

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

SCOTTISH THEOLOGIAN WILLIAM BARCLAY WROTE ABOUT AN IMPORTANT TOOL, CHRISTIANS CAN USE TO EQUIP EACH OTHER IN THEIR LIVES.

HE SAID: “ONE OF OUR HIGHEST DUTIES IS THE DUTY OF ENCOURAGEMENT...THE WORLD IS FULL OF DISCOURAGERS, WE HAVE A DIVINE CALLING TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER.”

BARCLAY ALSO WROTE THAT BY GIVING SOMEONE A PAT ON THE BACK IT CAN HELP SUSTAIN HIM OR HER. AND HE EXPLAINED P.A.T. IS AN ACRONYM FOR: “PRAISE, APPRECIATION, THANKS”.

WHAT A WONDERFUL WORD TO CHALLENGE US IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS.

OF COURSE PRAISE, APPRECIATION, AND THANKS, IS NOT THE ONLY WAY WE CAN ENCOURAGE, FOR EXAMPLE:

I CAME ACROSS A STORY FROM THE 1980’S ABOUT A WOMAN WHO DUE TO AGE AND SOME MOBILITY PROBLEMS COULD NO LONGER GET OUT AND BE AS ACTIVE AS IN THE PAST.

SHE THOUGHT AND PRAYED ABOUT HOW SHE COULD SERVE THE LORD IN HER NEW CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE IDEA CAME TO HER THAT AS A PIANIST SHE COULD PLAY HYMNS FOR PEOPLE OVER THE PHONE.

SHE PUT AN ADD IN THE PAPER, WHICH INCLUDED HER FIRST NAME, PHONE NUMBER, AND AN INVITATION FOR ANYONE IN NEED OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO CALL TO HEAR A HYMN.

THIS MINISTRY OF HERS ENDED UP BLESSING AND ENCOURAGING HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE, SOME OF WHOM ALSO SPOKE TO HER ABOUT THEIR LIVES.

THE WORD ENCOURAGEMENT, AS IT APPEARS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, IS TAKEN FROM A GREEK WORD THAT LITERALLY MEANS: “TO COME ALONGSIDE OF”.

PSALM 123 IS ONE OF MANY PASSAGES THAT DESCRIBES HOW US WE CAN TURN TO GOD FOR ENCOURAGEMENT AND HOPE BY SEEKING HIS PRESENCE AND HELP.

GOD INDEED HAS PROMISED TO COME BESIDE US AND GUIDE US AS MUCH AS WE ARE WILLING.

THE APOSTLE PAUL OFTEN USED ENCOURAGEMENT TO EQUIP HIS FELLOW BELIEVERS IN THEIR LIVES AND STRUGGLES AS CHRISTIANS.

BEING AN ENCOURAGER DOES NOT MEAN WE IGNORE FAULTS OR SINS, BUT RATHER SEEK TO MOTIVATE OTHERS, AND EVEN OURSELVES, TO DO BETTER.

PAUL WAS AS QUICK TO ENCOURAGE, IF NOT MORE SO, THAN TO CORRECT THOSE TO WHOM HE WROTE.

THE APOSTLE ALSO ASKED THOSE WHO RECEIVED HIS LETTER TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS.

IN HIS LETTERS TO TITUS AND TO THE THESSALONIANS HE CALLS FOR CHRISTIANS TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER IN THEIR WALK OF FAITH, AND IN THE MIDST OF DOUBTS AND FEARS.

OF PARTICULAR CONCERN AMONG THE THESSALONIANS WAS THE FACT CHRISTIANS WERE BEGINNING TO DIE FROM NATURAL CAUSES, DISEASE, AND INJURY.

IT WAS EXPECTED SOME WOULD BE KILLED FOR THE FAITH, BUT THEY WORRIED WHY OTHERS WERE DYING BEFORE JESUS RETURNED.

REMEMBER, IT WAS STILL THE GENERAL BELIEF JESUS WOULD BE BACK IN THEIR LIFETIMES, SO SOME WORRIED IF THOSE WHO DIED HAD NOT BEEN SAVED.

PAUL ASSURED THE CHURCH THIS WAS NOT THE CASE. JESUS WILL RETURN AS PROMISED, BUT WE CANNOT KNOW EXACTLY WHEN IT WILL HAPPEN.

HE THEN SOUGHT TO DRAW THEIR ATTENTION AWAY FROM WHEN TO WHAT THEY OUGHT TO BE DOING WITH THEIR LIVES IN THE MEANTIME.

HE ENCOURAGED THEM TO NEITHER FEAR PHYSICAL DEATH, NOR THE FINAL JUDGMENT AFTER THE RETURN OF JESUS.

THIS IS WHY PAUL INSTRUCTED THE THESSALONIANS TO CONTINUE TO HELP AND ENCOURAGE AND COMFORT ONE ANOTHER.

ENCOURAGEMENT IS IN FACT ONE WAY WE ARE GOOD STEWARDS AS CHRISTIANS-SINCE IT INVOLVES CARING FOR EACH OTHER BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

WORSHIP, INSTRUCTION, AND ENCOURAGEMENT TOGETHER MAKE UP WHAT COULD BE CALLED ONE PILLAR OF THE CHURCH.

THE OTHER PILLAR IS SERVICE TO THE LORD WITH THOSE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE FAITH COMMUNITY, ALONG WITH MAKING DISCIPLES.

TOGETHER THESE TWO PILLARS ARE WAYS WE CAN LIVE OUT LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF OTHERS.

TODAY'S PASSAGE, HOWEVER, FOCUSES ON THE FIRST PILLAR OF BUILDING UP FELLOW BELIEVERS SO WE CAN BETTER LIVE OUT OUR FAITH IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE WORDS OF A HYMN COME TO MIND WHEN THINKING ABOUT THE CONCERNS OVER WHEN JESUS WILL RETURN, AND WHAT THE DELAY MEANT IN BIBLICAL TIMES AND NOW:

'BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE, O WHAT A FORETASTE OF GLORY DIVINE. HEIR OF SALVATION, PURCHASE OF GOD, BORN OF HIS SPIRIT, WASHED IN HIS BLOOD.'

THESE ARE NOT PAUL'S WORDS, OF COURSE, AND YET THEY INVOKE HIS MESSAGE TO CHRISTIANS WHO NEEDED TO BE REMINDED ABOUT THEIR PLACE IN GOD'S FAMILY.

BOTH THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE AND VERSE OF THE HYMN GIVE TESTIMONY TO THE FACT THAT THOSE WHO ARE 'IN CHRIST' CAN LIVE IN CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S PROMISES.

THIS CONFIDENCE CAN HELP US PERSEVERE IN LIFE UNTIL EITHER JESUS RETURNS TO EARTH IN THE FINAL DAYS, OR OUR TIME ON EARTH ENDS AND WE SEE HIM FACE TO FACE.

SUCH THINGS ARE HELPFUL TO REMEMBER AS WE SEEK TO LIVE AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST, WHO ARE IN THE WORLD BUT NOT TRULY OF THE WORLD.

OF COURSE, BEING IN THE WORLD MEANS WE EXPERIENCE THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF MORTAL LIFE, ALONG WITH EVERYONE ELSE.

AND CHRISTIANS, IN SPITE OF THE BIBLE TELLING US THE TIME OF CHRIST'S RETURN IS GOD'S SECRET, HAVE OVER THE CENTURIES CONTINUED TO WONDER IF 'NOW IS THE TIME'.

THE LAST PERIOD THIS HAPPENED MOST INTENSELY WAS AT THE APPROACH AND ARRIVAL OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM.

THE CURRENT WORLD CONDITIONS OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UNREST, ALONG WITH THE CRISIS OF THE PANDEMIC, HAS RENEWED THE HOPE FOR SOME, JESUS IS COMING SOON.

BUT WHETHER HE IS OR NOT, THE WORLD TODAY IS IN NEED OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

AND AS WILLIAM BARCLAY SAID- 'WE HAVE A DIVINE CALLING TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER'

INDEED, IN ORDER ENCOURAGE AND SERVE, AND TO MAKE DISCIPLES, THERE ARE TIMES WE NEED TO FIRST BUILDUP ONE ANOTHER.

THIS IS LIKE THE EXAMPLE OF- IN AN AIRPLANE EMERGENCY, PUTTING THE OXYGEN MASK, FIRST ON YOUR FACE, BEFORE YOU PUT ONE ON SOMEONE ELSE.

PAUL OFFERED A SPIRITUAL OXYGEN MASK TO THE THESSALONIANS WHO WERE STRUGGLING.

WE TOO ARE STRUGGLING ALL OVER THE WORLD, NOT ONLY FROM THE ORDINARY TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS BUT IN THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC, WHICH IS NOW RESURGING.

ENCOURAGEMENT IS NEEDED AMONG US TODAY SO WE MAY BECOME ENCOURAGERS OF OTHERS IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

THIS IS ONE REASON WHY PAUL'S WORDS CAN BE SO HELPFUL TO US IN THESE DIFFICULT, AND FOR MANY, FRIGHTENING TIMES.

FIRST, HE TELLS US TO STAY ALERT, TO WHAT GOD IS DOING, AS WELL AS HOW WE ARE LIVING.

ONE KEY PROBLEM HE SITED THAT IS EQUALLY PRESENT TODAY AND IT WAS FOR THE THESSALONIANS IS THAT OF FALLING ASLEEP SPIRITUALLY.

SLEEP IS DEFINED AS "A STATE OF INACTIVITY WITH A LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, IT IS ALSO A DECREASED AWARENESS OF WHAT IS HAPPENING AROUND US.

WHETHER WE ARE THINKING ABOUT PHYSICAL SLEEP OR SPIRITUAL SLUMBER-SOMETIMES EMOTIONAL DISTRESS CAN CAUSE US TO SHUT DOWN.

SPIRITUALLY THIS CAN CAUSE US TO FALL INTO SINFULNESS OUT FEAR OR DOUBT OR ANOTHER STUMBLING BLOCK.

THUS THE APOSTLE STROVE TO GET CHRISTIAN'S ATTENTION ABOUT THE DANGER OF GETTING TOO CAUGHT UP IN WORLDLY BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES.

ANOTHER DANGER WHICH CAN HAPPEN ANYTIME, IS THAT OF A SPIRITUAL SLUMBER THAT IS INATTENTIVENESS TO THE LORD.

AND SO PAUL CALLED FOR BELIEVERS TO KEEP AWAKE AND BE WATCHFUL, EVEN AS WE LIVE OUR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD.

SOMEONE ELSE SUMMARIZED THE APOSTLE'S MESSAGE IN THIS WAY:

"LIVING EACH DAY IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S COMING ALERTS US TO OUR NEED FOR CONTINUED DILIGENCE, AND AWAKENS US TO THE PRIVILEGE OF HIS ABIDING PRESENCE."

BUT, FOR THIS TO HAPPEN, PAUL WAS AWARE THAT CHRISTIANS NEED FURTHER ENCOURAGEMENT TO EQUIP US FOR THIS TASK.

SO HE TURNED TO A METAPHOR USED BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH WHO SPOKE ABOUT THE GARMENT OF SALVATION.

AND IN ISAIAH 59, THE PROPHET ALSO WROTE ABOUT THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE HELMET OF SALVATION.

PAUL, MOST LIKELY INSPIRED BY SUCH OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES, WROTE IN LETTERS TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS, ABOUT CLOTHING AND ARMING OURSELVES.

IN I CORINTHIANS 13 WE ARE REMINDED ABOUT THE ABIDING VALUE OF "FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE".

THOSE THREE THINGS CAN ALSO BE VIEWED AS GARMENTS WE PUT ON. AND IN EPHESIANS WE ARE TOLD TO PUT ON THE ARMOR OF GOD.

PAUL COMBINED BOTH IDEAS IN HIS LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS, WRITING:

"...LET US PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF FAITH AND LOVE, AND FOR A HELMET- THE HOPE OF SALVATION."

THESE TWO ITEMS ARE THE SPECIAL EQUIPMENT CHRISTIANS NEED TO HELP US BE ENCOURAGED AND TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS.

THE BREASTPLATE IS, OF COURSE, A SHIELD THAT PROTECTS THE HEART, WHICH IN THE BIBLE IS A METAPHOR FOR ONE'S WILL.

THE IDEA IS TO PROTECT OURSELVES, AS CHRISTIANS, FROM THE FORCES OF EVIL THAT SEEK TO HARM OUR ABILITY TO FOLLOW CHRIST.

AND THIS PARTICULAR BREASTPLATE HAS TWO SIDES-ONE IS OUR FAITH AND THE OTHER IS LOVE.

FAITH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS CONFIDENCE IN THE PROMISES OF THE GOSPEL, AND TRUSTING IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS.

FAITH ALSO ASSURES US OF THE POWER AND RELIABILITY OF GOD'S GRACE TO PROVIDE THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

IT MIGHT ALSO BE UNDERSTOOD AS A READINESS FOR GOD, AND THUS ONE WAY TO HELP US STAY ALERT.

LOVE, COMPOSED THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BREASTPLATE. LOVE OF GOD IS THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT, AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AND SELF IS ITS COMPANION.

LOVE IS THE ESSENCE OF JESUS' TEACHING AND LIFE. LOVE, WHEN COUPLED WITH FAITH CREATES A MIGHTY SHIELD THAT CAN WITHSTAND ALL SPIRITUAL BLOWS.

ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT THIS IS TO THINK OF LOVE AS THAT WHICH EMBODIES FAITH IN CONCRETE ACTIONS, AS WELL AS WORDS.

THUS FAITH AND LOVE EQUIP US BY SHIELDING US FROM FORCES THAT SEEK TO DRAW US AWAY FROM THE LORD. AND THEY ENABLE US TO BETTER SERVE THE LORD.

NOW WE COME TO THE HELMET PAUL SUGGESTED ALL CHRISTIANS PUT ON.

A HELMET IS MEANT TO SHIELD THE HEAD, OR IN THE CASE OF A SPIRITUAL HELMET, THE MIND.

THE HELMET PAUL WROTE ABOUT WAS ONE THAT WOULD PROTECT US IN THE TRUTH OF SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST, WHICH PROVIDES US HOPE BOTH FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE.

AND HOPE, HAS MORE THAN ONE TRAIT, THE FIRST IS THE HOPE OF SALVATION JESUS WON FOR US ON THE CROSS.

HOPE ALSO INCLUDES HOPE OF OUR UNITY IN CHRIST, AND THE HOPE OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE WITH US ALWAYS.

THIS IS HOW CHRISTIAN HOPE CAN PROTECT OUR THOUGHTS AND INTELLECT.

SO LET US ATTEND TO THE MESSAGE OF SCRIPTURE AND BE ENCOURAGED IN FAITH, LOVE, AND HOPE, FOUND IN CHRIST JESUS OUR SAVIOR.

AND AS WE EQUIP OURSELVES, WITH THESE THINGS LET US SEEK TO FULFILL OUR CALLING TO BE ENCOURAGERS OF OTHERS DURING THIS DIFFICULT TIME. AMEN

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