

Study 6: 1st Thessalonians Chapter 5

Introduction

Paul concludes the doctrinal discussion on the Second Coming, and then adds some specific instructions regarding the situation in the church at Thessalonica, and general instructions for christian behaviour.

Body of the Study

The Lord's return

God's armour

Admonitions for leaders

Admonitions for unruly brethren

Punchline promptings

Benediction

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Think through the "punchline promptings" that Paul uses. How can you apply them to members of the local congregation? How can you put them into practice in your life?*
- *Think through the letter again, imagining that you are just a new christian who was converted by the writer only a few months earlier. How does Paul build and maintain the relationship with the readers? What type of relationship did he have with them?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Re-read the whole letter in a single sitting.
- Read the Second letter in a single sitting.
- Read chapter 1 of the second letter a day or so later in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 6: Chapter 5

Introduction

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Body of the Study

The Lord's return

The thoughts of the last chapter continue with further discussion of the Second Coming. He has clearly instructed them on the subject of *what happens to the dead christians*, and now begins to address the question of *when* the Lord's return might be. He had already given them some instruction on this matter (2:2:5), however with Timothy's return, Paul learns that they still have questions about it. In fact, the things that Paul writes in the first letter do not answer their questions, and Paul has to deal with the matter further in the second letter.

The Thessalonians appear to be sitting around and waiting for the Lord to return. It was (after all), about 20 years since He left with the promise to return. However, Paul says that “...*there is no need for me to write about this, for you know perfectly well that He will come like a thief in the night...*” (my paraphrase of 1:5:1-2). This should be no surprise, since Jesus had told the disciples that no-one knows the day – not even the angels in heaven, but only the Father (Mt 24:36). But we need to keep in mind that the New Testament had not been written yet – in fact the 1st Thessalonian letter was probably the first part of the New Testament that was written – the gospels came much later. So, whilst we can turn back and read what Jesus said on the matter, the Thessalonians did not have that ability. All they knew had to have been delivered to them by teaching (as Paul had done) or through the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Such knowledge was partial (1 Cor 13:9,12) and it is therefore not surprising that they had unrealistic expectations – especially considering that they were all new christians with (essentially) no leadership.

The Lord used many parables to illustrate the Second Coming, and to ensure that we are ready – the ten virgins, the thief in the night, the servants in charge of the house (Mk 13:33-37). Paul reiterates the thief in the night [which raises the interesting question of where Paul got the illustration from, since he was not there with the Lord when he gave it. Paul must have learned it during the three years that the Lord spent with him in Arabia]. The thief arrives by surprise. He is not expected. When you are watching he will not arrive at the time when you think he is coming. The time that he will come is when you are asleep, in the night.

Paul gives another illustration – a woman about to give birth to a child. Everything is going along quietly until the labour pains arrive, and then suddenly the whole world is seemingly turned upside down. Like the pregnant woman, there is no escape. The birth is inevitable, just as the return of the Lord is inevitable.

Whilst the thief will come in the night, our character as christians is not as workers of darkness. The contrast of darkness and light is often made in scripture, and as christians we are to “...*walk in the light as He is in the light...*” (1 Jn 1:7). We made the transition of darkness when we went through the new birth, and therefore “...*you brethren, are not in darkness, so that this day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness...*” (1:5:4 -5 NKJV).

The consequences of our character as God's children ought to bring about behavioural change “...*Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober...*” (1:5:6 NKJV). Paul calls on us to be self-controlled. We cannot continue in a lifestyle of moral deprivation (that some of them would have lived before they became christians, and some of them might still be engaging in). We need to be watchful, alert, and prepared for whenever the Lord returns “...*for*

those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night...” (1:5:7 NKJV). This is not to say that these are the only times people sleep (for example shift workers), but the usual time that people sleep is at night, and when people get drunk it is usually at night. As Christians we must not be like that – we need to always be alert. “...let us who are of the day be sober, putting on (God’s armour)...” (1:5:8 NKJV).

God’s armour

As in the Ephesian letter (which will not be written for another 10 years yet), Paul talks about the Christian’s armour. He talks about the breastplate of faith and love (in Ephesians it is the breastplate of righteousness, and the shield of faith), and the helmet of salvation.

When we put on the Christian armour, it will protect us and equip us for our eternal salvation “...for God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1:5:9 NKJV). Just as Jesus’ sacrifice was not passive, so our response to Him should not be passive “...who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him...” (1:5:10 NKJV). He ties the *wake or sleep* from the previous discussion on those who have died, into the current discussion of living for Christ and being prepared (awake).

For the second time in the letter Paul exhorts the brethren to be encouraged and comforted by knowing that God has not forsaken us (1:4:18) and has equipped us to be with Him (1:5:11).

Admonitions for leaders

Paul makes several admonitions, the first concerning the responsibility of the congregation towards its leaders. Many people teach that this instruction is specifically directed towards the elders who “...are over you in the Lord and admonish you...” (1:5:12 NKJV). Whilst it is true that that is the role and responsibilities that the elders have, and that we need to respect them and “...Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work...” (1:5:13 NIV), we need to remember that the congregation is young. It has been established for only about 6 months, Paul only worked with them for around a total of 3 months, so many in the congregation had only had contact with Paul for perhaps 6 weeks. After that period, the congregation was left essentially leaderless (in the sense that they did not have a Paul, or a Luke, or a Silas, or a Timothy to stay and work with them, as each of those men did in various congregations). In that context, it seems highly unlikely that elders would have been appointed at the time. [A contrary argument can be mounted by looking at Paul’s first journey – the journey to the Galatians. On the way out, Paul established a number of churches: Perga, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. On the way back (about a year later, and only months later in some cases) “...they appointed elders in every church...” (Acts 14:23)]. So, the question remains, did the Thessalonian church have elders, and is that whom Paul had in mind? Equally, the question is, does it matter?

Every congregation has leaders, whether they are formally appointed or not. If the congregation is to grow and survive, then someone (or “someones”) must assume the role. The leaders have responsibilities towards the congregation, just as the congregation has responsibilities to the leaders. They must not exercise a Lordship rule over the congregation, but rather be an example (1 Pet 5:3).

Paul describes what the rulers do. They:

- labour among you
- are over you in the Lord
- and admonish you

The Greek construction here has three participles following a single article, which means that it is one group of people who discharge all three functions, and not three groups.¹

¹ Morris, Leon “New International Commentary on the New Testament, 1 & 2 Thessalonians” ISBN 0-8028-2512-5 p165

Benediction

Paul again reminds them of the coming day of judgement as he closes the letter. He brings out many of the things that he has discussed:

May the God of peace	He has instructed them to be at peace with one another
Himself sanctify you completely	They were to be sanctified and set-apart as God's people
And may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved	Just because our bodies die, it does not mean that we die. Our soul and spirit lives on. There is hope for those who have died in the Lord.
Blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ	Jesus is coming again. He has not forgotten to come, nor has He forgotten His children. We are blameless (been made righteous) by His blood – He died for us (1:5:10). When He comes, we will be found righteous because of Him.
He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.	Jesus can be relied on to do what He said, and He will not let us down. We can be assured of His promises.

Just as Paul continually prayed for and remembered those in Thessalonica (1:1:2; 1:2:13; 1:3:10), so he asked for them to remember, Silas, Timothy and him.

The brethren were to greet one another. Paul instructs them with the customary greeting of the time and culture to “...*greet all the brethren with a holy kiss...*” (1:5:26). This was not an instruction to carry that the cultural practices of the time into the christian religion for all time. However, the nature of the greeting as a *holy* greeting is to be observed. In Western culture, the customary greeting is a hand-shake. We need to observe the *intent* of the greeting as we greet our fellow brethren (and those outside of the church), and do so in a *holy manner*.

Finally, Paul directs, as instructed by the “...*Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers...*” (1:5:27). There could be no question of the openness of the teaching and instruction, and all of the brethren were to receive it. Bear in mind that this was (most likely) the first writing of the New Testament written, and so from the beginning Paul sets the instruction of the letters being read in the churches. Such instruction is also encompassed in The Revelation – the last book of the New Testament to be written (Rev 1:3).