

July 6, 2008 8:30, 9:16, & 11am Worship Rev. Donald W. Hackett, D.Min.

First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

Topic: The Ultimate Challenge – **Choosing to Remember**

Main point – **As we remember what Jesus promises, God joins us and changes us.**

Key Passage – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

The Text - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

The Day of the Lord

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Final Instructions

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Introduction – This is a Day of Remembering

I had the honor of joining my two older brothers in Nevada this past week to celebrate my mother's 80th birthday. My mom glowed in all the attention as we talked around the dinner table. One of the activities we did together was the practice of remembering. My brother brought a stack of old photos, yearbooks, letters, and even a Little League Baseball season batting summary sheet. With the video camera running, we sat around and discussed each item. We asked who was in the photo, where it was taken, and why that person or event was important in our lives. We had a blast! We laughed as we recounted old stories and precious family memories. We chose as a family to remember the people and choices that had shaped our life together. We did not forget. We chose to remember.

One thing we did on our last day together was especially powerful. We hopped into our cars and drove down to the local Veterans Cemetery. This is a wonderful oasis in the midst of the barren, dry desert. My father helped establish this beautiful memorial to men and women who have served our country. My father, a retired Air Force Officer, has been buried there for over sixteen years. In the midst of all this remembering I almost forgot something very important. As I got out of the car and walked over to the place where my dad was buried, I started to cry. I had forgotten how much I missed him. My dad loved me well and was a key source of wisdom, hope, and encouragement in my life. I have missed him dearly. There has been a hole in my heart even since he died. I have gotten used to living without him, but I still miss him dearly. Thank you God for helping me to remember how precious James Hackett is to me.

How fitting on this Fourth of July weekend we remember all the people who have served our country well over the last three centuries. Thank you - men, women, and even children who have served us and continue to serve us at this moment. How fitting it is as well that later in this service we will remember all the family and friends in Christ that have left us to be with our Lord. We will choose to remember them and keep them foremost in our minds and hearts. Finally, how appropriate it is that we gather this day to honor our Lord, Jesus Christ. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has broken death's grip on humanity and opened the way for all to experience forgiveness, healing, hope, and eternal life. As we partake of the Lord's Table later in this service, the Holy Spirit will help us to remember that we are not alone. Jesus promises to never leave us and joins us in a deep, real, and substantial way as we break bread together. In communion, we choose to remember. All these ways of remembering invite God to join us and to change us.

The Importance of a Letter

In this last chapter of First Thessalonians, Paul is helping this young church remember. Paul had helped this young church in Thessalonica get started a few years before. He poured his life into helping them see that God loved them. Now he wanted to remember that Jesus would never leave or forget about them. Paul

had a problem, though. He was about 200 miles to the south in the seaport of Corinth and could not get back up to visit them. Paul tried, but he kept getting blocked. As he says in chapter two, “18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us.” Paul finally sends his co-worker, Timothy, to assist the church. When Timothy returns, Paul finds out that these followers of Jesus were doing great, but they had a few questions. Paul was eager and able to help them but he could not get to them. What was Paul going to do? This may seem like a simple and obvious answer, but Paul wrote a letter.

You see, the Apostle Paul liked to use the latest technology. Did he carry an iPod, surf the web, and connect with his friends via Facebook? No, but when he traveled, he used the roads newly paved by the Roman government. Paul hopped the fastest ships to cross the seas. He sat in amphitheaters to hear and engage in public discourse. Paul was conversant in trade languages of the day: Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He traveled from one city to the next helping people with receptive hearts and minds understand that they could be free in Jesus Christ. Paul visited the riverbanks, the regular gathering spots (the Starbucks of his day) and engaged people in conversation. He got them thinking about what was really important, what was true, and what would transform their lives. Paul preferred to help people face to face, but in this situation he encountered a serious roadblock. Paul had to change his strategy. Paul had to employ another technological method. Paul was forced to write a letter.

Why is Paul writing a letter so important? If Paul was able to keep traveling around to all these different churches, he may have never written down all that he was teaching these new believers in Jesus. The letter forced Paul to put into print the wisdom and truths that have helped people of faith for centuries. I thank God that Paul could not go and see the Thessalonians. His frustration turned out to be a great blessing for many! Are you presently frustrated by something that is not happening in your life? Even though you lift it up to God repeatedly, it does not change! My counsel to you is to pray, “God, what do you want me to do? What am I missing here? Open my eyes to what you are doing. Help me join you in whatever it is.” I think this is what Paul eventually prayed. He went on to write many other wonderful letters that have shaped the Christian community around the world. Paul passed on this wisdom, this learning to the Thessalonians. Let me highlight two essential truths in this passage that were vital for this early church and are very important for us today to remember.

Two Truths to Remember as We Wait - 1. Jesus will never leave you.

One of the main questions that this early church had was, “When is Jesus coming back for us?” Right before Jesus was arrested and crucified, he is recorded as saying in John 14 that he would go and prepare a place for his followers and then come back for them. After he was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples, Jesus explained that he must leave them in order to send his Holy Spirit to live in each of them. After he is taken up into the heavens, the

disciples are standing there looking intently into the skies. They were wondering where did he go? At that moment two angels appear and say, “**Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven**” (Acts 1:11). We know from Acts 2 that, 10 days later, Jesus fulfills his promise by sending the Holy Spirit at the Hebrew celebration of Pentecost. This launches Holy Spirit-empowered men and women to be messengers of Jesus around the globe. The question that remained with them and for us today is, “**When is Jesus coming back?**”

Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to be in us to guide and help us. The Holy Spirit is God’s down payment in our lives. The Holy Spirit is God’s seal that we belong to him. When our work on earth is done, God will gather all who have his Spirit, this family marking in them. The disciples in the early church were worried that if they died before Jesus came back, they would miss the boat. Would the dead be with Jesus, too? Paul essentially answers here and in other parts of the Bible, “Don’t worry!” In verse 9 & 10 he writes, “**For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.**”

Don’t worry. Jesus will never leave you or forsake you. As Matthew records in his gospel in chapter 28: “**Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**” We have important work to do. We are instructed by our Lord to develop intentional followers of Jesus in Lancaster and all around the world. As we do this work and even after our work is done, Jesus promises to be with us. We are never on our own with Jesus. That is the first truth for us to remember.

Sidebar: What happens to people who do not follow Jesus? The text indicates that some people are asleep and living in darkness. We know that Jesus is the light of world who has come to lead all people out of darkness (John 1). Can a person choose to ignore God and live in darkness? Can a person choose not to follow the evidence of God around them and the tugging of their hearts to seek the One bigger and greater than themselves? We know that God so loved you, me and the whole world so much that he sent Jesus to save us from ourselves (John 3). We know that God desires no one to perish but that all would come to transforming faith and life in Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3). God invites all to his table of eternal life. Do all people accept the invitation (in whatever way they understand)? You decide.

I think God honors the choices people make. I do not think God forces anyone to love and follow him. I know the people who follow Jesus in this life will follow him to his home in the next life. I am praying all people will be gathered to Jesus

in ways I cannot even understand. I live in this tension. I live with the mystery of serving a just and loving God. In the meanwhile, I believe each of us are accountable for what we know about God. The more we know, the more accountable we are to put into practice. There is important work for you and I to do. As we trust and follow Jesus, our work will get done.

Two Truths to Remember as We Wait - 2. Keep connected and responsive.

The second truth is: Keep connected and responsive to Jesus so you can do your work well. There is a lot of great wisdom in Paul's final words to the Thessalonians in this last chapter. Let me point to that advice that will radically change your life as you remember to practice it. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Paul writes, "**Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**" Here are three simple actions, three important choices that you and I can make each day. As we integrate these into our lives, we will become more aware and more responsive to God.

1. Be joyful always. This is not a surface happiness dependent on events. Joy is a deep heart attitude that knows God is in control. Even though hard things are happening, we know God is here to help us. Joy is fed by the decision to let God guide your life. As you and I hand over to God our plans, worries, hopes, and fears, joy will slowly grow in our hearts. Prayer is the way we hand the details of our lives over to God. That is why we are instructed to pray continually.

2. Pray continually. That sounds impossible. Do I have to stay up all night or drive with my eyes closed? Of course not. Do I direct my thoughts again and again through the day towards God. Most definitely. I think Paul is encouraging us to point our hearts to God. Most do this with Bible reading at the beginning or the end of the day. Many journal so they can learn to recognize God in their daily interactions. More are learning how to slow down, get centered, and listen carefully to that still, quiet voice of God. If you want God to be real in your everyday life, pause regularly to talk and listen to God. Let Him know what you are thinking and feeling. Ask for guidance, wisdom, self-control, and love to flow in you. Invite God into every thought and you will be connected to God and more responsive as God seeks to direct and use you.

3. Give thanks in all circumstances. Paul does not say give thanks for all circumstances, but in all circumstances. There are many difficult situations we find ourselves in that may be hard, hurtful, and even tragic. I do not give thanks for things like accidents, violence, cruelty, divorce, famine, poverty, and other things that break the heart of God. Rather, it is in those very hard times that if I will give thanks that God is with me, God will join me in a tangible way. God can show me how to bless others even in the toughest times. Paul showed us this in chapter two by holding a prayer and worship service in jail even after being beat up and whipped. Be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances. As we remember to do that, we will be changed and used by God.