing our hope. But because of all He has done, because of this table we just took, we have a hope that is sure and steadfast.) and let us consider how to stimulate one another (again our relationship and responsibility to each other) to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

We see one of the tactics of the enemy in these last days is to try to separate the brethren, to divide, and even trying to attack the preciousness of being together. Now when it talks about assembling together here, to me there are two words to consider. The one is forsaking; that is making a choice. You do not realize the value of the preciousness of being together. But the word that is even more critical in my heart is the word “habit.” We know that we are not going to be able to make it to all the meetings, but we do not want it to become a habit, which means it is something you are doing all the time. We see how things come up, and we cannot be at every meeting, but we are not condemned for that. However, we do not want it to become a habit. We want that desire to be in our lives and in our hearts to desire to be together whenever we can so that we can encourage one another. How vital this is!

So why did I really read these two passages? They are talking about living in light of the Lord's return. And if you look at I Thessalonians, it is Paul's first letter, and it is basically written to new believers. If you look at Hebrews, and for today, I am going to say Hebrews is written by Paul, even though I do not believe that. But for the sake of the many who say this was written by Paul, I want to avoid any controversy. We are going to say that this was one of his last letters. So, we say that it is written to encourage older believers. But we see all throughout Paul's ministry, throughout his life of sharing and encouraging one another, he always had this burden upon his heart of the Lord's return; it was always inside. It did not matter who he was writing to and encouraging, there was always a purpose and an end in view about the Lord's return. And now because of the Lord's soon return we are focusing even more.

The Basic Truth of the Lord's Return is for All of Us

So, what is the significance of this? The significance of this to me is that if you are a new Christian or if you have been one for a while, this basic truth of the Lord's return is for all of us. We can think at times that this is a higher teaching about the Lord's return. No, Paul shows us as he wrote to these new believers in Thessalonica and shared with them much about the Lord's

return, that it was for all. Regardless of how long we have been walking with the Lord, regardless of how much history we have with Him, this message, this truth of His return is critical and vital for all of us.

I appreciated a quote from a brother, A.B. Simpson. Many of us know him and have been encouraged by him. As I looked at his commentary on Thessalonians he had a note in it that says, "The fact that letters to the Thessalonians were Paul's earliest epistles, and this subject of the Lord's return is so prominent in both of them, makes it very plain that the doctrine of the Lord's coming is not an advanced truth that can only be understood by deeply spiritual Christians. It is one of the primary doctrines of basic gospel truth or foundational teaching. And is the very essence of the gospel of the kingdom and is for all believers."

So as we are sharing again about preparing for the coming of the Lord, which we have been hearing a lot lately over the years, some of us will sit back and say, "Oh, here we go again; we are just hearing about preparing for the coming of the Lord." But may it never grow weary to us. We are going to hear again today about the coming of the Lord, and may it not grow familiar to us.

I appreciate A.B. Simpson's quote, so I will read it again. "The fact that letters to the Thessalonians were Paul's earliest epistles, and this subject of the Lord's return is so prominent in both of them, makes it very plain that the doctrine of the Lord's coming is not an advanced truth that can only be understood by deeply spiritual Christians. It is one of the primary doctrines of foundations of the basic gospel truth. And it is the very essence of the gospel of the kingdom and is for all believers." Praise God! Would we come into seeing this. Because the basic truths, or we can call them foundational truths, really apply to everybody. Whether we are talking about faith, hope, love, salvation, the table, they are for all, and so is His return. All the basic truths that we have are for everybody.

An example is like the call of God that he has upon all of us. If you look at the example in Peter's life, what is the first recorded command that the Lord said to Peter? "Follow Me!" And what is the very last thing that He said at the end of the Gospel of John? "Follow Me!" It did not get more complicated as Peter got to know the Lord more. The standard was not changed. Sometimes it is like they change the goal line; they make it hard. You are going along, and then the goal changes. No; it was simply a call to follow Him. And that is really a principle related to all of the foundational truths of God. There is a simplicity there that we love to get away from and make things more complicated. But God wants us to stay in that place of simplicity in Him.

His Soon Return is such a Motivator to Us

Why is His soon return such a motivator to us? It is because the reality of His return relates to why we are here. Why are we here today? Are we just here in the moment for today? There is a goal in view. Even as you look at when it speaks about the Lord's table in Corinthians, we are doing this with His return in view. What are we living for? Where are we going? What are we doing? Is it just to escape this world?

His return is in view, and it should govern our lives. How do we press through difficult times? We see that these Thessalonians were persecuted from the very beginning. They are noted for enduring through persecution. How can we endure persecution in these days? One of the ways that the Lord encouraged those in Thessalonica, and He encourages us, is to keep that goal in view, keep His purpose, keep His end in view, and we will be able to go through it. That is why it is so simple but so critical for us to know what the goal is.

And sadly, for many throughout Christianity, there is a self-centeredness today. But we are not be self-centered but Christ-centered. And it is a shock to some hear this: “It is not about me?” They do not even realize it. But we see that it is not about us. If you look at all the teachings of our Lord in His parables about the second coming, He is working to change our perspective. He wants us to lift up our eyes as we are encouraged so often in the prayer meeting. We are to lift up our eyes so that we can see Him. It is about Him—not us.

He is coming back because His Father has had a purpose in His heart throughout eternity. It is a glorious and wonderful purpose. And His Father is so desiring of this, with such a love for us. He lives this out for us, and He is continuing to call us into that. We see that His return, as we have said, is about Him; it is not about us. It is about a bride for His Son. This is what the Father is jealous for, that His Son would have that eternal companion and corporate expression of His life. And it is so vital for us to see it in this hour and in this time. It is an amazing thing that God has chosen us—the failures, the weaknesses, the inabilities, our rebelling against Him at times, rejecting Him and neglecting Him. It is amazing that He has chosen us and put His life in us to conform us to His image. This is what it is about. This is what He is calling us to, and may we never grow tired of that.

Background of the Church at Thessalonica

So as we have kind of set the tone, let us look at some background and setting for this letter to the Thessalonians. Obviously, they lived in the city of Thessalonica which was an important commercial and political city. Commercially, it was on the major trade route between what today are called Istanbul and Rome. It is kind of like the I-95 of those days. It was the trade route, and of course, everything that went up and down, all the trucks were on there. It was a major highway that connected everything, the good and the bad. We see cities along 95, and they are an influence for good and for bad. But that is why this trade route was so critical because it was a big political center that included the capital and other important places, and because of that, it was a real diversified culture. Obviously, they were mainly Greek, but there were ones from every background and every culture. And there were also Jews there because there was a synagogue.

We are first introduced to Thessalonica after Paul comes from Philippi. Now we know that in Philippi, the first time Paul came to Europe through a vision, and he was imprisoned. Through Paul being thrown in prison in Philippi the Lord did a marvelous thing, but afterwards he is forced to leave (see Acts 16).

After he is forced to leave Philippi, he went to Thessalonica (see Acts 17). And there he goes to the synagogue and shares, which is his normal custom. And because of him declaring the glorious gospel, it opened the eyes of many who were blind, and many were saved there. It is interesting how it says there were both Jews, Greeks, and a third category called leading women. Now, do not ever underestimate the power of women. They had the Jews, the Greek and then there was this whole other category of leading women.

Paul ended up teaching there for an unknown amount of time. But because of his success, the Jews got jealous, and they created a huge uproar. Paul had to be sent away by the believers at night, and he ended up in Corinth. But he was concerned about the new believers back in Thessalonica, so he sent Timothy. Most people think that Paul was so well known that it would have been dangerous for him to go back. Timothy was more in the background, and they would not have recognized him. He could have snuck in as a special operator, and he would not have been recognized. Then he could assess the land and go back and report. And praise God, Timothy was able to do that.

He went back to Paul, who was in Corinth, and shared with him an encouraging word about how they were still pressing on in the Lord; they were going on. And he also said they had some questions about the Lord's return. So, Paul wrote this first letter to those in Thessalonica to encourage them and to clarify some questions they had about the Lord's return. Now it is good to remember here that between Paul's first visit to Thessalonica and when he wrote this letter it is less than two years. So, these are young believers. You cannot nail down the time exactly, but everybody knows it is less than two years. So it was written to ones who were young in the Lord, and the overall burden that Paul writes to them is related to the Lord's return.

The Purpose of Paul's Letters

Paul had shared with them about the Lord's return, and they had some questions about it. They were worried about the ones who died. What if they died before God came back? What is going to happen to them? And Paul reassured and comforted them that those who lived and those who died would be together with the Lord.

Paul was encouraging them because he had heard about their wonderful faithfulness in spite of the persecution that they had been going through. When Paul left, the Jews there did not stop the persecutions they were having to live under, and there was going to be future persecution. So, he was trying to encourage and comfort them. This is why these two letters to Thessalonica can be so encouraging for us in the last days because the persecution that we are going through is very slight now, but it is going to get worse. We know that many are suffering severe persecution. The comfort and the encouragement that these letters offer us become very relevant to us these days.

Now we are not going to go into specific details or the sequence of events of His return. We are just sticking with the principle that everybody can agree upon. Well, most everybody, there are some out there in the far left that do not, but He is coming back. I think we can all agree on that. We can have different interpretations on when and the sequence of events and all that.

But the principle, the foundational truth is that He is coming back. And praise God, this is what Paul encourages them with.

Work of Faith, Labor of Love, Steadfastness of Hope

Paul began this letter to encourage them, and we will look at I Thessalonians I. It is a tremendous encouragement that we see here in this letter because not only is it encouraging but it shares the testimony of the Lord's life in these dear believers.

I Thessalonians I:-1-6, 10 says, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you (not some of you), making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;" (Chosen by God, He made that choice. They were chosen; they were special. We are chosen, and we are special because He chose us. Praise God.) "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction;" (they were really captured by the Lord. The Spirit really moved upon them and captured them; it was a solid and sure salvation.) "just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." (And just remember that little phrase Paul was saying, how they proved themselves. As they were among these dear ones at Thessalonica, there was a proving, and ones came into respecting them. Thank the Lord. Paul was not trying to prove anything on his own, but the Lord's life in Paul testified to those ones in Thessalonica of everything that he was saying. And what is the result of this?) "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit," (They were going through the tribulation. Ones were persecuting them, but there was joy. There was a reality that had captured their hearts that brought about a joy that they were suffering with a purpose. It was like in Hebrews when it talks about the Lord going to the cross; there was joy set before Him. That is why it is so vital for us to see beyond the immediate into what God is after.) "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come."

Praise God, there is a wrath to come, but we have been delivered from that.

Now, earlier we compared Thessalonians to Hebrews. Let us look again at Hebrews, keeping these verses in view for a moment. Because if you look at Hebrews chapter 10, thinking of what Paul just testified of their work of faith, their labor of love, steadfastness of hope, look at what is shared with the ones in Hebrews. In chapter 10: 22 it says, "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (the work of faith), having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope (that is steadfastness) without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."

Testimony of Those in Thessalonica

Thank the Lord for the testimony of those in Thessalonica. And remember these were young believers. This Word of God, whether you are talking about the encouragement to those in Thessalonica or those in the letter of Hebrews who have a little more history, it is the same encouragement. It brings them back to Christ. And it is sometimes written to young believers, sometimes it is written to ones that have more of a walk with Him. Praise God it is written for all of us, because that is the foundation on which He works and that is what He builds on.

So what is this work of faith that they are talking about? It is a living faith expressed in their lives. This is in I Thessalonians 1:8a, where Paul testifies:

“For the Word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth.”

Praise God for the testimony they had, not just among themselves, but it was radiating all throughout the regions around Macedonia and Achaia. They were impacting others. When the life of the Lord captures one, you find out it is just not in you, but there is a radiating that comes forth. When a brother or a sister gets saved or has an experience with the Lord, and you are around them, you find yourself encouraged also because it radiates from them. His life just wants to burst forth in a greater and fuller way from each one of us.

Verse 9: “For they themselves (those outside of the city) report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.”

The faith that they had in Him, turning away from those idols that they had lived under and worshipped their whole life. God opened their eyes and in faith, they put those behind and they turned to serve the living God. Praise God, it changed their lives, but it also impacted others. Very thankful for that. We often talk about the testimony of Jesus, and this is the testimony of Jesus when His life radiates from us individually or together and impacts others. There is the testimony of Jesus. It is about Him.

Then we see their labor of love as Paul encourages them in I Thessalonians 1:6-7: “You also became imitators of us (or followers of us) and of the Lord, (I do not like that word “imitators”. It is almost like an outward imitation. So, I put “followers” as a little more something that comes from the heart. You are relating with them.) “having received the word in much tribulation (here is persecution again) with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

The word “labor” here it speaks of pain; it speaks of a weariness in spite of circumstances. There is a working through, there is a laboring. We see how Paul is desiring for these ones. They came in and were serving, and there was a labor of love within them. And we see Paul is jealous for them. When we think of this labor of love, we can also related it to Galatians where he said,

“I labor until Christ be fully formed in you.” Praise God for that! Again we see the impact on others.

Then we come to that steadfastness of hope. They were waiting, waiting, the hope they had. This hope was given them by His grace to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead. That is Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. That steadfastness, that patience, the endurance, the constancy of the hope of His return. It was a tremendous work of Christ in those young believers. We see that even though they were suffering through persecutions, there was a reality of His life in them, and they were able to press on very faithfully. That reality was expressed to others also. And as the reality of Christ kept these ones through difficult times, may that reality of Christ and everything that is upon His heart, impact us also. In the short time that we have may that impact our lives together and our individual walks to strengthen us for what lies ahead. As we are walking daily with Him, it prepares us for His return.

The Life in the Messenger Validates the Message

A little while ago one of the verses said that Paul proved Himself. So how did Paul prove Himself? What does that really mean? He simply gave himself to them. We come over in chapter 2, verse 8 here in this letter. It says, “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

Yes, Paul preached the gospel to them, but he did not stop there. He and the ones with him shared their lives with one another. You know, we can sometimes focus and put too much emphasis on the message. Now, the message is very important; do not forget that. But what validates the message? The character of the messenger. It is not just an academic teaching, but there is a character in the message. The life in the messenger validates the message. As Paul was sharing with them, these ones saw him living it out. He was not sharing theory with them; He was sharing life with them. And as he walked through that life and they listened to his teaching, they could see living examples of Christ in him, leading him this way and leading him that way. The testimony of the Lord was a reality there. And because of this relationship, Paul was able to establish these relationships with them. They were brought into a relationship together.

It is interesting the next couple of verses it speaks of the character of this relationship. I love how it is described because first Paul is described as a mother. I appreciate that because here Paul is a mother, and then we will see how he is a father, and you will see the very nature and character of each one as it comes forth through him.

Verse 7: “But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing *mother* tenderly caring for her own children.” (Now the word “mother” is not in the original Greek. It is just nursing. And the reason people insert “mother” there is because she is caring for her own children, motherly care. At times he needed to be gentle, very tender with ones, a comforter, one who has understanding. One who has a motherly heart, she cares, it comes in tenderly but then as ones

who have gone through a crisis, ones who have gone through things, there is also that encouragement from the mother that she can say, “You have had your little pity party, that’s okay; now it is time to stand up and go on.” (These are my words, not Paul’s.) If the mother really cares for the ones to go on, they are not going to let ones just stay in a little pity party. Maybe they have a right because something really bad happened, it is okay. If you really tenderly care for one, you have got to help them get out of that and go on with the Lord, and that is where the loving tenderness of a mother can come in. The father just comes in and says, “All right, get up, get over it and go on.” That does not usually work. And the life in Paul by the Spirit came forth in a motherly tenderness at the right time among those believers.

Verse 11: “Just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a *father* would his own children.”

There were times Paul needed to be a little firmer for correcting, disciplining, and redirecting. But the key here is that Paul had a relationship with them. They knew that he loved them; they knew that he had their best interest at heart, and he had established a trust within them so that when he spoke into their lives, they were listening. Often people will try to speak into our lives, but because they do not have any relationship with us, we do not really pay a lot of attention to it. But somebody who has proven themselves to you, who you know loves you, who you know they care for you, when they say something, even though it might hit you a little hard at first, you listen to that. This is why in these days, there is so much of that encouragement of caring, encouraging one another. That comes about through the relationships we have.

The Foundation of Relationship is Christ

Now we must be clear because there is a lot of relational Christianity out there today. But the foundation for relationships that we are talking about today is in Christ. The relationship we have with one another is not between us just because you and I have a lot in common. No, the relationship is Christ, and we lead ones back to Christ, and he can speak into their lives, not just in words but in life, not just love coming forth in word but in deeds.

As we mentioned earlier, it is similar to what we see in Galatians 4:19, that he speaks of them as children: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.”

That intimate relationship with his children. This is how Paul was able to come in and encourage them. And he was in agony, as it mentioned about the labor and in Galatians it talks about travail. There is an insatiable desire for them to know Christ in a greater way. Paul was in agony from suffering for ones. He loved him so much. As a mother or that father, he was in agony for his children that they grow up in Christ. They were not just numbers on a role or numbers to draw attention to.

I saw in the news that some churches in California want to baptize X number of people next. It was like thousands of people over one weekend. They wanted to baptize thousands of people in one day throughout California, and that is great, but are they believers? The goal is

not numbers. The goal is life in Christ. Praise God if they could baptize ten who really came to know the Lord and could stand for Him and go on. And this is what Paul was desiring, that they become conformed to the image of Christ as that father who has that heart. We have heard from Dana and Jim about the great need these last days for fathers and mothers. They could be the ones that comfort with that tenderness but also the spiritual wisdom to know when to come in for a little correcting, and challenging ones in love. The life of Christ within us has that and can do that. Are we allowing Him to do that?

Paul's Exhortation

And we are thankful how, as Paul encouraged them as a father, they responded to him. They had responded to his gospel. If you look at II Thessalonians, they responded, they continued on even through much suffering and persecution. Why was Paul challenging them like this? Because these ones, remember, they had a glorious testimony. Everybody was praising them. Ones were looking around, saying, "Look at Thessalonica there." Macedonia and Achaia hears about them. And Paul knows that young believers and old believers, any believers, when you get praised too much, you can become content, you can become complacent. You can start to think: "Oh, we have arrived." But Paul does not, and he transitions in his letter here to exhort them, to wake them up and press them on in two different ways. There are two exhortations for them. An exhortation has a double meaning. An exhortation is not only to encourage someone, but it is also to warn them. "Beware of this. Yes, you are doing this, but beware of this." And there are two exhortations. It first relates to their own personal relationship with the Lord. Their walk with the Lord and how they were pleasing to Him. The second exhortation is their relationship with one another.

Now, for the sake of time, we are just going to look at the first exhortation today. In his first exhortation Paul is focusing upon their personal relationship with the Lord because that is the foundation. Before you can go on and talk about relating with one another, you have got to have that clear foundation in Christ and realize that is where we are.

In I Thessalonians 4:1 we see this first exhortation: "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more."

And note here in this verse that he commends them for how they are walking and pleasing God. "You are doing it. Praise God, you are doing it." They have this personal relationship with Him.

Press On, Press On

But he does not stop at that. He says, "I want you to excel still more." Excel still more. And that is a great call for us. He is requesting. He is begging them. He is beseeching them to excel still more. He follows up with this, and a lot of the rest of this chapter, is on the necessity of sanctification. But his concern is that the praises of men could make them unconsciously think

they are doing okay. “Oh, because you are doing this, because you have so many at your meeting, because you have this kind of teaching, because you have such a nice worship time, because you have such good children's work, because you have this, because you have that.” Unconsciously ones can think, “I am doing okay.” But no, he is saying, “I want you to excel still more,” leading them not to be content or complacent.

As we see them excelling still more, it is so vital, because it is similar to what Paul wrote to those in Philippi. If you look at Philippians, he does not say excel still more, but what does he say? “Press on, press on. You have done all this. You have a great history. You have got this. Praise God for the blessing, but you have got to press on. Excel still more. Keep going on. In spite of what experiences you have, in spite of what you have attained, press on.”

Sadly, the age we are living in is characterized by this contentment. The age we are living in is referred to scripturally as the age of Laodicea. What is Laodicea's testimony? “We are rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” They are satisfied with themselves, but the Lord is outside. They are going through all the outward motions. They probably have great meetings. They have this and that. Their treasuries are full of all the things, but do not be content, do not be satisfied. Press on, repent, and keep going on; enter into more and more.

So how does Paul encourage them to prepare for His return? When he is saying, “Excel still more,” how is he encouraging them to excel more, to prepare for His return and that daily personal walk with the Lord? He reminds them, as we read earlier, that they are of the day. They are not in the night, but they are in the light.

And since they are in the day, in I Thessalonians 5:6, it says, “So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert (or watch) and sober.” There are three things here: Do not sleep, be alert or watchful, and be sober. What is this, “Don't sleep?”

I am not sleeping, I am just resting my eyes.” Some of us might think that we are not asleep, that we are just resting our eyes. And the sleeping here that he is talking of is spiritual laxity, moral laxity, just lethargy, indifference, or carelessness. It is just letting things go on Que Sera Sera. You could maybe think it, and I am not sure if you would say it to others, but it is like, “Oh, I am not worried about the Lord's return. He is not coming now. We do not have to worry. I am just going to do what I want to do.” And we are just caught off guard; we are asleep. Remember the five virgins who did not have that extra oil, and they were not prepared. But praise God! He is calling us to not be asleep, to wake up, to walk in the day, to be alert in Him, calling us to be alert and watchful.

You have got to watch. You never know when something is going to hit you. But being watchful is really staying in touch with Him. It is abiding; it is not distracting, but it is listening to the warnings, listening to the Scripture, listening to what is going on, being aware of the times that you are in, and conscious of His soon return. There is a spiritual and moral alertness of watching what is going on. That is like some of those virgins who were prepared. They had that

oil, they had been watching and listening. They knew there was the necessity for extra oil, and they had gotten to know him in a greater way.

But why are we talking about watching? We are watching because of the uncertainty of the day of His return. We do not know when He is coming. Nobody knows; He does not tell us, but He is going to come like a thief. We do not know when He is coming, and that is why we are watching for the signs, and everything that is going on.

We are also watching because we are aware there is an enemy out there, and we need to be on the alert. We need to be aware of the tactics of the enemy. We need to watch so that as we gather together for prayer, we will have some insight on how to stand against the tactics of the enemy. We are aware of all that is going on. This is not only just seeing about His return, but it is also having some discernment about the way you stand against some of the tactics of the enemy. And we also realize that the Lord gives signs of the time. When He gives these signs, are we aware of them? Are we alert? Do we see what is going on? There is a lot going on in the world now, and a lot going on in Israel now. Praise God, there are many that are watching. Nobody is clear exactly what is going on, but we know something is going on. And we need to be alert and watchful to see what He is going to reveal of His heart and His desire. So, praise God!

The third thing is for us to be sober. It does not mean you cannot drink, but sober really means being self-controlled. That sounds kind of odd when you talk about being self-controlled. But your self is controlled by the Spirit. The Spirit has the ascendancy in your life. In the final test for police dogs, which is self-control, it is like when a cat walks in front of them. They are disciplined to stay put.

It is interesting as you look at some of the other descriptions of everything related to this whole matter of being self-controlled, being sober. One commentator described it: "You are not overly excited nor are you indifferent." There is a balance in your life. You can get so excited at times that you mess up. I remember from playing sports, the coach would always remind us, "One play ends, the next one goes on." You can be so excited about maybe the pass you caught, the block you made that you are caught off guard. You make a great tackle and you are standing there boasting in yourself, and the next play the guy runs right by you. There is a watching and being sober and being alert. There is a being called, being steady, being sure, faithful in daily things. And I appreciated how one brother described it, that one does not live by their senses but by the Spirit; not living by your feelings but by the Spirit. Feelings can lead this way, they can lead that way, but being led by the Spirit there is a steadiness. That is the conforming work because it is natural within us to be led by our senses, but as we allow that conforming work of Christ in us to form Him in us in a greater way, we start to learn to be led more by the Spirit of the living God. Paul, in his encouragement to them chose a great contrast between night and day. In the night you are sleepy, in drunkenness. In the day you are watchful and sober. We thank the Lord, we are of the day; we are of the light. The light has come to us, it shone upon us, but we need to walk in this way.

Also, it was interesting that Friday night at the Bible study, we did I Samuel 9, and there was a great contrast manifested in that chapter. The contrast was between Samuel and Saul. In I Samuel 8, they said, "We want a king." And God said, "Okay, we will give you a king." In chapter 9, they found a king that met all the desires of the people of God, the man of the flesh, Saul. He looked great outwardly, he was respected, and he had certain good natural characteristics, and they said, "This is our king;" and they anointed him king.

But in contrast, you see a Samuel in this chapter who was so different from Saul. Even though Samuel had been rejected by these people, and in the chapter before we find that he was devastated. God came in and said, "Do not worry about it, Samuel. They are not rejecting you; they are rejecting Me." Samuel was able in the midst of rejection to continue serving the Lord and serving the people. Because he had that living relationship with the Lord, he kept in touch with Him daily. His heart and his eyes were open, and he could hear the Lord. In one of the verses there, one of the translations says, "And the Lord spoke to him in his ear." He had an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying. And that is what we need in this hour.

And the great contrast with Saul is that he had no relationship with Go; he did not even know that Samuel existed. He was blind, and he was just led around by circumstances. He could not hear Him when ones were trying to speak to him. There was such a contrast in their lives. That is the natural man.

Simplicity and Purity of Devotion to Christ

But God is wanting us to be those who are spirit-led, having that relationship with Him. And it brings me back to one of my favorite verses in II Corinthians 11:3b. To me all of this brings us back to how the Lord is calling us to return to that simplicity and purity of our devotion to Christ. That is the call in the last days, staying in that simplicity and purity of our devotion to Christ.

And by His grace, may we be those that are excelling still more. May we be those that are pressing on. Praise God for the work of faith He has done in our lives, the work of faith He is done in your life. But press on for more. Praise God for that labor of love you have shown to Him, but there is still more He wants you to experience. Thank the Lord for how you have held up through the trials of life and persecutions. And you had that steadfastness of hope, but come to know Him in a fuller and greater way. Press on, excelling still more.

Thank the Lord we are of the day. We do not want to be those that are sleeping. We want to be watchful, sober, able to know, "thus sayeth the Lord." There are many voices in this hour, many voices going around. Do we have that personal daily relationship with Him to know His voice when the Spirit speaks? As it says in Revelation, may we be those that have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. This is the call that we have in these last days before He returns.

We talk about being prepared for the coming of the Lord. And what encouraged me the most out of this was looking at those dear ones in Thessalonica who were young believers.

Being prepared for the coming of the Lord is not an advanced teaching, but it is a simple, basic walk with Him. It is daily walking by faith, daily walking in love, daily having that relationship with Him, and daily allowing Him to build upon that relationship and establishing us not only solidly in Him but also in relationships with one another, all for His glory and for His honor. May the Lord do that in our hearts and in our lives in these days as we desire to press on.

Let us pray:

Lord, we are ever grateful for who You are, we are ever grateful, Lord, for this great work that You have done. And we are also thankful that what is impossible with man is possible with God. Lord, it is impossible for us to conform ourselves into Your image. But we are thankful for the price You have paid. We are thankful for the Life that is within us. It is abundantly able to conform us into Your image. Lord, help us to be those that are willing to excel still more, to have a willingness and a desire to press on to know You in a fuller and greater way, all for Your glory and for Your honor. And settle it in our hearts that it is not about us, it is about You. You receiving the glory, You receiving the honor that is due Your wonderful name. In Thy name we pray. Amen.