

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 11

The Day of the Lord

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1. Review 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. What is the *importance* of the general resurrection of the dead to Christian theology? What *comfort* does it give?

The centrality of the general resurrection is related to the *hope* it undergirds amongst believers. A proper biblical anthropology recognizes the nature of humanity as both physical and spiritual, mortal and immortal, and that we are not truly “human” without both elements. The effect of death, to tear apart that union, is countered by the hope that, at the return of Christ, those who are “in him” will be restored to a perfect complement of body and soul. Thus, the resurrection, which follows after the example of Christ himself, is *essential* to Christian theology, and it must be recaptured as one of the central tenets of the faith.

2. (a) In analyzing 5:1, what *question* have the Thessalonians asked of Paul, via Timothy? From 5:11, what is he *trying to do* in answering the question?

Based on the language Paul uses about “*times and seasons*,” it would appear that the next logical question coming from the Thessalonian believers was: *when* will Christ return? Knowing that he will, the *obvious* next question would be as to *when* we might expect that to occur. So, based on the statement at the end of the paragraph, it would appear that Paul is simply attempting to give some “*encouragement*” to the believers in regards to this question, especially as it relates to what the believers are to be doing in the meantime. Note: Paul does not answer this question *directly*; he does not attempt to “lay out” a timeline that the Thessalonians should be looking through. Rather, he addresses *what we are to be doing in the meantime*.

- (b) What is “*the day of the Lord*” (see also Matthew 7:22; 12:36)? How does this fit with 4:13-18?

The term “*day*” is a general word that can have multiple meanings: it can mean a single, literal, 24-hour period (i.e., one calendar day). It can mean a longer period of time, expressed as a single unit (i.e., a period in history; e.g., the seventh day of creation, which extended beyond the act of creation into history). Or, as in this case, it can refer to an expected event; a specific time (in the future) when an event takes place. The day of the Lord, then, in this context, is the *Parousia*, the return of Christ, the specific time when Jesus returns to the earth, along with the events that will accompany it (i.e., the resurrection of the dead, the judgments, the destruction of the wicked, the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth, the new kingdom, etc.) The specific nature of the return of Christ and the resurrection accompanying it is described in 4:13-18; Paul simply “pulls back” from that specific event to refer to the *entirety* of the return of Christ; the day of the Lord is the *totality* of Christ’s eventual return.

- (c) How does Paul *describe* the coming of the day of the Lord? What three (3) *examples* does he use to visualize its arrival (see 5:2-3)? What is his *point* in these?

Paul visualizes the return of the Lord as an *unexpected* event; an event that cannot be *predicted* as to its actual date of arrival. Not that the Parousia is “unexpected” in that Christians are not waiting for it. Rather, since no one knows *precisely* when it will occur, the event will come upon the world “when it is least expecting it” (per se). Paul uses the examples of a thief in the night, a time of security and prosperity (where nothing bad is expected to happen), and a pregnant woman suddenly going into labor. Although everyone *inherently* knows that things can and will happen, their arrival is “surprising” because they cannot be predicted accurately. Paul’s point is that, although Christians inherently know Christ is coming back, they do not know *when* exactly, thus they are to be prepared for his arrival *at any moment*.

3. (a) From 5:4, what does it mean that the Thessalonians are “*not in darkness*?” How does Paul use this metaphor about how the Thessalonians are to be *living*?

Darkness is often pictured in Scripture as a lack of knowledge; being “in the dark” is to be ignorant of what has been made known or what can be known. The believers in Thessalonica have been made aware of the fact that Christ is going to return to establish his kingdom, thus they cannot claim to be “unaware” of this reality. Like a man preparing his home to protect against a thief, who could come at any time, so the believer is to be doing what is necessary *now* in anticipation of the return of Christ. In other words, Christians *know* that Christ is coming back, and when he does so, he will be expecting to find them seeking their sanctification and being obedient to him in all things, doing the works that he has established for them to do as a part of being his own.

- (b) Who are the “*children [or sons] of light*” (see 5:5) What does it mean to be “*of the night or of the darkness*,” in this context?

The children of light are those who have heard the message of the gospel and understand it; they have understood, by virtue of their regeneration and effectual calling, what the truth is about life in this world and about what it means to know God through Jesus Christ. To be a “*child*” of light is to be one born from light, to be one who is, by nature, a descendant of the nature of that light. The believer is such a person: one who is born again by the light of God’s revelation, and now lives as a “container” of that light, knowing the truth of what God has revealed and passing that along to others (see 3c below). To be “*of the night*” is to be one still floundering around in a state of *ignorance*: unaware of truth, unaware of the things of God, filled with sin and guilt, and still fully under the wrath of God who calls all men to come to the light.

- (c) Compare 5:5 to Luke 11:33-36. What does Jesus mean to have your “*whole body ... full of light*” versus having a body “*full of darkness*?” What do light and darkness *symbolize* here?

Light and darkness are New Testament metaphors involving the nature of *knowledge*, specifically, the knowledge God has revealed into the world about who he is and who we are. Light is revelation of truth, specifically the truth of sin and death and the work of Christ; darkness is simple the continuing ignorance of the natural human condition, unaware of what God has made known, either purposely or by nature. To have one’s whole body “*full of light*” is to be one whose nature is fully established and continues in the revelation that God has made known in the world. Such an individual is born under that light; he or she is resurrected from the darkness of falsehood and rebellion to a life *knowing* the truth of who he or she is before God and what God has done in Christ Jesus. Such a person then *lives* according to that light: he or she strives to *know* what God has revealed more and more, and then becomes a “beacon” to others about what has been revealed. A body “*full of darkness*” is a life still in ignorance; a life that continues in its natural state of hostility towards God and love of the world. Such a person *despises* the light because it reveals the true nature (and destiny) of such a person.

4. (a) Consider 5:6-7 and the metaphor of “*sleep*.” What does Paul *not* want the Thessalonians to be doing as they wait for the day of the Lord?

Sleep, here, is a picture of *laziness*; of not doing what one should be doing in anticipation of the day of the Lord and his return. Drunkenness is similar: “*escaping*” from reality through the use of chemicals that dull the senses and cause one to “*forget*” what is real. In noting the reality that Christ will return *unexpectedly*, and that the Thessalonian believers *inherently know* this and its accompanying responsibilities, Paul now encourages the church to *be awake and active*. Not to become lazy or complacent, or to “*ignore*” what is coming (i.e., to be drunk), but to pursue full obedience to Christ in sanctification, striving to do all of what Christ demands of those who belong to him as they await his return.

(b) Compare 5:8 to Ephesians 6:13-18a. What does each element of a soldier's armor *represent*?

Paul expects Christians to be like good soldiers, following the orders of their commanding officer *even when he is out of sight*. The metaphor applies to Christians in that they, too, must continue to act like good soldiers before Christ, knowing that he might show up to "inspect" them at any moment. So, Paul uses this metaphor as a picture of what it means to live the Christian life. Here, he speaks of putting on the "*breastplate*" of faith; the central shield of a soldier. The believer is to go out into the battles of life wearing a shield of faith in Christ, so that no matter what comes against him, he stands firm in his trust that Christ will see him through. The believer is also to put on a "*helmet*" of the hope of salvation, a covering over his head (i.e., a full knowledge) that he has been set apart by Christ and bears in himself the full hope that this life, although difficult and leading to death, is not the final act. Paul expands this metaphor significantly in Ephesians 6, adding a belt of truth (i.e., a waistband girding up our most vulnerable areas with truth), a breastplate of righteousness (i.e., a shield over our heart of the righteousness of God in Christ), shoes of readiness (i.e., the "mobility" of moving through life with all we have been given in Christ), a shield of faith (see above), a helmet of salvation (see above), and the sword of the Spirit (i.e., the word of God given to us that we can use as an *offensive* weapon against those things that would attack us).

5. (a) From 5:9, what does it mean that God has not "*destined us for wrath*?" According to Romans 8:29, to *what* has God destined the Christian?

To be destined for wrath is to have the outcome of our lives to be one of everlasting rebellion against God and to experience his rejection of us for that rebellion. The wrath of God is the fullest sense of God's *reaction* to sin: not only does such rebellion against his law anger him, but it also causes him to "cast away" everything that persists in rebellion. The destiny of humanity, in general, is wrath; by virtue of Adam's sin, all humanity is born in a natural state of rebellion against God. The corruption of the *Imago Dei* by virtue of the Fall makes all men guilty before God and inclined to sin; we are born into this world as rebels against the law of God, for we *naturally* desire to be God. Thus, all humanity is destined for wrath; it does not require any *specific* action (or inaction) on the part of a human being for God to "react" to him or her in disgust and anger. We *prove* we deserve this destiny as soon as we make a conscious choice to sin, and do not attempt to "change" that nature within us. However, for those whom God has regenerated and effectually called to himself by faith in Christ, a new destiny awaits; such individuals are no longer inclined to rebellion, but to obedience and love of God and his law. The new destiny of such individuals is to be conformed to the image of Christ himself, the perfectly obedient One. The destiny of the Christian is *holiness*; the goal of God in his decree to save is to draw forth a people from the destiny of wrath into a new destiny of being made perfect and righteous in his sight, an action accomplished by the decree of the Father, the sinless life and atoning sacrifice of the Son, and the regenerating, calling, *and sanctifying* work of the Spirit in the life of the elect.

(b) Paul writes (in 5:10) that, in this world, we are either "*awake or asleep*"; what are these two states, in this context? What does it mean to *truly be awake*, and to "*live with him*?"

In this context, and harkening back to his discussion in 4:13-18, Paul is probably referring to the states of either being alive or of having died in Christ. The goal is to "*live with him*," so the living are to pursue the same state of knowing Christ intimately, just as those who have gone off from this life do. To be *truly awake*, Paul contends, is to fully understand what it means to be called by Christ from darkness to light, from rebellion to obedience, from wrath to love, from death to life. The Christian is to live with the fullness of understanding of what God has done, to celebrate the hope that comes with knowing the day of the Lord is imminent and that the resurrection of the dead leads to an eternity of physical perfection. To "*live with him*" is to walk in the new relationship that the Risen Christ has with his people, to enjoy all that he is as the King of kings, and serve him with great gladness, knowing that our obedience will be rewarded and our love for him will never go unnoticed.