

EXEGETICAL PAPER: **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11** (NIV based)
by David M. Coddington

The end-times events and the return of Christ have fascinated Christian minds for centuries. A key text in understanding those events and how Christians should prepare for them is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. In these verses, Paul is confident that his readers will be prepared for the sudden coming of the Lord because of their righteous character. Paul can be confident because of his experience with these Thessalonian believers. In Acts chapter 17, he preached to the first converts in Thessalonica and founded the first church there. There is some debate about the accuracy of 1 Thessalonians because of the connection with 2 Thessalonians and Acts.

In order to understand Paul's familiarity with the Thessalonian believers, we must look at Paul's foundational work in Thessalonica. Paul traveled from Philippi to the city of Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. The events are recorded in Acts chapter 17. Paul came into the city and for "three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). After these three weeks, many of the Jews, Greeks, and leading women came to faith in Christ (Acts 17:3-4). Unfortunately the Jewish leaders became jealous and rose up against Paul and the believers (Acts 17:5). They charged some of the believers for usurping Caesar in front of the town authorities and Paul had to flee Thessalonica (Acts 17:6-7,10).

There is some debate about the seeming contradiction between this account in Acts 17:1-10 and information in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. It is clear from 1 Thessalonians 5:12 that a viable church was established, and many of the people turned from idol worship (v.1:9). This spiritual transformation was so great that news spread in every direction (vv.1:7-9). Also, Paul and Silas had enough time to instruct the new church, as seen in verses 5:1-2. This seeming contradiction can be explained by either considering the "three Sabbaths" as only referring to the number of occasions that Paul went into the synagogue, or that about a month was sufficient for all of these events to occur during which time perhaps Paul had preached a sermon to them on this topic (Hendriksen 7).

The section in focus here, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, sits at the very end of the book, right before the final salutations and commands. In the preceding paragraph, verses 4:13-18, reassurance is given to the believers about those who have died. The return of Christ is described and then there is a transition into chapter 5 about the suddenness of the day of the Lord that was just described. Following this section, the book is closed out by the giving of final exhortations and commands.

There is some debate about the corresponding passage in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Some scholars propose that the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians were authentic except for 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. They see a contradiction between the sudden nature of the return of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and the signs that are described in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. This position is untenable for several reasons. It is clear from Jesus teaching in Mark 13:14-37 that there was no problem for early Christians to accept the tension of the immediate return of Christ and the signs preceding His return. In addition, the surprise of the return of Christ described in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 applies only to those who are blinded by sin (Wanamaker 17).

The outline of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 is very simple. Verses 1-3 deal with the day of the Lord; verses 4-8a address the spiritual readiness of the believers; and verses 8b-11 wrap up the section with the hope of believers. The foundational verse of the passage is verse 1, "Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you". In the following sections, Paul explains why he does not need to write to them and exactly what "times and dates" he is referring to.

In verse 5:1, the phrase "about... we do not need to write to you" is used for the third time (c.f. vv.4:9,13) to introduce a change in topic (Wanamaker 51). The topic is related to the preceding passage; however, the intent is to bring out a specific encouragement and application for the believers. It is interesting that in the Greek the phrase "ho chronos kai ho kairos", that translates as "the times and the seasons", is used (Strong's #3588, #5550, #2532, #3588, #2540). The *ESV (English Standard Version)* translates the Greek words "ho kairos" as "seasons", but that does not bring in the way that "kairos" is primarily used. The usage of this Greek word "kairos" does not refer to a season such as summer or winter; rather it usually refers to a significant period of time that is either past, present, or future. In the Book of Romans, Paul primarily uses "kairos" to explain that Christ's work and death were at the proper time. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). In the Book of 1 Corinthians though, "kairos" takes on an eschatological meaning. "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes" (1 Corinthians 4:5a). Paul specifically uses these words to introduce the topic that he is going to expound upon. In fact, the plural nature of both "chronos" and "kairos" implies that he is bringing all of another Greek word 'parousia', the "presence, coming, arrival" and return of Christ to the mind of his readers, which he then elaborates on (Zodhiates #3952 p.1123).

Paul makes a confident statement in verse 1, "about times and dates we do not need to write to you". Paul has two reasons in mind to give him the confidence to make this claim. First, Paul personally taught the Thessalonians (Acts 17:1-10) and knows that they have been instructed properly. Second, he knows that those true believers have been redeemed from their ignorance and are now able to see the truth; this will become clear in verses 4-5. Finally, Paul explains in the next verse 2 that there is no need to write, "for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night".

Paul is confident that the Thessalonian believers know the true nature of the day of the Lord. The language of "the day of the Lord" originated in the prophets of the Old Testament when they prophesied about the day of God's wrath and victory poured out on the people of the earth. "See, the day of the Lord is coming -- a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger..." (Isaiah 13:9a-b). Paul alone, except one use by Peter, brings this language into the New Testament to refer to the triumphant return of Christ where He judges unbelievers and rewards those who have been faithful to Him (1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:2).

Paul is personally confident that the Thessalonian believers know that the triumphant return of Christ will happen suddenly like a thief in the night. As Gene Green points out, the metaphor of a thief in the night leaves room for signs that may precede the event, as in the discussion with 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, as already mentioned. The metaphor does emphatically explain that it is impossible to predetermine the exact time that Christ will return (Green 232). Thieves steal into a house without sound or warning. Christ will return in the same way.

In addition to the unknown time of Christ's return, people will be powerless to escape that and subsequent events that are directly implemented or orchestrated by God. "While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" - verse 5:3. As will be explained in the next verse, this does not refer to believers but rather unbelievers. Unbelievers will be deceived and believe that they are safe and secure. Unfortunately they are very wrong. Their experience is compared to that of labor pains of a pregnant woman. Labor pains are very intense and painful. They inflict a pregnant woman without mercy or warning.

Fortunately, true believers do not need to be afraid or caught unaware by the return of the Lord. "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief" - verse 5:4. "Darkness", or the Greek word "skotos" (Strong's #4655), is rich in figurative meaning and use in both the New and Old Testaments. Paul uses "skotos" 12 times in his writings, and three meanings appear. "Darkness" is a state of sin that someone can be in (Ephesians 5:8), "darkness" is an atmosphere of the power of evil (Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:13), and "darkness" is an evil that makes things hidden (1 Corinthians 4:5). All three meanings of Paul's usage of "darkness" are applicable. The term "in darkness" in 1 Thessalonians 5:4 refers to the fallen state of man before being reborn in the spirit, in which sin fills unbelievers, has power over them, and blinds them from the truth of God. Unlike the unbelievers who will be caught unaware and powerless in their darkness, true believers are "sons of the light" (v.5:5) and have redeemed sight that is able to accept the words of God and be prepared for His Son's return.

This line of thought is continued with two analogies in verse 5:6, "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled". This is an interesting exhortation. This idea is repeated and elaborated on in verses 7-8a. It appears then that believers can fall back into their old pattern of thinking characterized as being asleep or drunk. People who are asleep do not have any sight or interaction with the world around them, and drunk people have a twisted perception of that same world.

An interesting reason is provided for not falling back into the old way of thinking, "...And those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled..." - verses 5:7-8. The attitude of drunkenness and sleeping are incompatible with the righteous nature of the true believer. We have been redeemed and made to be children of the light. Paul uses first plural hortatory subjunctives during this whole section, transitioning from "You... are not in darkness" (v.4) to "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep..." (v.6). Paul uses this technique to include himself in this and to make the command more of an encouragement than cracking the whip on the Thessalonians. The use of the hortatory subjunctive rather than the imperative may also indicate that a less-harsh command style was chosen.

In the final section of this passage, the exhortations are brought around to the redeemed position of believers in Christ. Believers are to put on the breastplate of faith and love as well as the helmet of the hope of salvation because of what God has done for them. "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" - verse 5:9. A price has been paid to bring believers from the darkness into the light. Because of that, we are to put on the armor, or keep in mind our

faith, love, and salvation. In light of all of this, believers are to “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (v.11).

In conclusion, a positive approach is taken to remind believers about the nature of Christ’s return and how they should prepare and respond. Believers should be prepared for the unscheduled return of Christ because of their foundational knowledge and their redeemed nature. Believers will not be surprised or powerless to escape the wrath like the unbelievers who live in darkness. God destined us to be children of light who are paid for by the death of Christ. In light of our new nature and the work of Christ, we must be vigilant to keep alert and ready for the return of Christ. Even 2,000 years later, believers today can be reminded of their position in Christ and prepare themselves for His return. This is not a solitary effort; we must strive to encourage each other and keep each other awake for the return of Christ.

Works Cited:

Bible. *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007.

Bible. “The Holy Bible: New International Version.” *The Bible Library CD-ROM*. Oklahoma City, OK: Ellis Enterprises, 1988.

Green, Gene L. “The Letter to the Thessalonians.” *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Hendriksen, William. “First and Second Thessalonians.” *New Testament Commentary*. Banner of Truth Trust, 1972.

Nestle, Eberhard, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland, and Barbara Aland. *Greek-English New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.

“Strong’s Greek Dictionary.” *The Bible Library CD-ROM*. Oklahoma City, OK: Ellis Enterprises, 1988.

Wanamaker, Charles A. “The Epistle to the Thessalonians.” *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2013.

Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992.

Copyrights:

Scriptures taken from Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc®

Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Copyright © 2019 David M. Coddington and Mel W. Coddington, and permission is hereby granted that this document may be used, copied, and distributed non-commercially to non-profit organizations, individuals, churches, ministries, and schools worldwide, provided the copies are distributed at no charge and retain this sources documentation as supplied herein. This document is not for sale, resale, or for use as a gift or premium to be offered in connection with solicitations or contributions.

File name: 1Thessalonians5_1-11-Exegesis.____ (.htm, .rtf, .doc, .pdf)

Translation used: NIV, quoted or referred to in various places within this document

Source: www.BelieverAssist.com