

Lesson 7

Like a Thief in the Night

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Introduction

As Chapter 5 begins, we see Paul moving from addressing misunderstandings about Christ's return to emphasizing its significance through a balance of two concepts: *the unpredictability of the timing* and *the possibility of delay*. Drawing from Jesus' teachings, Paul urges constant vigilance, advocating for a life reflective of the expectation that Christ could return at any moment and preparing for the possibility that it may not happen soon. Given the uncertain timing of Christ's return, these instructions are intended for practical guidance rather than speculative prediction. They focus on distinguishing ourselves from the world in conduct and outlook.

Paul steers clear of speculating about the exact time of the return or predicting preceding signs, arguing instead that one cannot be sure when Jesus will return. He also highlights the contrast between the Christian lifestyle and those in the world, aiming to shape how we live in the present in anticipation of eternity. While the previous discussion centered on *salvation associated with the Lord's return*, Paul now touches on the accompanying *judgment, reassuring believers that it poses no threat to them*. For Christians, Christ's return signifies deliverance and vindication. In contrast, it spells condemnation for those who have rejected Him and persecuted His followers.

5:1-4 – An Unexpected Return

Having shown how Christ's return comforts the readers' grief, he now shifts to a reminder of the broader impact their expectations should have on their behavior. Paul's conversation hinges on the premise that Christ's return is unpredictable, aligning with the sentiment expressed in Matthew 24:36. He emphasizes to the Thessalonians the importance of recognizing the nature of the era in which they live—an era marked by the initiation of God's end-time promises. They were now in the "last days," characterized by fulfilling these promises and challenges such as deception, unbelief, suffering, and persecution. Paul aims to clarify that these adversities signal the impending judgment awaiting those unprepared for Christ's return. This perspective helps the Thessalonians, and by extension every Christian for the remainder of time, to understand their experiences considering the anticipation of the final judgment (referencing 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and Matthew 24:4-14, 32-35).²²

The Lord's return is likened to a thief in the night is a recurring theme in the New Testament, appearing in texts such as Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, 2 Peter 3:10, Revelation 3:3, and Revelation 16:15. This widespread reference across various New Testament writings suggests that this teaching of Jesus was well-known and broadly shared among the early Christians. It emphasizes the suddenness and unforeseen nature of the Lord's return, portraying it as an event that will surprise those not his followers, leading to disastrous consequences for them. While the thief's arrival is secret and unexpected by the

unprepared, when it happens, it is unmistakably apparent and brings immediate and severe repercussions for those who are not ready.

Paul uses the expression “day of the Lord” to refer to Christ’s return (5:2). The phrase has its background in the Old Testament (e.g., Isaiah 13:6-16; Joel 1:15; Amos 5:18-20; Obadiah 15–21; Zechariah 14). There, it can signify any great action by God bringing blessing or judgment, especially God’s final and decisive act of judgment and redemption. Only Paul in the New Testament uses this specific phrase to refer directly to the return of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:2). The phrase would have been familiar to his readers, as would its association with judgment for unbelievers but a blessing for those in Christ.

In verse 3, Paul echoes Jesus’ teachings from Matthew 24:36-39, stressing that the return of Jesus will catch many off-guard, occurring during times that are considered *normal*. While the world views life from the perspective of “peace and safety,” -- a false sense of security -- a sudden and unavoidable “destruction” awaits, disrupting their tranquility and confidence.

This abrupt end is likened to labor pains in a pregnant woman—unexpected and inescapable. It highlights the suddenness of Christ’s return and the inevitability of judgment for those unprepared. Paul is not the only one who uses this imagery. It is also found in Jesus’ teachings, emphasizing the impossibility of escaping the impending judgment.

In contrast to those caught unprepared, Paul reassures the Thessalonians that they are not in darkness and should not be surprised by the “day of the Lord.” As people of light and truth, they are distinct from those unaware and should view the coming of the Lord not as a disaster but as a moment of fulfillment and blessing. The emphasis is not on knowing the exact timing but on being spiritually prepared and receptive to Christ’s return, highlighting a fundamental difference in outlook between Christians and non-Christians.

5:5-8 – Live Inside Your Identity

Christians belong to the light²³. The Semitic expression “sons of” was used to denote individuals characterized by a particular quality; hence, Paul identified Christians as “sons of light” and “sons of the day.” This phrasing confidently links them to the anticipated “day of the Lord” and sets them apart from the misconduct associated with darkness and night.

Affirming that Christians do not belong to the night or darkness emphasizes their distinct identity (5:5b). Christians must live in a manner congruent with their identity as children of light. Paul focuses on this with two practical implications for their behavior, suggesting that their actions should reflect their allegiance to the light of God’s truth.

First, one must be “**alert**” (5:6a). Christians are called to “be alert,” a directive that means “to be awake” or, more figuratively, to remain watchful. This concept is emphasized in Jesus’ teachings about His return, found in passages such as Matthew 24:42-43 and Luke 12:36-38, where the importance of being vigilant and faithfully serving in anticipation of the Lord’s return is highlighted. Paul extends this call for vigilance by contrasting believers with those “asleep,” meaning those unaware of Christ’s return. He

admonishes the Thessalonian Christians to stand against societal pressures that would lead them into immorality and self-indulgence, thereby maintaining their commitment to living out their faith in a manner that reflects their readiness for the Lord's coming.

Next, one must be “**self-controlled**” (5:6b-7). This translates to soberness, in contrast to drunkenness. While the advice may include a literal interpretation, Paul's message emphasizes a broader perspective. He advocates for a clear understanding and awareness of spiritual truths, achieved through a genuine relationship with God through Christ. Using the present tense for both “be alert” and “self-controlled” demonstrates the necessity for these actions to continue, highlighting the never-ending commitment required to maintain spiritual vigilance and discipline.

Sleep and drunkenness are often associated with the night. Here, Paul uses these terms to identify spiritual unawareness and a lack of discernment stemming from a lack of faith. Beyond this, Paul might be drawing a more profound contrast between Christian living and pagan practices, particularly those involving drunkenness during festivities honoring the Greek god Dionysus, where heavy drinking was sometimes viewed as a way to achieve divine enlightenment. In stark contrast, Paul highlights that the revelation experienced by Christians is distinctly different from these pagan rituals. This contrast may also subtly refer to Jesus' teachings, particularly the example of the unfaithful servants who indulge in drunkenness in Luke 12:45, further emphasizing the call for Christians to live in sharp contrast to such behaviors, characterized by spiritual vigilance and clarity.

Living soberly entails a serious, balanced, and steady approach, focusing on maintaining proper priorities. Being sober is like being alert; the concepts are nearly interchangeable. While sleep and drunkenness symbolize a lack of awareness of spiritual truths among those associated with the night, alertness and soberness characterize those of the day as attuned and responsive to spiritual realities. Both sleeping and getting drunk are things generally done at night. Sleeping refers metaphorically to *passive indifference*, getting drunk, and *active sin*.

In verse 8, Paul draws off the imagery of someone in the military. The Christian life is like a soldier on duty, emphasizing the necessity of vigilance and protection in spiritual armor. We need to be prepared for spiritual battles against temptation and wickedness. The armor includes the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation, representing essential virtues of Christianity: faith, love, and hope.

Faith involves trusting God's nature, power, promises, and plan. It acts as a shield against temptation by affirming God's trustworthiness in all circumstances. It counters sins like worry, lying, and adultery by reinforcing trust in God's provisions and wisdom.

Love, described as the inner lining of the breastplate, signifies a deep affection and devotion to God. It deters sin by building a desire not to grieve or offend Him. Genuine love for God naturally leads to obedience, fulfilling God's law.

Hope, represented by the helmet, looks forward to the future aspect of salvation—glorification. It focuses on the promise of eternal glory and transforming our mortal bodies into glorified ones like Christ's. This hope guards against temptation by keeping us focused on the ultimate reward of our faith.

The interconnection of faith, love, and hope is crucial; weakness in one can diminish the others, making us susceptible to sin. Only by maintaining these virtues can we stand firm against spiritual challenges, embodying the light and truth of God in a world of darkness.

5:9-11 – Our Unique Destiny

Scripture starkly outlines two eternal outcomes: judgment for the wicked, resulting in eternal separation from God in hell, and salvation for those in Christ who are spared from wrath due to their faith. God's sons and daughters are characterized by their faith, love, and hope, virtues that safeguard them against spiritual darkness and the final judgment.

Paul teaches that God's wrath is reserved for the final judgment of the wicked. In contrast, God's children, destined for salvation since the foundation of the world, are assured of their salvation through Christ's atoning death. This salvation encompasses justification, sanctification, and ultimately glorification, exclusively accessible through Jesus Christ. His substitutionary death ensures that we will not endure God's judgment or condemnation (Romans 8:1), emphasizing the delivering power of faith in Christ.

In verse 11, Paul reinforces our dependence on one another, urging those in Christ to encourage and support one another with the assurance of salvation and the hope of eternal life with Christ. Mutual edification is vital for maintaining faith amidst uncertainty about the volatility of our world.

Ultimately, every person faces only two possible fates: eternal damnation for those who reject Christ and eternal bliss for those who embrace Him. Christians are assured a place in God's everlasting kingdom, a realm without night, illuminated by God's presence, where they will reign with Him forever. This part of 1 Thessalonians offers both a warning against unbelief and an invitation to embrace the light of Christ's salvation, promising eternal fellowship with God for those who choose faith over darkness.

What's In This for Us?

Constant Vigilance and Preparedness: In an uncertain world, believers are called to live consistently, reflecting a lifestyle that anticipates Christ's return at any moment. This mindset involves actively engaging in faithful service and avoiding spiritual complacency, mirroring a soldier's readiness on duty. This approach prepares believers for the unpredictability of Christ's return and distinguishes them from the spiritual indifference prevalent in broader society.

Spiritual Discernment: Paul's emphasis on being "alert" and "self-controlled" encourages us to cultivate spiritual discernment, enabling us to navigate the complexities of our time—a time marked by the fulfillment of God's promises but also by challenges like deception and persecution. Such discernment involves a deep understanding of spiritual truths and a commitment to living out these truths every day, ensuring that we remain sensitive to spiritual realities rather than succumbing to the moral and ethical lapses characteristic of those distanced from God.

Brotherly Support and Encouragement: Recognizing the importance of mutual support within the local church, we must encourage one another, especially in times of doubt or fear regarding the future.

This involves reaffirming the assurance of salvation and the hope of eternal life with Christ, building a culture of edification that strengthens individual and collective faith. Such encouragement is crucial for maintaining a positive outlook amidst the trials and uncertainties of life, reminding us of our shared destiny in God's eternal kingdom.

Embracing a Distinct Identity: The contrasting destinies of eternal damnation for those outside of Christ and eternal bliss for the Christian highlights the importance of embracing our identity as a "child of light." This identity, characterized by the virtues of faith, love, and hope, offers protection against spiritual darkness and guides us in living a life that aligns with God's plan. By understanding and acting upon our unique destiny, we can navigate the temporal world with an eternal perspective, ensuring that our lives reflect the power of Jesus' atoning death and the ultimate promise of glorification.

Conclusion

In navigating the complexities of Christian faith amid the world's uncertainties, this lesson from Paul guides us and fills our hearts with hope. It stresses the importance of vigilance, spiritual discernment, and edification from others and embraces our distinct identity as God's children. The unpredictable timing of Christ's return calls us to live each day in readiness, reflecting a life deeply rooted in the virtues of faith, love, and hope. These virtues prepare us for the eventual return of Christ and set us apart in a world often marred by spiritual indifference.

Paul's teachings remind us that, as believers, we are not destined for wrath but for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. This assurance should not lead to complacency but to a life marked by constant alertness, moral integrity, and mutual encouragement within the local church. By living out our faith with conviction and support for one another, we can stand firm against the challenges confronting us, confident in the promise of eternal life with Christ.

Ultimately, the message of vigilance, preparedness, and community support culminates in the assurance of our unique destiny. This destiny goes beyond the temporal and ushers us into the eternal presence of God, where night no longer exists, and His glory illuminates every moment.

For Discussion

1. How does the unpredictability of Christ's return influence your daily life and decision-making as a Christian?
2. How can believers maintain a state of vigilance and preparedness without falling into anxiety or fear about the future?
3. Discuss how the concept of living as "children of light" in a world often characterized by darkness can impact our interactions and relationships with those around us.
4. Reflect on the importance of faith, love, and hope as the "armor" of a Christian. How do these virtues protect and guide us in our spiritual journey?
5. How does understanding our distinct identity as believers destined for salvation change our perspective on suffering, persecution, and challenges in this life?
6. In what practical ways can we encourage and support one another within the Christian community, especially in times of doubt or fear regarding the end times?
7. Consider the balance between living with the expectation that Christ could return at any moment and the possibility of His return being delayed. How does this balance affect our long-term commitments and plans?
8. Discuss the role of spiritual discernment in navigating the "last days" characterized by deception, unbelief, and moral decline. How can we cultivate such discernment?
9. Reflect on the contrast between the eternal destinies of believers and unbelievers. How does this contrast motivate us to share the gospel with others?
10. Explore the implications of Paul's reassurance that believers are not destined for wrath but salvation. How does this assurance influence our understanding of God's character and response to His judgment?

²² Christians have been in the “last days” since the establishment of the church in Acts 2. Rather than referencing an distant time thousands of years in the future, the last days are the last dispensation of time or “the Christian age.” Biblically, the term is never used as to give any indication of the imminence of Christ’s return.

²³ To be in the light is to be in God’s truth, as seen throughout the scriptures (examples include Psalm 27:1, Isaiah 9:2, and John 1:4-9).