

FEARLESS
LIVING
IN TROUBLED TIMES

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



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*To Rick and Andee Swanson,
in deep gratitude to God for
their faithfulness and true partnership
in the gospel of Jesus Christ
around the world*

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I pray that, as I leave this legacy to the next generation, God would raise up a new generation of faithful men and women who would accurately interpret the living Word of God.

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Introduction

LIVING FAITHFULLY, LIVING FEARLESSLY

We live in an age of fear, an age that seems poised for the apocalypse.

Rogue nations are going nuclear. Terrorists and jihadists are springing up in our midst, committing senseless mass murders in once-safe cities like Orlando and San Bernardino. Across North Africa and the Middle East, terrorists commit beheadings and other atrocities, then post video of these acts on the Internet to shock the world. Wars ignite across the globe, and rumors of wars spread like wildfire. Fears of climate change are mounting. Resources are dwindling. Strange new diseases are mutating and threatening our children. Racial tensions have led us to the precipice of a race war. The national debt keeps rising, and there is no political will to stop it—which means that a global economic collapse is just a matter of time.

In the midst of all these threats, we find ourselves living in a post-Christian age, when all of our beliefs and values are under attack from a hostile media, the government, and even our neighbors and coworkers. Yes, we live in an age of fear, a climate of suspense. It's as if the entire world is waiting for Something Big to happen—something terrifying and apocalyptic. In May 2016, the highly respected British daily, *The Guardian*, published a report on the deepening fear and anxiety throughout our culture:

We live with an epidemic of anxiety. In 1980, 4 percent of Americans suffered a mental disorder associated with anxiety. Today half do. The trends in Britain are similar. A third of Britons will experience anxiety disorder at some stage in their life, with an explosion of reported anxiety among teenagers and young adults. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, attention deficit disorder and profound eating problems afflict our young as never before.

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition—as has depression and tendencies to self-harm—but never, it seems, on this scale. A number of trends appear to be colliding. This is an era when everyone is expected to find their personal route to happiness at the same time as the bonds of society, faith and community—tried and tested mechanisms to support wellbeing—are fraying. Teenagers in particular—fearful of missing out—are beset by a myriad of agonizing choices about how to achieve the good life with fewer social and psychological anchors to help them navigate their way. Who can blame them if they respond with an ever rising sense of anxiety, if not panic?¹

The Guardian concludes that this mood of spreading fear is due to a “fraying” of “the bonds of society, faith and community.” We are witnessing the collapse of the family, social structure, and the community, with the result that people feel increasingly vulnerable and fearful.

But God does not want his people to be anxious or afraid. For believers like you and me, these times are reminiscent of another time in history. In spite of superficial differences of supersonic travel, high-tech media, and the Internet, the twenty-first-century world exhibits many surprising parallels to the first-century world of the New Testament writers.

Fear was rampant in the first century. Crime, terrorism, plagues, famines, and wars were a constant fact of life in that era. Political oppression was the order of the day throughout the iron-fisted Roman empire. Christians in the first century were specially singled out for

persecution—which often involved the arrest of entire families, followed by horrifying tortures and martyrdom. Those were troubled times, and Paul wrote two letters of encouragement to the church he founded in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey—encouragement to live faithfully and fearlessly in the midst of those dangerous times.

The Greek city of Thessalonica was ancient even in Paul's day, having been founded around 315 BC by King Cassander of Macedon. He named it after his wife Thessalonike, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. The Thessalonian believers were a model of faithfulness, living in a culturally important city with a substantial population of Hellenized Jews (that is, Jews who had been culturally influenced by the Greeks).

Acts 17 tells the story of how Paul founded the Thessalonian church—and how he escaped being murdered by an angry Thessalonian mob:

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house.

They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue...But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up (Acts 17:1-10,13).

As is often the case, those who hated the gospel persecuted the messenger. They wanted to kill Paul, but he got out of Thessalonica just in time. He left behind many faithful believers, and it broke his heart. He dearly loved the Thessalonians who had received the gospel of Jesus Christ with joy and sincerity. He looked forward to returning to Thessalonica to spend more time with them and to help establish them in the faith.

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in AD 51 or 52, and it was probably the first of all Paul's letters to the churches (though some Bible scholars think Galatians might have been written before 1 Thessalonians). If 1 Thessalonians was written first, it would be the oldest book in the New Testament. Paul's next letter, 2 Thessalonians, was probably written within a few months of the first.

Paul's reasons for writing these two letters include: encouraging the church, refuting false allegations, comforting the persecuted believers, encouraging them to maintain their moral purity, correcting misinformation and false teachings about prophetic events, and teaching the basics of living a fearless Christian life in the midst of a disintegrating society.

So these two letters serve as a unified message of instruction on a number of issues:

- how to build and maintain a healthy church
- the importance of evangelism and church planting

- the value of godly living and morality
- the necessity of living productively and supporting one's family
- above all, the great theological questions surrounding the second coming of Christ

Paul wrote these letters to a church that was enduring troubled times. His words sent a message of faith and fearlessness to the Thesalonians, and to you and me—a message that points to the ultimate hope of all believers, the blessed return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE END-TIMES PARADOX

1 Thessalonians 1

Some time ago, a radio broadcaster announced that the Lord Jesus would return to earth on May 21, 2011, to take his followers out of the world and set in motion the terrifying events of the great tribulation. Many people sold their possessions and emptied their bank accounts to fund a \$100 million evangelistic campaign based on that prediction.

One young engineer at a Fortune 500 company quit the job he loved because he was certain the world was ending. In his resignation letter, he told his employer, “I desire to spend more time studying the Bible and sounding the trumpet warning of this imminent judgment.”

Another man with a good job cashed out his retirement savings—more than half a million dollars—and bought an RV that he had custom-painted with Bible verses and end-of-the-world warnings. He used the rest of his savings to buy full-page newspaper ads warning that the rapture would occur on May 21.

The night before the big day, many believers stayed up all night, watching CNN or checking Google News on their computers, expecting reports of a massive earthquake that they believed would herald the second coming. Others went to bed as usual, expecting to awaken in heaven. But the red-letter date came and went—and the world went on unchanged. Those who had fallen for the false prediction—and especially those who lost everything they owned because of it—felt duped,

disillusioned, and angry. Some even turned their backs on the Christian faith.

One man, a father of three, told a reporter, “You know what? I think I was part of a cult.” His biggest concern was how his sons, all of whom were old enough to understand, would look back on a failed prediction that the whole family had bought into. How would this event affect their faith in God and their view of their parents? “When my kids are older,” he said, “they’re going to say that we’re the crazy parents who believed the world was going to end.”²

It’s tragic when a false prophecy, based largely on human reasoning and wishful thinking, brings discredit and derision on God’s prophetic Word. When human illusions about Bible prophecy are exposed, the result is disillusionment. A misplaced belief in one man’s word often undermines belief in God’s Word.

Fortunately, most mainstream evangelicals put no stock in this radio broadcaster’s prediction. Christians today continue to be fascinated with prophecies of the end times. Many Christians are convinced, with good reason, that we might well be the last generation on earth. A 2014 Reuters poll found that almost a quarter of all Americans and one-seventh of the people of the world expect to see the end of the world in their lifetime.³ There has never been more interest in the end times than there is right now.

It’s perfectly right and fitting that we, as God’s people, should be attentive to Bible prophecy. After all, a major portion of God’s Word is devoted to prophecy. According to J. Barton Payne’s *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 8352 of the Bible’s 31,124 verses (almost 27 percent!) are devoted to Bible prophecy.⁴ So God clearly wants us to understand the basic outline of his plan for human history, which he has revealed to us in Bible prophecy.

Unfortunately, many Christians have taken a godly interest in Bible prophecy to ungodly extremes—including the arrogant extreme of pretending to know the exact date of the Lord’s return. Jesus himself warned against such foolishness, saying, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). That warning hasn’t stopped certain TV

preachers and authors who pretend to possess hidden knowledge of God's timetable. Like the man who predicted the end of the world in 2011, they always have a reasonable-sounding explanation for why the Lord's warning doesn't apply to *them*.

The Bible encourages us to study its prophetic passages—but the Bible also warns us not to become obsessed with predicting the dates and times. It's not our job to know exactly when any given event will take place. Our job is to preach the good news and to be spiritually and morally ready at all times for the Lord's return.

There's a strange paradox taking place in the church today, and it is focused on Bible prophecy. I call it the end-times paradox. The paradox is simply this: There has never been more interest in the end times than there is today—yet that interest is not being manifested in the lives of Christians.

For example, the Left Behind series is a franchise of sixteen best-selling novels that fictionalize a dispensationalist version of the end times. Published from 1995 to 2007, with many spinoffs, adaptations, and merchandise, including movies and video games, the Left Behind series has earned hundreds of millions of dollars for its publisher, Tyndale House, prompting one critic in *Vanity Fair* to label the series “the new wave of Rapturemania.”⁵ As you might expect, sales of Left Behind books and merchandise were driven by Christians—yet Christians give less than 2.6 percent of their income to the church (incredibly, Christians are less generous in these prosperous times than they were during the Great Depression, when Christians gave an average of 3.3 percent of their income).

Prophecy conferences with speakers and authors promoting their end-times merchandise easily draw tens of thousands of people—yet prayer meetings draw very few. Social media is abuzz with various theories about the rapture (the return of Christ for his church), the signs of the great tribulation, and the identity of the antichrist—yet fewer and fewer Christians are willing to witness for their faith.

Do you see the paradox? How can anyone sincerely await the return of the Lord, yet live as if the world will go on forever? How can we be watching for the second coming—yet we do so little to reach out to

those who would be left behind? There's nothing wrong with reading about the end times and learning about Bible prophecy, but shouldn't we also spend time inviting the lost into the Lord's kingdom?

One day, the Lord will return to take us to heaven. This truth ought to motivate every dimension of our lives. It ought to inspire us to serve more, to witness more, to give more, to pray more, and to live in the daily expectation that Christ could return at any moment.

C.S. Lewis once made this convicting statement:

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in;" aim at earth and you will get neither.⁶

In 2006 the Pew Research Center found that 79 percent of Christians believe in the return of Christ, and 20 percent believe that the Lord Jesus will return in their lifetime.⁷ You'd think that these beliefs would be translated into meaningful, visible action. You'd think that people would behave more selflessly, witness more fervently, give more generously.

Our generation is not the only generation that has strongly believed in the imminent return of Christ. From the early church to the present day, believers have had a compelling fascination with the *Parousia* (a theological term referring to the Lord's return to take believers to heaven, from an ancient Greek word meaning "arrival" or "official visit"). That's why the apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, was eager to dispel the many false and confused notions people had about the *Parousia*. He made it clear to the Thessalonian believers, who were living in troubled times, that they should live expectantly,

eagerly awaiting the return of Christ—and that meant they must live as though Christ might return any day, at any moment.

In short, if we say we expect the return of Christ at any time, we should live like it. And Paul spends the first half of 1 Thessalonians explaining how a Christian awaiting the return of Christ should live. In the second half of 1 Thessalonians, he explains what will take place when the Lord returns to earth.

A WORKING FAITH, AN ACTIVE FAITH

The apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, begins this magnificent letter by thanking God for the powerful Christian witness of the Thessalonian believers:

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10).

In these opening verses, Paul describes ten distinctive traits of the Thessalonian believers: (1) They had a working faith, (2) they had a laboring love, (3) they exhibited an enduring hope, (4) they displayed humility before God for his election and power, (5) they were genuine imitators of Christ, (6) they had joy in the midst of trouble, (7) they lived exemplary lives, (8) they had zeal in their witnessing, (9) they demonstrated transformed lives, and (10) they expectantly awaited the return of the Lord Jesus. To summarize, Paul said that the Thessalonian believers were characterized by faith, love, and hope—the three indispensable traits of a genuine Christian.

Each of these traits is outgoing, not inward; active, not passive; visible, not hidden; public, not private. Faith is active toward God. Love is active toward other people. Hope is active toward our expectation of the Lord's return.

Faith is anchored in the past, in actual historic events, as we look back to the Lord's saving work on the cross. Love is anchored in the present, as we practice Christlike love toward the people around us. Hope is anchored in the future, in the trustworthy promises God gave us in his Word.

Every genuine Christian trusts in God's Word, puts his or her beliefs into action toward others, and is confident of his or her ultimate destination. These three traits—faith, love, and hope—prove that we follow Christ, not just on Sunday but every day of the week.

Some people say, "I have faith, but I like to keep my faith private." Biblically, that's nonsense. The Bible does not recognize a "private" faith. Faith is, by definition, visible and active. Faith must work. Love must labor. Hope must endure.

Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—his death and resurrection—is our only means of salvation. Our faith must always be a working faith, an

active faith, not a dead faith because a dead or inactive faith is not faith at all. The apostle James tells us:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds (James 2:14-18).

If anyone claims to have faith, that faith will be manifested through visible acts of serving, witnessing, and giving. True faith will be expressed in love.

Authentic Christian love is exhibited through labor. What kind of labor? The labor of sacrificing. The labor of forgiving. The labor of persevering. The labor of stretching oneself out to the very limits of endurance in service to God and others. Any so-called “love” that does not labor is mere sentimentality.

True hope waits patiently, and it works as it waits. Authentic Christian hope is not demonstrated by putting on white robes, climbing to a mountaintop, and saying, “Take me away, Lord!” An authentic Christian hope is not expressed by hunkering down in a bunker and doing nothing. Hope is involved with the sufferings of humanity. Hope rolls up its sleeves and gets its hands dirty. Hope is continually lighting candles of faith in the hearts of others.

In times of persecution and oppression, hope endures. Hope perseveres. Hope brings us peace in the midst of trouble. The serene and confident expectation of the return of Jesus Christ, whether his return takes place in the next instant or ten thousand years from now, fills us with a peace that no persecutor can take away.

THE DYNAMITE OF THE GOSPEL

In 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul draws a correlation between the love of God and election, which is also known as predestination. God loves us, and God chose us. Why did he choose us? Was it because we are so lovable? Absolutely not! We were enemies of God by our very nature as children of Adam. Moreover, we were enemies of God by reason of our sinful and rebellious actions.

God chose us *not* because we are lovable but *in spite of* our unlovable condition. His love is unconditional. His choice was a function of his sovereign will. Why he chooses one and not another is a mystery known only to God. And because his sovereign election of you and me is an act of his sovereign grace, we have no reason to be arrogant. His election of us drives us to our knees in humility and brokenness before him.

We can only cry out to God and say, “Lord, I don’t know why you love me, why you called me, why you chose me, why you predestined me—but in utter amazement and humility, I say thank you, I believe in you, and I want to spend all of eternity praising you.” There is no power in the universe more humbling to our egos than the sovereign election of God.

Jesus said to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16a). If it were up to us, we would not choose to follow him. As fallen human beings, we are willful and rebellious by nature. Yet Paul says that God chose us so that we might make him known. “He has chosen you,” Paul wrote, “because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. . . You became imitators of us and of the Lord. . . The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”

God chose us so that his message might ring out from us and the good news of Jesus Christ might become known everywhere. Paul shows us three stages by which the gospel progressed in Thessalonica: (1) the gospel came to the Thessalonians, (2) they welcomed its message, (3) and the message went out from the Thessalonians to the people

round about them. This principle is stated again and again throughout Scripture: We are not saved merely for our own comfort and security. We are not saved in order that we would simply do nothing, say nothing, and allow the world to go to hell.

All too many people in the church today have an attitude that says, “I’m sure glad I’m saved. I’m sure glad my family is saved. Too bad about the rest of the world.” Or, “I’m sure glad God chose me. But I’m not responsible for my neighbors, coworkers, or classmates.” God didn’t entrust his gospel to you so that you could hide it away. God saved you for a purpose. He placed you where you are for a purpose. He provided you with opportunities for a purpose.

Are you living up to the purpose God chose you to fulfill? Are you living up to his calling on your life? The gospel is communicated in words—but it is so much more than just words. The good news of Jesus Christ is *power*. It is dynamite. And I don’t mean that in the flippant way. In Romans 1:16, Paul says that the gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” That word “power” is *dynamis* in the original Greek—the word from which we get our English word *dynamite*. So it is not stretching the meaning of God’s Word to say that the gospel is the “dynamite” of God. It blasts through our sin and rebellion, our brokenness and fallenness, our objections and rejection, and it powerfully draws us to him.

Why does God need to dynamite people with the gospel? Because blind eyes will not be opened by mere words. Hard hearts will not be softened by mere words. Stubborn wills will not be broken by mere words. That is why the Holy Spirit must dynamite our souls and spirits and consciences with the dynamic power of the gospel.

I could speak the most eloquent words. I could offer the most compelling arguments. I could communicate with unparalleled passion and intensity. But until the Holy Spirit of God takes those words and infuses them with power, they will never open deaf ears or blind eyes. That is why our witnessing and our ministry to the world must be bathed in prayer. We dare not do or say anything without calling upon God’s dynamite power.

In 1988, we began a small Atlanta-based radio ministry called Leading

The Way. It grew to become a global ministry, blanketing the world with the good news. One of the great privileges this ministry has given me is that I get to hear story after story of lives changed by the Word of God, especially in the Muslim world. I recently heard about a young Libyan man—I'll call him Shahid. He told us that he had studied the Islamic religion from age five to twenty. He had memorized the entire Qur'an and studied the prophetic hadiths (traditions) and the Sharia law. When he had questions and doubts about the Qur'an, the religious scholars told him not to think about his doubts, not to question his beliefs.

He went through four years of mental and spiritual struggle—an intense crisis of belief. Finally, he decided that the Islamic religion was not the truth. By a series of unlikely circumstances, he came in contact with our 24/7 TV channel we call THE KINGDOM SAT, which Leading The Way launched in 2009 to broadcast the gospel into the Muslim world. Amazed to find a Christian TV channel, he watched it day after day. He contacted our counselors and eventually traveled to Jordan for three months to study the Bible. Then he moved back to Libya, planning to be a witness for God there.

Soon after Shahid returned to his home country, our counselors lost contact with him. He stopped writing, and our counselors feared the worst. We later found out that Shahid had told his father he was a Christian, and his father became enraged and reported him to the Libyan government. The Libyan government ejected Shahid from the country, and he soon found himself in a United Nations refugee camp in Turkey. There, Muslim refugees twice attempted to murder him.

When our counselors finally located Shahid, they asked him, "Why did the other refugees want to kill you?"

"I couldn't keep my mouth shut," Shahid said. "I had to share Jesus with them."

It's exciting to see God opening minds and touching hearts like Shahid's. When you see Middle Eastern Christians, including former Muslims like Shahid, coming to Christ and sharing the good news with exuberance and urgency, knowing they are likely to be persecuted and even killed for their witness, it makes you wonder, "Why am I afraid to witness in America? I'm not worried that anyone would try to kill

me or harm me for my witness, yet I'm afraid to open my mouth and tell the world that Jesus is my Lord and Savior."

The believers in Thessalonica faced a similar situation to the believers in Libya and throughout the Middle East. They were living in the midst of great tribulation and persecution, yet they had received the good news. Knowing full well the dangers they faced, they took a bold stand for Christ. And so should we.

The Word of Truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, always arouses hostility. The authentic gospel always challenges human pride. Have you ever been persecuted for the sake of Christ? Today many Christians are undergoing torture and imprisonment, losing their homes and families, being beaten and killed for no other reason than saying, "Jesus is Lord." You may never have experienced that ultimate degree of suffering and persecution for the gospel. But I hope you have experienced *some* persecution at *some* time.

This world is hostile to the good news of Jesus Christ. If you are vocal about your faith, if you are open about your witness, then you should have experienced some of this world's hostility to the gospel—some name-calling, some mocking and jeering on social media, some snide remarks or being shunned by people at school or work. If you have *never* experienced even a little ridicule for your Christian witness, you should ask yourself, "Am I not vocal enough? Am I not bold enough? Am I not brave enough? Am I ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Am I too timid and silent? Does anyone even know I'm a Christian?"

The reason many Christians today do not experience opposition or hostility from the world is that they do not preach the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. The true gospel is offensive to the world. But many Christians walk on eggshells, avoiding any subject that might offend. They never speak of sin, hell, judgment, atonement, the cross, the resurrection, or the blood of Jesus. No wonder they never experience any persecution! They are so bland and timid that there is nothing about them that would offend anyone.

But the Thessalonians suffered persecution. They preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only on Sunday mornings but on weekdays, in the marketplaces and neighborhoods of that pagan city. They spoke the

truth—and the truth made a lot of people mad. Are you like the Thessalonian Christians? Do you speak the truth daily to the people around you? Has anyone ever gotten mad at you for the sake of the gospel?

WAITING AND SERVING GO HAND IN HAND

Someone once asked me, “Michael, do you ever get angry when people attack you personally and publicly?” I said, “No, I can answer you truthfully, I never become angry when an unbeliever attacks me because of the truth of the gospel.”

It never surprises me or troubles me or hurts my feelings when a secularist or an atheist or someone from another religion criticizes me for preaching the truth of God’s Word. What truly breaks my heart is not an unbeliever’s hostility but *a believer’s apathy*. Whenever you share the good news, some people will welcome it, and others will be hostile toward it. The hostility of the world should never catch us by surprise.

Paul said, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (verse 6). In spite of the hostility and persecution all around them, the Thessalonians welcomed the good news with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit gives power to our witness. He is at work in us as we witness, and he is at work in those we witness to. He gives power—dynamite—to our words, and he opens the eyes and ears of those who see and hear us.

Some of those who hear our witness will receive it with joy, and others will not. Some will even be angry. Don’t be intimidated; don’t be fearful. Share your faith boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit. Don’t think you can be a witness for Christ in your own strength—let the Spirit of God speak through you.

One thing is clear about these Thessalonian believers: They did not sit on their blessed assurance after they came to Christ. They moved out, fearlessly and dynamically, and they impacted the world for Jesus. Paul writes, “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere” (verse 8). Wouldn’t it be wonderful if such things were said of you

and me? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our faith in God was known everywhere?

How does that kind of vibrant witness take place? It takes place when lives are completely transformed. Paul writes, "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (verses 9b-10). The Thessalonians had been idol worshippers—but they had made a 180-degree turnabout. They had broken away from idols and now served the one true God. Not only did they serve God, but they patiently awaited the return of his Son, the risen Lord Jesus.

Here we see the three great evidences of faith: (1) You turn. (2) You serve. (3) You wait for Jesus to return.

You might say, "But Michael, I don't worship idols. I've never bowed down to an idol in my life. This passage doesn't apply to me."

Please understand, an idol is not merely a little god fashioned out of tin or stone. An idol is anything—or anyone—that occupies our attention, our finances, and our time. An idol is anything or anyone that controls us. An idol is anything that takes the place in our lives where God belongs. Our idols today might be selfish ambitions, or the accumulation of wealth and power, or an infatuation with another person, or an addiction to a substance or a behavior, or an obsession with pleasure and fun.

Many of us who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior would have to admit that these are idols in our lives. By the grace of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we need to declare that we hereby turn away from these idols, and we turn to the living God.

The Bible repeatedly contrasts idol worship versus faithfulness to God. Idols are dead; God is alive. Idols are false; God is the Truth. Idols are many; God is one. Idols are visible and earthly; God is invisible and heavenly. Idols are powerless; God is all-powerful. He is the Creator of the universe and the Creator of all humanity.

You cannot claim to have turned from idols to the living God if you're still serving the false idols of your selfish ambitions, your greed and lusts, your habits and addictions, your obsessions and unhealthy

relationships. Turn to Christ, and he will set you free from slavery to sin so that you can fully and freely serve the living God.

Finally, Paul commends the Thessalonians for waiting expectantly and hopefully for Jesus, whom God raised from the dead—“Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (verse 10). We live in a time when the church is splintered into a wide variety of movements and denominations. Various teachers, authors, and churches promote an array of “gospels” such as the prosperity gospel, the social gospel, and the post-evangelical “gospel” of the emerging church. But none of these are the true gospel of Jesus Christ, which he commissioned us to preach to every creature on the planet.

There are many “gospels” that make no mention of our fallenness, our sin, our need for a Savior, the blood of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the return of Christ. But there is one unmistakable sign of authentic believers: *they are waiting for their Lord’s return*.

Paul mentions the Lord’s return here in the concluding verse of 1 Thessalonians 1, and he will return to this subject and explore it in detail in later chapters. But here he is simply saying: An authentic follower of Jesus Christ is not panicked over false prophecies about the end times. An authentic follower of Jesus Christ waits and serves and expects Jesus to return at any time. The proof that you are truly waiting for the Lord is that you are sincerely serving him.

We often think of waiting as something we do passively, inactively. We wait in line at the DMV, we wait for a bus, we wait in the doctor’s office or the dentist’s office. But when the Bible speaks of waiting for the Lord’s return, it is not speaking of being inert and passive. Biblical waiting is active and productive. Those who wait for the Lord’s return are a blur of activity, and their actions are focused on serving God and others. Those who wait for the Lord are busy witnessing, serving the poor, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and comforting the afflicted.

In Luke 19, Jesus tells the story of a nobleman who leaves his servants in charge while he goes on a trip to a far country to receive the kingdom. This nobleman, who represents Jesus, expected his servants to work hard and put his resources to profitable use. There was only

one servant the nobleman punished when he returned—the servant who waited passively and achieved no profit. Waiting and serving go hand in hand. If you are truly waiting for your Lord to return, and you want to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” then make sure that you are actively waiting, actively serving, actively doing God’s will as you wait.

These are troubled times—but Jesus the Master is returning soon. He could be here any moment, even before you finish this book. In the coming chapters, we will see what we need to do to be ready for his return.