

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 28 June 1998

No. T0013

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Studies in 1 Thessalonians: Day and Night - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

Day and Night

By the end of this little study on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28, I hope that you will be able to tell whether you are a child of darkness or a child of light. In particular, 1 Thessalonians shows us that the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ should have a positive effect upon Christian behaviour. The passage may be split into two main sections.

1. The Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11), and
2. Christian Duty and Discipline (1 Thessalonians 5:12-28).

1. The Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)

First, the Apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonians about the times and the seasons relating to the day of the Lord. Times relate to the lengths of the periods, and seasons speak of the kinds of events which characterise these periods. The day of the Lord is the next major prophetic event after the Lord Jesus Christ comes to raise the bodies of those who have died in Him, and to catch up to be with Himself both these and the Christians living at the time (as was considered last week). The day of the Lord follows this and is an extended period of judgement lasting over a thousand years in length in which the Lord alone will be sovereign.

The first phase of this day is called by different names in other parts of the Bible. These include - Daniel's 70th Week (a week of years) (Daniel 9:26-27), Jacob's Trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) and the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:14-28). It starts with the signing of an agreement between the Jews (who have abandoned their faith) with the godless Roman dictator of the time as predicted by Daniel 9:27. At this point a definite sequence of events will take their course. The first part of this period includes three and a half years of peace which is immediately followed by wars and terrible judgements from God. He will destroy the ungodly Gentiles and the unbelieving Jews, but He will save the faithful Jews and repentant Gentiles. There follows a period in which the Lord Jesus Christ will rule gloriously over the earth for a thousand years. He will reign in righteousness as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). At the end of that time there will be a final judgement of the wicked who have emerged during that reign and have, previously, only pretended to believe.

Paul did not have to write in detail about the Day of the Lord because it is outlined throughout the Old Testament. No doubt, Paul had explained these Old Testament Scriptures to the Thessalonians during his evangelistic stay.

Thief in the night

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul was not concerned with what would happen in this period as a whole. His interest focused on how it would begin. Therefore, he compared its arrival to that of a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Like myself, you may have experienced your house being burgled in your absence. The loss is minor compared to the feeling of insecurity that follows. But there have been many instances where thieves have broken into houses while the families were in and subjected them to bodily harm and mental torment. The horror of such an occasion haunts the memory from then on. So the term "thief in the night" highlights both the devastating shock of the moment, and the terror which accompanies it.

The unbelievers of this materialistic world will stand to lose everything they count as valuable in that day. It has been said, "It is the total loss of all that makes life worthwhile. It is the destruction, not of being, but of well-being."

Lasting peace

This devastation will occur at the very moment when people are repeating their slogan, "Peace and safety" (1 Thessalonians 5:3). It will seem that inward "peace of mind" and outward "world unity" has been achieved. Yet there can be no real and lasting peace in this world apart from that which Christ will bring in. He is called the "Prince of Peace" in Isaiah 9:6. This world crucified Him and has suffered wars and other turmoil ever since. The Apostle

likens the moment of destruction to that travail (or labour pain) which overtakes a woman in childbirth (1 Thessalonians 5:3). It begins unexpectedly. It cannot be prevented. It must run its painful course.

Caught up...

We thank God that true Christians will not be found on earth in that day. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:9 verify that they are taken before this wrath of God is poured out. Instead of being cast down in sudden destruction, they will have been caught up in sudden deliverance. Instead of undergoing intense suffering, the raptured believer is both comforted and joyful.

Sons of light

In 1 Thessalonians 5:4, Paul shows that God always makes a distinction between His people and the unbelieving world. The Thessalonians, unlike unbelievers, were not in darkness. They had the light of knowing God's will. They would not be overtaken by the day of the Lord as a thief. Paul writes: "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). The expression "children of light" or better "sons of light" shows that a person has the character of his origin just as a child takes after his parent. So these Christians were marked by godliness - for God in His nature is light. They are also called "sons of day". Just as light rules the day, so God ruled these believers.

What was true of them is also true of Christians in general. Paul writes, "We are not of the night nor of the darkness," changing the "ye" to "we." Therefore, 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8 speak of the conduct of Christians in their character as sons of light. They are encouraged to watch and be sober (1 Thessalonians 5:6). "To watch" (1 Thessalonians 5:6) is to make an effort to be alert to the dangers and the urgency of the time, and to keep oneself from the attacks of the world, the flesh and the devil. Such wide-awake watchfulness is maintained by persistent prayer and the regular reading of the Scriptures.

Sobriety

In this context, "to be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:6) is to be free from the influence of strong drink. It means that you stay in control. You could say that it is keeping your spiritual intelligence in the face of religious confusion, natural human reasoning and wickedness. It means that a Christian walks as Scripture directs. Some unbelievers, on the other hand, close their eyes to immorality and degradation. Being unaffected by them, they are said to "sleep" (1 Thessalonians 5:7). Others have no control because they are in darkness, that is to say, they have no true principles or power of guidance to which they may gear their behaviour. They don't know that they are out of control. They reel about like drunkards in the night.

The very fact that a Christian is "of the day" causes him to maintain a calm, but firm stance against the wickedness of the world. In order that he may do this effectively, he must put on his gospel armour.

The gospel armour

The first piece of the armour mentioned is the breastplate of faith and love (1 Thessalonians 5:8). The purpose of the breastplate is to protect his vital organs. These are the organs that maintain life. Faith and love are the two main marks of life in a Christian. Faith shows that he believes the truth. Love is part of God's nature. It always seeks the best for the good of its object. The Christian is to love God, love his fellow Christians and love people in general. Sadly, 1 Corinthians 16:22 tells us that unbelievers are cursed because they do not love the Lord.

The second piece of armour is the helmet (1 Thessalonians 5:8). This protects the head. It symbolises the Christian's sure hope of salvation. The ordinary man has no such hope, but the believer looks forward, with anticipation, to "that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Salvation here is that future deliverance for which the believer yearns at the coming of the Lord Jesus. On the one hand, it means that he will be rescued from the wrath of the Day of the Lord. On the other, it will mean the perfect redemption of his physical body (Romans 8:23) and his entire sanctification and glorification (1 John 3:3). This hope has a purifying effect upon believers.

Claim salvation

So God did not appoint us to wrath, but appointed us to the obtaining of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:9). God's appointment is the place which He has given believers in His divine programme of the ages. God's wrath against sin will, in no way, fall upon the Christian now or in the future tribulation period. All of God's judgement which should have fallen on the believer was poured out on Christ at the cross of Calvary instead. Nonetheless, the believer is responsible for obtaining salvation. This means that he has to claim it and take full possession of it. In the days of the

Wild West, there would be races to claim land by staking it out. Once claimed, then the land was cultivated. So it is with the Christian. Salvation is claimed through faith and then it is cultivated by experience. Put simply, the Christian claims the promises of God found in the Scriptures. However, let us never forget that Christ died to secure our ultimate salvation and that this full salvation is completed at the rapture. As this only depends on what Christ has done, then all Christians will have their part in that event. Hence, the concerns of the Thessalonians over their departed loved ones were unnecessary.

Waking and sleeping

There are two different views on the meaning of 1 Thessalonians 5:10. Both hinge on who are meant by those who “wake” and those who “sleep”. The first interpretation takes the meaning of “wake” as being those Christians who are alive until He comes, and the word “sleep” meaning those who have died. The second interpretation takes the word “wake” to mean those Christians who are alert to **His** coming, and the word “sleep” to refer to Christians who give little thought, if any, to the fact that He is coming. I prefer the latter, but whichever interpretation you take, you can know for certain that all Christians will live together at with Him at the time of the rapture (1 Corinthians 15:51). The departed will be raised in their new bodies. The living will have their bodies changed in the twinkling of an eye. Both will live together with Christ. Thus, each believer will share a glorious life in common with other believers and with Christ. They will be for ever with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17, 5:10). With this in mind, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to comfort and strengthen one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

2. Christian Duty and Discipline (1 Thessalonians 5:12-28)

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 might be called: ‘Christian Duty and Discipline’. Here we find Paul encouraging proper Christian behaviour. He begins by asking the Thessalonians to recognise and lovingly respect those spiritual men who not only took a responsible lead in the Thessalonian church, but also laboured for the Lord. Note that there is no indication that these overseers had actually been appointed at Thessalonica by Paul or any other Apostle. Recognition of them involved knowing them in a personal way as men qualified with spiritual strengths and gifts. This was not easy for the Thessalonians, who had all been saved at about the same time and may have known one another previously. The change from the familiar, everyday contacts to the spiritual relationships and responsibilities of the local church (or assembly) must have been difficult for them to accept in some instances.

Leaders

Also notice that Paul reveals that there is not just one individual leader over an assembly. He uses the plural term. Therefore, the idea of one-man ministry in any local church is false. The qualifications of such bishops or overseers are listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Their responsibilities were threefold.

1. They had to be those who laboured (1 Thessalonians 5:12). This word for “labour” means wearisome toil. It meant that they were closely involved with the work that went on in and for the assembly.
2. Such leaders were to be “over” their brethren in the running of assembly affairs (1 Thessalonians 5:12). They stood before them in order to give teaching and guidance, usually by example. They were not to behave like masters, but their authority was “in the Lord”. This means that they carried out their work in practical subjection to Christ.
3. They were to admonish their brethren when necessary (1 Thessalonians 5:12). This means that they had to correct them gently in matters relating to Christian living or public assembly life. Although it was frequently a thankless task, it had to be done in faithfulness to the Lord - and in love.

When Paul’s directions are followed today, then it should be easy for Christians to worship and work together. It is necessary, therefore, that leaders refrain from being high-handed and that their brethren refrain from being contentious. As one has said: “The assembly is no place for having our own way, but is rather the place where God may have His way through those He has placed in positions of oversight.”

Concern for one another

The Apostle then goes on to speak of general Christian responsibilities (1 Thessalonians 5:13-15). All believers in the family of faith must exercise a concern for one another (1 Thessalonians 5: 13). Each one had to be dealt with according to his needs. The unruly or disorderly Christian had to be warned (1 Thessalonians 5:14). These were people who were idle and meddled in the private affairs of others. The feeble-minded or better “fainthearted” (1 Thessalonians 5:14) were to be comforted in the same way that a father would comfort his children. Finding the Christian life difficult, they needed extra assurance and security. The weak were to be supported and helped whether the weakness was physical or spiritual. Patience was to be exercised towards all.

Retaliation

The Apostle then forbids any retaliation for evil which was done to them (1 Thessalonians 5:15). They were to reward evil with good, whether it was towards their fellow Christians or to unbelievers. We are reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus, "Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you" (Luke 6:27-28). The Thessalonians had to be particularly aware of this as they were undergoing so much persecution for their faith; it would have been all too easy for someone to take matters into their own hands. On the other hand, Christians were to follow that which is good, being kind to one another and to all men.

Rejoice

The Apostle then describes some of the aspects of personal Christian life.

1. First, the believer is to go on rejoicing always (1 Thessalonians 5:16). The Thessalonians, despite living with daily persecution could still rejoice. They knew that the true secret of joy was not in circumstances, but in Christ.
2. Second, the believer is to offer up prayer without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This is frequent, heart-felt prayer. The Thessalonians were to persevere in prayer, showing an ever-increasing dependence on God the Father. This is a sure sign of spiritual life.
3. Third, the Christian is to be continually giving thanks "in" everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). This is an occupation which shows real faith. No matter what comes along in circumstances, good and bad alike, Christians are to accept their lot with gratitude knowing that all things work together for good to them that love God.

All this was the will of God in Christ Jesus for the Thessalonian believers. In other words, all that was happening was in accord to His purposes. How true it is that

*"God works in mysterious ways
His wonders to perform."*

(William Cowper 1731-1800)

Do not quench the Spirit

In regard to assembly responsibility, the Thessalonian Christians are told: "Quench not the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). They were not to limit the activity of the Spirit in their public meetings. This activity has been hindered in some areas of Christendom by the one-man clerical system and dead ritualism, and, at the other extreme, by an untamed emotionalism. During the apostolic era there were many manifestations of the Spirit. Speaking in tongues and healings are two examples. These were sign gifts. They were allowed of God to verify that this new Christianity was His work. However, prophecy was another way in which God addressed His church. The prophet spoke the mind of God for that time in a way which was God-breathed. Therefore, the Thessalonians were ordered not to think lightly of prophesying (1 Thessalonians 5:20).

It seems that the prophet, in this primary sense, and the sign gifts, passed away with the completion of the canon of Scripture. 2 Peter 2:1 shows that the teacher has taken the place of the prophet. The teacher is still able to give a "prophetic" message, namely, the mind of God for the moment; but it is as explained from the Bible and not given in the God-breathed sense. Yet how many, just like the Thessalonians of old, are still demeaning the importance of the presentation of God's Word? Bible teaching is to them a boring occupation. How insulting to the Spirit of God!

Even in the light of this, the Thessalonians had to "prove all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). They had to determine whether or not any given prophecy was inspired. The reason being that there were false prophets even in that day. But do note that Paul emphasises the positive. The Christians were to hold fast to that which was genuine (1 Thessalonians 5:21), that which was good. Furthermore, they were to keep themselves away from any revealed form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Evil has a habit of showing itself in all sorts of forms which include various practices of immorality and the teaching of had doctrine.

Sanctified

It was Paul's desire that they be sanctified by the God of peace (1 Thessalonians 5:23). To be sanctified means to be set apart to the pleasure, possession and purposes of God. Practically, it meant living holy lives. They were to be sanctified in spirit, soul and body.

The highest part of man is his spirit. It is through the human spirit that a man is brought into touch with God. The soul is thought to be the part of man which embraces the emotional and psychological. Nonetheless, there may be an overlap between these two parts. The body is, of course, the physical organism of man. It is the channel through which the spirit and soul express themselves. All these parts are set aside to God in holiness. So, at the coming of the Lord Jesus, the entire person will be kept free of all blame. It is God who will ensure that Christians are sanctified in this way. And God is faithful! We can depend on Him to sanctify us in the same way, today. The result is peace.

Prayer

The Apostle then appeals to his Thessalonian brethren for prayer support. Paul experienced similar problems to us in his Christian service. Therefore, he pleaded for his brethren to keep right on praying on behalf of himself and those with him (1 Thessalonians 5:25).

He goes on to instruct that a holy kiss (1 Thessalonians 5:26), by way of greeting, be passed on to all - even to the disorderly. This showed his loving concern for every single one of them. He then asks that the whole letter be publicly read to all the holy brethren (1 Thessalonians 5:27). All should hear both the admonition, the doctrine relating to the Lord's return and, also, be assured of Paul's genuine affection for them.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

Finally, the epistle is concluded with the words: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen" (1 Thessalonians 5:28). There is nothing the believer needs more than the strengthening grace of the Saviour. It is confirmed to them by the full authority found in His Name, the Lord Jesus Christ. By the same Name it is given to us today. So let it be.

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