

GETTING READY FOR CHRIST'S COMING

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

The opening verses of chapter five beautifully complement the previous discussion of Christ's coming for His Church (4:3-18). Whereas the coming of Christ should be a source of comfort concerning loved ones who have passed away "in Jesus," it also ought to motivate the living believer to serious Christian service. Paul reveals that the proper attitude should be one of watchfulness and sobriety. These verses are not implying the believer be watchful lest he miss the rapture, but rather, in light of the uncertain time of Christ's return for the believer and the awesome tribulation to follow, the believer is to exercise a careful and sober Christian walk. Amidst these stern warnings of judgment that will come upon corrupt unbelievers, Paul explicitly reveals that it will not come upon genuine believers (5:4, 5, 9). Instead, a firm hope fixed upon Christ's coming should heighten a Christian's service (5:6, 8; 1 Jn 3:2, 3; 2 Peter 3:14). Paul concludes this epistle with an assortment of practical exhortations directed to individual and corporate Christian living. The Thessalonian believers are given exhortations in the areas respecting their church leadership, their handling of brethren with special needs, and their spiritual attitudes, spiritual gifts, and personal holiness. The apostle develops a challenging picture of how a healthy congregation ought to function together.

I. Be Watchful – 5:1-11

5:1-11 – These verses explicitly state that the sudden destruction, judgment and wrath are to come upon the ones crying, "Peace and safety." These are the ones who are drunken and sleeping in the darkness of night. The believers are distinctly set apart as "the sons of light" and "the sons of the day" and thus have no affinity with the works of darkness, or with the wrath to come upon the ones living therein. Paul emphatically states that "God has not appointed us to wrath" (5:9). This is a clear, concise statement that the Church believers will be raised in the Rapture to meet the Lord in the air and taken to Heaven before the Tribulation when God pours out His wrath on the unbelievers. According to v.10, the believers shall "live together with Him." Compare that with 1 Thess 4:17. This should comfort and build up the believer.

5:1 – "Times and seasons" - These referred to future events. These Christians had been well informed about future events by Paul, even though Paul did not stay with them very long. It shows that prophecy is important for young Christians to know. It helps them endure the persecution that they will suffer.

5:2 – The "Day of the Lord" is to be understood according to the Jewish reckoning of a day (night begins a day and is followed by light). It will be a period of darkness (Tribulation judgment) followed by light (Millennial blessings). Thus the "Day of the Lord" begins with the gloom of the Tribulation.

"As a thief in the night" – That "Day" shall come totally unanticipated by the unbelievers, but not so for the believer.

5:3 – "Sudden destruction" - Utter ruin will strike the unbeliever quickly, just when he feels inward "peace" and everything around him suggests "safety."

"As travail upon a woman" – The sudden birth pains that a woman feels is like the suddenness of destruction that unbelievers will experience when the Tribulation begins.

5:6 – "Let us watch and be sober" - Such an impending judgment upon the unbeliever ought to sober up the Christians to live watchful and careful Christian lives.

5:8 – Believers are exhorted to equip themselves with a breastplate (to protect the heart) of faith and love for the Lord, and a helmet (to protect the head) of the hope or assurance of salvation. Paul likely drew the figure from Isa 59:17. This triad of hope, faith and love is a favorite of Paul (cf. 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3).

5:9-10 – Paul assures Church believers that God's plan is not to bring the Church into the Tribulation to make them repent of any disobedience, because the judgment for their sins was removed when they repented and received Jesus as Savior. His blood cleanses them from all sin. Rather the purpose of the Tribulation is to get unbelievers to repent, especially Israel. The Tribulation is a part of a prophecy pertaining to Israel (Dan 9:24-27). It was a prophecy of 70 weeks of years (490 years) that Israel would experience. After 69 weeks of years were fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem and was heralded by His followers as the King, there is a gap in the prophecy. One week of years (7 years) is yet to be fulfilled by Israel. This prophecy will be fulfilled in the Tribulation which lasts for one week of years (7 years). Israel will make a covenant with a desolator (Antichrist) for seven years, but Antichrist will break it in the middle of the covenant. Then he will attempt to destroy Israel during the last 3 1/2 years. This is the time of God's wrath on Israel, which will bring her leaders to repentance and they will receive Jesus as their Messiah and God. Then they can be cleansed of their sin (Zech 12:8-13:1). So the Lord is not going to bring Church believers into this time of wrath, but whether they be alive or dead when Christ comes, they shall be brought into His presence to fellowship with Him (cf. 1 Thess 1:10).

5:11 – The proper Christian response to all of this instruction concerning the coming of Christ and the Day of the Lord is to use that knowledge to build ("edify") and to comfort one another.

II. Be Respectful – 5:12-13

5:12 – "And we beseech you" - There is at least a loose connection here to the preceding context - Paul is still loosely pursuing the theme of Christian conduct in light of the Rapture.

"To know" – It means to "see one's true character," "to recognize the worth of someone" or "to appreciate a person."

"Labor among you . . . over you . . . admonish you" – The construction in the Greek indicates that these three activities mentioned are the functions of the pastor's office. These three functions are all described with participles and not nouns (laboring, directing or guiding, admonishing). Thus they are aspects of a functional office, not for mere show and status. The term "labor" describes a hard laborious toil. The term "over you" literally means "to stand before" and implies authority to direct another person. This authority is limited by the prepositional phrase "in the Lord." The term "admonish" is very descriptive. This term implies more than an appeal to the mind as done in teaching. It also emphasizes an appeal to the will and disposition. It seeks to correct the mind, make right that which is wrong and to improve the whole spiritual attitude. The pastor, operating in the scope of this term, sees some problems, confronts the person (or persons) involved with an appeal to Scripture, and seeks a change in behavior.

5:13 – "Esteem them" - The believers are to continually esteem (Greek present tense) these leaders very highly in love. This is a command and implies that such esteem is an act of the will. The believer cannot allow his feelings to supersede a command of God.

"For their work's sake" – Does not mean the Christian is to examine the individual works of a pastor and then decide what degree of esteem they deserve (Paul forbade that practice in Corinth - 1 Cor 3, 4). Rather, the word for "work" is singular; it deals with the office in the Lord's work. It is because of the work they are in, not the works that they do, that gives them the right to be esteemed.

"To be at peace among yourselves" – This present tense imperative could be rendered, "Keep the peace among yourselves." How interesting it is that this command comes in the context of attitude toward leadership. Wrong attitude toward church leadership causes a loss of peace and it results in church division (cf. 1 Cor 1:11-13).

III. Be Helpful – 5:14-15

5:14 – Paul deals with three special classes of people that need help in the church. Each class of people needs to be handled in a special manner.

"Unruly" – This refers to those who are disorderly and walking out of line. These people need to be warned or admonished (same word as v. 12). They were to be confronted and sharply corrected with God's Word (cf. 2 Thess 3:11-15). Their disorderliness was idleness - not working to supply their needs.

"Feeble-minded" – A better translation for today is "fainthearted." These people were discouraged and needed to be comforted or cheered up.

"Weak" – It refers to those who easily fall to temptation. They need the help and support of strong Christians.

All of these commands are present tense imperatives which indicate they are the responsibility of every member of the church to practice them continually.

These activities are to be carried out in an attitude of patience or longsuffering (cf. 1 Cor 13:4; Gal 5:22; 1 Tim 4:2).

5:15 – With regard to all men, they are not to return evil for evil (cf. Rom 12:17; Mt 5:38-42), but are to pursue good for all. The word "good" implies that which is "beneficial" for the other person.

IV. Be Joyful – 5:16

5:16 – They had already evidenced joy in adverse circumstances (1:6). Now they were told to keep on rejoicing. This is the sixth time in this letter that Paul has used the little word, "*pantote*." It is translated "evermore," "ever," "always" (1:2; 2:16; 3:6; 4:17; 5:15). Joy is a state of the heart, not a product of circumstances. It is imperative for Christians to live in a continual attitude of rejoicing regardless of the circumstances.

V. Be Prayerful – 5:17

5:17 – The attitude of prayer to God should be unceasing. It should express itself throughout the day in constant recurring prayers (cf. Paul's testimony in Phil 1:4; 1 Cor 1:4; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3).

VI. Be Thankful – 5:18

5:18 – Being thankful is closely connected to being prayerful - 1Thess 1:2. This is a command and it takes a conscious exercise of the will to obey it. For other references on thankfulness, see Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Eph 1:16, 5:20; Phil 1:3; Col 1:3, 3:17; Philemon 4. A thankful spirit is part of God's will for every believer.

VII. Be Careful – 5:19-22

5:19 – The command, "Quench not the Spirit," is one that could be translated, "Stop quenching the Spirit." "Quench" means to stifle or hinder. It is not the Spirit Himself but His work in the human heart that is quenched.

5:20 – With regard to spiritual gifts, there seemed to be a disregard of prophecy here as well as in Corinth (1 Cor 14:1-5). Prophecy was a gift given to proclaim God's will for the church before the New Testament Scriptures were completed, and also to foretell the future. Evidently there had been false prophets at Thessalonica who had foretold false information about the coming of the Lord. As a result some members had been led astray and the others were soured against prophecy. Thus this command was given to correct their improper attitude toward true prophets of God. "Despise" means to treat with contempt or to regard it as nothing.

5:21 – "Prove all things" - They were to prove all things by testing them, then clinging tenaciously to that which was found to be good (good in the sense of genuine in contrast to counterfeit). This implied the need to exercise spiritual discernment (cf. Phil 1:9, 10; Heb 5:13, 14).

5:22 – "Abstain from" - "Hold yourself from" is in contrast to "Hold fast" in v. 21. They were to hold on to the good uses of spiritual gifts, but avoid the evil uses of them.

"Appearance" – This word is used for "shape" in Luke 3:22 and John 5:37, "fashion" in Luke 9:29, and "sight" in 2 Cor 5:7. In this passage "form" or "species" of evil seems to be the idea rather than "appearance." The context is the use of spiritual gifts and Paul is warning them to avoid every form of spiritual gift that is improperly used.

VIII. Be Faithful – 5:23-24

5:23 – It is natural that Paul's instruction concerning practical Christian living should be followed by a prayer to God that holiness would be perfected in the believers. Paul's prayer illustrates the confidence Christians can have in God, because that which He has initiated in our lives He is going to bring to ultimate fulfillment when Jesus Christ comes again for His Church (cf. Phil 3:20, 21; 1 Jn 3:2).

5:24 – The Christian's hope in God's keeping grace and God's sanctifying grace is firmly grounded in the faithfulness of God who has saved them.