

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 (ESV)

**1 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.**

In 1972 a Christian film came out based on this passage. It was called a thief in the night. It was based on a dispensationalist futurist biblical view. The thief, Christ, came back and secretly raptured all the believers from earth in order to avoid the 7 year tribulation. The punch line was, you don't want to be left behind do you? A lot of conversions were attributed to that that movie. And most people who are believers and are over 50 have seen it.

What we will see this morning is that the meaning of our text does not support such a view. We saw last week that Christ's return will be visible and audible. This week we will see that that the thief, in this instance, primarily returns to reign judgment on the wicked. The surprise is not presented as a good surprise where Christ is scarfing up people into heaven for a part 2 to happen later. The surprise is a fearful one for those who are in living in darkness and are sleeping spiritually and are living unaware like a drunken person.

Context matters.

**1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.**

The times and the seasons. What is this talking about? Evidently the Thessalonians are looking for specific details. They want details that would allow them to determine when Christ is returning.

The “times” are likely referring to a length of time. The “seasons” are probably the sequence of events. The phrase, itself was probably used commonly to describe the timing and events preceding the coming of Christ. So we could paraphrase the question that the Thessalonians are asking. Paul, please tell us how many years and what events will surround the return of Christ.

Have you ever noticed that these same questions are very often the primary focus of many of the books written by those with a futurist view of Revelation. They try to tell us how to figure out who the Anti-Christ is. They try to calculate the years. They focus on the things that are happening in relationship to the timing of the Lord’s return.

Certainly there are prophecies that will be fulfilled. And we should read them and know them. But we make a mistake when they take center stage in our zeal to live for Christ. Paul could have gone to the book of Daniel and started laying out his theories about what the prophecies mean and what they correlate to. But he did not. I would guess that Paul had a better understanding of those prophecies than we do. But he wouldn’t bite. That should tell us something.

He did say, again, that there was no need to go any further on this topic. Now what is this day of the Lord?

If you follow this phrase throughout the Bible you will find it is generally describing the overthrow of God’s enemies. Its focus is not as much on the **good things** that will happen to the **righteous** but the **bad things** that will happen to **the wicked**. Isa 2:12, 3:16-24, 13:9-11 etc 1 Cor 4:3,

In reality, part of the good that will happen for believers is that all those who are not in Christ are against Christ. And all that are against Christ are removed. We cannot have an eternal life in the way that we want it, we cannot have it the way Christ describes it, if that reality has both friends and enemies of God living together. In the day of the Lord, God is pictured rescuing His people by destroying their enemies. We need to keep this in mind as we look at our text.

**2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.**

This translation is very good in translating it “fully aware”. It is more than just hearing a concept.

I had a pet peeve in the job I used to have. Our department was known for providing end users the best instructions for doing tasks. We made the

instructions nearly dummy proof. You look at the picture and then you do what it says. There was no question left unanswered. Well, we would often send out these instructions and then two weeks later we would get a phone call from someone who didn't pay any attention to the instructions we sent them. They took no effort to use what we gave them. And then when they needed to learn something, they put the burden back on us. They wanted us to do their work for them.

I would guess Paul had to be feeling some of that in this text. You can almost hear him saying, C'mon guys. You know this. And you have got to know that now you aren't even asking the right questions. I taught you what you needed to know. So go by it.

Now, look very carefully at what Paul says next.

**the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.**

**\*\*\*Judgment comes suddenly and unexpected to the unbeliever.**

Thief in the night. Does that phrase ring a bell? This was a direct quote from teaching that Jesus did.

Matthew 24:43 says

**43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**

Let's back up and read this whole teaching of Jesus because this is what we can assume that Paul had already taught the Thessalonians.

Matthew 24:36–44 (ESV)

**36 “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. 37 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, 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. 40 Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. 42 Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44**

**Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**

You don't have to read this long to get the main points. Christ, even if He could have, was not going to tell His disciples WHEN He is going to return. In fact, this passage does a lot to say that there are more **unknowns** than **knowns** in His return. What will be happening when Christ returns? Life as usual. They are making meal plans and cooking them. They are kicking back and relaxing and having a drink. They are planning weddings and getting married. They are mocking people who believe God. There is nothing that will **key in the untrained observer**. It will be on a day just like any other day.

The element of surprise is intentional. God wants it that way.

I think that is because what we do when no one is looking is what we really are. And God does not want it to be otherwise. We are told to live by waiting. Every day is to be a day where we know Christ could show up suddenly today. So we live by faith. We continually work out our salvation. We are watchful. So when Christ appears, it will certainly be a surprise, but not an **unlooked for** one. It is kinda' like me coming home from fishing. Carla is reasonably certain that I will return. But when I return is usually a surprise.

Also there is

**Acts 1:6–7 (ESV)**

**6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.**

So the day of the Lord will come in such a way that it will be a **surprise** to the **world** that it **happens at all**, and somewhat of a surprise to **Christians** as to **when** it happens.

Now are there no clues as to when? Yes. And they seem to be the kind of clues that are best understood right as they are happening.

Here are two.

**Matthew 24:14 (ESV)**

**14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.**

Something that will be accomplished prior to the end is that the **Gospel** will go to **every people group**. As we see missionaries reach those unreached groups, and as the number of unreached people groups gets smaller and smaller, we know the time is very short before Christ's return.

And we also have this sign.

## 2 Thessalonians 2:3–5 (ESV)

**3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?**

There is an anti-christ coming. He will be the embodiment of all anti-christness. We have always had individuals who represented the **anti-christ** spirit. These are people who are attempting to do the same kinds of things that the devil wants. They are exceptionally evil and are effective at getting people to follow them. I think of Hitler as one of these. But this guy will be **THE** anti-christ that the devil will prop up and use and empower. He will be the **most purely evil** and most **effective** and most **politically powerful representative** of the devil.

To him, there is only one god to be worshipped and it is **him**. He will be **blatant** in his defiance of God and his demand for worship. I think when that quality **is revealed**, it will be unmistakable to believers and he will seem like a godsend to the world. He will have the world's political power behind him, but that will not be enough. He will demand to be worshipped. And it says he will take a seat in the temple of God. There are two options here. Either Israel will rebuild the temple. And he will **sit** in that temple. Or this is referring to **the church**, since **we** are the current temple of God. He may try to set himself up as a spiritual leader, and the true church will vehemently reject him. And that would lead to great chaos and persecution.

It looks like Paul thinks this last sign will be the most obvious sign that the end **is very very near**. There are other prophecies we could look at, but none of them answer the questions the Thessalonians were asking in a way that would give them exactly what they are looking for. The timing of the end is unclear and it is supposed to be unclear for now.

OK, let's go back to our text.

**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.**

Some scholars believe that the Roman government promoted itself to its citizenry by saying that Rome was the **source of peace and security**. The

idea was being sold that if people will only give themselves over to Roman rule, they will get peace and security as a result.

The Roman government wasn't the only government that sold itself as the answer to what humans need. Ours is doing the same thing. But government will **never save us** from what we **most need saved from**. It didn't then and it doesn't now.

So people are saying peace and security, they're saying, everything is ok. All is good. We are in a good spot. The future looks promising. Not only are they **NOT** expecting something bad to happen. They are expecting **good things** to be in their future.

And what happens.

Sudden destruction from the hand of God.

**\*\*\*Judgment is inevitable to the unbeliever.**

It is interesting that Paul chose labor pains as his illustration. One thing is for sure with labor pains. There is no going back. When the real labor pains start, an expectant mother does not say, Oh, I think I would rather go shopping than have this baby today. No. She is powerless in this process. The inevitable result will be that a baby is born or life will end. That process is beyond **her control** and it will **completely control her**.

I think that is the point about labor pains. It is the beginning of an **unavoidable inevitable** life event. Once started, there is no time to change one's position or one's mind. The expectant mother is pretty much helpless in avoiding what is going to happen to her.

A non believer, like an expectant mother, will not escape what is about to happen to them. And in the case of the Lord's return, the judgment of God is what will happen. It is too late. There are zero alternatives.

**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.**

Notice here that it says "in darkness". Paul is talking about a state of being. And there are only 2. A person is in darkness, they are under the power of sin, or they are in the light, they are under the power of Christ. And that state will determine both **your path** and **your destination**.

The people of the light are living in a way where they are **looking forward** to **Christ's coming**. It is not only something they **know** will happen. They **want it** to happen. They are **counting on it** to happen. The sooner the better. So it might **surprise us**, but **not** like a thief would. Our surprise will be on which

exact day it happens on. But there will be no surprise about what will take place on that day. We don't know **how**, but we know the world will be judged by Christ's hand.

**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.**

This was probably a saying, a truism in Paul's day, like a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. "Those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night." Obviously this is not totally true all the time. People sleep in the day and get drunk during the day. But that is the nature of a proverb. They are generally true. And Paul uses the saying to emphasize his point.

And his point is this.

We should live congruent to our state. Since we are of the day, since we are children of light, we ought to live like it. This isn't talking about being literally awake and literally sober. Naturally, it has to be **at least** that. But it is much more. It is a mindset we are to have because of the change that God wrought in us.

We need to be people who are **always looking** and **always thinking**. Those are the things that people who are awake and sober are enabled to do.

### **Keep awake and be sober**

To sleep means to live as if there will never be a judgment. To keep awake, or as other versions say, be watchful, means to live a sanctified life with an awareness of the judgment day. William Hendriksen says this:

**To be sober means to be filled with spiritual and moral earnestness, being neither overly excited on the one hand, nor indifferent on the other, but calm, steady, and sane (cf. 1 Peter 4:7), doing one's duty and fulfilling one's ministry (2 Tim. 4:5). The sober person lives deeply. His pleasures are not primarily those of the senses, like the pleasures of the drunkard for instance, but those of the soul. He is by no means a Stoic. On the contrary, with a full measure of joyful anticipation he looks forward to the return of the Lord (1 Peter 1:13). But he does not run away from his task! Note how both here and also in 1 Peter 5:8 the two verbs to be watchful and to be sober are used as synonyms.**

*William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, Exposition of I-II Thessalonians, vol. 3, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 125.*

**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.**

Do you see the mention of faith, hope, and love again in this verse. Paul uses this trio several times. It is **at the core** of the **heart** of every Christian. We cannot be Christians without these things growing in us.

Now Paul just told us to be looking and thinking. Now he changes imagery to where it becomes a military duty. We are putting on our **defensive battle armor** as a **sentry**. As one **standing guard**. Our watchfulness must be applied to our enemies attacks.

**Breastplate of faith and love.**

This breastplate is protecting our vital organs. It is essentially protecting our hearts as Christians. It is interesting here that **active faith** and **love** are our defense. It is our **active faith** and **love** that protects us. That is a bit odd. Wouldn't it seem like these should be for **advancing on enemy territory**? But Paul knows that the best defense is a good offense. We love our enemies. We believe God's promises. And the more we are attacked, the tighter we cling to these things. We respond with faith and love to secure our defense. What is the opposite of **faith and love**? **Unbelief and selfishness**. And even though that is our fleshly natural response to normal life, those responses leave us unprotected.

**for a helmet the hope of salvation**

As this **sentry** standing guard and living vigilantly, what protects your mind? I am not sure that anything can help us while under attack more than this idea. When Christ returns, it is for the judgement of the unbelievers. But it is also for the **glorious salvation** of God's children.

If we focus on our troubles, we will never see them as light and momentary. We cannot. Because the troubles are real. And if our focus becomes to describe them in the greatest detail, we are going to get the wrong perspective. Our troubles will become bigger and badder than the bigger reality. When we focus on **our salvation**, they take the perspective they should have. What is a **year of trial** compared to an **eternity of bliss**? Hope in **salvation** puts the toil and the struggle and the trials **into perspective**. It does not deny their existence. It simply reveals how worth-it following Christ is, no matter **what** the temporary cost.

This salvation has a positive and negative slant. We are **saved from our sin** and **the wrath of God**. We are saved **FOR** life with our savior forever in a state where there is nothing to impede our constant joy. Our salvation is **full** and it

will be **complete** when we see Christ. We now **have** the salvation through Christ. We are **in possession** of it. And we right now **have life with Christ**. It is truly the best life we are capable of on earth. But even better is coming.

**9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,**

Remember what the day of the Lord is all about. It is about **wrath** to the person who **is not in Christ**. If you are **in Christ**, you have an amazing destiny. This salvation that is our hope is **what we are destined for**. So Christ will come like a thief in the night, but we are not destined for any harm on that day. Our future is all good.

The word **obtain** might be misunderstood here, except that it is coupled with the **means** for **how** we obtain it. It is obtained **through the Lord Jesus Christ**. We get, it in the **future** through what **Christ** did for us **in the past**.

**10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.**

This gives us the details for how we obtain salvation. It is not obtained by our effort. It is obtained by **Christ's death** and is maintained **by His life**. We need not fear death. We need not fear the future. We just need to **pull our view back** from time to time. Our tendency is to focus on our moment of time. Our minutes today **loom large**. The events of today seem like the only events that matter. We tend to judge all of life by them. But Paul calls us to zoom out, not in.

This is the big picture. This life is short. If you are children of the day, your destiny is certain. Your reward is forever. When Christ returns, if you are **IN HIM**, you will surely be **WITH HIM**. The judgement of the day of the Lord is not intended for you. Salvation is.

**11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.**

Are fears **looming large** in your life?

Is your hope **waning**?

Do you seem to lose more battles than you win?

Are you facing something that seems too difficult for you?

Be encouraged. If you are in Christ, **you are not in darkness**. You are a child of the day. God did not appoint His children for wrath? **Punishment** is not what exists around the corner. No salvation is. And any trials may seem long. But in the big picture, they are just a blip.

So hang in there. Don't lose hope. **Reason** is on the side of **perseverance**. Whatever you are facing is **worth it**. It might feel like Monday, but **payday** is coming.

That is the encouragement that is found in our text. We, of all people have reason to **keep on keeping on** because our hope is certain in Jesus Christ. In closing, this passage paints a picture of two different kinds of people. The first are the people **who do not know Christ**. They live oblivious to the things of Christ. They are **living in this world** and their sights are on **what is to be gained in this world**. They live **unaware** and they are, even more importantly, unprepared. **Inevitable swift judgment** will fall upon them on a day just like today, an ordinary day. If you are not **in Christ** this morning, if you are not **certain of your salvation**, today is the day to **MAKE sure**. If there is ever an event you want to spend your life preparing for, this is it.

The second kind of people are those who **are** prepared. That is Paul's point to the Thessalonians. And how do we prepare? Do we pull out our charts and paperbacks on prophecy? Well, that is not the route that Paul took.

Look at Paul's focus. It was not on **speculation** on when Christ returns but **preparation** for when Christ returns.

So how do we prepare?

First we make sure we are in the right state. We need to make sure we are children **of the light**. We need to make sure we are **of the day**. We need to make sure we have obtained salvation through the death of Christ and that we are currently living with Him. We need to be **rock solid sure** that we are in Christ.

Second, we need to **live congruently** to our state. We need to be aware of what is going on in our lives. We need to be **alert** and **watchful** and **clear minded**. The need to think right and live right. And that means a battle for our souls will continually be waging. We must cling to and apply our **faith, hope and love** that empowers us to overcome our adversaries. We need to rest upon and utilize the resources given to us by being in Christ.

Third, we need to cling to **the hope of Christ's return** as the answer to our **life's greatest needs**. When the government says you can trust us for peace and safety and prosperity, we say in our hearts, "No. That is a false trust. My King is returning. I will place my hope and trust in Him." When our lives are hard we say the time is short. My Savior will return soon. When our brothers and sisters are struggling to hang in there, we remind them of our sure hope of rescue. And we need to offer this message of hope to anyone who does not

know Christ. If they will respond to Christ by placing their faith in Christ, they too can have this hope.