

Thessalonians, Part 11: God Has Not Destined Us For Wrath

1 Thessalonians 5:1 ESV (Pg. 574) Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. **2** For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** While 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. **4** But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. **5** For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. **6** So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. **7** For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. **8** But 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. **9** For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, **10** who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. **11** Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

- I. Paul begins the last chapter of 1 Thessalonians, by continuing to talk about Jesus’ second coming. He told them in chapter of the promise of Jesus’ salvation for them. Now he speaks of damnation awaiting those outside of Christ. Jesus appeared to be a suffering servant for mankind in a manger at Bethlehem. But when he returns he will be a judge, delivering God’s holy vengeance on the wicked.
 - A. We might wish that he would answer their questions clearly like wizard with a crystal ball, but Paul (like in chapter 4) addresses their concerns like a **pastor**, to encourage them. He begins this portion. **“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.”**
 1. They want dates and a timeline. What should they expect, and when should they expect it? The Thessalonians were not unlike many Christians today. Books predicting the details and chronology of the end are often best-sellers¹. The disciples asked for the same details from Jesus.
 2. On the Mount of Olives, they asked when the end was going to come about. But Jesus didn’t give them the specific answers they asked for. Instead, he told them: **Mark 13:32 ESV** **“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**
 - a) There may be a couple of reasons for not answering questions about timing. If people know the exact date, and it is **soon**, they might slip into slothfulness. “If Jesus is coming next week, why pay the bills? I’ll just wait for the heavenly bus to come pick me up!” We’ll see clearly in a few weeks, that this is exactly what many of the Thessalonians did!
 - b) Conversely, if you knew the return of the Lord may not happen for decades, or even centuries, why would you urgently obey all of God’s commands? You would rightly assume you had all the time in the world to pursue other, more worldly concerns instead of preparing yourself.
 - c) **2 Peter 3:3b ESV** **...scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”**

3. But the message of Christ's coming should have 2 effects on us all. We should be **ready**, confident that he could come at any time; and yet we should also be **busy**, diligently accomplishing his purposes in the world. **Luke 18:8b ESV "...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"**
 - B. So Paul doesn't try to supply more details than those he has already passed on to the church. They don't need more information, they just need to live in the expectancy and urgency of what they are sure of; the fact that Christ is returning! But Paul says there is a negative side of the "second coming coin".
- II. "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come **like a thief in the night**. While 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.**" Paul draws from Old Testament language² talking about the "Day of the Lord"; the final outpouring of God's righteous wrath on the wicked.
- A. The Day of the Lord was anticipated as a day of vindication for the righteous who have been faithful to God through trial and persecution³. It was also portrayed as a day of terror, as a just God poured out retribution on the wicked who had frittered their lives away in rebellion and mockery of his holiness⁴.
 1. Paul says that this day "will come as a thief in the night". The implication is that the Day of the Lord will be both **unexpected** and **unpleasant** for those who experience it. No one enjoys being robbed, and a thief never announces his intentions in advance of breaking into your house.
 2. This will not just be a "bad day" that you can power through! Everything will change suddenly and forever. It will be a day of pain and torment when all of the bills come due all at once. No unbeliever will escape God's holy wrath.
 - B. Paul proves just how unexpected this day will be when he tells us that the victims of it will be saying "There is peace and security", right before the hammer falls. **Matthew 24:37 ESV For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage (business as usual), until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**
 1. The spirit of "blissful ignorance" that is even now at work in the world will prevail until that last moment, and men and women, boys and girls, will never even see the destruction coming that will consume them in an instant.
 2. All the mockers, rebellious, apathetic, the hypocrites, abusers, users, the violent, and the lazy will be swept away in a flood of righteous fury.
 - C. Paul not only says that the day will come unexpectedly and unpleasantly like thief, but he also says that "sudden destruction" will come upon them like "labor pains come upon a pregnant woman". This speaks of inevitability. Once a woman's contractions begin, there is no turning back. That baby is coming!
 1. I also think that we should take notice of the words "sudden destruction", and consider what they might mean to the chronology of these events. Although some of you may disagree with me (and that's ok!), I have come to view this and other "end time" passages very differently over the years.

- a) I was taught to expect an initial, “secret” rapture of the church, in which Jesus would gather his church, followed by a 7 year period in which the Day of the Lord would unfold on earth over in a time known as the Great Tribulation. At the end of this time, we were told the Lord would return again (second coming), and punish the wicked, and set up his earthly kingdom. But this interpretation doesn’t strike me as “sudden” at all.
 - b) But I don’t see this in either this, or other key texts. What I see is a single, cataclysmic event, called interchangeably the return of the Lord, the second coming, or the “Day of the Lord”; a relatively short period of time when the Lord suddenly appears, gathers the church, as the wicked are **simultaneously** judged, followed by the establishment of his earthly kingdom, leaving the righteous amazed and the wicked devastated.
2. However, if you can’t see that, you are more than welcome to disagree with me. I promise that I will never contest your God-given right to be wrong.
- D. Regardless, Paul says on the Day of the Lord, “they will not escape”. There will be no pleading for mercy or forgiveness that will avail on that day. The demands of holy justice will be fully satisfied; and the death of Christ will be vindicated⁵.
- 1. All of villains throughout history that seemed to get away with their crimes , will now have to pay for their transgressions. Yet this will only be the beginning. They will not only pay for their sins; but answer for them as well.
 - 2. **Revelation 20:11 ESV** Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. **12** And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. **13** And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. **14** Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. **15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**
- a) We will all be judged; some by what is written in your own personal biography, the one in which every page is filled with the story of how you did what was right in your own eyes⁶, worshipping the idol of self.
 - b) Or you will be judged by Jesus’ biography; the one Book of Life. The one in which you are already dead, but your life is hidden with Christ in God.⁷
- III. It is important to note that Paul’s talk of the fate of the ungodly is not a rebuke, or even an invitation for the Thessalonians to repent. He assumes he is talking to people who (the majority of them at least) have put their trust in Christ. **“But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.”**
- A. The wicked who operate in spiritual darkness will be surprised and overwhelmed by this day. But those who have trusted Christ, though they may not know the exact moment, live in the constant awareness that these events will take place, and they focus their hearts and adjust their lives accordingly.

1. Followers of Christ don't have to live in fear of judgement, awaiting a day when we be judged by our own deeds on the scale of God's perfect justice.
 - a) To be a Christian, means we understand that all of our sin was already punished in the body of Jesus on the cross. While we may face God's good discipline from time to time, our fear of final judgement is over.
 - b) This causes us to look to the end of all things with hope and not terror. If you tremble when you think of Christ's coming, and the judgement that accompanies it, you may want to examine the validity of your Christianity.
 2. The awareness of Jesus' promised coming can fill us with joy, confidence and hope no matter what our present circumstances are. What a blessing and relief this must have been to the Thessalonians enduring persecution!
- B. By the contrast between light and darkness, day and night, Paul is telling the Thessalonians, "You have privileged information, and know something the world doesn't. You know how the story is going to end before the last chapter begins."
1. Imagine if in a moment of tragedy (fire, flood, etc.) all of your resources were wiped out: your home, vehicles, saving and retirement accounts, family heirlooms...everything! Imagine nothing is left but the clothes on your back.
 2. Now imagine that a week before this devastating event, you had received a certified letter from a lawyer's office in town saying that a rich uncle had passed, and you were to come **that very day** and pick up a check for one billion dollars. How would that news shape the experience of your losses?
- C. **1 Peter 1:3 ESV** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be **born again to a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4 to an inheritance** that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, **5** who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a **salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6** In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, **7** so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the **revelation of Jesus Christ**. This is the message of Christ's return! The promises of the gospel sustain us, knowing that "**what** it is now, isn't **all** it will be."
- IV. This should affect how we live. "**So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But 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."
- A. Unlike in chapter 4, Paul's use of "sleep" doesn't mean death, but the spiritual indifference and laziness that is natural to worldly people. He says people sleep and get drunk in darkness. He's talking about two different kinds of problems: to be **oblivious** to judgement, and to be **rebellious** to God's holiness.
1. People of the world, and the worldly people that infest the church, are spiritually sleeping, and are oblivious. Remember the thief? **Luke 12:39 ESV** But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.

- a) Spiritually oblivious people ignore the tranquilizing effect of their own sin, and find comfort in the sedative properties of mere religious observance.
- b) When they defy God’s law, they make excuses, or judge themselves against the standard of other people instead of God. But they will awaken when the trumpet of God announces that judgement day has come.
- 2. On the other hand, people may have heard the gospel of Christ, but have chosen to get drunk on rampant immorality or worldly philosophies that say these warnings are either metaphorical, or a myth. But a day is coming when they will be shaken to sobriety as the cry of God’s command is heard.
- B. But Paul says you and I are not to approach the Day of the Lord like this! We are to rouse ourselves from the sleep of unrepentant sin, and empty religion. We are to throw down our bottles of worldly values and thinking, and throw open the shades and walk in this world as the children of light and children of the day!
 - 1. Paul says we do that by putting on armor to protect the parts of us that are vulnerable (our hearts and minds). This passage is very similar to the one in Ephesians 6 that speaks of the “whole armor of God”⁸.
 - a) First, he says we put on a breastplate (which is designed to protect your heart) of faith and love. We guard our hearts by clinging to our faith in Jesus, and determining to love others no matter our circumstances.
 - b) Then he says our hope is like a helmet, which protects our head (or mind). This means the hope of ultimate salvation will keep you from going insane in this crazy world; when nothing makes sense. No matter how bad it gets, you have the assurance that God will have the last word.
 - 2. But also notice that for the third time in this book, Paul returns to the triad of foundational Christian characteristics: Faith, Love, and Hope. These are always the ingredients of successful Christian living.
- C. “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.” This is the great promise of the return of Jesus for those who have believed in his name! Wrath is no longer a part of the final picture for you!
 - 1. Believers who are awake (alive) will be changed in the twinkling of an eye and caught up to be with the Lord forever, ruling and reigning with him!
 - 2. The spirits of believers who have died (fallen asleep) will return with Christ to retrieve their resurrected, glorified bodies, and together we will serve the Lord in sinless eternal security and joy; and every tear shall be wiped away.
- D. As he did in our text last week. Paul concludes by reminding us of the great purpose of these passages: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” God’s intention in us knowing that he is coming is for us to encourage one another, calling each other to endure. He intends that we should face any trials or persecution with the knowledge that everything is about to change.

Benediction: 2 Peter 3:8 ESV But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. **9** The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. **10** But the day of

the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.**11** Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, **12** waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! **13** But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

¹ The Late Great Planet Earth, written by Hal Lindsey in 1970 sold over 28 million copies in 20 years (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Late_Great_Planet_Earth); Similarly the “Left Behind” series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins sold over 80 million copies; with seven titles in the adult series reaching #1 on the bestseller lists for the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind)

² Amos 5:18-20

³ Isaiah 27:2-13; Jeremiah 30:8-9; Joel 2:31-32; Obadiah 21

⁴ Isaiah 13:6-16; Joel 1:13-15, 2:1-11; Obadiah 15-20; Malachi 4:5

⁵ Zechariah 12:10-14

⁶ Judges 17:6, 21:25

⁷ Colossians 3:3-4

⁸ Ephesians 6:10-20