

21 exactly. 21 steps to one end of the mat. 21 seconds pause. 21 steps back. 21 seconds pause. Always the same. The guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers Arlington Cemetery in Washington, DC are that precise. "Post and orders remain as directed," is spoken every half hour or hour when the guard is changed in a brilliantly precise ceremony. There the guard remains, on the watch twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. There's no room for complacency.

Being on the watch in our lives doesn't seem to involve so much precision. We don't even have a tomb to guard or a military post to keep. Still we're to watch. It's too easy for us to get complacent and slack off. Everything seems to push us to do just that. We fall into patterns that take us further from watchfulness and deeper into complacency.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in the second lesson he was concerned they had become complacent. Maybe they had given up the watch. The report he heard though was different than what he feared. He was uplifted and joyful. He wanted to express that to them as well as encourage them and us to keep at it, stay on guard, continue to be...

**On the watch
Given the faith to watch
Christ returns for those in faith**

Bible information class with the Thessalonians lasted four weeks during which Paul gave them the basics of Christianity. Certainly he would have stayed longer. These new Christians needed more to be better off. But outsiders came in and broke up the instruction before he could complete it. These outside false teachers were a threat. If the Thessalonians didn't remain watchful they could easily fall back into unbelief.

His instruction not complete, forced out of town, Paul was worried. Did the Thessalonians remain watchful? Did they fall away from faith? Timothy, Paul's associate, was to return with a report as quickly as possible. Paul wrote in the verses before ours, **"Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. Therefore in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."** It was great news. The Thessalonians had not given in but had remained watchful in their faith.

When you get that text or email from loved ones after they travel home on Thanksgiving you feel relief. Good news when you're worrying is a huge relief. Paul was joyful and thankful. No self-congratulations here though. It wasn't his brilliance or strength that kept them in faith. Paul thanked God. **"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"** God gave these Thessalonians their faith in the first place and God preserved their faith during persecution and threats. And God gave Paul the urgency to get back there. Paul wanted to be encouraged by them and be encouraging to them. He wanted to share more of the basics of the Bible. Not that they missed something important, just there's always room for shaping faith. God always has more to share to polish faith to a shine.

Your faith lacks nothing. From the moment you were brought to faith you had everything you needed to get to heaven. Whether baptism as an infant or later in life, faith comes from God and when you have it you're saved. The reality for today is how is the polishing of that faith going? Maybe you set aside the faith you once concentrated on for other pursuits. Suddenly faith isn't so important. You don't intend to lose it. You just aren't caring for it as much. You figure you'll always have it to fall back on if things get bad. But faith can get weak and cold through lack of use. It can be lost if it isn't strengthened. False teaching from the world, not learning more from God, losing your conviction. Anything can happen and when other things become more important faith is hurt. Maybe you've given up precise watch over your faith.

To regain watchfulness requires going back to what God gave you in the first place. Your faith is like a precious jewel. God shows this precious jewel from many sides. At one point he'll tell you in love he cast your sins into the deepest part of the ocean, never to be heard from again. From another angle he'll describe the pain and suffering Jesus willingly went through in order to secure your forgiveness. From yet another angle God will make clear his love in continuing to focus our attention towards the future we'll have in heaven. He highlights how baptism washes sins away. He talks of the forgiveness that's yours in the Lord's Supper. From every angle God's grace is shown to have made you one of his children.

Be joyful as you hear the good news of Christ Jesus again. Jesus brings you into the family of God and his presence. Jesus makes heaven a reality for you. God wants you to continue in this confidence. He wants you growing in faith, just like Paul. **"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."** No one's faith is perfect. No one has learned it all. Where you might be lacking in specific knowledge which can strengthen your faith God wants to make that connection stronger. Faith can be built up. Weaknesses in knowledge can be filled in. The Bible can be learned so it can be applied. Bible studies, worship, home devotions, Sunday School, Vacation Bible school, pastoral counseling, the goal is stronger faith, closer relationship with Jesus, deeper understanding of his awesome love for you. Be on the watch with the faith God gave you.

Sure faith is focused on the future, the Savior we watch for. But what about today? As Paul has a tendency to do he interrupts his thoughts with a prayer. He asks the Lord to work in the Thessalonians lives right now, even while they watch for Christ's return. **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."** Like a cup fills up with water to the point where it overflows, that's what Paul wants to see the Thessalonians doing with their love. God fills them up with his love in Christ and they overflow. That love will show itself in their lives as they love each other. This was no demand. Love would flow from faith. The stronger that faith the more love they'd show. And the Lord would supply it all.

Love is no demand on us either. God doesn't count your works of love to give you credit for heaven. Too often when we think we've done something good without any help, we might be tempted to take credit. Go around thinking we accomplished something great with no help. If we figure our works of love are counting for something and that we should be stockpiling them to gain credit before God we're mistaken. If we demand works of love from other people with the law we sin against God and them.

We need forgiveness from these sinful ways. We need the God of love to show us his love first. God gives love and shows love, first. **"May the Lord strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."** In sending his Son Jesus he made the first move of love towards us. With love Christ came to set things right between God and you. Jesus paid your sins. God forgave those sins because of Christ's sacrifice. In Christ's resurrection the guarantee is fulfilled. Now Christ waits to return one more time to earth. When he does he's taking us and all believers with him. He calls for us to be watchful. The focus for God is on Christ's return. He's returning for those in faith, so we not only need to be in faith but we will be showing the deeds of love of our faith.

We have the opportunity to live and continue to show that love. It's not about the numbers. It's about the heart, yours and mine. Motivated by God's love in Jesus and with that love flowing you work in the world. Not just on holidays but every day. It's a lifestyle and choice of love watching for Christ's return. It shows itself in different ways in different people. Some show love by caring for their children or elderly parents. Some show love by being concerned about brothers and sisters in Christ here at church. Some show love by donating time or money to a cause. Showing love is individual and unique. But be assured its God working through you with his love.

The precision of the guards on the watch at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers is highly tuned. Their movements are perfect. They're on the watch. My life and yours can always use tuning. More precision can be gained the more we know the Word of God. Our faith can get stronger and our dedication to doing works of love will grow. God gave us our faith to use. So we do. We put our faith to use as we go on the watch for Christ's return.