

I became a Christian at a time in our nation's history when there was a keen interest in the second coming of Christ. Movies were made and books were written warning people to get their lives in order so that when Jesus returned they would not be "left behind." Hal Lindsay, a graduate of Dallas Seminary, wrote a book titled, "The Late Great Planet Earth" that sold more than 10 million copies in 108 printings. In the 1980's the New York Times called it "the number 1 non-fiction bestseller of the decade." Lindsay indicated that the second coming of Christ would happen in 1988. It didn't!

Jesus warned us not to be preoccupied end times predictions. When His disciples asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." (Acts 1:6). On the other hand, Jesus did teach His disciples to be prepared for His coming. In Mt. 24 He gives an extended lesson on the signs of His return. He concludes His message with, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Mt. 24:44-51. The return of the Master should motivate us to live our lives as though He were coming back at any time.

Jesus was teaching His disciples to live in the future tense. Knowing how a story ends makes all the difference in how we live. Last Sunday, NBC did a remake of "Jesus Christ Superstar." It was a quality theatrical production but it left out one minor detail - it ends at the crucifixion and makes no reference to the resurrection. Seems strange for an event billed as an Easter special! If the biblical story ended with Jesus on the cross then we would be without hope. But it doesn't, at least not the story God wrote. The resurrection is a daily reminder that no matter how dark our days may get we can live with hope knowing that God can reverse any situation including death.

Today we begin a new series of messages from the book of 1 Thessalonians called "Last Things First." Every one of the five chapters in this letter written by the apostle Paul ends with a statement about Jesus' second coming. But it wasn't written to give details about the end times. It was written to encourage and instruct a young church about how to live in light of His coming. The second coming of Christ is not a curiosity that makes for stimulating conversation. It is a reality that calls for faithful obedience. The message of 1 Thessalonians is how the future return of Jesus should impact our lives and our practices as a church. The Master is coming back. Will He be pleased with what He finds?

Chapter 1 begins on an encouraging note...vv. 1-3. When Paul thinks of this fledgling church he identifies three praiseworthy qualities that should always be demonstrated by the people of God...faith, hope and love. These three virtues determine the measure of a church. In fact, that's the title of a book written by Gene Getz. Dr. Getz says,

"The characteristics of a mature church in the New Testament is abundantly clear. The degree in which faith, hope and love were expressed in a local church was the criterion that appears again and again as a standard used by New Testament leaders, particularly the apostle Paul." Gene Getz, (*The Measure of a Church*).

This triad appears in almost every one of Paul's letters - Ro. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6; Col. 4:4-5. Of all the gifts available to the believer, these three are the most important because they are eternal. "As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away" (1 Cor. 13:8) but faith, hope and love continue forever. The degree to which faith, love and hope are expressed is the measure of the maturity of a church and for us individually. Let's check our progress this morning with three questions.

I. When the Master returns, will He find a faith that is unshakable? Faith is the assurance that God acted in the past to save us. A mature church is full of people who are so convinced that Jesus paid the penalty for sin and purchased a place in Heaven for us that our future is secure. The Thessalonians were "elect" v. 4 because they "turned to God from idols." v. 9. As God's chosen, we can afford to take some risks in order to spread the Good News.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for their "work of faith." v. 3. Doesn't that sound like an oxymoron? We are not accustomed to putting those two words together. I am saved by faith not by work. But Paul is pointing out that saving faith works. One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was because there were some in this church who heard about the return of Jesus and decided to just sit it out and wait. Some of the Thessalonians quit working and became idle busybodies since Jesus was coming back. "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. **7** For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." 1 Thess. 5:6-8

Knowing Jesus died for our sins in the past and is coming back in the future gives us the courage to be bold in the present. This past week marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of MLK. On April 3, 1968, Dr. King went to Memphis to support a garbage collectors' strike that had been going on in that city for weeks. Memphis was a boiling cauldron of racial conflict. Despite numerous death threats, Dr. King felt he owed these men and their families his support, so he went. He did not seek police protection because he believed that if his enemies were determined to kill him, they would succeed. Dr. King told his attorney, "I'll never live to be forty. I'll never make it." So why did he go?

In his final speech on the night of his death, he offered some insight on why he went: "*Well, I don't know what will happen now. (humility) We've got some difficult days ahead. (reality) But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. (vision)... And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*" Martin Luther King saw the glory of the kingdom of God that would be established at Jesus' second coming and nothing would keep him from pursuing that kingdom on earth. He paid for his vision with his life. His fear was overcome by his faith in the return of Jesus.

If you are facing a difficult decision, ask yourself, "If I knew Jesus were coming back this year, how would I make this decision?"

II. When the Master returns, will He find a love that is practical? Just before Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he had "suffered and been shamefully treated in Philippi." (2:2). Acts 16 reports that he and Silas were stripped bare, beaten with rods and thrown in jail. He doesn't give us details of how the Thessalonians demonstrated their love toward them but their actions were well known. In fact, in 4:9, Paul says, "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more." 1 Thes. 4:9-10

Whatever the Thessalonians were doing for Paul and others it was a practical response to an obvious need. It's not the size of the deed that matters as much as the timing of it. Loving acts in tragic times are never forgotten. The loving acts of the Thessalonians were well-known all over that part of the world...1:6-9a.

I will never forget the man who mowed our grass during the week Jana's dad died. That man could never have found the words to comfort us in our grief so he consoled us without words by a simple act of kindness. To whom would you reach out a loving hand if you knew Jesus were coming soon?

III. When the Master returns, will He find a hope that is durable? When the Thessalonians worshiped idols, they had no hope. Once they turned to the one, true God, they waited expectantly for His return...1:10. Hope is essential part of the gospel. Hope is the confident expectation that "He who began a good work in us will complete it." That's what Easter is all about - finite disappointment followed by infinite hope. "So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

Is your hope durable? Don't let go of hope. Easter teaches us that no matter how dark the circumstances, new life is possible. You may have a child that has taken a wrong turn, don't let go of hope. You may have a bad diagnosis, don't let go of hope. You may carry around a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach because your marriage is on the rocks, don't let go of hope. With God, all things are possible. Just think who won that last two World Series - the Cubs and Astros.

Our faith is built upon what God has done in the past. Our love is based on what God is doing in the present. Our hope is based on what Christ will do when He returns. Faith, hope and love. Hang on to these. The Master will be looking for them when He returns.

Many years ago I was talking to an older woman about her past life. She told me about waiting for her husband to come home from WWII. In those days, communication was not as easy as it is today. She would go for weeks without hearing from him and even then, news usually came in

the form of a letter that had been written a couple weeks earlier. As the war wound down she said she got up every morning thinking this could be the day that Bob come home. She straightened the house and dressed the way she wanted to be dressed when he walked through the door. And one day, he did. The cynical part of me says, "What difference does it make what you're wearing when he comes home." But Loretta wasn't cynical. She loved her husband and she loved him best by thinking of him every day and wanting to please him when he returned.