



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for July 4, 2010
Released on Wednesday, June 30, 2010**

"God's Plan for Salvation"

Lesson Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Background Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:28

Devotional Reading: Joel 3:11-16

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

1 But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you.

2 For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.

3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

4 But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.

5 Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.

6 Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

7 For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.

8 But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.

9 For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ,

10 Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.

11 Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to know Paul's description of the coming Day of the Lord and how to live in anticipation of that event.

Principle: to be aware that the children of light can look forward to the future with a sure hope.

Application: to urge believers to be wakeful and to seek to awaken sinners before it is too late.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 51

Place: from Corinth

The believers in Thessalonica were suffering a variety of temptations to abandon their faith. The Jewish community as a whole had rejected Paul's message of Christ (Acts 17:1-9). So the Jews who became believers faced continuing opposition from that community. Thessalonica was predominantly Greek, however, and not Jewish. The people worshiped the supposed gods on nearby Mt. Olympus. In addition, Thessalonica was a key Roman colony, devoted to the imperial cult of Rome. These Greek and Roman pagans exerted considerable pressure on the Christians there, pressing them to join in their worship of the gods and devotion to Caesar.

It also appears that people of influence, whether inside or outside the body, were causing the believers to doubt the prophecies of God's coming judgment. As a result some questioned whether Christ was returning to judge, so they began to flirt with loose living. Some worried that those who died before Christ returned would miss out on His kingdom (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Some feared that those still living would be trapped on the earth and caught in the crossfire as God vanquished His enemies. Others were so convinced that Christ would soon return that they no longer took any thought of the future and even quit working. Still others believed that Christ had already come and that they had missed out on it.

Paul wrote to these believers to empathize with their suffering, clear up their doctrinal confusion, and encourage them to remain firm in their faith. He reaffirmed the prophecies of future judgment, taught that Christ would return at an unknown time, and assured them that no one would be able to miss it. He then clarified that the faithful who had died and those who were still living would escape Christ's judgment on the wicked; both would gain entrance into His eternal kingdom.

On that basis, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to live modest yet active lives consistent with their salvation in Christ. Our text today picks up near the end of 1 Thessalonians as Paul finished clarifying the doctrine of the last days and commended the Thessalonians to live appropriately.

CHRIST WILL RETURN (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)

1. What is the meaning of "the times and the seasons" (1 Thessalonians 5:1)?

There was no necessity for Paul to write about the time and the characteristics of the Day of the Lord in the overall plan of God. He had instructed the Thessalonians very clearly on this subject (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1,2,5). They later became confused about it, but it was not due to a lack of teaching on the subject.

The "times and the seasons" are words associated with the end times (Acts 3:19-21). The pair of terms concerning time in this verse combine to point to the ultimate time in world history for which God's people have long been waiting: the day of the Lord. It is a continuation of the theme of Christ's return already introduced in 4:15. We see a similar pair of words in Acts 1:7, where Jesus tells the curious apostles that it had not been given to them to know the times and dates when Christ would return.

It is only natural to wonder and to ask when the day of God's ultimate salvation will be. Daniel wondered "How long?" (Daniel 12:6), as did Jesus' closest followers (Mark 13:1-4). When one has the luxury of consulting an angel or the Messiah

himself, one cannot help but ask the question everyone has been asking, in hopes that this exceptional figure might have inside information. Apparently the Thessalonians hoped that someone like Paul, who had personally encountered the exalted Christ, might know. But they are quickly reminded that “when?” is still the wrong question to ask.

Paul gets to the heart of the issue. The Thessalonians do not need the “when” question answered; they need to be reminded of the implications of the more fundamental truth that they already know.

2. What is the "day of the Lord"? (v. 2)

The *day of the Lord* is a phrase that points to God’s final judgment—a phrase with a rich biblical history (see Isaiah 2:12–22; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 30:2,3; Amos 5:18–20). In most cases, it concerns God’s wrath on His enemies. The Old Testament prophets saw this whole span of time as a period both of divine judgment and of salvation (Joel 2:28–32; Zeph. 1:14–18).

This focus on divine judgment suggests that the believers in Thessalonica are not simply curious about when they will be saved, but also anxious about being in the world when God’s anger is poured out on His enemies.

Even so, the answer they receive is no different from what Christ taught His followers (Matthew 24:43, 44; Luke 12:39, 40) and what His followers, in turn, taught others (2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). That day will come like a *thief in the night*. It will come suddenly, when it is least expected. It will come at a time when the people of this world are least vigilant and most ignorant as to what God is doing around them.

3. In what manner will this “sudden destruction” come upon men? (v. 3)

The bad news continues. God’s judgment comes when the people of this world think they have secured *peace* and tranquility for themselves. They are like the wicked of ancient Israel who cried peace when there was no true peace (Jeremiah 6:14; Ezekiel 13:10, 16; Micah 3:5).

The wicked have no clue when the hour of their *destruction* will come, but it will come. Just as the travail of labor pains is inevitable for a mother giving birth, so the travail of God’s wrath will be inescapable. Jesus, himself, used this metaphor to describe God’s judgment (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8).

Paul provides no particular details here about the nature of the final judgment. His concern is that the readers know it will be unexpected, unstoppable, and inescapable. This is bad news for God’s enemies.

BELIEVERS BE READY (1 Thessalonians 5:4–8)

4. What is the meaning of "the children of light" (vs. 4,5)?

At least part of the reason Paul provides no details about the coming judgment is that such details need not worry these believers. It simply does not pertain to them. They are dwelling on possibilities that should be of no concern to them. Paul uses a common metaphor for distinguishing those who do and do not have reason to fear the *day of the Lord*—that of *light* and *darkness*. (See Luke 16:8; John 12:35, 36; Ephesians 5:8–14.)

Children of the day live in the light, who is Jesus, and thus need not fear. Only those who live the *night* life, the life of darkness, are vulnerable to the intrusion of the *thief*. In Jesus’ teaching, walking during day or night was a powerful image for conveying rival ways of living (John 11:9,10). This image is particularly vivid for

those who live before the widespread use of electricity. Without proper illumination one is susceptible to stumbling and injuring oneself on rocks in the path, getting lost without the benefit of visible landmarks, or suffering the attacks of crooks who spring from the shadows to prey on unsuspecting travelers.

Paul feels no need to explain in great detail how to live in the light. These believers already know that. They need to be reminded of who they are in Christ. They are already *children of light*. It is pointless for those who travel only during the day to anticipate what it means to safely navigate the nighttime world. Dwelling on such matters reflects spiritual amnesia and should not be encouraged—not in Paul's day and not in ours.

Accustomed to Darkness

Nighttime satellite images of Earth show that South Korea is bathed in light, with its cities gleaming in the blackness, while North Korea is dark. But it's more than just the lack of *visible* light. Intellectual and moral darkness also covers the nation of North Korea. The government is one of the most repressive on earth. Radio and television sets are hardwired to receive only government propaganda. The government banned cell phones in 2004. North Koreans still have no access to the Internet—a source of information readily available in other impoverished countries around the world.

There is another significant contrast: the North is officially atheist—the last remaining Stalinist communist society. The South has known Christian influence for more than a century. The technological difference between the two nations illustrates the difference between spiritual darkness and light.

Scripture uses the darkness/light contrast frequently to illustrate the difference between Christian behavior and that which characterizes people in the world. Just as the citizens of North Korea are accustomed to darkness because they have never known modern lighting, many people the world over have lived in spiritual darkness all their lives and do not comprehend how the darkness affects them. Do we Christians show them the benefits of living in the light? —C. R. B.

5. What is a sober-minded Christian, and how does his or her lifestyle contrast to the unsaved? (vs. 6,7)

Believers should conduct themselves by living a lifestyle appropriate to their spiritual enlightenment. The words "sleep," "watch," and "sober" were used figuratively by Paul. "Sleep" denotes an indifference to the things of God. Paul's injunction points out that this attitude is not an option for believers. To "watch" means to be alert or vigilant in anticipation of the Lord's return and to live accordingly. To be "sober" means to be temperate or self-controlled.

A sober-minded Christian is one who is spiritually alert, calm, and steady while anticipating the future (1 Pet. 5:8). While the Day of the Lord will not overtake believers, they nonetheless must not adopt the same ethical behavior as those who will be caught unawares by the day.

Believers are contrasted to the unsaved, who are living in darkness and who are of the night. They are morally lax and live as though there will not be a future Judgment Day. The sudden and unexpected appearance of the Day of the Lord will catch them totally unprepared.

In everyday life, sleep and intoxication are usually associated with the night, not with the day. Both sleep and drunkenness render a person unalert to danger. So it

is with the unsaved and their lifestyles. It is natural for them to be indifferent to the things of God.

6. How does the Apostle Paul use a breastplate and helmet to illustrate Christian sobriety? (v. 8)

Paul left the discussion of being awake and watchful for the moment while turning to sobriety as a countermeasure to spiritual drunkenness. Believers belong to the realm of spiritual daylight and should therefore exercise spiritual sobriety.

The apostle made an illustration using two pieces of armor worn by a Roman soldier. His purpose was to depict Christian sobriety. The believer will avoid spiritual lethargy by clothing himself with the virtues the armor represents.

The first piece of armor mentioned here is a breastplate. In Ephesians 6:14 Paul spoke of "the breastplate of righteousness." In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, it is a "breastplate of faith and love." So what can be learned from a breastplate analogy? The Roman breastplate covered a soldier's chest, shoulders, and back. This protected most of his vital organs, especially his heart.

Faith and love, like defensive armor, protect our hearts, referring to our inner thoughts and the wellspring of our commitment to God. Faith in God's Word provides us with certainty in the promises of God and prompts us to do God's work. Our love for God is due to His redemptive love for us (1 John 4:10,19). His love sparks our labor for Him.

The second piece of armor mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 is the "helmet, the hope of salvation" (cf. Eph. 6:17). A helmet protects the head. Our hope is the confident expectation of the completion of our salvation when Christ returns (Rom. 8:23-25; Col. 1:5). The helmet protects our thinking from attacks on our acceptance of the guarantee of our salvation and the certainty of Christ's return.

The helmet encourages us to continue to live for Christ while we confidently watch for His return (cf. 2 Pet. 3:11,12; 1 John 3:1-3).

GOD WILL FINISH WHAT HE STARTED (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11)

7. What is included in God's plan for our salvation? (vs. 9,10)

Since the Thessalonians desire inside information about the day of the Lord, Paul shares the most relevant information they could hear about God's *wrath*. Yet this information pertains not to *when* but to *whom*. Those who have been clothed in Christ look forward to *salvation*, not wrath; to life with Christ, not fear of Him.

Believers have the hope of salvation because of God's appointment. He has not assigned us to wrath. Instead, He has assigned us to receive eternal deliverance from sin and judgment through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:9; 8:1). We have been delivered from "the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

Christ provided specifically for our salvation through His substitutionary death. He died in our stead, for our benefit (John 10:11; 1 Pet. 2:24). This is God's plan for our salvation, and it is the foundation for our commitment to worship and serve Him as Christians.

The fact that believers will *live* with Christ, whether awake or asleep, can be confusing (1 Thess. 1:10). In verses 6 and 7, wakefulness and sleepfulness represent godly and ungodly living. This leads some to surmise that Christ will save us regardless of how we live, as if the only relevant factor is whether God has

appointed us or not. Such a position undercuts the force of everything else we have read so far.

To get the context for this statement, one must go back to 4:13–15 and note that one of the questions that vex the Thessalonians is whether or not those who die before Christ comes will share in Christ's salvation. In those earlier verses, *sleep* functions as a metaphor for death.

Paul's point in this case would not be that moral living is optional. Rather, he emphasizes that Christ is in control of our salvation and that those clothed in Him have no need to fear.

8. What are ways in which believers can encourage each other? (v. 11)

With such future assurance of deliverance from wrath, believers have been given two important imperatives. We are commanded to encourage and to build up each other. The force of the word "comfort" is "to encourage." The Greek term it translates is *parakaleo*. Jesus said that His Father would send another Comforter (*paracletos*), meaning the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26).

The word "edify" means "to build up," as in constructing a house. This is one aspect of an extensive scriptural metaphor. This spiritual temple is built on the foundation of Jesus, the precious cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:6-8), and the apostles (Eph. 2:19-22; cf. Matt. 16:18; Gal. 2:9). Believers are its living stones (1 Pet. 2:4-5; cf. 2 Cor. 6:16).

These two imperatives are lifestyle characteristics, not one-time actions. We are to continually fortify and promote spiritual growth in each other (Eph. 4:12; Jude 1:20).

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** The Lord's coming is to be a present hope, not an abstract curiosity (1 Thessalonians 5:1).
- 2.** We must not be lulled to sleep by those who dismiss God's coming judgment (vs. 2,3).
- 3.** The Day of the Lord will come suddenly, but it should not surprise us (vs. 4,5).
- 4.** We should not focus on what the world treasures but on the hope of Christ's return (vs. 6,7).
- 5.** As we look for the Lord, we are to diligently prepare for spiritual conflict (v. 8).
- 6.** The sure hope of salvation is our comfort as the world awaits judgment (vs. 9-11)

CONCLUSION

The Right Questions

"When?" is such a tantalizing question! But it is clearly the wrong one. We humans simply prefer to know our limits. We want to know exactly how long we have to do what we want to do before we have to buckle down and do what others require of us.

Yet God would not have us play such games with Him. It is dangerous, indeed, to know when Christ will return. We might be tempted to pace ourselves when it comes to discipleship, to wait until the last minute before we "go all out" for Christ. Before then, we might cling to the toys of this world and lose ourselves in our own amusement.

So Scripture discourages questions about timing and replaces them with the challenge of Christian identity. Will we walk in the light of day? Will we encourage our brothers and sisters in the faith? Will we place our confidence in God's faithfulness to finish the work He began in us?

PRAYER

Patient God, we are a curious people. We're curious to know what You, in Your wisdom, keep hidden. Teach us the grace of humble ignorance. Teach us to accept the limits of our knowledge and to respect the depths of Yours. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

All we *need* to know is our true identity in Christ.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Glory to Christ**" and tells how Paul and his companions gloried in the endurance, patience, and faith of the Thessalonian Christians as they underwent persecution. Study 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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