

With These Words 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (& 4:18)

Pastor Bill Mosley November 15, 2020

There's an old story about the Greeks. That a philosopher named Damocles gave banquets and feasts with the table set with sumptuous food beneath a sword hung from the ceiling by a single thread. On the sword was engraved the saying, "Remember Death."

With these words, Damocles tried to demonstrate his philosophy that life is a banquet or party, but that death, like the sword, hangs over us, could fall on any of the partygoers at any time.

Remember Death. That's not a bad motto. Even very Christian, if you interpret it to mean, "Get the most out of life because any minute life might end."

A sword hangs over our heads. Since WW2, a nuclear sword. The Cold War of the 50's and 60's melted into Detente and Glasnost, and then dissolved completely with the end of the Soviet Union. But the possibility is still there. And we have a conventional shooting war in Iraq. We did that in Korea and Viet Nam, horrors we're still trying to work through in our national psyche.

Remember death. Even without war, we've still got the problems of daily life. Accident, illness, aging. Taking a bath is a risk. You can slip and break your neck. Getting in a car is a risk. During hunting season just taking a walk in the woods is a risk. These days shaking hands, or just being too close to another person is a risk.

What really is the sting of death? That life will end? Some people are not enjoying life enough to miss it.

Paul says the real bottom line is that at death, communion with God will end. For Paul, death is the wages of sin, the symbol of our rebellion against God, and the final separation from God and his word. But WE still have life, and like the righteous who have gone before we cling to God's Word while we still have life.

With these words we know of the majesty of God, of his power in creation, of his love, but also of his law, his justice, his wrath.

Zephaniah's message was of the coming day of the Lord, echoing Amos' idea that it will not be a day of reward but a day of wrath.

Sometime in the last week of his earthly life, Jesus sat at the Mount of Olives & spoke to his disciples about the signs of the end of time. Today's GOSPEL reading is the parable of the talents. Being trusted with talents is no small thing. We use them to the glory of God. The talent God gives to everyone is the power of love. Don't bury or squander it.

Today's 2ND Reading is the last in a series of readings from the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, thought to be the earliest letter of Paul. In this passage he answers a question asked by the Thessalonians: when will the Lord come? To say that no one knows, Paul mixes several metaphors & similes: Within the framework of calendar & time of day he mentions thieves & childbirth, & the beginning of the idea of the armor of God he completes in Ephesians 6.

We have these words from Paul, "We will always be with the Lord." (1 Thess. 4:17c) For God is gracious & seeks us with his free gift of absolution and the forgiveness of sin.

1. With these words, we share our faith; we comfort one another. With these words, God gives us life.

1 Thessalonians is probably the book written earliest in the NT, by Paul in 50 or 51 AD. It's mostly a personal letter, to encourage the Thessalonians in their faith, but Timothy had reported to Paul a couple of questions they had asked, & Paul tries to answer them. The answers concern the life that pleases God, those that have fallen asleep in the Lord, & readiness for his coming.

The question of the Thessalonians was one people have asked for many centuries: what happens when we die?

Our faith is that we join Jesus and our Father God. By his word we live -- he gives us creation. By his word we live eternally -- he gives us redemption. He gives us life.

It is a faith we have that where our life is, there is hope also. Faith bursts forth and we have to confess it, we have to bear witness to it. And in this faith, life is overflowing. There is so much of it we can't hold it.

If we try to hold it back, it rattles its cage and roars like a lion in a zoo; it wants out.

Faith and love have this in common: they both grow when they are given away.

2. With these words we share our faith, & with these words we comfort one another.

The faith we have within, that must come out, strengthens other faith -- some of us have less love and look to the lights of others.

This is one point of the parable of the talents. There is more to be made. Use your talents now, or it may be too late. Share your love of God with others.

Paul says to the Thessalonians, "You are all children of the light & children of the day, so then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake & be sober."

There is a sword hanging over us, a sword not of death, but of fear. The fear of not being right instead of the desire to treat people right.

Paul encourages us, when he says, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another & build one another up; just as you are doing."

I know people who are afraid to make bold their confessions of faith. They say they don't have the words, or the education, or the strength of faith. It's like they have a sword hanging over them.

If you don't have the words, use the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or James, Peter, or Paul.

If you don't have education, use your presence, your attitude of confident, joyous faith. Love God's creation and all of his children. That doesn't take words, but a smile, a hug, a handshake (when we are allowed to shake hands).

If you don't have strength of faith, use your hands to cook a meal, knit a shawl, sew a quilt, paint a wall, fix a car. The Bible says serve God with body, mind & soul.

Faith is doing, as well as saying. Either way, someone else will find comfort and strength through you. Or not, if you withhold it.

Paul says comfort one another with these words.

With these words, we share our faith; we strengthen & comfort one another. 3. With these words God gives us strength, courage, peace, faith, life, power, grace, forgiveness.

For the power of our words comes from God, the Holy Spirit working in and through us. We could not say the words of faith but by the Holy Spirit within us enabling us to accept God's grace.

We could not baptize if we had only water and a baby, but when God in his word chooses us. We could not partake of Christ's body and blood if we had only wine and bread, but when we have his word that he is present for those who truly repent.

God created the world with words. He said, let there be light. Let there be a firmament, let the waters be divided, let the earth bear fruit. Let there be life.

We should remember death. There is a sword hanging over us. But it doesn't matter so much with the Word of God. This word still becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth. And this is how we behold his glory, because he gives us his word, and his word becomes our words, his faith, our faith, his life, our life.

Lord, with these words we say no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you. 1394 wds