

A Study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians (NIV 1984)

“To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(1 Thess. 1:1b and 2 Thess. 1:1b)

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Note as an introduction the words of one commentator:

“Paul’s discussion of Christ’s return now shifts from correcting their specific point of misunderstanding to a more general reminder and exhortation about its significance. Two key concepts stand in dynamic tension throughout the New Testament teaching on the parousia: the possibility that Christ could return at any time and the prospect that His return will take longer than His people might expect or hope. Though modern scholars have attempted to reconstruct early Christian thinking as having begun with the first idea, later abandoning it for the second when the expectation of Christ’s immediate return was disappointed, such reconstruction fails to do justice to any part of the of the New Testament as it addresses these topics.”

[Note: parousia in Christian theology is the time when Jesus Christ will return to judge humanity and the end of the world]

It is precisely because of both sides of this teaching that Paul makes the exhortation here, based on Jesus’ own instruction (cf. Matthew 24:1-25:46; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 12:35-46; Luke 17:22-37; Luke 19:11-27; Luke 21:5-38), for enduring watchfulness. The Lord will indeed come back, and He could do so at any moment. His followers must therefore live with that expectation and reflect it in their sober behavior. But because He may not come back immediately, they must strengthen each other to remain faithful.

As in the preceding section, the eschatological teaching here is given for its practical value, not for speculation. In particular, Paul has nothing to do with conjecture or hints about the precise time of the Lord’s return or signs which may precede it. In fact, the entire course of his argument depends on the time of Christ’s coming being uncertain. Instead, he offers this teaching to throw into sharp contrast the attitude, lifestyle, and destiny of the Christians in comparison with their pagan neighbors. Understanding how their identity with Christ will affect eternity will in turn define for them how their lives are to be different in the present.

[Note: eschatological: Christian doctrines concerning the Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgment]

As the emphasis of the preceding section was on the salvation that comes with the Lord’s return, so here the emphasis lies on the judgment that comes with that event. Like the tension between imminence and delay, this tension is consistently presented in Biblical eschatology. Paul’s assurance to the readers is that judgment for them is no threat: Christ’s return means condemnation only for those who have rejected Him, the very people who now oppose and persecute Christians.

1) Note v.1. Paul says that they do not need to write to the Thessalonians about what two?

Paul indicates with this statement that he continues the previous subject while altering the specific focus. Having shown how Christ’s return provides comfort to the readers’ grief, he now shifts to a reminder of the broader impact that their expectation should have on their behavior.

“times and dates” – the combination may, in fact, be a common way of referring to the time of final judgment (cf. Acts 1:7)

2) Note v.2. The Thessalonians very well know that what will happen? And, it will happen like what?

The comparison of the Lord's return to a thief in the night is found in a variety of texts in the New Testament (Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). The distribution of these references through all parts of the New Testament indicates that this aspect of Jesus' teaching was widely circulated among the early Christians.

The thief's coming is secretive; those who are unprepared have no idea that he is coming at all. But the context does not permit the inference that he both comes and departs without being noticed, as in the eschatological view that argues for a "secret rapture."

"the day of the Lord" – refers to Christ's return

3) Note v.3. While people are saying what 2? What will come on them? And will do so how?

Christ will return in a time that appears to be ordinary and comfortable to unbelievers.

4) Note v.3. To emphasize the suddenness of Christ's return, Paul says it will be like what?

5) Note v.3. Will they escape?

As with labor associate with child-birth, there will be no escape.

6) Note v.4. Who is not in darkness?

The Thessalonians need to realize that they are not in darkness but in the Light; they are associated with God and with His Truth.

7) Note v.4. So this day should not do what? Like a what?

"you" – an emphatic pronoun (Greek: *hymeis*) which draws a sharp contrast between those not prepared for Christ's return and the readers of the letter

The arrival of the day of the Lord will be no surprise for Christians, not because they know when it will come, but that when it comes, they can welcome it rather than fear it.

8) Note v.5. They are all what 2?

See Matthew 5:14; Luke 2:32; John 1:4-9; 1 John 2:8

9) Note v.5. They do not belong to what 2?

As those characterized by light, the people of God have nothing to fear from something that comes as a thief for those in the darkness. Their behavior should fit the light to which they belong.

Paul next sets forth two behavioral implications of belonging to God's light.

10) Note v.6. Let us not be like others who are what?

Because Christians belong to the light, to be "asleep" for them is inappropriate.

11) Note v.6. But let us be what 2?

"alert" – literally, "to be awake," but often takes the sense of being watchful

Christ's disciples are to be faithful in the Lord's absence, expecting the Lord's return at any time, busy in faithful service at all times.

"self-controlled" – literally, means to be sober as opposed to drunk

Paul's usage here partly relates to literal soberness, but his point is much broader, as the following verse will show. He has in mind the keen grasp of spiritual reality that comes from knowing God truly through Christ.

Both verbs ("alert" and "self-controlled") are in the present tense, stressing that the actions are to be continuing.

12) Note v.7. Those who sleep do so when? Those who get drunk do so when?

At the very least, this verse continues and amplifies the comparisons of verses 5 & 6. Both sleep and drunkenness were associated with the night (the latter is less confined to the night in our culture than in Paul's). But clearly, as in verse 6, the expressions here are figurative, suggesting the spiritual insensitivity and absence of clear thinking which result from unbelief.

Since drunkenness was associated with revels honoring the Greek god Dionysus, and sometimes in that setting seen as a medium of receiving enlightenment from the god.

See Luke 12:45.

13) Note v.8. We belong to what?

14) Note v.8. Let us be what?

Paul now amplifies the meaning of "self-controlled" or "sober" with the figure of a soldier or sentry, perhaps suggested by the idea of watchfulness.

15) Note v.8. Putting on what 2? As a what?

16) Note v.8. What is their helmet?

Paul's point seems to be that by practicing faith, love, and hope the readers overcome the pressures of their environment to conform to pagan standards, thereby proving faithful to the Lord who returns for their salvation.

17) Note v.9. God did not appoint us to do what? But to receive what? Through Whom?

“wrath” – God's holy anger against sin

18) Note v.10. What did Christ do for us? So that whether we are what? We may do what?

Nothing can separate the believer from Christ's love and fellowship, not even death itself. Whether alive or dead, Christians can be assured that they belong to God through Christ in every respect. As the Thessalonians look forward to the culmination of that relationship when Christ returns, they live out an alert and faithful life by demonstrating their union with Christ through Christ like behavior.

19) Note v. 11. Therefore encourage whom? And do what?

As in 4:18, so here Paul concludes his eschatological discussion by reminding the readers to recognize the value of the message as a source of encouragement.

20) Note v. 11. Were they doing this already?

Paul indicates that the Thessalonians are already following these instructions, as they have received them before (cf. vv. 4:1-2; and 5:1-2).