

Well, I don't know what you have planned for the rest of the day, but if you haven't heard what's coming tomorrow, you may need to make some adjustments in preparation...because apparently, it's going to be a big day! According to Christian numerologist David Meade, on April 23, 2018, Jesus is coming back. Here's how he figured that out. The sun and moon will be in Virgo, as will Jupiter, which represents the Messiah. The alignment represents "the Lion of the tribe of Judah", marking the Rapture, when Jesus brings the faithful into paradise prior to a period of tribulation on earth that precedes the end of time...Meade said he believes the so-called Planet X, which is also known as Mibiru, will appear above the sky on the April date, causing volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and earthquakes...Meade described it as "a unique once-in-a-century sign exactly as depicted in the 12th chapter of Revelation. This is our time marker." Talk about a case of the Mondays.

Of course, he made this proclamation after his original date of September 23, 2017, came and went without incident. David Meade is another in a long line of prognosticators who claim to know something even Jesus says he doesn't know. The problem with outlandish ideas like the one this guy proposes is that it desensitizes us to the truth that Jesus will return. Because you know what? Jesus MAY return tomorrow. It's possible. And if he does, how will he find us?

We are in a series on the book of 1 Thessalonians, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to encourage and instruct a young church how to live faithfully and lovingly in light of Christ's return. The message of the letter is not intended to create fear that we're going to be busted for not doing what we should be doing when he returns, nor is it a warning that, should Jesus find us misbehaving when he comes back, we risk being left behind. It is a message, though, about how the certain hope of the future return of Jesus should motivate us to get moving being about the business of God. How should we live individually, and as a church, in light of this truth?

This week we're going to look at chapter 3. While it is easier to live right when things are going well, how are we to live in when in the midst of affliction? To understand the context of this passage, we need to go to Acts 17. Many had responded to the Gospel preached by Paul and Silas, and others were beginning to take notice. The young church in Thessalonica was quickly faced with harsh realities of following Jesus.

[ACTS 17:5-10] ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. ¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.

The city of Thessalonica was under Roman rule but enjoyed the privileged system of patronage. A handful of local citizens were appointed to the office of politarch (city authority), and their responsibility was the management of the city and the assurance of loyalty to Rome and to the emperor. That balance was upset when Paul and Silas came to town, proclaiming the Gospel of

Jesus, declaring him as King, and a King who would be returning. The new church in Thessalonica was quickly seen as a growing threat to the Roman system, to the empire, and to the city officials who held privileged positions. They acted swiftly to rid themselves of Jesus' disciples and persecute the new believers of the city. How would they respond?

The American church faces the same question. While we are not being run out of towns or being arrested for our beliefs, there are many who see the church as a growing threat and are reacting as such. How will we respond? How should we respond? If Jesus returned tomorrow, how would he want to find us responding? At war with the culture? Sequestered, in hiding? Turning from or denying our faith? Or living as we will see the Thessalonian church living, a church characterized by radical love for one another? What can we learn from how they lived in the midst of affliction?

You are God's provision of comfort and encouragement.

The call of a believer is to rush in when the fallenness of this world comes crashing in around our brothers and sisters in Christ.

[1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5] Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

The first thing that explodes from these verses is Paul's deep burden and concern for the Thessalonian church. He has a deep love for this church, and he wants them to thrive. Paul is not satisfied to have converted a bunch of people. He is eager to care for them and see that they are living their lives faithfully to God.

We know from the end of chapter 2 that Paul wanted to go himself, but he was hindered by Satan. We don't have any more details than that. We just know Paul couldn't get there. So he sends his young protégé, Timothy (who happens to be Greek and will likely not stand out as much as Paul would have anyway), and his role was two-fold: to establish and exhort the Thessalonians. The verb translated "establish", or "strengthen" in some translations, was often used in the context of supporting someone who is in danger of falling in some way or another. These young Christians faced the hostility of their peers and needed to be steadied in the midst of that trial. He was also to exhort them. The idea there means to come alongside. Once stable, Timothy was to pour into them, grow them up in their faith, and make them useful in the Kingdom of God.

Last year was a terrible year for hurricanes. If you've ever lived through one, you know how devastating they can be. I remember when Hurricane Elena rolled through Florida in 1985. You could barely stand the winds were so strong. They could knock you right over. I found a Red Cross guide to repairing your home after a storm. While there are several instructions on what to

do, there are two general categories each fall in. First thing is to shore up the damaged structure. Reinforce it, strengthen it, to make sure it will remain standing. Once stable, the second is that you would build and rebuild, adding to the structure to increase its usefulness and make it more impervious to inclement weather.

There are people in our midst who have been rocked by the storms of life, and they are teetering. It may or may not be because of persecution, but they are certainly afflicted, and at risk of falling. It may be denying their faith, it may be a moral failure, it may be just giving up, and they are in desperate need of someone to come rushing in to strengthen them, to stabilize and reinforce them, keep them standing, and then come alongside to build them up to not only withstand the next storm, but also so that they would flourish in their faith and begin to live out God's calling in their lives. And if you are teetering, don't keep it a secret. Cry out for help.

Paul continues by reminding them that this affliction is to be expected. In fact, he says we are destined for it, and you can tell from his words that this is something he teaches these new churches from the beginning; following Jesus comes at a cost. Remember, this is a young church. They may think following Jesus means life is supposed to get easy, or that this difficulty is a sign that God is mad at them. Paul is reminding them what Jesus said to his disciples. If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. Don't be surprised when suffering comes.

The American evangelical church is young in a lot of ways, particularly as it relates to affliction. We haven't experienced a lot of it, but we need to hear the words of Paul, and Peter, and John, and James, and Jesus, and have a sober and biblical perspective on suffering. Any time of peace, agreement, and cooperation between the church and culture-at-large is a gift of mercy from God. It's not normative. We should expect trial. So, we can't be surprised when the opening of Chick-fil-A in New York is referred to as "a creepy infiltration". If you haven't heard, *The New Yorker* ran an article this week about the fast food chain opening up stores in the city, saying "The brand's arrival here feels like an infiltration, in no small part because of its pervasive Christian traditionalism." While that sentiment may cause our mouths to drop open, we have to know this kind of stuff is coming. But how should we respond when the affliction comes? Join the outrage culture, fight back, check out, preserve ourselves and walk away from the faith? I propose we hang on the hope we have that Jesus will return and make all things right, and that we keep running hard after him and loving the heck out of each other. And who knows, maybe there will be a revival in NYC attributable to lightly fried deliciousness and the sweet refrain of "my pleasure".

So why does Paul write with such a sense of urgency? We see in v. 5 that, ultimately, he's afraid the Thessalonians will fall away from their faith. Paul knows the devil gets busy where the Gospel is taking root, and he's concerned he will use this persecution to tempt them with the prospect of self-preservation and cause them to drift from their faith. And Paul's not anywhere near there to establish and exhort them when the temptation comes. His spiritual babies are under attack and he's not around, and it puts him in a panic.

Some of you know exactly how Paul feels, and I am a mere three years away from joining you. There are few places in America that seem more hostile to the Gospel and teach things more contrary to the Gospel than a college campus. Our kids will be exposed to all kinds of ideas, all

kinds of truths, all kinds of influences, and few, if any, will encourage a vibrant walk with Jesus. They will be out from under our rooves, out from under our protection, and out from under our influence. And I don't know about you, but I have a fear that I'll drop off my God-loving son and four years later I'll get back a God-loathing heathen. Paul is afraid he'll find something similar.

Thankfully, for the Thessalonians (and our kids!), though we may be away, God's presence, protection, and influence are always near. That means we can remain hopeful. And when we witness God's continued faithfulness in others, the script flips. Rather than being God's provision of comfort and encouragement,

You are God's beneficiary of comfort and encouragement.

An amazing thing often happens as a result of our ministry to others. As we rush in times of affliction, the comforter often becomes the comforted. The encourager often becomes the encouraged.

[1 THESSALONIANS 3:6] ⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—

Timothy returned to Paul and reported his findings. Not only were Paul's worst fears not realized, but he characterizes the content of Timothy's report by using the same word he uses for the declaration of Gospel. The Thessalonians have held fast to Jesus and persisted in faith and love; faith in God and love for each other. Additionally, the Thessalonians had grown fond of Paul and Silas and were eager to be with them again, face-to-face. They had weathered the storm of persecution and wanted to proceed in their walk with Jesus in the company of the disciples.

As many of you know, we have been focusing on building relationships and doing ministry in Nicaragua. We train pastors, many of you sponsor children through the Compassion International site there, and we serve their communities in a number of ways. In fact, our students will be making their first trip there this summer. But there is one partnership I think really reflects the intimacy of relationship we see between Paul and the Thessalonians. Pastor Nestor is in the village called "Sweet Name of Jesus". We partner with him and his church to minister to their people and surrounding villages. It's a very poor area, and the vast majority of our work is to supply encouragement and resources. Now, we could just send money to do what needs to happen, and we've offered it. But Pastor Nestor refuses, saying he wants to see us face-to-face, that our presence is as encouraging for him as it is for us. That's Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians. And when you have that kind of that kind of a relationship, you come alive!

[1 THESSALONIANS 3:7-10] ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

By the time Timothy returned with the report, Paul was in Corinth and described himself as being “in weakness and in fear and much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). Paul had been beaten, jailed, and defamed in Philippi, run out of town in Thessalonica, followed to Berea to be persecuted and expelled from there, and rejected by many in Athens. Paul is afflicted. But the love, comfort, and encouragement he poured out to the Thessalonians was returned to him in the midst of his suffering through the Thessalonians faithfulness to God and love of Paul. He experienced comfort and joy and gave thanks to the Lord. The minister had been ministered to.

This past week, I had a married couple reach out and ask to meet. They were having some real difficulty about a significant decision they were trying to make and wanted to process it with me. And as we started I could tell pretty quickly they were far apart. But as we talked, and they processed, the conversation didn’t turn combative. In fact, it was just the opposite. They affirmed each other. They listened and appreciated what each other is saying. At one point, the husband said “I’m just such a processor” and the wife, whom was teed up to nail her husband said “I know you are, but that’s a good thing.” Their faith in and pursuit of God and their love for each other was so encouraging to me that I interrupted them in the middle of their conversation to thank them. They asked for my help, but I came away blessed and encouraged. **Never underestimate the power your perseverance in the time of affliction can have to encourage and comfort someone else.** That’s what the Thessalonians did for Paul, and this couple did for me.

Notice the impact doesn’t stop with Paul’s with comfort and joy. The Thessalonians faithfulness motivated Paul to continue his work. Paul declares he wants to supply what was lacking in their faith. Paul was not content to make a bunch of converts in one city and then move onto the next. He loved them, he wanted to see them thrive, and he wanted to make them more useful and increase their impact for the Kingdom of God. He wanted to equip these saints for the work of ministry. Paul knew his purpose from God, and he pursued it relentlessly in spite of whatever the consequences might be.

What stirs your heart? Is it a kid accepting Christ? Helping set someone free from bondage? Teaching Scripture? Connecting people to other people? Giving hugs? Is there anyone who causes you to “pray night and day”? Who is it that makes you so inspired that you say “I don’t care of the consequences. I’m doing more of that for them!” In other words: **Who are your people?**

This week, the participants in our Repurposed Training Experience will be working on their two words. These words are the expression of our people’s hearts and the essence of the purpose for which God has created them. **Those two words belong to you, but they are not for you.** They are the context in which you will bless others and, as we see in this passage, the context in which you will be blessed in return. Your two words are the way you love others.

Before I ever knew we’d be teaching through 1 Thessalonians, I selected 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 as our staff Bible passage of the year. Paul’s sentiment continues in ch. 3. Through it, I challenged our staff to be with our people. In a big church, it’s so easy to become managers of ministry instead of lovers of people. And they have responded. I want to lead a church that is characterized radical love for one another.

But the only way we'll get there is the same way the Thessalonians got there. It's by God working in us and through us. Paul closes this chapter with a prayer that I believe is appropriate for us.

[1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13] ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This is a prayer that God has answered and will continue to answer if we seek him faithfully.

We are a congregation who writes cards of encouragement to prison inmates, who stuffs bags of goodies to appreciate our teachers in Vickery Meadow, who takes care of facilities so that we can bless our refugee neighbors through the Melting Pot and through a literacy center, who come together with other churches in the area to love our city. That's the church God has gathered at Fellowship Dallas. That's the love God has made abound here. Let us continue that good and loving work until Christ returns.