

1 Thessalonians 5

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One of the funny things about Bible study is how the most obscure and hard-to-understand parts attract the most attention. I've met more than a few people who don't know the Sermon on the Mount from a hole in the ground, but are fascinated by the book of Revelation. Sadly, though, this emphasis on only one book leads to big problems down the road. Today, this is most evident among those who believe in premillennialism. Ironically, premillennialists often take the first three chapters of Revelation, which are fairly straightforward and easy to understand, and turn them into a metaphor, while they take the whole rest of the book, which is highly metaphorical, and read it literally. They believe that if they take Revelation and read it with just the right prophetic slant, they can use the book to predict the end of the world.

Not surprisingly, people who do this commonly arrive at the conclusion that the end times are upon us. The language of Revelation is so complex that it's like one of those Rorschach inkblot personality tests. You look at it and you see whatever it is that you want to see. Thirty years ago, premillennialist preachers claimed that Revelation was about the Soviet Union, so we'd better get ready for the Lord's return. Today, they claim that it's about Iraq or Afghanistan, so we'd better get ready for the Lord's return. Thirty years from now, it'll be about some new enemy of the U.S., but they'll still be claiming it's a sign of the Lord's return. No matter the world events, to these preachers, they always line up.

The only cure for bad Bible study like this is to return to the word. Instead of vainly trying to predict when Jesus will appear, we need to believe God when He tells us that such prediction is impossible. The best way for us to prepare for the day of judgment is to get our own lives in order. We see this in Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5.

The Day of the Lord

In the first section of this chapter, Paul reveals the truth about the day of the Lord and what it will mean for everyone. He begins by discussing **ITS TIMING**. Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3. To me, it's terribly ironic that these Thessalonian Christians, who had probably only had Paul teaching them for a few months, already understood that the day of the Lord was going to come like a thief in the night. There was no sense in trying to predict the times and seasons, because the times and seasons were totally unpredictable. Nor was this accidental. God wants the day of the Lord to be a surprise, so that the wicked will be caught in their wickedness and punished as they deserve.

The message here for us is simple. There are lots of spiritual concepts we should spend time pondering, but the day of the Lord's return isn't one of them. No matter how hard we try, we will never be able to figure out something that God has chosen to keep hidden. Likewise, if we turn on the TV, and there's some preacher telling us about how he knows that the end times are going to come upon us in the next five years, we can save ourselves a lot of time by turning him off before he gets to the second sentence. The preacher may be sincerely fooling himself, or he may be cynically exploiting the topic to get his ratings up, but one thing's for sure. He's wrong, and he isn't worth our attention.

That's what the day of the Lord means for the ungodly wicked, but **ITS MEANING FOR US** is quite different. Paul explores this difference in 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5. When Jesus returns in the clouds, just as Paul had described in the previous chapter, He isn't going to catch us unaware in our evil deeds. However, this isn't because we got advance warning of J-Day and stopped being wicked the night before. Instead, because we are children of light, we walk in the light. Even though we don't know the day or the hour, our righteous lives prepare us to meet our Lord at any time.

Paul explains this by comparing Jesus to a thief. If there's some thief who's sneaking through our neighborhood at night, there are only two ways to be ready for him. The first is to get some advance warning of when he's going to break into our house, sleep every other night, and only spend that night awake and ready. That's the method that the day-of-the-Lord predictors are trying to use, but as we've seen, attempted predictions are a fool's game. The second method, though, for dealing with this thief is to be awake every night, so that whenever the thief happens by, he'll find a well lit house and ready occupants. That's the way that Paul wants us to be, people who are always ready for Jesus.

He then explains what **OUR ACTIONS** must be if we want to be ready. We find this explanation in 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8. We can't be asleep, we can't be drunk, we can't be anything that makes us inattentive to our Lord. We have to be awake, and we have to be prepared. Just like a homeowner might put on armor to protect himself from the thief's attack, we have to armor ourselves with the virtues that God wants to see in us. Only when we make this careful preparation and maintain this constant vigilance can we expect to be prepared for the return of the Lord.

This, friends, is why Christians don't get to take days off on their discipleship. Willful sin might seem so harmless to us. We might think that we can get away with some pattern of unrighteousness in our lives, because we'll always have the chance to repent tomorrow, or six months from now, or whenever we feel like coming back to the Lord. Brethren, that kind of delay is an invitation to disaster. Maybe God will be gracious and give us opportunity to repent, but do we really want to entrust our eternal destiny to a maybe? Any one of us could die tomorrow, and if we do, we will appear

before God in judgment in the state in which we died. Or the Lord could come back tomorrow, and if He does, then all of us will be judged in just the condition in which He found us. The only way to be safe is to be righteous.

Of course, none of us are constantly vigilant, constantly ready 100 percent of the time. Thankfully, we can also rely on **GOD'S SALVATION**. Paul leads us to this idea in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10. Part of what we armor ourselves with as Christians is this salvation. It's important that we work to be faithful and loving, but it's even more important that we rely on the grace of Jesus. God made this salvation available precisely because He knew that even if we wanted badly to obey Him and live with Him forever, none of us would ever obey Him perfectly, and even though He will not save the unrighteous from their own willful wickedness, He's willing to save people like us, people who want to, but just aren't getting the job done. Some might want to read this passage in a once-saved-always-saved way, but it doesn't teach that. If we have truly fallen away from the Lord, we're no longer children of the day. We've rejoined the children of the night, and we're going to be surprised just like they are. However, if we're still fighting to keep awake, to stay ready for the Lord's return, even if we lose some battles, He's still going to be gracious and merciful to us.

Preparing for the Day

For the rest of the chapter, though, Paul focuses on what we must do in preparing for the day of the Lord. First, we must **HONOR OUR ELDERS**. He outlines what this means in 1 Thessalonians 5:11-13. Notice, first of all, that this context begins with "Therefore". Paul's point is that we need to follow all the practical pointers for righteous living that he's about to give us because they will prepare us for the day of judgment. As part of that, we need to interact with our elders in three main ways. We need to honor them, esteem them in love, and live in peace with one another.

On a practical level, here's what this means for our relationship with Joe and John. First, we need to respect them and obey them. No, they aren't God, but God has set them over us, and when they urge us to do something, whether it's to come to a workday, a special study, or a gospel meeting, we need to listen to them. Second, we need to appreciate them. Brethren, even if we don't know it, they're working for us day in and day out, and we need to let them know how much we value their efforts. Finally, we need to live in peace with one another. There are few things that make an elder's life more miserable than Christians who can't get along. Let's not put that burden on our elders.

Second, we must **TREAT OTHERS WELL**. Consider with me 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15. This passage governs our relationships with others, especially with other Christians, and its underlying theme is that we must have the wisdom to know what our brother needs and the courage to give it to him. Some Christians with problems are just being spiritually lazy. We need to give them a swift kick. Others are worn down and need a kind word. Still others can't get to where they need to be on their own, and we should be willing to give them a helping hand. All of this, though, must be softened by patience. There are few things more difficult than positive spiritual change, and no matter how much help we give a brother, he isn't going to change overnight. We need to work with him patiently to help him on to heaven.

In our interactions with anyone, we must also learn not to return evil for evil. This can be so challenging. All of us have known people who get under our skin, who wrong us in many different ways, who really make us grind our teeth when we think about them. Sometimes, we get the opportunity to do back to those enemies, and it's so tempting to slide the knife right in. It would feel so good. However, it's wouldn't actually be good. Even though it's difficult, even though it requires a great deal of patience, we must seek to be a blessing to everyone, regardless of what they've done to us.

Third, we must **LOVE GOD**. Paul explains how this reveals itself in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22. We begin by talking to God. When He fills our lives with good things, we must rejoice to Him. When we need something, we must go to Him in prayer. When He answers us, we must thank Him. The second part of this is that we must listen to God. In our adult Bible classes, we've been discussing the Holy Spirit and the work of inspiration, the way that the Spirit is responsible for every prophecy of Scripture. The upshot of this for us is that when God speaks to us in His word, we must pay attention. The third part of this, though, is that we must obey God. This begins when we cling to what is good, when we endure steadfastly in putting God's word into practice in our lives. The other half of that is when we reject what is evil. The old King James version here says, "Abstain from the appearance of evil," but that's actually a misleading translation. The point isn't that we should avoid things that look evil but actually aren't. Instead, it's that whenever evil appears in our lives, we should shun it. This doesn't apply just to some evil, or even most evil. It applies to all evil.

From there, Paul concludes the book with some **CLOSING REMARKS**. We can find these in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28. In this, I think there are two significant things we need to look at. First is the emphasis that Paul puts on prayer. After he's spent the past several verses telling the Thessalonians what they need to do, now He's asking God to do His part. We must do the same. Our holiness will always be incomplete, but God can sanctify us completely. We incur blame through our sin, but God can make us blameless. He has promised to do these things, and He will surely do it.

Second, though, we also see insight into how these letters were originally used. Paul didn't write them with chapter headings and verse numbers. Instead, they were basically speeches for the various churches to read out loud. When we study them then, we must remember not to focus so much on the little points that we miss the big ones.