

# Be Ready

Psalm 22:1-21a, 2 Timothy 4:1-22 (ESV)

July 9, 2006

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” Although this is an exhortation, an encouragement to do something, there is an underlying reality on which this charge is based. There is a word to preach. There is a gospel to proclaim. There is good news to share. This word to preach is the word of God. This gospel to proclaim is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this good news to share is for you and for me.

What is this word of God, this gospel, this good news? There are many aspects of it. Part of it has to do with God creating the world, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with God calling a people to be his own, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with God caring for his people, which he did with a word. Part of it has to do with the end of time, when a word of judgment will be spoken. There are many aspects of the word of God. There are even many aspects of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Part of it has to do with his birth. Part of it has to do with his teachings and parables. Part of it has to do with his miracles and healings. But the heart of the word of God, the very gospel of Jesus Christ, can be usefully summarized in two words: the good news of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

Thus Paul preached Christ crucified. His life, his teachings, his healings, and his ministry were all concentrated into that moment of supreme obedience when Christ willingly gave his life for us, suffering false accusation without objection, suffering wrongful conviction without defense, suffering flogging without striking back, suffering crucifixion without cursing those who crucified him, suffering death without condemning those who killed him, without ceasing to believe in the goodness of God, without ceasing to love even those who hated him. It was on the cross of Jesus Christ that the powers of sin, death, and evil were broken. He who was without sin took on our sin, all of our sin, yet it did not make him sin. He who was without evil withstood the terrible onslaught of evil but frustrated and so undid it because he never responded in kind. He who was life itself willingly submitted himself to death and, strangely enough, so occasioned the death of death.

The crucifixion was not the end of Jesus Christ. If Jesus had only died as he died, it would have been a noble death, but it hardly would have been a saving

death, it almost surely would not have been remembered, and it certainly would not have been proclaimed. But the crucifixion was not the end of Jesus Christ. And the crucifixion is not complete in and of itself. The crucifixion is the necessary, negative premise of the subsequent, glorious resurrection. God vindicated the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ by raising him from the dead, restoring him to life, the same body and person, but forever beyond the reach of death. He raised him to life eternal. God did not raise just anyone to life eternal. God did not first raise to life eternal one who had lived a long life and died a peaceful death. Nor did God first raise to eternal life any one of the hundreds of others—perhaps thousands?—who had been so cruelly crucified. He raised this one, his Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, who had willingly submitted to being so wrongly crucified.

So there are two parts of this, distinguishable but inseparable. The crucified one was resurrected. And the resurrected one is none other than the one who had been crucified. And these two parts of this one event standing at the center of the history of the world lead directly to the two aspects of the very gospel of Jesus Christ: the good news of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. On the cross of Jesus Christ, he effected a wonderful exchange with us. He took on our infirmities that we might be well. He took on our sin that we might be forgiven. He took on our misery that we might be joyful. He took on our death that we might live forever. He took on our gonewrongness that we might be set right. The horror of his death indicates that there was no other way to accomplish what he did. The glory of his resurrection indicates that what he did was perfectly in agreement with the will of God.

Of all the words in the word of God, these two words are most to be proclaimed: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of all the words in the word of God, these two words of death and resurrection form the foundation of the two words of the gospel: the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. So these are not rootless or empty promises. The good news is anchored in the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And because of that reality, we can know, believe, receive, and rejoice in the reality of this gospel: your sins have been forgiven, and you have been promised eternal life. Thanks be to God!

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the word.” Already Paul had told Timothy to keep and to guard the treasure with which he had been entrusted. And now he tells him to preach it, to proclaim it, to share it with all the world. This is why he was guarding it. It is necessary to keep and to guard the treasure. If that is not done, we have nothing. But it is not enough to keep and to guard the treasure. For if that alone is done, we still have nothing. It is of the nature of the gospel to be preached. It is the purpose of the gospel to be proclaimed. The reason for the gospel is to share it with others. And this is what Paul told Timothy to

do. And in telling Timothy to preach, was he not also telling the church, all of us, to listen, to hear, to believe, to receive, to absorb, to digest, to obey, to live in, and to rejoice in this good news? There is nothing magic about the gospel. Preaching is not done to an empty room. Preaching is done for the sake of those whom it gathers, for all of us who are hungry for the word of God in our own lives.

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...be ready in season and out of season.” The ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be confined to eleven o’clock Sunday morning. Neither can the life of the church of Jesus Christ be confined to eleven o’clock Sunday morning. What we do here on Sunday morning—gathering to glorify God, reading, preaching, and hearing the word of God, and giving thanks to God—what we do here on Sunday morning is the heart of our life as the church, but it is not the whole of our life as the church. The minister of word and sacrament must be ready for Sunday morning but must also be ready for every other day of the week. And so must we all, as the church, continue to be the church as we go forth from here into work and play, school and home, indeed into all the world.

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” For all the importance of private reading, learning, and even memorizing the word of God, there is a continuing importance of the public preaching and teaching of the word. We need both, and the latter in particular is not to be neglected. The minister is to preach and to teach, for that is the way that God has appointed for us to hear the gospel and to learn the faith. Given the opportunity, we might have arranged things differently, but no one asked us. So this is what we have been given.

Given this apostolic exhortation and the gospel undergirding it, why must we be ready both to preach and to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” Does this not sound like the times in which we live? We human beings suffer from a lust for novelty. We labor under the misconception that whatever is newest is best. This often results in the rejection of the ancient wisdom of the church surrounding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have learned recently of efforts within the larger church to rename the Trinity in ways intended to be more expressive of God’s overflowing love. Some of the more striking suggestions are “Rainbow, Ark, and Dove,” “Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River,” “Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb,” “Sun, Light, and Burning Ray,” and “Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains.” Such efforts are not new. And for

some years now, the Trinitarian personal language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” has, in some parts of the church, been replaced by threefold functional language such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” But are not these novelties indicative of itching ears?

What most if not all of these proposals share is the abhorrence of all things male and the determination never to allow a single male noun or pronoun to cross one’s lips. But that creates a problem for the Christian faith. Few if any people dispute that Jesus Christ was male. The Bible and all the historic creeds understand Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus frequently addressed God as “Father.” He instructed his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” To avoid such realities runs the risk of separating the faith from its historical truths and wandering away into myths. “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” are not merely replaceable images of God but are the very names of God. We are not at liberty to change those or to depart from them.

The danger of the new proposals is, of course, that the distinctives of the Christian faith will be lost. The already commonplace expression, “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,” may seem more benign than other suggestions but for that very reason may be more insidious. People of various theistic faiths might be able to refer to God as “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,” but only Christians believe that God the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and that God the Son is eternally the Son of the Father. This is distinctive Christian language, and as such it is necessary and irreplaceable Christian language. So faithful, historic, and traditional Christian worship will continue to address God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” It is no accident that we have four explicitly Trinitarian doxologies in the service every Sunday morning. I am grateful for this and other expressions of this church’s commitment to sound teaching of the Christian faith.

Given the apostolic exhortation the gospel undergirding it, and the context within which we find ourselves, what are the implications of the gospel for the ministry and for the church? “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” These words are no less true for Mr. Thomas or for me today than they were for Timothy nearly 2,000 years ago. We commit ourselves to these. We want to be right thinking pastors, to endure suffering with and for you, to work with and beside you as evangelists, preaching the gospel and building up the church, and so to fulfill our ministry here. And we invite and urge you to be both a congregation formed by such ministry and also a congregation fostering such ministry. The two go hand in hand.

To conclude today’s sermon, we can do no better than to hear Paul’s farewell, itself a wonderful proclamation of the gospel: “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the

good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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