



1 THESSALONIANS 4-5 ON THE RETURN OF CHRIST, PRACTICAL ADVICE

After Paul admonished the Thessalonian brethren to avoid sexual immorality, he then focuses on another problem. It seems some members, immersed in prophecies about Christ's soon-hoped for return, had quit working and had started living off other brethren, causing criticism and ill will in the congregation.

Paul has to state, "But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead *a quiet life, to mind your own business*, and to *work with your own hands*, as we commanded you, that you *may* walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you *may* lack nothing" (1 Thes. 4:11-12).

Paul was correcting some of the brethren about their idle and disruptive behavior.

As *Expositor's Commentary* brings out, "To disturb tranquility violates the love that permeates a truly Christian community...It is quite probable that the condition stemmed from their misapplying truths about the Lord's return to their daily living. Christians must never evade their daily responsibilities under the pretense of proclaiming or preparing for Christ's return. To do so is to distort this great hope...Busybodies were active (see 2 Thes. 3:11) and needed a reprimand. But the exhortation goes beyond telling them to stay out of other people's affairs; it also implies the necessity of keeping one's own affairs in order. Still another exhortation, 'work with your hands,' implies that idleness was a problem among the Thessalonians" (note on 1 Thes. 4:10).

So Paul corrects some wrong views circulating about Christ's return. It appears some thought members who had died would not participate in the victory at Christ's coming. Obviously, Paul hoped Jesus' return was going to happen during his lifetime, although it was a supposition on his part. After all, he admitted "we know in part and prophesy in part" (1 Cor. 13:9-12).

Then he says, "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord

Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (4:13-18).

Notice this doctrinal point: it is Paul who describes the brethren who have died in this way-- as "those who have fallen asleep," as "those who sleep in Jesus," and as "those who are asleep." It is clear "sleep" here is symbolic of being in an unconscious state after death, until being awoken back to life at a coming resurrection.

Samuel Bacchiocchi notes, "As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection. There are two Greek words meaning 'sleep' which are used in the New Testament. The first is *koimao* which is used 14 times for the *sleep of death*. A derivative of this Gk. noun is *koimeeteerion*, from which comes our word *cemetery*...The second Gk. word is *katheudein*, which is generally used for ordinary sleep. In the New Testament it is used four times for the sleep of death....The fact that the living saints will meet with Christ at the same time as the sleeping saints indicates that the latter have not yet been united with Christ in heaven. If the souls of the sleeping saints were already enjoying fellowship with Christ in heaven and were to descend with Christ to earth at His Second Advent, then obviously they would have an unmistakable priority over the living saints. But the truth is that both sleeping and living believers are awaiting their longed-for union with the Savior; a union which both will experience at the same time on the day of Christ's coming" (*Immortality or Resurrection?*, 1997, pp. 142, 145).

Paul explains that faithful members, both living or dead, will be resurrected with the blowing of the trumpet at Christ's coming. This resurrection is called "the 'First Resurrection'" in Rev. 20:6 and those in it are named "blessed." This news should comfort the deceased member's families and friends—for one day they will be reunited again!

Paul then instructs how to prepare for Christ's coming. He said, "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But 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 nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing" (5:1-11).

Paul begins by using Christ's references about the end time period. He said it would be a time that would surprise unbelievers but it shouldn't the Church (Lk. 21:34-36). While the unconverted think they live in a world of relative peace and security--now with world organizations, treaties, armies, technology, general prosperity and comfort to keep the peace--the end time cataclysm would begin and continue for an extended length of time, just as a pregnant woman in labor (Mt. 24:8). Christians, therefore, should be spiritually alert and be "watching" world events (as the fig tree with leaves sprouting) and always wearing their spiritual "armor" based on a strong faith, a deep love and an unflinching hope.

Barclay gives good background information on this: "We shall not fully understand the New Testament pictures of the Second Coming unless we remember that they have an Old Testament background. In the Old Testament the conception of the Day of the Lord is very common; and all the pictures and apparatus which belong to the Day of the Lord have been attached to the Second Coming. To the Jew all time was divided into two ages. There was this present age which was wholly and incurably bad. There was the age to

come which would be the golden age of God. In between there was the Day of the Lord which would be a terrible day. It would be a day in which one world was shattered and another was born.

"Many of the most terrible pictures in the Old Testament are of the Day of the Lord (Is. 13:9; 22:5; Zeph. 1:14-16; Am. 5:18; Jer. 30:7; Mal 4:1; Joel 2:31). Its main characteristics were as follows. (1) It would come suddenly and unexpectedly. (2) It would involve a cosmic upheaval in which the universe was shaken to its very foundations. (3) It would be a time of judgment. Very naturally the New Testament writers to all intents and purposes identified the Day of the Lord with the day of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

"Naturally men were anxious to know when that day would come. Jesus himself had bluntly said that no man knew when that day or hour would be, that even He did not know and only God the Father knew. But that did not stop people speculating about it, as indeed they still do...To these speculations Paul has two things to say. He repeats that the coming of the day will be sudden. It will come like a thief in the night. But he also insists that that is no reason why a man should be caught unawares. It is only the man who lives in the dark and whose deeds are evil who will be caught unprepared. The Christian lives in the light and no matter when that day comes, if he is watchful and sober, it will find him ready."

He then reminds them to respect their spiritual leaders: "And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thes. 5:12-13).

As Barclay mentions, "Paul comes to an end with a chain of jewels of good advice. He sets them out in the most summary way but every one is such that every Christian should ponder it. Respect your leaders, says Paul; and the reason for the respect is the work that they are doing. It is not a question of personal prestige; it is the task which makes a man great and it is the service he is doing which is his badge of honor." This is so true.

Paul concludes by saying, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the

fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen” (1 Thes. 5:14-28).

Paul gives advice to the leaders and brethren about dealing with people who are problematic in the congregation. First is a warning about the unruly, from the Gk. word *ataktous*, or those who are idle and disorderly. Secondly, he says encourage the timid or fainthearted, who tend to shirk from the slightest difficulty. Thirdly, help those with spiritual weaknesses to overcome them. And fourthly, to be longsuffering (Gk. *makrothumeo*), which means giving an even-tempered response by one who is slow to anger. You will need this virtue, especially when dealing with the idle, the timid, and the weak, but it is not limited just to them—it needs to be applied to all.

Next, Paul, again based on Jesus’ teaching, tells the brethren when tempers run short, not to retaliate for wrongs suffered.

Expositor’s explains, ‘Jesus refuted a false scribal inference drawn from Exodus 21:23, 24. ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’ that was originally intended to restrain people from going beyond equal retaliation in punishment for social wrongs against the community. The scribes had distorted the commandment’s purpose by using it to justify personal revenge. What had been given as restrictive law had, through human traditions, been transformed into a permissive rule. In speaking out against this tradition, Jesus emphatically set the tone for his followers in forbidding personal revenge altogether...Non-retaliation for personal wrongs is perhaps the best evidence of personal Christian maturity. Paul

gives then gives the constructive alternatives to retaliation: ‘Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else’” (note on 1 Thes. 5:20).

He then talks about developing the attitude of constant joy despite trials and difficulties. He says it can only be done through constant daily prayer--that is what “pray without ceasing” actually means, not nonstop praying but recurring frequently to prayer as an attitude of dependence on God. Also, ‘give thanks in all circumstances’ means no combination of events can be termed ‘bad’ for a Christian because of God’s constant oversight, as Rom 8:28 brings out.

He also reminds them to not “quench the Spirit” which indicates God’s spirit can be put out, as Paul also mentions to Timothy in 2 Tim. 1:6—refuting the idea of “once saved, always saved.” He then goes on to warn them not to “treat prophecies with contempt.” It appears some had their own “pet” prophetic ideas about Christ’s return and other things, disregarding what Paul and other apostles had been saying and causing confusion.

So Paul advises them to first “check things out” and see if they truly conform to God’s Word. Those things that are in accordance to it, we should believe and ‘hold fast.’ Also we should avoid all “appearance” of evil and not to even get close to things that might not be, but which look like evil.

He then mentions the three parts of a human being – spirit, soul and body – to be preserved blameless at the coming of Christ. There is nothing here about an immortal soul. The spirit (*pneuma*) is what preserves our being after death, although in an unconscious state; the soul (*psyche*) is our life essence that disappears at death, and the body (*soma*), also perishes at death. In the resurrection our spirit will be glorified into a divine nature (2 P. 1:4), our soul will be life eternal, and our bodies will be made of an everlasting spiritual substance.

Paul ends the epistle encouraging them to greet each other with a “holy kiss,” as members of a family would do--a tradition still kept in Latin and other countries. But it is to be a “holy” kiss and should never have any sexual connotations. He wishes that the “grace” or divine favor of Jesus Christ be always with them. After going through this material, all I can say is, “what an epistle!”