

The Teaching of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10

Sometime back I did a comprehensive study of First Thessalonians 4:17 and its context; at that time I avoided getting much into chapter five which deals with the same topic because I wanted to do an in-depth study of the first ten verses later, so here I am now on the case.

In the light of the Lord's return about which Paul wrote in First Thessalonians 4:13-18, he then in 5:1-22 listed several directives for the church: They were to *be careful* to test everything and not minimize the value of prophecy (vv. 19-22); they were to *be thankful* no matter what transpired (v. 18); they were to *be prayerful* and *joyful* at all times (vv. 17-18); they were to *be merciful*, not returning evil for evil (v. 15); they were to *be encouraging* to one another (v. 14); they were to *be respectful* to their spiritual leaders (vv. 12-13); they were to just generally *be helpful* and *upbuilding* (v. 11); and they were to *be watchful* of the Lord's arrival (vv. 1-10).

Related to this event Paul indicated that there would be two responses: There would be the response of the children of darkness (vv. 3 & 7), who, in their drunken unbelief, would think that all was quiet and peaceful until overtaken by destruction; and there would of course be the response of the children of light (vv. 4-6 & 8-10), who, in their sober watchfulness, would be saved from destruction because they had armored themselves. So let's begin our study with...

Verses 1-2: Concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves know perfectly that the Day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

The Greek term for "times" here is *chronon* and refers to general spans of time within history, while the Greek term for "seasons" here is *kairon* and refers to specific intervals of time within those general *chronon* spans of time. (A more in-depth study of these two terms and how they relate to one another is actually an important endeavor, so you're encouraged to check out my passage studies on Acts 3:18-26 and First Peter 1:3-13 in which I spend considerable more time on these; also see some detailed info in Earle's *Word Meanings in the NT*.)

They didn't need for Paul to write some lengthy discourse about the Day of the Lord (or "The Lord's Day" as in Rev. 1:10) because they knew quite well it was coming like a thief in the night, meaning that its arrival would be a surprise. To them? No. Why? Because they knew to keep watch for it, of course! 😊

Verse 3: For when they say "peace and safety," then sudden destruction comes upon them as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they shall by no means escape.

The phrase "peace and safety" might be better translated in our vernacular today as "safe and secure" (cf. Earle); i.e., as lexicographers like Thayer indicate, it was a phrase related to the general feeling of no concern for their national or overall peace of mind that "all is well." But, as we know, just when men become all self-confident and cocky, that's when their guard is down and "the element of surprise" becomes most valuable in the hands of the enemy; in fact, the Greek word for "sudden" here means "totally unexpected," an idea which corresponds perfectly to the unanticipated (and undesired) onset of birth contractions. Speaking of his pregnant-woman illustration...

Not only do her contractions epitomize Paul's point of being surprised, but it also hints at two other concepts related to the coming of the Lord against unbelievers: It brings to mind that which is inevitable and that which would sadly include agony. And speaking of agony we must now ask:

Who are the "they" and "them" of this verse? Well, whoever they were was different from those meant by the pronoun "you" in verses 1-2; and Paul defined the "you" as "brethren" who accepted the return of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. So who else could "they" and "them" have been except those who weren't brethren and who therefore didn't believe He would come back? The point then is that the Lord's Day was only as a thief in the night to unbelievers, a fact that's supported by the following verses.

Verses 4-5: But you, brethren, are not in (engulfed by) darkness so that this day should overtake you as a thief would, for you're all sons of (genitive, belonging to) light and sons of (id) day; we're not of (genitive, belonging to) night nor of (id) darkness.

The Greek term for "darkness" is *skotos*, and it (along with its four related terms found 58 times in the NT) is used to refer either to actual darkness (such as in a pitch black night) or to metaphorical darkness, primarily meaning *ignorance* (such as when we say "Tom's so in the dark on this topic"), and sadly this ignorance usually leads to lives steeped in wickedness.

Due to man's nature (i.e. being created with free-will, etc.) the perfect law that God provided national Israel tended to exacerbate instead of counteract evil; all we have to do is just read Romans 7:7-25 (and do read it) to see the impossible situation in which a person with even Paul's intense love for Yahweh found himself.

I bring this up because the Law (tho perfect in/of itself), intensified darkness, meaning that, for practically everyone under law—even perfect law from God Himself, left man feeling totally defeated and unable to see any way out of his predicament of being incapable of avoiding wrong on one hand and being right in his relationship with his Creator on the other hand! THAT's what I call "darkness," folks! And...

This is why I believe that the revealing of the Law was done so by God within such a negative atmosphere, an atmosphere of "blackness and darkness" (Heb. 12:18); Paul called that time of law and what it gave birth to an age of darkness (Eph. 6:12; cf. Luke 16:8), and an affinity for it by its adherents only managed to blind their minds (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7-4:6; verses 4 & 6 even specifically refer to those who allowed their minds to be blinded by that law-age; otherwise, the Gospel's light would've shined God's glory upon them, that glory being His grace—His gift of eternal life thru Jesus apart from works of law).

Not only did Paul gratefully write in the AD 50s (in 2 Cor. 4) concerning the dispelling of that darkness through Jesus, but later, within spitting distance AD 70 (i.e. the time of the demise of Jerusalem with its temple and law) John, writing of the age when darkness was blinding people's eyes (1 John 2:11), wrote of it as being in the final stages of "biting the dust" when he said "the darkness is passing away" (vv. 8 & 17) and that ... *hallelujah!* ... it was in its "last hour" (v. 18). On the other hand...

The Greek term for "light" here is *phos* where of course we get our word "photo" which in turn is based in the Greek word *phos* from which we get our word "phosphorous," a chemical used in fireworks and matches to create ... light. ☺ In our text here...

Paul was obviously contrasting light with the darkness we just talked about; so if in this context Paul was indeed talking about the time of darkness of living under law, especially "the" Law with all its negative consequences in people's lives (and I think the fact that these brethren were being persecuted by Jews [2:13-16] substantiates this), then the light Paul brought up pictured the opposite—the time of living under grace with all its positive consequences, i.e. the age when all things related to fulfilling everything necessary for that grace age was finally and totally accomplished. See...

During Paul's time light was shining in darkness, but hadn't yet overcome it: A verse mentioned a moment ago (viz. 1 John 2:8) indicates that, at the time John was writing, light was breaking through so much so that it was causing the darkness to pass completely out of existence, leaving a kingdom full of light into which all may come and rejoice! And also as mentioned...

Paul spoke of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" and "the light of the good news of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4 & 6) right after speaking about how that those first-generation brethren were being transformed out from under Moses' veil of darkness and into the glory-light of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18), which means the same thing as when Paul wrote of "the inheritance of the saints in the light" and of their being "delivered from the kingdom of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's Son" (Col. 1:12-13). So...

The point I see Paul making was that these brethren had welcomed the light of the gospel (2:13), therefore accepting that Jesus was the promised Messiah who, *per the signs He provided in His Olivet Discourse* (Luke 21), would return to complete what He had begun relative to their salvation; this is why they "belonged to" the age of light, reminiscent of Peter's words when he wrote about the church then as being a light shining in a dark place until the day dawned and the morning star arose in their hearts (2 Pet. 1:19), i.e. until nothing but light was left on the kingdom scene (sort of like the kingdom having all the tares ripped out and the chaff all burned away per Matthew chapters 13 & 3). So...

Because these brethren no longer belonged to night and darkness, that is they no longer were ignorant of truth and the soon consummation of salvation, they would have no excuse (not that any excuse would matter) if the Lord's Day or the day of the Lord's coming would surprise them. However...

Not only was Paul teaching that idea, but he also made use of the opportunity here to transition into other ramifications of their being children of light.

Verses 6-7 (more literally than the NKJV): **Therefore may we not be [caught?] sleeping as the others, but may we be awake and sober, for those sleeping sleep at night, and those getting themselves drunk are drunk at night.**

So far Paul hasn't been talking about literal light, dark, day, or night, and I don't believe he changed gears here, but with the word "night" was merely making further use of his metaphorical analogy; thus it seems logical that he also wasn't talking here about literal sleeping or literal drunkenness or literal abstention from alcohol, but again was making further use of his metaphorical analogy. This therefore means that...

Paul was encouraging them to (regardless of whatever was to transpire in their Christian lives) hang in there, keeping clear and serious minds about themselves so that they wouldn't be drawn off (the) course (per Heb. 12:1); for if they didn't mind Paul's words, they would certainly drive off the road to the kingdom like a drunk or someone who fell asleep at the wheel, thereby finding themselves in the same sinking sandpit of the drunks, sleepers, and unbelievers of this passage.

Verse 8: But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and—as a helmet—the hope of salvation.

Since Paul chose an aorist past tense more literally saying, "having put on the breastplate and helmet," I personally think this verse would be better translated like this: "But since, having put on the breastplate of faith/love and the helmet of salvation, we are [soldiers] of the day, let's be sober-minded!" This sounds much like what Peter once said: "So gird up the loins of your mind and be sober" (1 Pet. 1:13a). See...

According to James MacKnight (who wrote a well-respected commentary on the NT back in the 1700s), "drunkenness in the day-time," says Raphelius quoting Polybius, "was reckoned highly indecent, even by the heathens." This is of course reminiscent of Acts 2:13 when the apostles were chided for being drunk at 9 AM, something that just was all but unheard of, especially in contrast to us today. So Paul was saying, "Just as folks wouldn't be caught drunk in the day-time, let us, who are of the day, not even act like sleeping drunks, but keep awake and alert to the signs that Jesus shared for us to watch for." Otherwise, and this is my query: If there were no signs of Christ's return, as some claim, then what was there to watch for? Besides that...

Notice how all the language in this passage indicates that Paul believed the Lord would return in the lifetime of those to whom he was writing, corresponding perfectly to his inspired choice of the first-person pronoun "we" at the end of the previous chapter: "we [i.e. out of you Thessalonians and myself] who are alive and remain till the coming of the Lord" (v. 15), and "we [i.e. out of you Thessalonians and myself] who are alive and remain shall ... meet the Lord" (v. 17). See, all the language from 4:13–5:10 (as well as throughout both of Paul's letters to them) was imminent language when speaking of the Lord's return.

The breastplate-and-helmet language took these brethren back to Isaiah 59:17 in which it speaks of the Messiah (the Leader of these brethren as I mentioned in relation to Hebrews 2:10 & 12:2 earlier) who, as the capt of an army, went into battle thusly clad; and, obviously, the army itself was expected to be clad the same way, with (as Paul called it in Rom. 13:12 in which he mixes the metaphors he used here) "the armor of light." (BTW, Paul was ending this letter the way he began it—with faith, love, and hope—and even in the same order [1:3].)

Verses 9-10 (slightly more literal): **God has not put us into wrath, but into the procuring of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that, whether we are staying awake or sleeping [when He comes], we might live together with Him.**

In case you didn't notice, when Paul mentioned salvation in verse 8, he spoke of it to them as the "hope" of salvation, implying (as he did in numerous other of his writings) that those of his generation had not yet attained to consummate salvation; now here in verse 9, based on what he had just said in that regard, he assured them that they had been called to be busy doing their part in procuring that salvation (cf. Php. 2:12 e.g.)—if they kept busy, there would be much less of a chance for them to be knocked off course. So if they held their own through thick as well as thin, i.e. remained faithful to the Lord, then He would gather them into His fold of safety from the wrath that He would pour out on His rejecters.

There's one question: Since it doesn't appear to correspond to the staying awake and sleeping of verses 6 & 7, what did Paul mean by "staying awake and sleeping" in verse 10? Well, we must go back to 4:13 where Paul began this extended section of Scripture, because verses 13-17 were speaking of those biologically dead in Christ as "asleep" or "sleeping," while the others in that passage who were awake were biologically "alive" in Christ. So...

After writing about those who in Christ were asleep and awake, he apparently saw an opportunity to capitalize on that language and encourage those who were physically alive in Christ during these latter years of persecution (2:14) to stay awake mentally, i.e. to retain their "first love" (cf. Rev. 2:4) or their determination to press forward to what they could see by the signs wasn't all that far away (cf. Heb. 10:25); in fact, in his second letter to them, he assured them that, when the Lord did arrive, He would give them rest from their troubles, while He would trouble those who wouldn't give them rest (2 The. 1:3-10), reminding them to not let anyone shake their faith (2:2), for the Lord would gather them to Him when He returned for them (2:1). So...

In verse 10 here Paul was harkening back to how he had begun this section in 4:13 telling them that, whether they were physically dead or not before the Lord returned, they, if they remained faithful to Him, could be assured that He would provide them with eternal life; a great verse with which to end this here was written by this same apostle to the Romans in 14:8: "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

{Tony E. Denton, 4/16/16; ASiteForTheLord.com.}