

TEXT – 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Introduction: “Whenever you’re ready.” That’s the advice given to the thrill enthusiast standing at the top of the platform about to plummet hundreds of feet secured only by a bungee cord. “Whenever you’re ready.” That’s what the driving instructor says to the white-knuckled, nervous teen about to take the road test in order to get a driver’s license. “Whenever you’re ready.” That’s the confident and encouraging words of a grandchild trying to teach computer illiterate grandma and grandpa how to use the internet. But “whenever you’re ready” does not work for those who are not ready and not at all waiting for Jesus’ return. Jesus gives us every opportunity to prepare ourselves for his return. His Word and sacraments are all we need to be ready and prepared for his expected return to judge all people and send them to their eternal dwelling place whether in heaven or in hell. Jesus has set the time for his return and he is coming whether people are ready or not. We want to be ready right now, so along with the Apostle Paul we ask Jesus to help us. **JESUS, GET US READY FOR YOUR RETURN – 1) supply what is lacking in our faith, 2) make our love for everyone increase, and 3) strengthen our hearts for holy living.**

I. Supply what is lacking in our faith

- The city of Thessalonica was a bustling city of commerce and trade. Its population is believed to be around 200,000, and it was one of the leading cities in Macedonia in the northern part of ancient Greece. Paul traveled through this important city on his second missionary journey and established a church there.
- The problem with Thessalonica was its intense persecution of Christians. Paul was only able to preach there for three successive Sabbaths. In that short time some of the Jews in that city were brought to faith along with a fair number of Gentile men and women.
- Yet because of the jealous, hostile Jews, Paul and Silas were forced to flee to Berea. These persecutors of the Christian faith continued to pursue Paul in Berea as well. So the Apostle traveled to Athens in southern Greece where he also preached the message of salvation in Jesus to Jews and Gentiles there.
- After leaving Thessalonica, Paul was still concerned about the Christians he had left behind. Would they abandon their faith under such intense persecution? Timothy was sent to check out how things were going and he came back with a glowing report. They were filled with faith and love in Christ. They also hoped to someday see Paul again.
- Paul was overcome with joy. He could not thank God enough knowing that the Thessalonians Christian were standing firm in their faith in Christ. But even such faith was not complete. There was so much more Paul needed to share with them and teach them. There was more they needed to learn in order to continue to grow in their faith.
- Paul writes that he was praying for the opportunity to see the Thessalonians again and supply what was lacking in their faith. By God’s grace, we are privileged to have the words of Paul and the other apostles as well as God’s O.T. prophets to supply what is still lacking in our faith. In fact, we have the complete revelation of God’s Word.
- There is no reason for us to be unprepared as we await our Savior’s return. That is, as long as we make use of God’s Word. As long as we continue to fill in the gaps of our faith that cause us to doubt and question what is going on in our lives, why it is going on and whether God really loves us.
- Like a puzzle God’s Word fills in the missing pieces of the picture of his love for us in Christ. Our faith then sees the whole picture of God’s eternal plan for us. Paul writes in Ephesians, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

Transition: Lord Jesus, get us ready for your return by supplying what is lacking in our faith through your Word. Jesus we also pray that you get us ready for your return by making our love for everyone increase.

II. Make our love for everyone increase

- Paul was deeply concerned that he would not be able to see the Thessalonians Christians and help them in their faith. He knew his life would be in danger if he ever set foot in that city again. He writes to the Thessalonians that they only way for him to return would be if God the Father and the Lord Jesus cleared the way for him.
- Paul’s prayer was answered as he did return to Thessalonica on his third missionary journey be it only briefly. He was able to further instruct the Thessalonians with a second letter that he wrote to them.
- In the meantime Paul prayed that the Thessalonians’ love for each other would continue to increase and even overflow, like a river overflowing its banks. Paul even takes it one step further and prays for their love to increase and overflow not just for each other but for everyone. That included family, friends, neighbors, rulers, employers and co-workers, and yes in true Christ-like love even their enemies who were persecuting them.

- Why is love so important? Isn't faith in Christ the key issue? The Apostle Paul often times joins faith and love together. Love is the fruit of faith. It shows that faith is there, that faith is strong and active.
- The Apostle James challenges us to find true faith that doesn't express itself in love. He writes, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."
- It is love that brings the Christian life full circle. God the Father shows his love for sinners like us by sending Jesus, his Son, to save us from a much deserved punishment in hell. Jesus shows his love for sinners like us by willingly and humbly bearing our guilt and punishment on the cross. The Holy Spirit shows his love for us by creating faith in our hearts to believe in Jesus as the Savior that has been sent.
- This love that God has for us is a love that we now know. This love then flows through faith into our lives as we live in love toward God and one another. How can we not live in love when we know God's love?
- John writes in his first epistle, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him."
- John beautifully ties in this thought of love made complete and preparing for the judgment, just as Paul does in our text. We know that when we as Christians are living in love toward everyone as an expression of our faith in Christ that we are ready for Jesus' return.

Transition: Jesus, get us ready for your return by making our love for everyone increase showing that our faith in you is alive and well. Finally Jesus, get us ready for your return by strengthening our hearts for holy living.

III. Strengthen our hearts for holy living

- Paul knows that with faith growing and love increasing that the Thessalonians will be strengthened in their hearts to live more holy lives. But that is always such a strange concept – sinners living holy lives. We know that by ourselves with our sinful nature holy living is a complete impossibility.
- There are some things that do not go together like the Hatfields of the pioneer days who settled mostly on the West Virginia side of the Tug Fork River and the McCoys who mostly lived on the Kentucky side. We may have our own rendition of the Hatfields and McCoys in our extended families. They just can't get along. Although in 1891, the famous feuding families of the Hatfields and McCoys finally did agree to stop fighting after some 26 years. In 1979 descendants of the two families even appeared on the game show Family Feud.
- But sinners can't stop fighting against God because they can't stop sinning. Sin is war and rebellion against God and as sinners we can't stop. God's Word tells us that whoever hates his brother is a murderer. How are we any better than the Hatfields and McCoys and their even murderous ways?
- There is no end to this feud because of us as sinners, because we keep on sinning against God's strict commands not to sin. We are filled with hatred and anger over the littlest things. How is it even possible for someone like Paul to speak of our being blameless and holy when Jesus returns?
- Here is the remarkable thing about God. He has ended this war. By his grace and mercy he has established peace through Jesus. The war between sinners and the holy God came to a bloody end on the cross. There God poured out his justified hatred and anger toward sin as he punished Jesus in our place.
- Through faith in Jesus our sins are forgiven and forgotten. Micah writes, "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."
- As forgiven sinners in Christ, as holy people, we are able even in our daily living to do what is pleasing to God. Though never completely free from sin, God accepts even our feeblest efforts at holiness when it flows from a heart of faith and love in Christ. That's why Paul prays, that's why we pray that God would strengthen our hearts, give us strength through his Word to think, act, and live more like Jesus our Savior.
- Aren't we really asking for a change of heart in every area of our life? Isn't that what King David desired after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah?
- He wrote in Psalm 51, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me." We too as forgiven children of God pray for a clean heart, a heart that is strengthened in faith and love by Word and sacrament to live a holy, sanctified life while waiting for Jesus' return.

Conclusion: "Whenever you're ready." In some instances we may be offered a little extra time. But Jesus will come when people least expect him, like a thief in the night. There will be no time to quickly put one's faith in Jesus and go to heaven. The time for preparation is right now, and Jesus will help us. Through his Word he supplies what is lacking in our faith. Through his Word he makes our love for everyone increase as he strengthens our hearts for holy living. His last words to us were, "Yes, I am coming soon." We say, "Make us ready. Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.