

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for January 25: Are you ready?

January 14, 2009

Charles Swindoll tells a story about his experience as a young man working in a machine shop. One of his coworkers, a fellow named George, had the daily responsibility of cleaning the metal shavings out from under the machinery. Near quitting time one day, the other workers told George to start getting cleaned up so he could go home.

George announced he was ready, this despite the fact he was covered from head to toe in dirt and metal shavings. When the others insisted George go get ready to go home, he just unzipped his coveralls and showed that underneath, he was wearing clean clothes. When quitting time came, all he had to do was step out of his coveralls, punch his time card and go. George's comment was, "I get ready by staying ready!"

How are we to prepare ourselves for the return of Jesus Christ? By staying prepared, of course. This is the theme of our study passage.

In verse 1, Paul counseled the Thessalonians that they did not need for him to write to them concerning the time or date of the Lord's return. That certainly was not because they already had the time and date figured out, and didn't need any further instruction on the matter.

There are a couple of reasons why "times and dates" are not the main point of scriptural teaching concerning the return of Christ, and both of those reasons are addressed in this brief passage.

First, trying to determine the time of Christ's return is a futile exercise. (If

you question the truth of that statement, I invite you to read a volume that was sent to me, unsolicited, more than two decades ago. The title of that book is *88 Reasons Christ Will Return in 1988*.) In verse 2, the apostle reminds us the Day of the Lord will come like “a thief in the night”—that is, unexpectedly and at a time that people do not know for certain.

But in addition to the ineffectiveness of trying to establish the time of Christ’s return, there is a second reason why “times and dates” shouldn’t be our focus. When it comes to the matter of Christ’s return, attempting to decipher times and dates really isn’t the activity with which our returning Lord wants us to be busying ourselves. Rather, we should be concerned with living in a condition of readiness, so that whenever Jesus comes back we will be prepared for that great event.

The tragic fact is some will be woefully unprepared for the Lord’s return. They will be describing their lives with words like “peace and safety,” but destruction will come on them without warning (v. 3).

A person might live in a gated community, install the best locks on his home money can buy, put an alarm system in his house and then say, “I am safe.” But those outward protections cannot guard against the spiritual tragedy which will befall those who are unprepared for the Lord’s return.

Followers of Christ, however, live in the light of the knowledge of Christ’s return, and so have no excuse for not being ready to see him (vv. 4-5).

The metaphors of light and darkness, of day and night, are carried forward in verses 6-8. For some, the night is the time for sleeping while for others, it is the time for partying (v. 7), but Paul was not commending one activity over the other. Rather, here is an illustration which contrasts those persons whose spiritual lives are characterized by night activities such as sleep or carousing, with those whose lives are characterized by daylight activities of working and awareness. As followers of Christ, spiritually we are “day

people” and need to act like it.

Paul used the word “self-controlled” to describe one quality of a person prepared for Christ’s return. In fact, that characteristic is so important it appears twice in the space of just three verses—in verse 6 and again in verse 8.

The King James Version translates the word as “sober” in both verses, and it indeed is contrasted with drunkenness in verse 7. But there is much more substance contained in the word than simply the idea of avoiding alcoholic inebriation: the word means to be free from all excess, rashness or confusion.

In 2 Timothy 4:5, the NIV translates a command that Paul was giving to Timothy in which this same word is used in this way: “Keep your head in all situations.” When you lose control over your life through excess, rash action or confused thinking, then you are in poor condition to greet the Lord when he returns.

Paul’s instruction in verse 8 to “(put) on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” is reminiscent of Ephesians 6:11-17, although in this 1 Thessalonians passage the armor metaphor is explored much less, and there are some differences in parts of the symbolism. Here faith and love are likened to a soldier’s breastplate, that part of the warrior’s protective covering which guards his most vital and vulnerable organs.

Faith speaks to our relationship with God, and love to our relationships with others. Hope—specifically, our hope of salvation—is the helmet which guards our minds and keeps us looking expectantly toward Christ’s return.

The imagery of verse 10 looks back to 4:13-18. Christ died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep—whether we are alive when Christ returns, or have already passed from this life—our hope of salvation is

secure.

The passage closes with instruction to “encourage one another and build each other up” (v. 11). Being ready for the return of Christ is not a solitary enterprise in which our own lives are disconnected from the lives of those around us. We have sacred responsibilities toward one another as we anticipate (without attempting to predict the day of) the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.