

A close NFL football game is exciting to watch, especially right around what time of the game? The Two-Minute Warning. The Two-Minute Warning goes back to the NFL's earliest days when the referee's wristwatch was the official game clock. When two minutes were left in the game, he would stop the clock and let both teams know exactly how much time remained. Starting in the 1960s, though, the NFL made the stadium's clock the official game clock. But the league didn't want to do away with the Two-Minute Warning because it built excitement and gave TV and radio networks more opportunities to sell commercials.

1 Thessalonians 1 has a lot in common with NFL's Two-Minute Warning. Paul says that world history is almost over. The time is short. The game is on the line. The problem, though, is that too often we live as though there is no need to be all *that* urgent. We believe the voice that says, "Christ won't return any time soon, if at all; so what's the *big* deal? Live and let live!" And so, we think we have all the time in the world.

Paul protests. We're living in the last days! Christ's return is imminent! Believers need to have a plan! We need a two-minute drill! What does that look like? Paul lays it out in 1 Thessalonians 1.

1. REST IN GRACE

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace... (We continually remember) before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 3–4).

Yes, history is coming to an end. I think especially during Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas, it's so easy to get caught up in the rush of life, that we tend to forget something else is coming one day. Something we must be ready for. Something much bigger than celebrating Christ's first coming.

Christ is coming back *again*. And this time it will be to judge the living and the dead. Everyone will appear before God's judgment throne. But this doesn't mean that we who trust in Christ need to panic. Just the opposite! Paul says to *rest* in grace. How so? What does that look like?

Remember, as Paul says in our text, we believers are "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In fact, one of Paul's most frequent expressions is "*in Christ*," and life *in Christ* means we have grace and peace. God has chosen us. He is at peace with us!

But there's more. Life in Christ brings with it faith, hope, and love; three big things that Paul talks about again in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 (v. 8) and then most famously in 1 Corinthians 13:13 where he says "Faith, hope, love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love". Faith draws us closer to God. Hope draws us toward Jesus' Second Coming. And love draws us closer toward one another.

2. WITNESS TO OTHERS

Moving on in our text Paul says, "(Y)ou became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere" (vv. 6-8)

The time is short so we can't waste it on unimportant stuff. To make the most of every opportunity during their two-minute drill teams employ a no-huddle offense. That's what the Thessalonians are doing. They are making the most of every opportunity. And that means one thing; witness to others.

What does their witness consist of? In verse 5 of our reading Paul calls it "the gospel." This gospel, preached in Thessalonica, according to Acts 17:6, turned the world upside down! Why is that? According to the very next verse there it's because there's another King—Jesus!

In verse 6 of our text we see that this gospel didn't just change the people's *talk*; it also changed their *walk*. They started living *differently* than they used to; differently than the non-believing world around them. They lived as imitators of Christ and His servant Paul.

It isn't programs, decorations, a beautiful building, or a huge parking lot that gives a church a credible testimony. Although we are very blessed to have these things! It's our willingness to allow the gospel to change us into people who imitate our Lord in the way we live our life. That's what gives a church a credible testimony: Letting God's Gospel have its way with our lives!

Verse 8 of our text from 1 Thessalonians says, "The Lord's message *sounded forth* from you." The Greek word for "sounded forth" is ἐξήχηται (*exechetai*), from which we get the English word "echo." An echo repeats what is originally spoken. Our witness echoes God's word. We don't need to create our own witness. God wants us to *echo* what He has already said and what's more, to do it with *enthusiasm*.

Did you know that a bee's stinger is 1/16th of an inch long? The rest of what you feel is... enthusiasm! This is what we need for our two-minute drill! **Enthusiasm** to invite others to embrace our loving Lord!

3. TURN FROM IDOLS

Paul continues in verse 9: "They ... report how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." (1 Thessalonians 1:9) The city of Thessalonica was only fifty miles from the great Mount Olympus—the supposed residence of the Greek gods. If you lived, then, in Thessalonica and were going to plant crops you would pray to the god of the harvest, the god of soil, and the god who brought rain or sunshine. If you were going on a business trip you would pray to the god who provided safe travel and the god who offered favor in business dealings. But when the Holy Spirit opened the Thessalonian's hearts to the gospel, they realized that all their idols could not offer a real solution to their greatest problem. They discovered that their greatest problem wasn't their harvest, and it wasn't their business dealings. Their greatest problem was that they had offended a holy and just God. But Paul told them that Jesus poured out His blood to forgive them. Rose on the third day to embrace them. And is coming again to restore them.

A man from another country visited the U.S. and when he returned home someone asked him if Americans worshipped idols. He said, "They have three idols. In the winter they worship a fat man in a red suit. In the spring they reverence a rabbit. And in the fall, they sacrifice a turkey!"

Unfortunately, we have way more than three idols in our culture. It may be things like a luxury car, our labor, leisure time, or lots of other things. Two-minute drills don't have time for competing opinions. And **we** don't have time for competing **gods**. Paul admonishes us to turn from our idols.

4. WAIT FOR CHRIST

We come to verse 10: "And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come."

This is where the analogy with 1 Thessalonians 1 and the NFL two-minute drill ends. In a close game NFL teams don't know if they are going to win or not. That's not us. We **know** the outcome. There's no doubt about it! Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath.

There was a duck hunter who was in the wide-open land of Southwest Georgia. Far away on the horizon he noticed a cloud of smoke and realized the terrible truth; a brush fire was coming, and he couldn't outrun it. So, he lit a fire, let it go out, and then stood in a circle of blackened earth, waiting for the fire to come. The fire came near but swept over him.

When Christ returns the judgment of God will be like that fire. It will be powerful and destructive. But if we stand in the burned over place, we will be saved. And where is the burned over place? The burned over place is the foot of the cross. The wrath of God was poured out there. And so there we stand.

When you realize that time is short, your plans change. Just ask any NFL coach. But better yet just ask Paul!

God's blessings to you, throughout this Advent Season, as together we receive the Lord in faith, look forward to His promised return in hope, and reach out to all with His love. Amen.