

*Children of Light*  
1 Thessalonians 5:4-11  
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We turn this morning to 1 Thessalonians 5 as we've spent a couple of weeks together looking at the nature of the day of the Lord and His return and the implications that has for us as believers even as we consider the different traditions and ways in which those passages have been interpreted and understood. But Paul quickly turns, and he seeks to address them. As he's beginning to wrap the letter up, his desire is to remind them what it is for them to live in their given day, in the midst of their suffering, in the midst of their persecution, he's seeking here, again through the establishment of great doctrinal truths in very spare words but with great richness, how their inheritance as the children of God enables them to live in this life, how it also prepares them as the Lord will come again. They are, indeed, children of light. Paul in this very short set of verses is again renewing and reminding them of what he is most oftentimes known for, and that is union with Christ and what difference does that make?

My hope this morning is that you walk away more encouraged, strengthened, and filled up with just how good our God is. Let's go together to His word, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11. Hear now God's word.

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord we ask that you would fill us with this word, that your Holy Spirit would work afresh in the body of Christ this morning that we would be encouraged and seek to encourage and build one another up. But that we would recognize the great gift that we have been given and how that changes everything. For we are children, but most importantly, we are children of the light for you are light and you are our salvation. In Jesus's name we pray, help the teacher. Amen.

So, as you look at your outline this morning, we'll look together at this brief text. You'll see in verses 4-8, we looked together at "Stay alert" and the different metaphors that he uses to drive us to that imperative to stay alert as a people. He then wants to remind them in verses 9-10a, if you will, to "Remember your destiny. Now, I will note – if you have a pen – in my exuberance in putting in my outline, I flipped two words that I shouldn't have. We're going to begin with "What," then "Who," then "When." So, just make sure because when I get on those sub points, I'm starting with "What," not "Who." So, "Remember your destiny." And then finally, 10b and following through 11, we have "Therefore." "Stay alert," "Remember your destiny," "Therefore."

"Stay alert." He's already described for them what the last day, the day of the Lord, will be like. In fact, it is going to come like a thief in the night, but not for everyone. His point is that you are children of light if you proclaim and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And he changes pronouns. Now, he turns not to you, but he turns to the "we," incorporates himself in this whole passage. But his point is to stay alert, to be aware. And he uses several metaphors to contrast what it means to be alert and to be aware, to be looking for. And that is, these different metaphors are light and darkness, being awake versus being asleep, and being sober versus being drunk.

Now, before I go any further, we've already learned in the previous verses that when he uses the idea of being asleep, he's been talking about it as those who are believers who are now asleep, meaning they've passed away. And if you remember, that was their concern. What if fellow believers, brothers and sisters in Christ, have died and have fallen asleep before the Lord Jesus returns? He comes back to that understanding the metaphor later in this verse. But here, he's not meaning being "asleep" in that way. He's still using the word, but he's not using it in that way. So, how does he use it? Well, he begins by talking in this contrast of being in the light versus being in the darkness. And he says, "But you are not in darkness," meaning, for those who do not recognize the Lord, for those who do not trust in the Lord, they are living in darkness. They do not reason that He even exists. They're not expecting Him, they're not trusting in Him for salvation. For them, the day of the Lord will be like a thief in the night. It wasn't something that they were expecting because they have rejected His grace. They've rejected the message of the gospel.

But he says, "But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief." He says, verse 5, "For you are children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness." And then he contrasts, and he says, "So then let us not sleep as others do," meaning those who are in darkness. In other words, they are in darkness not recognizing the gospel and who Jesus Christ is. They are, as a matter of speaking as a metaphor, just wandering around. They are the walking dead. They are walking asleep. They are sleep walking. They don't recognize what is going on around them. They do not discern the Lord.

And then he says, "We are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober." What he's doing is he's not just giving these three distinct contrasts, light and darkness, awake and asleep, sober versus drunk. He's actually beginning to string them together as a preparation for each one. There's a logic to them. And that is, those who belong to the Lord are those who are awake. They discern the message of the gospel. They have received it as a gift. And in so doing, they walk with Him aware and discerning that He is the Lord, He is the one who is in control of all things. And they walk about not as though they are asleep, but they are awakened even though the circumstances around them might scream out that the Lord is not real, they know that even in their suffering and persecution the Lord is with them because that is what Paul has already taught. Nor are they, if you will, walking around in drunkenness.

Now, here, the theme is not drunkenness. Although the Bible is very clear about the nature of drunkenness – not alcohol, but drunkenness – that's not his point. His point is that to be in the dark and to be as one who is sleep walking is like one who is drunk. You are not discerning. You are dull to the things of the Lord. You're not able to grasp truth. You're not thinking rationally. You are like a wave on the ocean.

Paul's use of these metaphors of blindness, of sleepiness, of drunkenness is that they are vulnerable, and they don't even know it. But in contrast to that he's reminding them that if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and receive the gospel, what describes you is you are ones who have received Him and you are alert to how the Lord is working, what He is doing, and you are trusting. You are trusting in His promises. And then what He does after he describes these things, he says in verse 8, "But since we belong to the day, let us be sober." And then, as we talked about earlier in the services, he draws on that imagery Isaiah 59:17, "Having put on the breastplate," instead of "righteousness" as Isaiah does, Paul incorporates this in a beautiful biblical, theological fashion and he says you are now putting on the breastplate of faith, hope, and love.

And this helmet, this idea of "helmet," what's interesting is he's switching these metaphors. He's talking about being asleep and in darkness or awake and being sober versus drunk. He then switches to a military imagery. What is he doing? He uses these military components because he's not meaning them to be weapons of offense, but weapons of defense. Because remember, they're surrounded by persecution. And he says, take this on. Because of what the Lord has done, you can take on the breastplate of faith and love trusting in the promises of God, choosing not to wage war but choosing love, and because you have

been loved and you've put on the helmet of the hope of salvation. This is to remind them how they are to live in the world. In other words, the Lord has you. He is with you.

But I need to be clear, it goes further than that and goes far deeper because of this word, the hope of salvation, "hope." As one commentator said,

"For Paul, hope is not, as in the English use of the word, a kind of watered-down wish fullness about the future, as in, I hope so but don't really have certainty. Rather, this is a content word full of assurance of the absolute certainty of the believer's future predicated on the death and resurrection of Christ, not a vague hope but certainty through Christ."

I've used this illustration before. So, if you remember it from a few years ago, I apologize. But as I was reading this, I was reminded of the end of my first year racing bicycles when I was 16 years old. When my year began, I had never raced a bicycle at this level before. I couldn't finish the race. The field lapped me because I had no one to train me. But after that first race, I said, I have to get a coach, I have to get a team. Now, I'm towards the end of the season. I'm not on the other side of the state of South Carolina. My parents have completely embraced my racing bicycles, thanks be to God, because the way I was living life before, the fact that they would give themselves to this, they were there with me. And I remember my father, who's own father was not present for these kinds of events in his life. But my father was present. And it was in the last half mile of the race.

In American cycling, they only open up the complete road in the last 400 yards because they don't shut down whole roads, and it's complicated which makes for a very dangerous situation when you have a pack of cyclists on one lane and then you say, use the whole road. And so, I had learned at that point that I needed to get out of the fuss, and guys were beginning to bump and fight each other. In fact, the two people who were bumping and fighting each other had been my two chief rivals. And I saw them angry at each other, bumping elbows. And I said, I'm going to take advantage of that so I'm going to get out of the way. And as I exited their slip stream, I could see the finish line. And all of a sudden, I saw my father. He jumped out beyond the finish line out into the middle of the lane, and he says, go, go! I did not win the race. But I finished. I finished.

And this passage is saying to these believers in Thessalonica, you're surrounded by fighting, they're fighting against you. You feel the temptations. You want to give into it. You're concerned, you're anxious. But Paul is saying, you've been given the hope of salvation like a helmet. And it's not a vague hope that you will finish the race, that your Father will be there in the end. He is with you and He will always be with you. This is a certainty of the great doctrines of the gospel.

And as PD was leading us through the liturgy this morning, I couldn't help but be reminded of Psalm 139. For some of you, it's your circumstances that cloud and you wonder, is the Lord with me? Will he provide for me? And some of you oftentimes try to escape the Lord. But the psalmist says in Psalm 139 these beautiful words,

Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there! If I make my bed Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say surely that darkness shall cover me, the light about me will be not the night, but even the darkness will not be dark to you. The night is bright as the day for darkness is as light with you. [ESV]

So, dear friends, if you claim Christ as your Savior and your hope, your circumstances oftentimes might be dark. But the hope of the Lord is the light. And for some of you, in that darkness you might want to flee from Him. But know this, it is the Lord who holds you in His hand. And He says, I am with you. I

will never leave you nor forsake you. For darkness is as light to Him. Come, children of the light, be renewed and reminded of this great promise.

And He says, stay alert. Stay alert, why? Because you are to remember your destiny, verses 9-10a. What is he saying here? In verses 9 and following, he says, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,” he begins with the “What.” He says because you have been given these things, this breastplate of faith and hope and the helmet of the hope of salvation, why is this? It is because God has not destined His children for wrath.

Do you believe that, Christian? If there is anything I want to remind you of and to dispel from the Christian lexicon that if you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and profess Him as Father and Savior and the Spirit, know this. His destiny for you is not wrath. His song over you is love. He has destined you to obtain salvation. And this word “obtain,” thanks be to God that he used this word. This idea of obtaining something, to some sense it is to lay hold of it. But it has a richer meaning in the Greek. It’s the sense, you are experiencing it. It’s not that you possess it, it’s that in some sense, it’s obtained you. It is your experience. And so, he says, this is what you have been given. This is what you have been given.

And then he says the one through whom it has come when he says, “through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us whether we are awake or asleep.” Now, here he returns back to that language as he did in 4. Whether you are alive or you have passed, it doesn’t matter. For His destiny for you is to receive and obtain and experience His salvation, but it is through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through His righteousness, it is through His obedience, it is through His grace, it is through the fact that He is the Son of God made man, walked in our steps, came into history, into time and space, to experience what you and I experience, to experience relational strife, to experience persecution, to experience suffering, to experience rejection. And He did it all for the sake of the will of the one who sent Him that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that we might obtain salvation through Him, not through you, not through me, not through your obedience, not through your righteousness, through Christ.

This is why I need to say to you, Christians, who profess Him, you according to my friend Dr. Anthony Bradley who reminded me, you and I are not a mess. Do you hear that, church? In Jesus Christ and because of His work, you and I are not a mess. Let me quote him directly.

“Brothers, if you are united to Christ, you are not a mess. You are strong, image bearing saints armed for greatness being sanctified for the glory of God. Shaming is not humility. Covenantally fathered saints are made for great things by the Spirit. You are not a mess. Paul never opened a single pastoral epistle with this anthropological identity as a starting point. No, not even one. #notamess.”

We have been destined. We’ve proclaimed Christ to obtain and experience the salvation. And that experience begins to understand your identity has fundamentally been changed. And it is united to the glory and beauty of Christ.

And so, from the “What” through the whom to the “When.” He changes from this and he says, “who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him looking to the future.” This is Paul’s point, this idea that no matter what, no matter what, those who are children of the Lord have obtained and experienced this salvation whether you are alive or you have gone and passed away, regardless, that the day of the Lord will come and we will live with Him forever. And he repeats what he had already assured them in the chapter earlier.

Imagine what that does and how it can change the way we view this life, the way we view our possessions, the way we view our gifts, the way we view our time. If the future is this, that we will be with Him forever and we brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing from it, that means that what we have now this day is transformed fundamentally by what is promised in the future by that

certainty. That means today, I can live in radical generosity because we have everything in Christ. We can learn to walk in what it means to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ because we say, thanks be to God, it is not predicated on being alive or being dead. It's not predicated on my performance. It's on Christ which has been accomplished for us. That means, I can give and give and give.

It enables us to escape status anxiety. The world around us, and sometimes if we're honest even our own hearts, what creeps in is, just like the world around us, they are drunk on the status whether it's education, whether it's achievement, whether it's through children. But we can be freed from that anxiety and what do I mean by that anxiety? It's this. One of the books that I'm reading this year is written by philosopher Alain de Botton in his book called *Status Anxiety*. And what does he mean? He means, "Status is one's position in society, but in a narrow sense the word also refers to one's legal or professional standing in a group." But in different societies, status is often awarded to different groups, hunters, fighters, ancients, families, priests, knights, women.

But what's interesting, consequences in the west since 1776, status is this vague but comprehensible territory that has been awarded in relationship to your financial achievement. That somehow, status is achieved through what we have. The problem becomes that subtly, many of us, if we're honest, still think that high status is what many want, even what we secretly might want. But the truth is, does it bring what it promises?

Now, Alain de Botton is not writing from a Christian perspective. But he says the following,

"What happens in this seek for status is that a worry so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect and a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one. And anxiety grips us, it provokes us."

And so, his thesis is as follows, that "Status anxiety possesses an exceptional capacity to inspire, but an incredible capacity to bring sorrow." That "the hunger for status like all appetites at times has its upsides, spurring us to do justice to our talents, encouraging excellence, restraining us from harmful eccentricities. But like all appetites, its excesses can kill." That "the most profitable way of addressing the condition of status anxiety is to understand and to speak of it." I agree, we need to talk about it.

But Christians, I will tell you, no Christian is immune from status anxiety. If we say and receive what Paul is declaring here of the one through whom this great salvation has come, and if it transforms our future, if it doesn't impact our day to day living, then we really haven't experienced it quite yet. How is it freeing us? It's not just to know that we might suffer from status anxiety, it's that the work of Christ, what we are destined for, radically frees us from that anxiety. I don't have to be measured by what I have or what I have achieved. My identity is in Christ. And this is a reminder we need on Sunday morning, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and back to Sunday again.

So, "Therefore," if we are to stay alert and remember our destiny, it is the "Therefore" when he says in verse 11, "Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up just as you've been doing." This idea, these two verbs "encourage" and "build one another up." So, that means that as we live life together in our community groups, volunteering in ministries together, in our neighborhoods, in our communication with each other, we've been given an imperative to not ask how the weather is or what you're doing - which is all fine - or just how your kids are doing, but it's to say, how are you doing? And to seek by God's Spirit, through His word, how can I encourage you and build you up? That we might be reminded and remind one another, the Lord is our salvation, our refuge, and our strength in whom we have obtained salvation. And as children of the light, we can experience new freedom. We can be renewed in what it means to live in this freedom that comes through the work of Christ, freedom from the anxiety. It doesn't mean anxiety doesn't still grip us, it doesn't mean doubt doesn't grip us, it does. But we can encourage one another and pray for one another in this.

But yesterday as we finished the seminar on discipleship – and before I share this, I want to be reminded, did you write this Dr. Guthrie? Thank you, I thought it was you. So, Dr. Guthrie actually wrote this. And we recited it together. And so, you're going to be seeing this in the weeks to come because we're going to remind each other of this. It's these words, that "By God's grace, we are not what we once were, nor are we yet what we will be. But having been loved with perfect affection, redeemed at great expense, and given new life, we live today because today matters and eternity awaits."

Eternity, Paul teaches us here, is certain and it is waiting. But it makes a difference in today, that we are not what we once were. We are not yet what we will be. But through the extravagant grace, mercy, and love of Christ, we have a hope because the Redeemer at great expense has given you, has given us new life. And that makes all the difference.

If you are not a believer this morning, please note there's been a lot of "us" and "them" conversation. We do not consider those who do not believe as a "them" because there's nothing that we've received that we deserve. So, we all stand before God as those who are in need of His mercy and grace, and we invite you in to hear that the Lord invites you to experience and obtain and to know a love and a grace that can never be exhausted, that is not predicated on what you do or who you are or where you're from. He invites you into a freedom of finally living what it means to be a human in relationship with the one who's created you. So, please know we invite you to know Him today.

Believer, if you are a member or a regular attender here or if you're here as a visitor, we want to encourage you that this salvation isn't just a little doctrine. The gospel isn't something we just preach to non-Christians. The gospel is something we need every single day. And to remember that the Redeemer, at great expense, has given us new life. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your grace to us, for your grace is enough. Help us, O Lord, as those who have obtained your salvation live in your light. Help us, then, to walk as those who live in the light as you are in the light. Help us to walk with alertness and sobriety, rejoicing in the work of Christ, the hope of our salvation, and how that renders us a different people who are not a mess, but who have received life. And while eternity awaits, today we can be free of this pursuit of status and to be a people of radical generosity for the gifts that we have, the time that we have, the treasure that we have, is all gift. And we can learn to give it away as you have given yourself to us. Help us to do this, O Lord, and renew us. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.