

An outline of 5:1–11

Verses 1–3 address the day of the Lord

Verses 4–8a treat the need of vigilance in light of that day

Verses 8b–10 speak of how a Christian can prepare for the day

Verse 11 reinforces the need of mutual encouragement, functions as a conclusion, and makes a transition to the next section

5:1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.

5:2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

“Now” (δέ *de*) in 5:1 introduces a new topic related to the subject matter of chapter 4. In 4:14–18, the coming of Christ was viewed from the perspective of salvation; in 5:1–11 it is viewed from the perspective of judgment. Chapter 4 was instruction concerning the dead in Christ; chapter 5 is instruction to the living.

In chapter 4 the Thessalonians were concerned that those who had died prior to the Lord’s return would miss out on something that the living would experience. Paul had put that notion to rest by telling them that when the Lord returns, the dead in Christ will rise first. But it appears that the Thessalonians were also worried about “the day of the Lord” which coincides with Christ’s coming. Perhaps they were thinking that if they knew when these events would take place they could prepare more adequately for them.

Regarding times and the epochs, Paul had no need to write anything (5:1), for they knew “full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” (5:2). The point is that the time of the parousia (Christ’s coming) is uncertain.

No one knows the time of the Jesus’ return. Jesus had even said that He did not know the date of His coming; only the Father knew it (Mk. 13:32). Later He told the apostles, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Our ignorance of the date is expressed in Jesus’ words, “the Son of Man will come in an hour when you do not expect Him” (Matt. 24:44).

In the Old Testament the expression, “the day of the Lord” was used by the prophets when speaking of both near historical and future eschatological events involving God’s wrath.

Day of the Lord prophecies found fulfillment in various ways. These included (1) the Assyrian deportment of Israel ca. 722 BC (Amos 5:18, 20), (2) the Assyrian invasion of Judah ca. 701 BC (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11), (3) the Babylonian exile of Judah ca. 605–586 BC (Isa. 13:6; Ezek 13:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; Zeph. 1:7), (4) the Babylonian defeat of Egypt ca. 568 BC (Ezek. 30:3), (5) the demise of Edom ca. 845 BC (Obad.1–14), and (6) the eschatological worldwide judgment of God’s enemies (Mayhue, MSJ 22/1; Spring 2011; 65–88). Although judgment stands out, it should be noted that the day of the Lord, at

times, also resulted in salvation and blessing to the people of God (Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 9–10). Paul's following discussion about night and darkness demonstrates that worldwide judgment is intended; "they," upon whom destruction will come suddenly (5:3), is the entire unbelieving world.

OT verses that show the day of the Lord is a day of judgment

- Isaiah 13:9–11: "Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless."
- Joel 1:15: "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty."
- Zephaniah 1:14–18: "Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly; listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner towers. I will bring distress on men so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; and their blood will be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the LORD'S wrath; and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth."
- Included are also Isa. 2:12–21; 34:1–8; Ezek. 30:30ff; Amos 5:15–20; Joel 2:1

OT verses that show the day of the Lord is a day of blessing

- Joel 2:31–32: "The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls."
- Joel 3:14–18: "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon grow dark and the stars lose their brightness. The LORD roars from Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth tremble. But the LORD is a refuge for His people and a stronghold to the sons of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain. So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more. And in that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills will flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah will flow with water; and a spring will go out from the house of the LORD to water the valley of Shittim."
- Malachi 4:5: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."
- Included are also Obad. 17–21; Zech. 14:1–21

Thus, the day of the Lord is not a 24-hour day but a period of time related to Christ's second coming that includes the judgment of the unbelieving and blessing of the saved. This twofold significance (judgment and blessing) can also be found running through the Pauline passages mentioned below (Wanamaker, 179).

On a final note, when the phrase appears in the Old Testament, "the Lord" is clearly a reference to God; however in the New Testament, early Christians felt that it was natural to substitute "Yahweh" with "Christ" whom they identified as their Lord (thus, "the day of Christ"—Phil. 1:10; 2:16; "the day of Jesus Christ"—Phil. 1:6; "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"—1 Cor. 1:8; "the day of our Lord Jesus"—2 Cor. 1:14; "the day of the Lord"—1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 1 Cor. 5:5; "the day of the Son of Man"—Lk. 17:24, 30; but also "that day"—2 Thess. 1:10; the "last day"—Jn. 6:39f. ; "the great day"—Jude 6). In other words, the NT authors saw nothing inappropriate in applying things said of Yahweh to Christ.

Both the return of Christ and the day of the Lord are said to come when people are unsuspecting and unprepared; they will come like a thief in the night.

- Matthew 24:43–46: "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes."
- 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."

5:3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

Paul begins by explaining the unbeliever's relationship to the day of the Lord. The unbelieving have no concern about God's judgment. They feel no need to prepare. They hear no alarms warning them to repent. They live in a fantasy, a state of false security, where they assure themselves that they are safe and at peace. The words remind us of the false prophets in the OT who assured the people that they had nothing to fear despite the moral rot that characterized them and their society (Jer. 6:14; 8:11; Ezek. 13:10–16; Mic. 3:5; Marshall, 134). But this is a fatal delusion; "destruction will come upon them suddenly *like labor pains . . . and they will not escape*" (5:3; Isa. 13:8–9; Jer. 4:31; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9).

When the time has come for what is in the womb to come forth, the travail of birth cannot be avoided. There will be no warning. Any effort to flee will be futile.

***5:4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief;
5:5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;
5:6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.***

“But you” (5:4) contrasts the Thessalonian believers to those in verse 3 who are in darkness and saying “peace and safety.”

Darkness is the atmosphere in which the unbelieving live and move (Acts 26:18; Ro. 11:10; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:13; 1 Jn. 1:5, 6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Darkness can refer to ignorance (mental darkness—Eph. 4:18; Ro. 1:21; 2:19; 1 Cor. 4:5), or to sin (moral darkness—Ro. 1:21; 13:12; 1 Jn. 2:9, 11). In general terms it symbolizes alienation from God (Job 22:9–11; Psa. 27:1; 74:20; 82:5; 112:4; Isa. 2:5; 9:2; 60:19ff. Prov. 4:18ff.). Believers are not in darkness; rather, every believer is a son of light and son of day (5:5).

Light is often associated with God’s revelation (Lk. 2:32; Jn. 1:4–9; 8:12; 1 Jn. 2:8) and righteous behavior (Matt. 5:14–16; Ro. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:14). Christians will not be overtaken by the day because they are sons of the day and sons of light. We have been transformed by the new birth and belong to the light. Believers live in the sphere of righteousness and salvation; they also “live in the light of divine revelation and do what is pleasing to God” (Marshall, 135).

In short, Paul assures all believers that as children of the day *they are already prepared for the day of the Lord*. They possess the quality of light and live in the sphere of light so they are prepared for the age of light. What they are will carry them into the age to come. The day of the Lord will not surprise them like a thief (even if it is at an unexpected time), because they are not in darkness.

However, there are also moral consequences (or, logical consequences) to being sons of light. These are introduced in verse 6: “so then (since we are all sons of light and sons of day) let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.”

“It is common for the New Testament to urge believers to do what they have already started to do at conversion or to be what they have already become” (Marshall, 138). Sons of day should “be what they are”; that is, they should display the characteristics of someone who is active in the daylight hours. They should not be asleep but should be alert and sober (5:6).

We can do nothing to prevent the burglar from coming, but we can avoid the surprise if we are awake. “Sleep” in verse 6 is not a metaphor for death (as it was in 4:13–15), but a figure of spiritual insensitivity; it is the characteristic activity of the unsaved. Those who are asleep are unaware of what is happening. Those who know that the day has already dawned (1 Jn. 2:8) should be awake, alert, and watchful. Watchfulness is not just being aware of dangers to avoid, but also actively looking for Christ’s return.

We should also be sober. Of course, Christians should never get drunk, but here drunkenness and soberness are metaphors. Soberness describes being rational and self-possessed, being in perfect control of all of our senses. Without this sobriety true vigilance is impossible. We must keep free from the stupefying effects of sin and self-indulgence (Hiebert, 219).

In sum, sleep (total unawareness) and drunkenness (lethargy) are the hindrances to being prepared for the coming of a thief. As Jesus said, “Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:34–35).

5:7 For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

5:8 But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Verses 7–8 give the rationale behind Paul’s comment, “let us not sleep . . . let us be sober” (5:6). People who sleep and get drunk usually do so at night (5:7). But if it is day we should not act like it is night.

We are not just *in* the light, we are *of* the light; that is, our nature is that of light (5:8; Hiebert, 216). God is light and we are sons of light (1 Jn. 1:5–7). We have already been delivered from darkness. Spiritual light is the pervading element of who we are. “Since we as believers have our sphere of life in the realm characterized as ‘day,’ we are obligated to be sober” (Hiebert, 220). Furthermore, the present tense verb “let us be sober” calls of a continuation in soberness; spiritual sobriety should be our habit.

Being of the day also means being properly armored, in this case, “having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.” Paul is fond of warrior imagery but does not attempt to attach the same significance to a piece of equipment every time he uses it (see Eph. 6:13ff.; Ro. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4).

“Isaiah 59:17 speaks of righteousness as a breastplate and the helmet of salvation. Paul alters the picture by associating the breastplate with faith and love and the helmet with the hope of salvation. He is not quoting the Old Testament passage but making a flexible use of its language, and in so doing he brings in the Christian triad of faith, love and hope (1:3)” (Marshall, 138).

The climax of the thought is the hope of salvation. It is this hope which encourages Christians to be watchful. In verse 9 Paul proceeds to develop this idea briefly.

5:9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

The reason we can wear the hope of salvation as a helmet is because God has destined us to obtain salvation. To say it simply, as Christians we have the hope that we will be saved because our *God* has purposed to save us. If God had *not* determined to save us, our salvation *would* be hopeless since it would depend on our own ability to keep it. However, since God cannot fail to do what He has determined to do, we need not fear that we will fail to reach our destiny. In the present context, this means that in the day of the Lord we need not fear that we will experience the wrath of God for God has already predetermined a different destiny for us (the specific wrath being spoken of in both 1:10 and 5:9 is almost certainly the wrath that comes in the day of the Lord, not wrath in the abstract, or the wrath of the final judgment).

Lastly, Paul says that “God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation *through our Lord Jesus Christ*.” Christ’s death was “on our behalf” (huper hemon, ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) terminology used for substitutionary death; that is, His death was the “sole condition in procuring as God’s peculiar

possession a people destined for salvation when the rest of the world is plunged into the wrath of the future day” (Thomas, 285).

The reason He died for us is so that “whether we are awake (alive) or asleep (dead), we will live together with Him.” As Paul said in Romans 8:38–39, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus’ death was a substitution for us so that we might live with Him. This is the heart of the gospel and is what it means to obtain salvation.

In 1:4 Paul had reminded the Thessalonians that God had elected them, and in 3:3 he referred to their affliction as part of the destiny to which they had been appointed. Now, in 5:9–10 he emphasizes that their final salvation also rests on divine initiative.

The section ends with the confident application to encourage one another, just as chapter 4 did.

In conclusion, “the believer should live in constant joyful expectation of Christ’s return; though he does not know the exact time of it, he should always be ready for it” (Hoekema, *ibid*, 126).

Points upon which all Christians agree:

1. Christ will come again.
2. Virtually everyone agrees that the judgments related to the second coming are in some sense part of the day of the Lord (Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 108).
3. The dead in Christ will be raised when Christ comes.
4. Those who are alive when Christ comes will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. All agree that 1 Thess. 4:13–18 concerns the rapture.
5. Believers should be alert for the coming of Christ and the day of the Lord since we are sons of the day.
6. Believers will not experience God’s wrath.

Questions that are debated:

1. When does the day of the Lord begin and when does it end?
2. Would the Thessalonians have seen a word like “wrath” (5:9) as an allusion to the Tribulation in distinction from final judgment?
3. Will the church be removed from the period of God’s wrath (raptured) or will it be protected in the midst of it? That is, would the Thessalonians self-consciously distinguish between being removed from the Tribulation versus being preserved and protected as they passed through it?
4. Does 1 Thess. 4:13–5:10 concern two successive events (the rapture followed by the day of the Lord) or two aspects of a single event?