

FOCUSED ON FAITH: BE AWAKE

SHERARD EDINGTON

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

My wife and I have been married for twenty-one years. People ask how we met and I tell them we met the old-fashioned way—we were set up on a blind date. Mutual friends suggested that we get together. We arranged to meet in Nashville and go out to dinner. We went to a restaurant on Division Street near Vanderbilt called the Ultraviolet Diner. It was a cool place in its day. It's since gone out of business. In fact, several restaurants have opened in that space and then closed again. As a sign of respect, Courtney and I always try to have at least one meal at each new business that opens there. It's become sort of a superstition for us.

To have been married for more than twenty-one years must mean that we had had an amazing first date—chemistry, electricity, love at first sight. But, no. It was a pretty awful date. Courtney thought that I was far too young (I looked much younger) and kind of dorky (I was), and I was convinced that she had no sense of humor. It was a disaster. There were no follow-up phone calls. Nothing. Seventeen months later we ran into each other at a pre-wedding party of another mutual friend. After an awkward few moments Courtney decided that maybe I wasn't so bad after all and I discovered that she possessed a sense of humor. At the beginning of the party, which was held out in the country, a severe storm swept through and knocked out the power for an hour or so. The host brought out candles and the party went on. The band was forced to play all their acoustic arrangements. Courtney arrived just after the storm and coming up the driveway she saw that a large limb had fallen on a small red car. She thought it was funny how this big limb covered this little car. When the lights came back on we went out to investigate. I didn't think it was very funny at all. It turned out to be my car. A few weeks later, I called Courtney up and asked her out, and we met for lunch. We started over and the rest is history.

As a pastor, I have the joy of officiating at weddings. Before each wedding, I meet several times with the couple. I always ask them how they met and what it is that draws them to each other. I get a wide range of responses, such as this person is caring, or thoughtful, or funny, or giving. What I don't hear is, for example, the bride-to-be saying, "I was drawn to him because he is so impatient. He is always hurried and preoccupied. Sometimes he doesn't even know that I am around." Or the groom-to-be saying, "I like how she is totally self-absorbed. She obsesses over her past and is paralyzed by her future. She is unsupportive of anything I do and is clearly unavailable physically, mentally, and spiritually." Or the bride saying, "He is manipulative and controlling. He's rigid and stubborn." Or the groom saying, "She is complacent and bored. She is oblivious to the world and critical of everything. She is defensive and anxious." If I caught a hint of any of this I would

refuse to marry the couple and then send them for counseling. What is being described here is someone who is absent, purposely removed, and disengaged. It is not anyone that I would want to be married to or even be friends with. A relationship demands a personal investment, and this person is clearly not invested.

The Apostle Paul addresses this sort of investment in his First Letter to the Thessalonians. Thessalonica is a port city in northern Greece where Paul established a church. After he left the city for other mission fields, he wrote this letter addressing some of the ongoing concerns of the congregation. This letter is the earliest document of our New Testament.

Today's sermon is the first in a five-part series that I'm calling Focused on Faith. Through these sermons we will look at the ways that we may better be prepared for the arrival of God's kingdom.

Our reading today is from 1 Thessalonians. Paul addresses the coming of what he calls the day of the Lord and the timing of that event. Paul mirrors Jesus' words when he writes, we don't know the day or the time. It will come like a thief in the night.

The kingdom of God is truly a mystery. When can we experience it? What will it be like? These are some of the questions that we will explore over the next few weeks.

In our reading today, Paul exhorts his people to stay awake. Don't fall asleep as others do, but keep awake. As most people would understand it, staying awake means simply not falling asleep. But we all need to sleep. Even the wise bridesmaids in the parable we looked at last week fell asleep. If you want to experience the day of the Lord then you need not just to be awake but you need to be ready, to be prepared. Another way to express what Paul is describing would say 'to be present.'

A few moments ago when I was describing a poor potential mate, I used terms that I consider to be the opposite of being present—being distant, unsupportive, self-absorbed, controlling, unresponsive, complacent, oblivious, preoccupied. These would be terrible qualities for anyone, and they are terrible qualities for anyone seeking a place in God's kingdom.

To be present means to be open and available, to be patient and unhurried, to be responsive and engaged. To be present means to be empty and hungry—not so full and bloated that you don't care. To be present means to be vulnerable and accessible, to be welcoming. There are certainly more ways to describe what it means to be present and we will be exploring them over the next couple of weeks. To be spiritually present as Paul describes in this letter means that one is actively engaged in preparation for the coming of the day of the Lord, that one isn't self-

absorbed, or absent, or uncaring, but that one has an active interest in being ready. Paul tells his people to *stay awake, to keep sober*. He tells them that they are *children of light* and *children of the day*. For the Thessalonians, these are not merely metaphors. They are literal. In Thessalonica, the god of wine, Dionysus, was widely worshipped. The worship celebrations of Dionysus had the reputation of being frenzied, ecstatic events that took place at night and were fueled by the generous consumption of wine. Paul is calling the Christians to abandon any worship of this dead idol in favor of a commitment to the living God. Keep awake, be sober. You are children of the day.

Next, Paul introduces an image of battle and urges his people to attire themselves with armor—specifically the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation. Soldiers do not go into battle unprotected. They wear armor. By putting on this spiritual armor, Paul's people will be strengthened in their quest for God's kingdom. The armor is also a sign of the mission they are undertaking; it shows that they are present.

The reason that we need to be present, to be awake, to be prepared is that with the coming of the day of the Lord there will be judgment. There is an urgency here. We don't know the timing of the day of the Lord. It could be tomorrow; it could be in a hundred years. But it will happen just as certainly *as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman*. This judgment comes not because God is seeking to punish us. Judgment comes when we find ourselves in the full presence of God's absolute holiness. It is like a purifying fire. It destroys whatever is unprepared to be in its proximity. As Paul reminds the Thessalonians, *For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*. God does not choose that we are punished; God's plan is for our salvation. That is God's desire. However, we have to work it on our end because if we are not prepared, if we are not present, if we are asleep, then we will get burned.

Amen.