

“Be Prepared!”—1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Be Prepared!”, is 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 → *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

“Be Prepared!” Many people will immediately hear these words and recognize them as the Scout motto. The Scout Motto is BE PREPARED which means you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your DUTY. This motto is intended to give direction to the scouting program which strives to mold youth into mature, responsible adults who know how to act appropriately in all circumstances.

However, if these words are spoken during the month of December, many will immediately think of all the preparations which take place for the celebration of Christmas. Purchasing the necessary gifts; drafting the annual Christmas letter; designing the annual Christmas photo card; baking the traditional treats and cookies; attending Christmas parties, and get-togethers; taking in special holiday concerts and plays; attending special advent services as we are doing this evening. All of these activities are done in a effort to . . . celebrate Jesus?

“Be Prepared!” is not just a motto of scouts or a mantra for the month of December. Actually it should be the “motto” for everybody every day in a spiritual sense since the LORD has prepared a heavenly celebration at which He desires every person’s attendance! Jesus spoke about the need to be prepared in Matthew 24:44 → *You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.* His desire is for us to be ready for the celebration which will commence on the Last Day!

In our text Paul speaks about the day on which this celebration will commence for all Christians. Questions arose concerning Christians who died before the coming of Jesus on the Last Day. Will they have a part in the celebration of eternal life with Jesus at His 2nd Advent? *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.* (verses 15-16) These words were intended to bring comfort and encouragement in the midst of grief when it is so difficult to celebrate.

There are many factors which make it difficult to celebrate Jesus. Sometimes all the work and responsibilities connected with our preparations to celebrate Jesus at Christmas can provide the devil a foothold to fill us with resentments and sins of all kinds. Ever feel like the “hustle and bustle” of the Christmas season is more like a “hassle and bother?” Ever feel like it’s more the season to be “stressed out” than the season to be jolly? Ever feel like you are serving your “Christmas traditions” instead of your “Christmas traditions” serving the true message of Christmas for you?

The most dangerous factor which hinders the celebration of Jesus is unbelief—not even considering the atonement of Jesus Christ for our sins in the midst of it all. There are so many ways we can get distracted by all our earthly preparations for celebrating Christmas and lose sight of the most important preparation of all—the preparation which happens by faith **in Christ**. Consider the following poem:

‘Twas the night before Christ came and all through the house,

Not a creature was praying, not one in the house,
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care,
Not thinking that Jesus would one day come there.
The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And mom in her rocker with baby on lap,
Was watching the late show while I took a nap.
When out of the east there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!
When what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But angels proclaiming that Jesus was here.
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray,
I knew in a moment that this was The Day!
The light of His face made me cover my head,
It was Jesus returning, just like He said!
And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth,
I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.
In the Book of Life which He held in His hand,
Was written the name of every saved man.
He spoke not a word as He searched for my name;
When He said, "It's not here," my head hung in shame.
The people whose names had been written with love,
He gathered to take to His Father above.
Those who were ready arose from the ground,
While all the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late;
I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight:
"Oh, if only I had been ready tonight!"
In the words of this poem the meaning is clear;
The coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one chance and when comes the last call,
We'll find that the Bible was true after all!

During the Advent season we reflect on Christ's coming, not just in terms of preparing to celebrate Jesus' coming as the Babe of Bethlehem at Christmas, but also preparing to celebrate His coming on Judgment Day. Preparation for both celebrations is actually the same—repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Who came to deal with the guilt of your sin once and for all by His life, death and resurrection. As we focus our lives on the coming of Jesus Christ we'll discover that our preparation is actually done for us in Christ's life, death and resurrection!

The focus is on Christ's work for you, not your work for a proper celebration. Jesus came that first Christmas to defeat the power of sin, death and the devil in your life so that, whether physically dead or alive, you are prepared to *be caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air* at His 2nd Coming, *and so we will always be with the Lord!* (verse 17)

As you reflect on all your preparations for Christmas, are you prepared to meet Christ with a proper heart of repentance and faith? Do you look at all of these “Christmas traditions” connected with celebrating the “holidays” and find the Person & Work of Christ in them somehow? Just in the “spirit of Christmas” where people feel giving and joyful and loving you can find the celebration of Jesus as He comes to you through His means of grace where you receive the forgiveness of your sins anew! You receive a new attitude toward Christmas with all its celebrations! In fact, the Advent-Christmas season is one of the best times of the year to connect people in their celebrations to the atoning work of Jesus because they’re recognizing a celebration **which He started!**

“Be prepared!” Colossians 2:6-8 gives excellent instructions on being prepared for your celebration of Christmas with family, with the church and with others. It says: *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so **walk in Him**, rooted and **built up in Him** and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. **For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*** Christmas is about the incarnation—God taking on human form in the Person of Jesus to save you! “Blessed incarnation!”

The Holy Spirit prepares you to meet Christ as He calls you by the Gospel, enlightens you with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps you in the true faith! He works repentance and faith in Jesus **alone** so you are prepared to celebrate Jesus—whether that be at Christmas, or in death or on the Last Day!! Amen.

*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely,
and may your whole spirit and soul and body
be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He Who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)