

## Us & Them

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You, O Lord.

I'm preaching today from the Epistle reading, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Paul's first stop in Europe was Philippi where he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. Then he went to Thessalonica and it was a short visit, just a few weeks. He had to flee because of Jews conspired against him, stirred opposition and persecution against him and his traveling companions, and wanted to hurt him. He goes to Berea next and the Jews follow him and do the same thing. From there, his friends sneak him out of Berea and into Athens by sea. He is alone in Athens after a series of conflicts and persecutions. He had a challenging confrontation with the pagan Athenians. By the time Paul made it to Corinth, he was completely demoralized.

But finally he received some good news from Thessalonica and money from Philippi. His two companions that he had to leave behind, Silas and young Timothy, arrived in Corinth and reported to him that the church in Thessalonica is doing well, staying the course despite the persecution, growing in faith and love. But because he spent a short time with them, they had some questions, or rather some voids in their theology, especially about the Second Coming of Jesus. Some misunderstanding. They were told Jesus is coming back for us, His disciples. So they were waiting for His return. Weeks pass, then months, and then some disciples from among them started to get sick and die. The Thessalonians thought that those who died missed the action, and when the Lord comes back, they have no share in Resurrection. So Paul wrote 1st and 2nd Thessalonians to encourage the church and to correct their expectations.

Just before today's reading, in chapter 4 of this letter (1 Thessalonians), the last paragraph of the chapter, Paul tells them that since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. The Lord himself will descend from heaven. The dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive will be caught up together with Him. And so we will always be with the Lord.

And then in today's reading, the first paragraph of chapter 5, Paul responds to their question: When? When it's going to happen? But instead, he doesn't tell them. Instead he tells them how they and we should live in light of the certain blessed

hope of His return. It is the season when we remember Jesus' Advent, Second Coming. It is the season to remember three things based on today's scripture: our HOPE, our ACCOUNTABILITY, and our MISSION, to remember hope of resurrection and eternal life, remember that we will be held accountable in His coming, and remember the reason why we're still here on this planet, our mission and the work He commissions us to do until He comes back.

Paul talks about the Day of the Lord. All through the Scriptures, the Day of the Lord is a day of reckoning and judgment, but not for you and me. (Romans 8:1) "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Why? There is no condemnation because Jesus was condemned. There is no second death because He died for you. There is no judgment because He took it all; He took all judgment upon himself.

700 years before His first Advent, before His birth, Isaiah the prophet says about Jesus (Isaiah 53:6) "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Peter says: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree"; that is, on the cross. When He bore your sins in His body, and became a sin for you, all God's wrath and all God's judgment for all your sins, was poured upon him.

Again, Isaiah 53 says: "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we were healed." There is no judgment. God has no judgment left for you. Jesus took it all!

So, what does God have for you, you who believe and trust Jesus? Only mercy, forgiveness, grace, acceptance, adoption into His family, resurrection, and life eternal. And He's calling you today to receive His mercy and grace. Will you?

God poured out His judgment on an evil and corrupt world at the time of Noah, "a flood of waters came upon the earth to destroy all flesh", but those who were in the Ark were 'home and dry', literally dry when everything around them was wet. Rain fell upon everything except for them because they were in the Ark. Water hit the Ark, but they were safe inside of it. Great picture to keep in mind when we hear Paul saying: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus", our Ark. Because judgment came upon Him. He took it on their behalf, on

our behalf. And in Him, in Christ, you and I are safe. Run unto Him and take refuge!

Verses 9 and 10 of today's reading: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep (euphemism for whether we are alive at the time of his coming or are dead and buried), we might live with him."

So Number 1, we remember and hold fast to our HOPE in Christ; salvation and eternal life.

Number 2: We remember our ACCOUNTABILITY. If there is no judgment for us, what does Paul mean in Romans 14:10 when he says "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ"? He's talking to believers in Rome and including himself. So what does he actually mean? He tells us what he means in verse 12: "So then each of us will give an account (accountability) of himself to God." So, for you, a believer in Jesus, it's not a day of judgment as in whether you will be saved or not, whether you will be with God forever in eternal bliss or banished from His presence forever in eternal damnation. It's not that, because salvation already happened to you! When you received faith in Christ, you were saved, and you are waiting for the final phase of your salvation, the resurrection of your body. When He comes, you will become like Him. You'll be clothed with a spiritual, glorious, eternal body like Jesus' resurrection body. We just confessed that in the Apostle's Creed: I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

Paul mentions the same event in 1 Corinthians, and he calls it "the Day".

(1 Corinthians 3:11-15) "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." You have this foundation when you believe and were baptized. You have Jesus Christ. "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. And if anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

So if anyone's work remains, he will receive a reward. It's accountability and reward. God is a God of rewards. Some of us are super-spiritual. "No, I don't want any rewards, I do everything for the love of God." Yes, you and I serve God and serve our neighbor, and because we're so grateful for what God has done for us, we obey Jesus' commandments because we love Him, but God rewards that. Listen, if you don't want your rewards, can I take them? So, let's remember our accountability, that we will be held accountable before Him in His coming

Number 3: Remember our MISSION. Verse 5 of today's reading: "For you are all children of light, children of the day." The day is for work, Jesus said. (John 9:4) "We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work." What work is that?

Today's Gospel lesson is a parable Jesus told about a man going on a journey. Jesus went on a journey, ascended to heaven, who called His servants and entrusted to them His property. He expected them to grow it, and He praised those who did, who grew His property. Growth is a common theme in Jesus' Kingdom parable. The farmer went out to sow seeds and the seeds grew to a big harvest. Good soil grew and multiplied the seed. A woman put a little bit of leaven in the dough, and it grew. A man planted a tiny mustard seed, and it grew and became a huge tree.

The time between Jesus' First Advent and His Second Advent is marked with 'growth', with advancing the Kingdom of God at the expense of the kingdom of darkness, plundering hell to populate heaven, growing the "WE" at the expense of the "THEM".

In today's reading from Thessalonians Paul uses two sets of pronouns to refer to two groups of people. He says: People, they, them... the unbelievers. We, you, us... believers and followers of Jesus. And He doesn't use this language to demean unbelievers, I'm holier than thou, or in any judgmental way. On the contrary. Paul himself talks as a Jew, believing in Jesus, about the other Jews who don't believe in Jesus, saying: (Romans 9:1-3) "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen..." This is how Paul feels about the unreached, those who don't believe, the "THEY".

Go and make disciples of all nations. Grow the family. Help them move from the THEM column to the WE (US) column. This is the assignment. This is the work Jesus left for us to do, our Great Commission, our marching orders, to go out searching for the scattered sons and daughters of God and bring them home. To grow the family, our family, God's family. May His last commandment be our first priority.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen