

Anxiety over the Return of Christ

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Today we continue our discussion of the return of Christ from 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. The passage we considered last week in chapter 4 addressed the concern that believers who have died might be at some disadvantage at the return of Christ. Paul assured them that that they weren't at any disadvantage; if anything they have an advantage because "the dead in Christ will rise first." If you missed last week's message you can listen to it on our web site.

In our passage for today (5:1-11) Paul addresses a concern among believers who are alive and awaiting the return of Christ. There seemed to be some anxiety over what would happen to them at the return of Christ. Specifically, there was some fear that when Jesus returned they would be unprepared and would therefore experience God's displeasure instead of His grace.

I suspect that most who are striving to follow Christ have experienced a similar type of anxiety over the return of Christ. We all have our regrets about how we've lived our lives. Even if we have assurance of our ultimate salvation, in the back of our mind we suspect that Jesus is going to give us a good scolding (or worse) when He returns. You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus is coming again and He's really hacked off!" As crass as that sounds, that's sometimes our dominant thought about the return of Christ, isn't it?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Paul gives the Thessalonians a perspective about the return of Christ that should both eliminate their anxiety over the return of Christ and motivate them to live in a state of preparedness for the return of Christ. I think that we'll find as well that as believers in Jesus we have every reason to look forward to the return of Christ with great anticipation and that we have every capability to live lives that are compatible with His return.

In 5:1 Paul gives the basic theological truth from which his discussion flows:

The "day of the Lord" will come just like a thief in the night. (5:1-2) As Paul does repeatedly in this letter, he affirms that the Thessalonians are already mature in their thinking and in their behavior. Specifically, they were already well-informed about the events surrounding the return of Christ ("the times and epochs"; see 2 Thess 2:5).

5:1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

When Paul had been in Thessalonica he had taught quite extensively about the return of Christ (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5). The personal return of Christ wasn't some esoteric doctrine that ordinary Christians should avoid so as not to get confused. The return of Christ had very personal, practical implications for the believer. Paul had discussed "the times and epochs" (the "last days" in the flow of history) with the infant church in Thessalonica.

The main thing he had communicated was that "the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night." The "day of the Lord" is an expression found in both the Old and New Testaments. In the OT the day of the Lord referred to "a day of judgment for the opponents of God, but a day of deliverance for the faithful" (Isaiah 2:1-4:6, Joel 1:15, etc.) (Blomberg, p. 166). There was a dual focus: the enemies of God would be punished and the people of God would be rescued.

Paul retained this dual focus when he spoke about the day of the Lord in the NT (1 Cor. 1:8, 5:5; 2 Thess 2:2, Acts 17:31, etc.). Paul will emphasize that believers and unbelievers will have a very different experience on that “Day.”

By saying that “the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night,” Paul was emphasizing how suddenly and unexpectedly the return of Christ would be. Paul probably got this imagery from the teachings of Jesus. For example, in Luke 12:39-40 Jesus said:

39 "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 40 "You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

That’s the thing about thieves: they don’t announce ahead of time when they’re coming. They come at an hour that you do not expect. Thieves value the element of surprise. If somehow you got tipped off that thieves were going to show up at your house at 10:45 tonight, you’d be ready, wouldn’t you. Some of you would call the police; others of you would say, “I think I’ll handle this myself. . .” But if there’s a thief in your neighborhood but you don’t know when he’s coming, you would live in a state of readiness. You would keep your eyes open and your doors locked.

Jesus isn’t a thief, but He is in the neighborhood and He’s coming at an hour that we “do not expect.” That’s the main thing we know about the timing of the return of Christ. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus spoke of His return:

36 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

In every generation there are some who ignore or misinterpret these Scriptures and who think that they have figured out when Christ will return. Such misguided efforts miss the obvious point of all these Scriptures: since we don’t and can’t know when Christ is returning, we should live in a state of readiness. We’ll discuss this later in 1 Thessalonians 5. (See also 2 Peter 3:10, Revelation 3:3, 16:5, Luke 21:34ff,)

After acknowledging that the Thessalonians are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night, Paul describes *Two types of people*. (5:3-5) – those who are completely unprepared and those who are living in continual readiness. The first type of person is described in verse 3:

3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

Paul’s words echo the OT prophets before the exile who warned against those who justified their complacency and their disobedience by saying, “Peace, peace” when in fact there was imminent danger (see Jeremiah 6:14, Ezekiel 13:10). In the same way, just before Christ returns some will feel safe and secure when in fact destruction will come upon them suddenly. Political and economic realities can be very deceiving. People might think that they’re safe and secure because they’re doing well financially and because they live in a strong, stable society. As important as those things are, they are relatively superficial indicators of “peace and safety.”

True, lasting peace and safety come from being rightly related to Christ in the kingdom of God. One day the kingdoms of this world will cease to exist; on the day of the Lord the kingdoms of this world will be subsumed by the kingdom of God. On that day, the only people who are safe are those who are rightly related to the King. Those who are not “will not escape.”

Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers that they were in fact safe and secure in Jesus Christ.

4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief;

Here Paul begins an extended metaphor using darkness and light. Darkness is associated with sin and separation from God. Those who live in darkness will experience the day of the Lord as sudden and terrifying. Paul wants the Thessalonian believers to know that they are not in that category. They are not in darkness that the day would overtake them like a thief.

5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;

Since “God is light” (1 John 1:5), those who know Him are sons/children of light and of day. Light is associated with righteousness, truth, and goodness. Those who know Him are not of night nor of darkness. That’s the identity of the believer because of our union with Christ.

And so I say to you this morning what Paul said to the Thessalonian believers: if you are trusting in Jesus alone to take away your sins and to give you life, you are sons and daughters of the light; you are sons and daughters of the day. You are not of the night nor of darkness. You no longer have to live as someone who is terrified of a thief in the night. When Jesus returns, even though suddenly and unexpectedly, you have nothing to fear. Jesus is coming to rescue you, not to punish you. When He comes you will always be “with the Lord” (4:17).

If you don’t yet have this assurance, please understand that Jesus makes a standing offer to you. This is the way He put it in John 12:46

46 "I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.

If you believe that Jesus died on the cross as payment for your sins, you will no longer remain in darkness. You too will become a son/daughter of the light/day. And you too will have the assurance that when Jesus comes He is coming to rescue you. You become a child of God by faith alone.

Just as there are two types of people, correspondingly there are *Two ways of living. (5:6-11)*. What we find in these verses is a classic example of what NT scholars call “the indicative and the imperative” in Paul’s writings. Paul makes an indicative statement – a statement that declares that something is true. Based on that indicative statement Paul then makes an imperative – a command/challenge about how people should live. We’ve already seen Paul’s indicative statement: “you are all sons of light and sons of day; we are not of night nor darkness.” In light of that indicative, Paul makes this imperative:

6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. 7 For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we are

of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Do you see how Paul is challenging us to live in a way that is compatible with our identity? We shouldn't live like "others" do – like people who are "of the night/darkness." Paul mentions two things that people commonly do at night: people sleep at night and get drunk at night. The fact that Paul mentions one thing that is always wrong (getting drunk – whatever time of day) and one thing that is good and necessary (sleeping at night) lets us know that he is making an analogy here. He's obviously not saying that Christians shouldn't sleep at night.

Paul is saying that people who live in darkness essentially sleep through this life spiritually; they are oblivious to the spiritual realities all around them. Like sheep without a shepherd, they wander into all sorts of danger and trouble; they go through this life spiritually thirsty and malnourished. Spiritually they are as sharp and useful and alert as someone who is drunk. Their spiritual senses are dulled and muted. They are groggy and sloppy spiritually.

By contrast, Paul says to sons and daughters of the light and of the day (back in verse 6):

6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

In contrast to someone who is asleep or drunk, we should be as spiritually alert and sober as possible. We should be wide-awake and clear-headed when it comes to experiencing God in this life.

When I was 5 years old I would often sleepwalk. My mom would get up in the middle of the night, and find me in my brother's closet. I had walked out of my room, down the hall, past a flight of very steep stairs, into my brother's room and into his closet – where I would lay down and keep sleeping. My mom would pick me up and carry me back to my bed. I, of course, was oblivious to the whole thing; she would tell me about it the next morning.

Paul is saying that as children of God we should not sleepwalk through this life. We shouldn't walk around oblivious to the spiritual realities around us. No, we should be "alert and sober"; we should be wide awake, as clear-headed as possible (Cf 1 Peter 5:8).

Can you identify anything in your life that is making you spiritually dull and foggy? Is there anything that is keeping you from being wide awake and clear-headed? There have been times in my life when unforgiveness has made me spiritually dull. I spent so much time mulling over an offense against me that I'm sure I miss some of what God wanted me to experience. Sometimes a sin can dominate a person's life to the point where s/he is consumed with guilt and shame; there's no energy or motivation to seek God and participate in what He's doing around you. At the risk of being misunderstood I'd like to mention one other issue. Sometime our habits of eating/drinking and exercise and sleeping can leave us spiritually groggy. Trust me, I understand that you can't decide, "I'm going to eat well, exercise 5x a week, sleep 8 hours and night and then I'll feel spiritually alert and clear-headed." I know that it's not that simple. But we should pay attention to these things because they do affect our mental, emotional, and physical health (see 1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Look at verse 8 again:

8 But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Here again we have the triad we saw in chapter 1 (see 1:3) of faith, hope, and love. He's saying that we are spiritually alert and clear-headed when we put on faith, hope and love like we were putting on armor for battle (see also Ephesians 5:8, Romans 13:12). Sometimes Paul used this imagery to emphasize the unseen spiritual battle all around us (Ephesians 6). Here Paul says to put on faith and love like a breastplate. Let faith and love be your protection.

You will be more spiritually alert and clear-headed if you exercise faith in specific circumstances. Can you think of a situation in which you need to exercise faith – in which you really need to trust God (instead of yourself or your circumstances or whatever)? Maybe it's a situation at work or school that is stressing you out. Don't sleepwalk through that situation because God wants to work in you and through you.

You will be more spiritually alert and clear-headed if you exhibit love in specific relationships and circumstances. Can you think of someone whom God is specifically calling you to love? It could be someone in the church, in your home, in your workplace, or simply a friend. You could sleepwalk through that relationship, but life's too short for that! Allow God to love that person with a perfect love through you.

Paul says to put on "the hope of salvation" as a helmet: be confident that God *has* saved you in Christ and that God *will* save you "on that Day." Who would go into battle without wearing a helmet (without protecting their head)? My son and mobs of his friends entertain themselves playing "airsoft." They own airsoft guns that shoot plastic bb's at 250 to 450 feet per second. Basically they run around in the woods shooting each other with plastic bb's. There's a long list of horrible injuries they could sustain playing airsoft – dangers that really can't be avoided (bruises and welts, running into barbed wire, etc.). The one danger that we address up front. We have one *law* for airsoft wars, "Thou shalt not play airsoft unless every single person is wearing full face protection." Like a Red Rider BB Gun, you literally could "put your eye out" playing airsoft. Who in their right mind would go into battle not wearing a helmet?

That's why Paul says, "as a helmet, the hope of salvation." No believer in his/her right mind would go through the trials and tribulations of this life without wearing the hope of salvation as a helmet. In other words, we should go through this life confident that since Jesus Christ gave His very life for us surely He will return and rescue us and bring us home.

I'll close by reading verses 9-11. To believers who might be anxious about the return of Christ Paul writes:

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.