

1st Thessalonians

"Don't Walk in Your Sleep!"

(1st Thessalonians 5:1-11)

Some Context: Jesus Christ both unites and divides. We are all members of the universal church, the called-out body of believers. Paul said that "we will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air," never to be separated again. However, not everyone is a believer. Faith in Christ also separates from the world. We are in the world, not of the world. Jesus prayed this way to the Father, saying, "They are not of this world, just as I am not of this world." (John 17:16). There is a difference between believers who are looking for the Lord's return, as was the case with the Thessalonian church, and the people of the world; and this theme was developed by Paul in Chapter 5. His purpose was to encourage the Thessalonian believers as they lived their life in a dreadfully pagan culture. He did this by pointing out the vast differences between the worldview of believers and unbelievers.

The Text: Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (ESV)

Knowledge and Ignorance (5:1-2): Believers are knowledgeable about the truth while unbelievers are ignorant. They don't know who God is or what he is doing. In this passage there are three KEY phrases in these two verses: (1) Times and the seasons – God's plans for the nations with Israel being the KEY nation, (2) The Day of the Lord – A time when God will judge the world and punish the nations and at the same time prepare Israel to receive her Messiah, and (3) Thief in the Night – An image of the coming of the Day of the Lord which is characterized by suddenness and surprise. This image helps us understand why we need to be living lives of working and witnessing while we are watching and waiting. Paul's emphasis here is that believers are "in the know" about what is to come and unbeliever's live in ignorance. When the Lord is ready to judge the world and prepare Israel to receive her Messiah, the Rapture of the church, which initiates the Day of the Lord, will come suddenly for unprepared unbelievers.

Expectancy and Surprise (5:3-5): The believer, who is living life as if the Lord could come back at any time will be ready to go, while the unbeliever will be caught off-guard. The unsaved world will believe that the outlook of the day is promising. Men will not hear God's words or heed his warning. Think about God warning the people in Noah's day and how the people reacted. Think about Lot trying to warn his family that Sodom & Gomorrah would be destroyed. Think about Jesus warning the Jews that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Paul uses the image of the labor pains of an expectant mother. It will be surprising and yet inevitable that God's judgment is coming. However, believers are not in darkness, and they know the truth. Consequently, we must live expectantly!

Soberness and Drunkenness (5:6-8): Paul presented two groups of people: (1) Believers: who are Awake and Alert, and (2) Unbelievers who are Drunk and Asleep. The alert crowd was ready and unafraid with the drunken sleepers unaware of the danger lurking around the corner. Paul characterizes the believer as sober-minded. He has a calm and sane outlook on life. He is not complacent, frustrated, or afraid. He hears the tragic news of the day, yet he does not lose heart. He experiences the difficulties of life, but he does not give up. He knows the future is secure in God's hands. He lives every day calmly, creatively, and obediently. On the other hand, the unbeliever is not alert. They live in a false paradise enjoying false security. They accuse the believers of being drunk (Pentecost) but it is actually they themselves who are living like drunken men unable to determine reality. Paul encourages the Thessalonians regarding their faith, love, and hope. We have met faith, love, and hope before (1st Thessalonians 1:3). Paul refers to the breastplate of faith and love which would cover their heart and the helmet of hope which covers their mind. The hope of salvation does not mean that at last we will be saved (Paul said that he knew that the Thessalonian believers were chosen by God [1st Thessalonians 1:3]). The hope of salvation refers to the future hope that salvation gives us. Our salvation has a past, present and future. In the past we have been saved from the guilt and penalty of sin. In the present we are being saved from the power and pollution of sin. In the future we shall be saved from the very presence of sin when Christ returns. On the other hand, unsaved people are without hope.

Salvation and Judgment (5:9-11): Believers do not need to fear God's judgment because that is not part of God's program for them. Verses within this letter such as 1:10 and 5:9 seem to support this position. Many Godly students of the word disagree on this matter. That said there are biblical reasons to believe that the church will be raptured to heaven prior to the Tribulation Period. These reasons include but are not limited to (1) the nature of the church, (2) the nature of the Tribulation, and (3) the promise of Christ's imminent return. The church is the body of Christ, and he is the head. When he died on the cross for us, he bore all the divine judgment necessary for our salvation. He has promised that the church will never face any of God's wrath (John 5:24), and the Day of the Lord is a time of God's wrath and judgment. It is unnecessary for the church to experience this. On the other hand, the Tribulation is a period of time where God will judge the Gentile nations and purge and prepare Israel, who currently has rejected Jesus Christ, for the coming of Messiah. Furthermore, Paul taught the Thessalonians to live expecting the Lord's return at any time. If Paul believed that Jesus would come for his church *after* the Tribulation, he would have taught them to prepare for this seven-year period (Daniel 9:24-27).

Next Week: "It's All in the Family (1st Thessalonians 5:12-28)"