1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18: A Parenthesis

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The Lord's Coming—The Rapture

Vss. 15-18—The aspect of the Lord's coming that Paul has been speaking of in verse 14 is the Revelation, or the Appearing of Jesus Christ. When the Lord appears and judges the world in righteousness, "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep." But in order for them to come with the Lord out of heaven, the sleeping saints will have had to be raised from the dead prior to His Appearing. Therefore, in a parenthesis (vss. 15-18), Paul explains how and when this will happen.

Vs. 15—He tells us that what he was about to say is something that he had received by "the Word of the Lord." In mentioning "the Word," Paul did not mean that he got it from the written Word of God—i.e. the Old Testament. Nor was he saying that he got it from the New Testament, for it had not been written yet. He meant that it was a special communication, or revelation, that had been given to him from the Lord. Thus, it was not something that was based on theological speculation or conjecture—it came from the Lord Himself! On these grounds, he assures the Thessalonians that "we which are alive and remain shall not prevent [go before] them which are asleep." Thus, all of the saints (the living and the dead) will go into heaven in a glorified state together.

Vs. 16—Paul proceeds to tell us when this transfer to heaven will take place. He says, "The Lord Himself, with an assembling shout, with archangel's voice, and with trump of God, shall descend from heaven," and He will call us all away together. This is the believer's "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). It is what Bible teachers call the Rapture. (The word, "Rapture," is found in the Latin Vulgate Bible, where the words, "caught up," appear in our English Bibles.) Paul speaks of three things here:

- The "assembling shout"—This is to raise New Testament saints.
- The "archangelic voice"—This is to raise the Old Testament saints.
- The "trump of God"—This is to call away the saints who are alive and remain on earth.

The "shout" awakens "the dead in Christ." These are Christians who have died down through the years since the day of Pentecost, when the Church began. We know that they are Christians because they are said to be "in Christ." All believers from the beginning of time have a blessed relationship with the Lord, but only Christians are in this position before God. "In Christ," literally means to be "in-Christ's-place-before-God." In order for this to be so, Christ had to ascend to God's right hand as a glorified Man and send the Holy Spirit, by which believers are linked to Him in that place at God's right hand. Thus, to be "in Christ" is a distinctly Christian term denoting the believer's link to Him as the Head of the new creation race. Old Testament saints are not said to have this connection with Christ, even though their souls and spirits are safe with Him in heaven.

Having died in faith, the souls and spirits of these dear Thessalonian believers have gone to heaven to be with Christ while their bodies sleep in the grave. All such could be called "the sleeping portion" of the Church. It is noteworthy that even though death has claimed their bodies, they are still referred to as being "in Christ." This shows that death has not changed a single thing as far as their standing before God is concerned. At the Lord's coming, these Christians will have their bodies rise out of their graves in a glorified state (1 Cor. 15:23, 51-56; Phil. 3:20-21). This is part of the second phase of the first resurrection mentioned previously.

At the same time, the Lord will make Himself heard "with archangel's voice." The KJV implies that Michael the archangel will come with the Lord and will utter his voice, but it should be translated "with archangel's voice." This suggests that it will be the Lord's own voice in the character of the archangel. It has to do with the Lord's calling of the Old Testament saints out of their graves. He had often appeared to His people of old as "the Angel of the Lord," and now, at this moment, He will call them out of their graves with that same voice with which they are familiar. They will rise out of their graves at the same time the "dead in Christ" rise. Even though these are different classes of righteous persons, both the dead in Christ and the Old Testament saints will partake in the second phase of the first resurrection at the same time.

Hebrews 11:40, confirms this, stating that the Old Testament saints will be "made perfect" at the same time as the New Testament saints are perfected. They are referred to as "just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23). Also, in connection with resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15:23 says, "Christ the first-fruits: afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." Those who "are Christ's" are all the saints of God from the beginning of time who have died, not just the Church. Furthermore, in the book of Revelation, the 24 elders (who represent the New and Old Testament saints) are seen in heaven before the Tribulation judgments occur (Rev. 4-5). The Old Testament saints, therefore, must have been raised sometime prior to the Tribulation period.

The following quotes from respected expositors teach this: "The shout of the Lord is for the Church, the voice of the archangel is for Israel, and the trump of God for [believing] men generally" (Scripture Truth, vol. 30, p. 60). L. M. Grant said, "'With the voice of the archangel' is added here. Only Michael is referred to in Scripture as the archangel (Jude 9). Whether there may be others we cannot say. Since Michael is called Israel's prince (Dan. 10:21), and the dispensation of the Law was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator (Gal. 3:19), it has been suggested that the archangel's voice may have some connection with the raising of Old Testament saints at the coming of the Lord" (First and Second Thessalonians, p. 29). H. A. Ironside said, "The archangel in the Old Testament is connected with the Jewish people in a very special way. 'And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people' (Dan. 12:1). When the Lord Jesus comes in fulfillment of these words, not only the saints of this age, but also the saints of all past ages will be included. So the voice of Michael the archangel will be heard at the same time that the Lord gives the awakening shout" (Addresses on Thessalonians, p. 50). W. Macdonald

said, “The voice of Michael, the archangel, is commonly understood as being a command for the O.T. saints, since he is so closely associated with Israel (Dan. 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). (Believer’s Bible Commentary, p. 2038). Paul merely alludes to the raising of the Old Testament saints here, in verse 16, because his thoughts and focus in this passage were on the Thessalonian believers who were sorrowing over their brethren (fellow Christians) who had died.

The “trump of God” signals the catching away of the living saints who will be “alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord.” These will be “caught up together” with those who are raised from the dead (vs. 17). This is “the last trump” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52. It is not, however, “the great trumpet” in Isaiah 27:13, Matthew 24:31, and Revelation 11:15, which has to do with the restoration of Israel after the Appearing of Christ. Paul then gives the assuring words: “So shall we ever be with the Lord.” (vs. 17b).

The Moment for Which All Other Moments Are Made

This will all happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). H. E. Hayhoe used to say, “This is the MOMENT for which all other moments have been made.” It will be the first time the Church, which is the bride of Christ, will see its glorified, heavenly Bridegroom! Presently, the deceased saints are “with Christ” in heaven (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8), but they do not have their bodies to participate in what their spirits and their souls are enjoying. But when this moment arrives, we will be instantly glorified like Christ (Phil. 3:20-21), and we will see Him face to face! An Old Testament type of this is seen in Isaac (a type of Christ) lifting up his eyes and Rebekah (a type of the Church) also lifting up her eyes, and they meet for the first time. When this happened, Rebekah “sprang off the camel”—a picture of the Rapture (Gen. 24:63-64).

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The Normal Christian Hope—To Be Called Away to Heaven Without Seeing Death

All through this passage regarding the Lord’s coming (the Rapture) Paul has included himself in this great hope, by stating “we.” He speaks from the perspective of it being the Christian’s normal posture, which is to be called away to heaven without seeing death (Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 5:2; Phil. 3:20-21; 2 Thess. 2:1). Being a special vessel and an apostle, it was revealed to Paul at the end of his life that he would be called to heaven through death; thus, he would not be among the number of the living saints who would not see death (2 Tim. 4:6-8). He was willing for this (2 Cor. 5:8) and even desired it, if it was the will of God for him (Phil. 1:23; 3:10-11). The Apostle Peter was told the same thing (2 Peter 1:14). But these exceptions in no way negate the fact that the normal Christian hope is to expect to be called away to heaven without seeing death.

Note: the raising of the saints in a glorified state does not occur in heaven, but here on earth where they lived and died (1 Cor. 15:51-56). There will be a demonstration of complete triumph on the very battlefield in which the saints have fought “the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12). These saints testified here, fought here, and lost their lives in conflict here, and now they will have victory with Christ on that same battlefield! Paul says, “Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54, 57; 2 Cor. 5:4).

The Lord will then parade the glorified saints through “the air”—the very realm where the devil, “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), has had access and has done his evil work. He will, thus, make an open show of the victory before our spiritual foes. Thus, the same power of God that triumphed by raising Christ from the dead as “the first-fruits” of the first resurrection (Psa. 18:6-19; 1 Cor. 15:23) will be exercised at His coming in the raising of the saints (1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14; Eph. 1:19-20). The “victory” will be flaunted in Satan’s stronghold, and he and his angels will not be able to resist it, for they are defeated foes! (1 Cor. 15:57). Hence, the saints will leave this scene triumphantly!

Vs. 18—Paul concludes his parenthetical remarks by saying, “So encourage one another with these words.” Thus, he wanted the Thessalonians to spread the word among their number concerning this great truth, and comfort any who had mistaken ideas about their loved ones who had died.

Some Wonderful Results That Await the Saints at the RAPTURE

- We will be with Christ forever (John 14:2-3).
- We will be made like Christ—morally and physically (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2).
- We will be re-united to our loved ones who have died in faith (1 Thess. 4:17).
- We will be forever delivered from the physical and spiritual dangers and troubles of earth (Jude 21).
- We will receive the rewards of our labours in this time of Christ’s absence (Matt. 25:19-23; Luke 19:15-19; Heb. 10:35-37; Rev. 22:12).

No Man Knows the Day, nor the Hour, of the Rapture and the Appearing of Christ

The Lord clearly stated that no man knows when He will come at the Rapture (Matt. 25:13 – J. N. Darby Trans.), nor when He will Appear to judge the world in righteousness (Matt. 24:36). It is, therefore, futile to be trying to set dates for either of these events.

Matthew 24:36, is almost universally used among Christians to teach that no one knows when the Rapture will occur. However, this verse is not referring to the Rapture (which happens before the Tribulation period), but to the Appearing of Christ (which happens after the Tribulation – Matt. 24:29-30). The correct verse to use in establishing this point concerning the Rapture is Matthew 25:13. Note: the latter words of this verse in the KJV—”wherein the Son of Man cometh”—should not be in the text, as indicated by their absence in the J. N. Darby Translation. The subject, in Matthew 25:1-13, is the Lord’s coming as the Bridegroom. It is not His coming as the Son of Man. His coming as the Son of Man is always in connection with His coming to judge the world in righteousness, which is His Appearing.

The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians 4:2-5:11: Practical Things That Should Characterize Christians While They Wait for the Lord's Coming

(Chapters 4:2–5:11)

In this section of the epistle, Paul outlines four great things that ought to characterize the practical lives of Christians who are waiting for the Lord to come. These things are to be viewed as being normal to Christian living:

- Holiness toward God (chap. 4:2-8).
- Love toward one another (chap. 4:9-10).
- Honesty toward them who are without (chap. 4:11-12).
- Watchfulness in view of the Lord's coming (chaps. 4:13–5:11).

Holiness Toward God

Vss. 2-8—Paul begins with reminding them of the moral "charges" that he had given them when he was with them, because it was "the will of God" that they should walk in practical "sanctification" (vss. 2-3). Sanctification means "to make sacred by being set apart." In connection with Christians, it is used in three ways:

1) Absolute or Positional Sanctification

This is a work of God done in the believer through new birth (1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2) and for the believer through being justified by faith in Christ (Acts 20:32; 26:18; Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; Heb. 10:10, 14; 13:12; Rev. 22:11) whereby he is set apart from the mass of mankind for eternal blessing. This is a once-and-for-all thing and is true of every believer, regardless of what state his practical life may be in.

2) Progressive or Practical Sanctification

This has to do with the believer perfecting holiness in his life practically (John 17:17; Rom. 6:19 ("holiness"); 2 Cor. 7:1 ("holiness"); 1 Thess. 4:4-7; 5:23; Eph. 5:26-27, and Heb. 12:14 ("holiness"). This aspect of sanctification should be an on-going, daily exercise in the believer's life. It involves judging oneself, and separating in thought and action, from everything that is inconsistent with the holiness of God. It is the aspect that Paul is referring to here in 1 Thessalonians 4.

3) Relative or Provisional Sanctification

This has to do with a person being in a clean place on earth through his association with what is clean, without necessarily having an inward work of faith in his soul.

In the case of a marriage where one partner is saved and the other is not, the unbelieving one is "sanctified," in this relative sense, by his or her association with the believing partner who is sanctified (1 Cor. 7:14). It does not mean that the unbeliever is thereby saved, but that he is in a place of holy privilege.

In the case of those associated with Abraham, Romans 11:16 states that they are in a place of relative holiness (sanctification). The point that the Apostle Paul is making in this passage is, that if the "root" of the nation of Israel (Abraham) has been set in a holy place of privilege in relation to God, then the "branches" (Abraham's descendants) are in that "holy" place too (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 1 Kings 8:53; Amos 3:3).

The Apostle also refers to a person purging himself from the confusion that has come into God's house (Christendom) by "separating himself" from it, and thus, being "sanctified" in this relative sense (2 Tim. 2:19).

This aspect of sanctification is also seen in Hebrews 10:29. The Jews who professed faith in Christ in that day had thereby taken Christian ground, and thus, they had been "sanctified" in a relative sense by Christ's blood. But some of these were not even born of God.

The Sin of Fornication

Vss. 3b-8—The chief thing that Paul had in mind here, in connection with practical sanctification, was the sin of "fornication." This term covers a broad spectrum of immoral behaviour, all of which are to be abstained from in Christian living. In 1 Corinthians 5, it is in connection with incest; in this chapter it has to do with adultery, and in Jude's epistle it is in connection with homosexuality. Paul insists that every one among them should "possess [keep or preserve] his vessel in sanctification and honour." The "vessel" that he is referring to is our physical body. Since marriage involves the physical union of "they two" becoming "one flesh," some translations suggest that "vessel" could be translated as "wife." In fact, the word "vessel" is used for wife in 1 Peter 3:7.

Marriage in Christianity is to be held in "honour" (Heb. 13:4), which was something that was not done in heathendom. Since these Thessalonians had been saved out of that heathen lifestyle, they needed to understand that God's intention for Christian marriage was not along the base lines of "the lust of evil concupiscence [passionate desire]." Hence, they were not to be found "overstepping the rights of and wronging" their "brother" in the matter—i.e. adultery.

Paul proceeds to mention three great reasons why we must abstain from moral evil:

- The Lord's governmental judgment will be upon all such who engage therein (vs. 6). He is "the Avenger of all such" (Prov. 6:29).
- God has a claim on us through redemption to be holy. He has "not called us unto uncleanness, but to sanctification." The person who "disregards his brother" by overstepping himself in adultery "disregards, not man, but God" (vss. 7-8a).
- The believer's body is "the temple of the Holy Spirit," and it, therefore, must be devoted to the service of the Lord and not to immoral practices (1 Cor. 6:19). God has "given unto us His Holy Spirit" and this divine Guest within us will be grieved by such activity (Eph. 4:30). We will lose the practical benefits of His presence—such as giving us the present enjoyment of our blessings in Christ and practical discernment (vs. 8b).

Love Toward One Another

Vss. 9-10—Paul goes on and says, “Now concerning brotherly love....” The practical flow of brotherly love among the saints is normal to Christianity and a mark of a healthy assembly (John 13:34-35; Heb. 13:1). They had been “taught of God to love one another.” This refers to the new life in the believer responding normally and according to its nature. The Apostle John said that this is one of the characteristics of the new life and nature: “Every one that loveth Him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of Him” (1 John 5:1).

He commends them for letting their love express itself among the other saints in Macedonia (Philippi, etc.) and encourages them to “increase more and more” in this virtue. This will happen quite naturally, but the problem often is that we hinder the outflow of divine love inherent in our new natures. Hence comes the needed exhortation, “Let brotherly love continue” (Heb. 13:1).

Honesty Toward Them Who Are Without

Vss. 11-12—Paul moves on to speak of the need for being gainfully employed and occupied with upright things so that the world would see that we are honest persons.

Paul had taught them the great truth of the Lord’s coming (the Rapture), and they rightly lived in the imminence of it. But some of them wrongly reasoned that if the Lord was going to come—and it could be that very day—why bother with working at all? Brotherly love that was in action among the saints in Thessalonica had taken care of those who lacked, and these persons may have presumed that that same love would take care of them too. These converts were predominantly Greeks, and the Greek philosophers of those times despised manual labour. So, when the idea of “not working at all” (2 Thess. 3:11) arose among the Thessalonians, there were certain ones who had been saved out of that philosophical persuasion who naturally gravitated to it. They may have excused their idleness with the thought that it was faith on their part not to work, because it showed (in their minds) that they were truly living in the imminence of the Lord’s coming. But it was not a good testimony to the world.

Understanding that this situation existed among them, Paul exhorts them to “study [strive eagerly] to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands,” so that they would “walk honestly” before “them that are without.” Even those of the world despise a man who will not work to support his family. Far be it that such a thing should be found among Christians (1 Tim. 5:8). Hence, they were to work with their own hands and to go on quietly with the Lord. Paul instructs us that we should pray to that end (1 Tim. 2:1-2). He adds, “As we commanded you,” reminding the Thessalonian believers that he had already exhorted them along these lines when he was with them. When Christians neglect this, the world will be quick to find fault. To negate this, we are to “provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17).

In the second epistle, Paul told them that if there was an individual who persisted with not working, they were to “withdraw” themselves from him and to “have no company with him, that he may be ashamed” (2 Thess. 3:6-16). This shows that Paul saw this idleness as a serious disorder and something that was damaging to the Christian testimony.

Watchfulness in View of the Lord’s Coming

(Chapters 4:13–5:11)

Paul then sets straight the misunderstanding that the Thessalonians had regarding their loved ones who had recently died. Somehow—probably through bad teaching which 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 suggests—they had picked up the idea that their brethren who had “fallen asleep” were going to miss out on the Rapture and of being part of the kingdom that Christ would establish when He appeared. This caused much grief and “sorrow” among them. It shows how bad doctrine (misinformation) can affect our joy. These poor souls were sorrowing over something that wasn’t even true!

Vs. 13—Paul traces the whole thing to a simple matter of ignorance, and says, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep.” There was no need for them to “sorrow...even as others who have no hope,” for they would surely see their brethren again. Death is not a final parting of brethren. Paul does not say that we shouldn’t sorrow when death claims a believing loved one, but that it need not be to the extent of despair that unbelievers experience.

It is interesting that this state of “sleep” is said to be something that is brought to pass “through Jesus.” This means that their death, though it may seem untimely for the saints who remain alive, is really no accident. In fact, the Lord Jesus is the One who induces it—He puts them to sleep! His manhood name, “Jesus,” is used alone here (without His titles) to emphasize His sympathy, for He too walked in this world as a Man and knows what it is to pass through the article of death. Their disembodied spirits and souls are presently with Him while they are in the separate or intermediate state, and thus, they couldn’t be in better hands (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). Their bodies lie in the grave awaiting resurrection.

It is well for us to remember that when the Bible speaks of believers sleeping, it refers to their physical bodies, not their spirits and souls (Matt. 27:52). Sleep is never applied to unbelievers who have died. “Soul sleep” is a false doctrine that supposes that the spirits and souls of the dead are not conscious. However, Scripture says that believers who die go immediately into “paradise” (Luke 23:43) and are “with Christ which is far better” (Phil. 1:23). How could this possibly mean being made unconscious? An unconscious sleeper cannot experience the thrill of paradise. If he is unconscious he wouldn’t know a good state from a bad one! Nor could he experience fellowship with Christ! Paul said, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). He lived and served in the enjoyment of communion with Christ. If he were to die, and if that meant that he would become unconscious, he would lose the blessedness of his sweet fellowship with Christ! How could death be a “gain” to him?

Vs. 14—Paul then says, “For if (since) we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in [through] Jesus will God bring with Him.” That is, just as surely as Jesus died and rose again, so also will those who are asleep be raised, for both are of the same order of resurrection. Scripture says, “Christ the first-fruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor. 15:23). Thus, the basis of the believer’s hope of resurrection is founded on the fact of Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 6:14). His resurrection is the pledge and proof of the believer’s resurrection! Bible teachers call this “the first resurrection.”

Three Phases to The First Resurrection

There are actually three phases to the first resurrection:

- ”Christ, the first-fruits” (1 Cor. 15:23a).
- ”They that are Christ’s at His coming”—the Rapture. This refers to both Old and New Testament saints (1 Cor. 15:23b).
- The faithful who die during the seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy (Dan. 9:27). This will occur just prior to the Appearing of Christ (Rev. 14:13; 20:4).

Four Things That Give Us Comfort Regarding the State of Departed Believers

Comfort concerning our loved ones who have deceased will not come from listening to the opinions of sincere people, nor will it come from subjective feelings that we might have concerning their state. Comfort can only come from understanding and believing the facts regarding those who have departed, and these facts can only be found in the Word of God. The gospel has brought these things concerning “life and incorruptibility” to light (2 Tim. 1:10), and when they are understood, they give us peace and comfort. The following four facts help to this end:

- The state of death is temporary—This means that our loved ones who have passed away will not be dead and gone forever. They will rise again when the Lord comes at the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:23, 51-56). Since the Lord’s coming is imminent, their rising from the dead could be today!
- The condition of departed believers is that of bliss—While the spirits and souls of departed believers are in the intermediate state, waiting for the Lord to come, they are “with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8) “in paradise” (Luke 23:43) and in a state which is “very far better” (Phil. 1:23). This means that they are with the best Person possible and are far happier than they ever could be on earth. This gives us comfort, knowing that all is well with them.
- Their death has not been an accident—God makes no mistakes in what He allows to happen to His people, because “His way is perfect” (Psa. 18:30). While we may not understand why He has allowed death to overtake one of our loved ones, He will explain it all in the coming day, and it will make perfect sense.
- There is going to be a grand reunion of the saints—At the Rapture, the deceased saints and the living saints will all be caught up together, and we will never be separated again (1 Thess. 4:17). This, too, is a great comfort.

The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3: The Day of the Lord

Chapter 5:1-3—In closing the parenthesis, Paul returns to his remarks concerning the Revelation, or the Appearing of Christ, which he had been speaking of in chapter 4:14.

He mentions “the times and the seasons” which have to do with God’s dealings with the earth, and thus, this brings us into the realm of prophetic events that will occur after the Church has been called away to heaven. Paul is now going to speak of the judgment that will fall on unbelievers who will be left behind after the Rapture. This is indicated by a marked change in his use of pronouns—from “we” (Christians), in chapter 4:15-18, to “they” and “them” (unbelievers), in chapter 5:1-3. It is clear from this change that he is now referring to a different group of persons.

Paul says that there was “no need” of him writing to the Thessalonians in any great detail about that time to come because he had instructed them about it when he was with them (2 Thess. 2:5). Timothy may also have touched on those things when he visited them (1 Thess. 3:1-2). Hence, they knew “perfectly well” that “the day of the Lord” would come as “a thief in the night” on the unbelieving world.

“The day of the Lord” is a term used in both the New and the Old Testaments to indicate the time when the Lord will intervene upon the world in judgment, whereupon His Lordship authority will be publicly asserted on earth (1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Thess. 2:2-3 – J. N. Darby Trans.; Luke 21:34). (“The day of the Lord” is not “the Lord’s day,” the first day of the week – Rev. 1:10). It will begin at the Appearing of Christ and will continue throughout the Millennium (2 Peter 3:8-10), and thus, it will last 1000 years. God has “appointed” this “day” when Christ will “judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

“The day of the Lord” should not be confused with “the day of Christ.” These terms both refer to the same period of time (the Millennium), but in different ways:

- ”The day of the Lord” has to do with the exercise of Christ’s judgment on earth, whereby the world will be subjugated under His Lordship authority (2 Thess. 1:7-9).
- “The day of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16, etc.) has to do with the heavenly display of Christ’s glory through the Church (2 Thess. 1:10).

Paul says that the day of the Lord will take the men of the world off guard. It will come upon them when they think that they have “peace and safety.” This false sense of security that people in the West will have will result from the military presence of the ten-nation federation in western Europe (the beast) under its political leader (“the little horn” Dan. 7:9, 20-21, 24-25). “Sudden destruction” will break in upon them at the Appearing of Christ “as travail upon a woman with child.” Those on earth at that time “shall not escape” the judgment (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

Those in the coming Tribulation period who are instructed in the Word of God may understand that the day of the Lord will be signaled in by four things, and thus, they will know that that day is near “at hand.” These are:

- The “falling away [apostasy]” of Christendom to worship the Beast and its image (2 Thess. 2:3).

- The revelation of “the man of sin” (the Antichrist) (2 Thess. 2:3).
- The removal of the restraint on lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:6-7).
- The attack of the King of the North (the Assyrian) on the Jews who will be gathered back in their homeland at the end of the Great Tribulation (Joel 1:15; 2:1-11).

The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, Sobriety Regarding the Imminent Return of the Lord: 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

Chapter 5:4-11—Paul assures the saints that “that day” of judgment would not “overtake” them. To indicate this, he changes the pronouns again. He has been using “they” and “them” in verse 3, but now he says, “But ye brethren...” and “we are not of the night...” and “let us...” etc. By changing from the third person plural back to the second person plural, it is evident that Paul is now returning to speak to the Christian company again. The reason why “that day” of judgment will not overtake Christians is that we will have been taken away from the earth approximately seven years before that time at the Rapture. He has just explained this in the parenthesis of chapter 4:15-18. As mentioned in our comments in chapter 1:10, each time that the Lord’s coming is spoken of as a “Thief in the night,” it is referring to the Appearing of Christ, not the Rapture (Matt. 24:43-44; Luke 12:39-40; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:5; 16:15). As mentioned already, at the Rapture the Lord will come to call away the Church, which is His bride. He comes at that time as “the Bridegroom” (Matt. 25:6-10), not as a “Thief.”

Moreover, the passages having to do with the Lord’s coming as a Thief are always in connection with Him executing judgment on the world. This will happen at the Appearing. There is no judgment executed upon the world at the Rapture; it is a silent snatching away of believers from the earth. The saints will hear the “shout,” the “voice,” and the “trump” (chap. 4:16), but the world will hear nothing. It’s true that the Rapture will seal the doom of those who have rejected the gospel of the grace of God, but their actual judgment of being cast into the lake of fire will not occur until later, when the Lord appears as a Thief.

Paul speaks of those of the world as being enveloped in moral and spiritual “darkness” (vs. 4). By way of contrast, he reminds the Thessalonian believers that they are “the children of light, and the children of the day” (vs. 5). Thus, he uses “darkness” and “light,” and “day” and “night” as figures to describe those who are believers and those who are not. This is not uncommon in Paul’s writings (Rom. 13:12-13; Eph. 5:8-14). Since judgment will fall only on those who are part and parcel of this world’s darkness, but not on those who are of the light, it is clear that believers on the Lord Jesus Christ are exempt from the judgments connected with the day of the Lord. In fact, they will come with the Lord when He returns to execute judgment in that day (1 Thess. 3:13; 4:14; Jude 14; Zech. 14:5, etc.).

Vss. 6-8—In the next series of verses, Paul gives some practical exhortations based on the fact that the Thessalonians were “of the light” and “of the day,” and not “of the night, nor of darkness.” These things apply to us today as much as they applied to the Thessalonians in their day. He says, “Therefore, let us not sleep as do others; but let us watch and be sober” (vs. 6). Here, Paul uses “sleep” as a figure to describe spiritual indifference. He says that there needs to be watchfulness and sobriety on our part so that we won’t fall into a similar state of carelessness. His point is that even though the world is spiritually asleep, we shouldn’t be. The watching that Paul refers to here is not exactly watching for the Lord to come—although we certainly should do that (Luke 12:36-38). It is watching against the spiritual dangers of the night which can have their negative effect upon us. The point in the exhortation is that if we are not careful, we could get dragged down by the elements of darkness in this world through which we pass. The Lord prayed that the saints would be preserved in this way (John 17:15-17). We maintain our spiritual alertness by self-judgment and in keeping close to the Lord through constant communion with Him. The only place of “safety” for us is being near the Lord (Deut. 33:12).

Paul says, “For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night” (vs. 7). He speaks of sleep here literally, but goes on to make a practical application from it. His point is that just as “sleep” in the natural realm is associated with “night,” it is the same in the spiritual realm. The spiritual sleep of indifference is associated with those who know not the Lord and who live in spiritual darkness. Being who we are, (“the children of light and the children of the day”), we need to be consistent with the realm to which we belong and be spiritually awake.

To guard against the state of spiritual slumber overtaking us, Paul mentions our resource. He says, “But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet the hope of salvation” (vs. 8). Thus, while the world is characterized by sleeping in the darkness of the ignorance of God, we are to be living in view of “the hope” of our final “salvation.” This is to be with and like the Lord in the glorified state—which will occur at the Rapture. Until then, there are two pieces of armour that we must put on that will keep us from sinking into a state of carelessness:

- The “breastplate of faith” guards our hearts’ affections.
- The “helmet of salvation” guards our thoughts.

Our hearts and minds are two vulnerable areas where the enemy makes his points of attack. Note: we are responsible to put these pieces of armour on; it is not something that God does for us. Thus, He wants us to participate in this practical deliverance. That means that there needs to be spiritual exercise and energy involved in wearing this protection. Wearing “the breastplate of faith” is to be careful not to allow our affections to go after things that are earthly and worldly, because in the process we can get wrapped up in those things which will cause us to slumber in divine things (Prov. 4:23). Wearing the “helmet,” has to do not only with having our thoughts focused on right things that concern Christ and His interests (Phil. 4:7; 1 Peter 1:13), but by being occupied with the hope of salvation that will be brought to us at the Lord’s coming. The tendency is to allow our hearts and minds to run after extraneous things that dampen our spiritual alertness.

Vss. 9-11—And the reason why Paul encourages such a focus is because “God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.” This final aspect of “salvation” that Paul refers to here (as in verse 8), occurs when the Lord comes—at the Rapture (Rom. 13:11; Phil. 3:20-21; Heb. 9:28; 1 Peter 1:5). He says that this salvation awaits us regardless of whether the believer is living (“wake”) at the time of the Lord’s coming, or has died (“sleep”). As he has explained in chapter 4, both will rise to meet the Lord in the air. Paul closes his remarks on this subject by again stating, “Comfort yourselves

together and edify [build up] one another, even as also ye do."

Paul has used the word "sleep" in verses 6-10 in three different ways:

- The sleep of indifference (vs. 6).
- Natural sleep for the rejuvenation of the body (vs. 7).
- Sleep in connection with the separate or intermediate state of a believer (vs. 10).

The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, Practical Things That Should Characterize a Christian Assembly Waiting for the Lord's Coming: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

(Chapter 5:12-28)

Thus far in Paul's exhortations, he has addressed the Thessalonian saints as individual believers. Now, in this closing section of the epistle, he exhorts them collectively as a company of believers (an assembly) that is waiting for the Lord to come (the Rapture). Thus, these exhortations address the assembly as a whole, and outline what a healthy assembly should be characterized by.

Vss. 12-13a—The first of these exhortations has to do with recognizing and respecting those who are in the place of leadership in the assembly. Paul says, "I beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you [take the lead among you] in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." This teaches us that those who compose a local assembly are to respectfully esteem the elders/overseers in that assembly on account of the place that they have and the work that they do. The "labour" and "work" that Paul refers to here are a local thing, for responsibility in oversight is purely a local function in the house of God. Thus, elders in one assembly do not function as such in other assemblies.

The KJV says that these men are "over you in the Lord," but a better translation reads, "Who take the lead among you." "Over you," implies that they have a position in which they officially preside over the saints in an authoritative manner, but this is the very thing which Peter warns against (1 Peter 5:3). Rather, the elders/overseers are to move "among" the saints in meekness and lowliness, seeking to guide and help them in their particular difficulties, and thus, they "shepherd the assembly" (Acts 20:28).

It is noteworthy that when the function of elders/overseers is in view in Scripture, they are mentioned in plural ("them"), but when their moral qualifications are in view, they are mentioned in the singular (1 Tim. 3:1 – "If a man...."). This shows that the government of a local assembly is not to be in the hands of one man. God intends that they should function as a group of men, and thus, check and balance one another, if need be. This would give the assembly a greater immunity against an elder/overseer rising up and taking over. Diotrephes is an example of an overseer who had no check from the others, and sadly he went awry (3 John 9).

Regarding those functioning in this office in the house of God, Scripture tells us to "know" them (1 Cor. 16:15), "esteem" them (1 Thess. 5:13), "honour" them (1 Tim. 5:17), "follow" their faith (Heb. 13:7), "obey" them (Heb. 13:17), "submit" to them (Heb. 13:17), and "salute" them (Heb. 13:24). But it does not tell us to ordain them, simply because assemblies have no power to ordain elders/overseers. In every case in Scripture where assemblies had ordained elders, they were ordained for the assembly by apostles or delegates from an apostle. In spite of this, virtually every Christian assembly today attempts to appoint and ordain its elders!

There is wisdom in God not giving assemblies the power to ordain their elders. If an assembly did possess such powers, it might be tempted to appoint men who were biased toward its interests. To guard against this danger, God raises up these men by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), and they will be known by their moral qualifications and by the work that they do. In the early days of the Church, the apostles, or delegates from an apostle, recognized this work of God in certain men and ordained them to this office (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The Spirit of God is still raising up men today to carry on the work of oversight in local assemblies. These cannot be ordained to that office officially, because there is no apostle on earth today to do that. Nevertheless, God would have local assemblies to recognize these men by their moral qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9) and by the work that they do (1 Thess. 5:13; 1 Tim. 5:17-18), and thus, to allow them to "shepherd the flock" of God by "taking the oversight thereof" (1 Peter 5:2).

Those of whom Paul is referring to, here in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, had not been officially ordained by an apostle. Paul and Silas were thrust out of Thessalonica after being there only three Sabbath days, and thus, there had not been enough time for the new converts in that city to mature spiritually for them to be appointed to such a work. To ordain a babe in Christ to this place would be putting a "novice" in spiritual danger, whereby he could fall into "the fault of the devil"—which is "pride" (1 Tim. 3:6; Prov. 16:18). But now, at the time of the writing of this epistle, certain ones had manifested spiritual maturity and the Holy Spirit had raised them up for this work.

The point in Paul's exhortation here is that the assembly should acknowledge them and "esteem them very highly in love" and support them in their work. This is a needed exhortation for all assemblies, for there is a tendency for the saints to treat the personal care that overseers might show toward the saints as an intrusion into their lives and become resentful of it. It may be asked, "How is an assembly supposed to 'know' these men if they have not been appointed?" The answer is simple; they will be conspicuous by their having "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (1 Cor. 16:15). We should know them by the work that they do.

Vs. 13b—Paul then says, "Be at peace among yourselves." It is not by accident that this exhortation follows his word on respecting those who take the lead. Peace usually resides in an assembly that accepts, rather than resisting and challenging its elders. Uprisings against leaders in the assembly have been the chief source of the disruption of peace and unity throughout Church history.

Vs. 14—Four exhortations follow in this verse, and they seem to be addressed particularly to the elders. Paul says, "Warn them that are unruly [disorderly]." God's house is a place of order, and unruly/disorderly persons should not be found there doing as they please. Therefore, all such are to be corrected. Note: he does not tell the assembly to excommunicate them, but rather to "warn [admonish]" them, and thus, restore them to an orderly walk (Gal. 6:1). This exhortation would particularly apply to the "busybodies" who were "walking disorderly" among

the saints in Thessalonica (2 Thess. 3:6-15), but can apply to all such who walk disorderly.

Paul then says, “Comfort the feeble-minded [faint-hearted].” This refers to those who are discouraged. Comforting the downcast is an important work because a discouraged Christian is in danger of falling prey to the enemy and getting taken away (1 Peter 5:7-8).

Paul adds, “Support the weak.” He is probably referring to those who were weak in the faith—that is, deficient in their understanding of the liberty of grace (Rom. 14:1; Gal. 5:1). He may be referring to those who had been converted from Judaism who had certain scruples concerning foods and feast days.

Lastly, they were to be “patient [longsuffering] toward all.” This means that we need to have special grace toward those who irritate us, and are not to allow our spirits to get provoked in a fleshly way by such persons.

Vs. 15—Paul then warns against retaliation when we have been wronged. “See that none render evil for evil unto any man, but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.” To retaliate among brethren will surely disrupt peace in the assembly. The proper way to deal with personal offences and wrongs among brethren is taught by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17. The remedy for all animosity shown towards us is to return goodness to such who do us evil (Rom. 12:18-21). This is to be done among our Christian brethren, as well as to those of the world (Luke 6:27-29). Retaliating against unbelievers will surely render a bad testimony before the world.

Vs. 16—Next, Paul says, “Rejoice always.” We may think that this is not humanly possible because there are occasions when we simply can’t avoid sorrow. We are even told to go into “the house of mourning” and to “weep with them that weep” (Eccl. 7:2; Rom. 12:15b). However, Paul is not speaking of these exceptions, but rather, of the general tenor of our lives—of what should characterize us normally as Christians.

Vs. 17—Paul then says, “Pray without ceasing.” Similarly, in Ephesians 6:18, he says, “Praying always.” (Compare also Luke 18:1.) We might wonder what he meant when he knew that the saints had daily responsibilities to attend to. They simply didn’t have the time to stay on their knees all day long—even the Lord Himself “ceased” from praying! (Luke 11:1) However, Paul was not referring to set times of private prayer (Matt. 6:6; Eph. 1:16, etc.), but to the instantaneous attitude of prayer that Christians should live in as they go about their daily responsibilities. We should live and move and have our being in on-going communion with the Lord, and this should take the form of the spirit of prayer. This can be seen in Nehemiah. As he worked for the king of Persia, the king asked him a question, but he didn’t have time to steal away to his closet to pray, so he prayed on the spot by sending up a swift little prayer to the Lord, and then he answered the king (Neh. 2:4-5).

Vs. 18—Paul then says, “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” This shows that we need to have a spirit of submission and thankfulness regarding everything that happens in our lives. It is easy to thank the Lord when good and pleasant things come into our lives, but when negative and trying things come our way, we will need special grace to take those things from His hand. The Lord Himself is our great example in this. When He came to His own, they would not receive Him (John 1:11). He accepted it with a spirit of submission, saying, “I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth....Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight” (Matt. 11:25-26). We will only be able to do this by believing that God is over all of the circumstances in our lives, and that He will only allow things to touch us that are absolutely necessary (Lam. 3:37; Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:17). Faith that believes that He is truly a good God (Psa. 73:1), and that He is only interested in our good and blessing (Job 23:14; 2 Cor. 4:17) will submit to what He has allowed, and will even thank Him for it—even if it is something disappointing.

Vs. 19—Next, Paul says, “Quench not the Spirit.” God wants to use us as channels through which His Spirit would work for the blessing of others. The Lord said, “He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive” (John 7:38). God desires to work through us by the Spirit, and we are to let the Spirit have that liberty. We must not hinder Him in this. If we do, we are quenching the Spirit. It is like a garden hose that has water running through it. If someone were to take the hose and bend it together, the water flow would be shut off, or at least it would be greatly impeded. Similarly, the Spirit of God may want to lead us to do something for the Lord, but our wills may be opposed to it, and so we refuse to follow His promptings. By resisting in this manner, we have quenched the Spirit. The context of this exhortation may be in the assembly, but quenching the Spirit could also take place outside the assembly in the course of daily life.

Quenching the Spirit is illustrated in Scripture in the story of Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24). He is a type of the Holy Spirit who has been sent into this world to secure a bride for Christ (of whom Isaac is a type) Having secured her for Isaac by the giving of gifts etc., Abraham’s servant rose up to take her to Isaac, but her mother and her brother interfered and wanted to detain him “for a full year” before letting him go with her (Gen. 24:55 – margin). This is a picture of quenching the Spirit. The servant then answered, “Hinder me not, seeing the Lord hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master” (Gen. 24:56). The Spirit is, likewise, saying to us, “Hinder Me not.”

Grieving the Holy Spirit is slightly different (Eph. 4:30). It has to do with us going out and doing something that the Spirit has not led us to do, whereby He is grieved by our actions. It is sin that grieves the Spirit. When the believer sins, the divine Guest within us feels it and will exercise us to judge it. Simply put:

- Quenching the Spirit is not doing something that He is leading us to do,
- Grieving the Spirit is doing something that He hasn’t led us to do.

Vs. 20—Next, Paul says, “Despise not prophesyings.” Again, the context would indicate the assembly setting where prophesyings are usually given, but it could also refer to a brother or a sister prophesying outside the assembly as well. This exhortation is needed today as much as ever, because we tend to “lightly esteem prophesyings” and to take a disliking to the person who prophesies in a way that touches our consciences. If the person ministers in the Spirit, and we disregard it, we are turning a deaf ear to what God may be saying to us. Wicked king Ahab is an example. He said of the prophet Micaiah, “I hate him, for he never prophesied good unto me, but always evil” (2 Chron. 18:7). He saw Micaiah’s prophetic ministry as evil because it rebuked him. Naturally, we like prophets who “speak unto us smooth things” (Isa. 30:10), but there are times when “a word of exhortation” to our consciences is needed (Heb. 13:22). Let us not resent it; God may be using it to correct us in some needed way. Prophesyings are a God-ordained way of communicating to us.

Vs. 21—Then Paul adds, “But prove all things; hold fast that which is good [right].” The fact that he put a conjunctive, “but,” into the text here, indicates that he was connecting the foregoing verse (20) with this statement. It shows that prophesyings need to be tested as to whether they come from God or not. This is a necessary precaution—especially in these last days when the Christian profession has many “false teachers” (2 Peter 2:1) and “deceitful workers” (2 Cor. 11:13). The point here is that not all prophesyings may be of God and from God. The believer is not to be naive and gullible, but to “prove” these things by the great standard of the Word of God itself (Isa. 8:20). The question is: Does it coincide with the Scriptures? If it does not, then we are to set it aside. If, on the other hand, it is according to the Word, we are to “hold fast” to it.

However, if we do not know the Scriptures as we should (perhaps because we are new to the faith), we can rely on the “unction from the Holy One” (1 John 2:20-26). This refers to the presence of the Spirit of God in us giving us to discern the truth when it is presented, and contrariwise, giving us to discern error. But this necessitates abiding in Him through communion.

Vs. 22—God desired that the Thessalonian saints would keep themselves apart from every kind of evil—for their personal preservation and for the testimony’s sake. Hence, Paul says, “Abstain from every form of evil” (W. Kelly Trans.). This may take spiritual discernment because sometimes “evil [wickedness]” can manifest itself in subtle forms.

Vss. 23-24—W. Kelly indicates that these verses are the substance of the Apostle’s prayer for the Thessalonians. He says, “Now the very God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly: and your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it.” In chapter 3:10, Paul told the Thessalonians that he prayed regularly for their spiritual perfection and understanding; now in these verses, he tells them that he was also praying for their preservation. The subject here, as in chapter 4:3, is practical or progressive sanctification. The order in which he speaks of the three parts of our humanity is significant and gives us the key as to how we are preserved. He says, “Spirit, and soul, and body....”

- Our spirits are our God-conscious, intelligent (rational) part of our beings (Job 32:8; Prov. 20:27).
- Our souls are the seat of our appetites, emotions, and desires (Gen. 27:4; 34:3; Deut. 12:20; Mark 12:30; 1 Peter 2:11).
- Our bodies are the physical part of our beings (Gen. 2:7).

Thus, the way in which we will be kept from evil is to always have our spirits in the place of taking the lead in all matters and decisions in life. If we let our soulish emotions lead in making these decisions, we will soon be led astray, for our heart’s affections and emotions can be deceptive (Jer. 17:9) and fickle (2 Sam. 13:15). Hence, we are not to be guided by what feels good or by what our hearts lust after. We are to buy things, eat things, go places, and to do things which the intelligent part of our beings believe to be according to the will of God. This is determined by principles from the Word of God. When these choices are good and right and according to God’s Word, then we can engage our souls and bodies. Herein lies the way of our preservation. The men of the world turn this order around, and say, “Body, soul, and spirit.” They live predominantly for what pleases the body and soul, and neglect the spirit—and all manner of sin results.

Vs. 25—Paul then solicits the prayers of the saints regarding His work and service for the Lord. This shows that prayer before the throne of grace is reciprocal. It is a privilege to pray for the saints.

Vss. 26-28—Paul closes the letter with his usual greetings, desiring that “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” would be with them.

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