

*1 Thessalonians 5:1-5a***PREFACE**

In our last two sessions—4:13-18—the apostle Paul discussed *what* was going to happen at “the coming of the Lord.” The dead in Christ will rise first, then those who are alive; we all will meet Him in the air, and so (the best news of all) “we shall always be with the Lord.”

Now, as we turn to the fifth and final chapter in this first letter, Paul addresses the *when*—or, more precisely, the fact that *we don't know* the when.

Let's take the long view first. The pronouns in the approximate first half of Chapter Five (vv1-11) seem to stand out—marking to whom or about whom Paul is speaking, and drawing a contrast between them. This effectively breaks the passage into six portions. Note first, along with referring to them as “brethren,” his use of “you” four times in vv1-2, as he addresses the church.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2.

Then in v3 he switches to speaking from the perspective of unbelievers, switching the pronouns to “they” or “them” three times.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

In the third portion, Paul returns to describing believers in the church, switching back, in vv4-5a, to “you” three times.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5a.

In vv5b-6, Paul includes himself, changing the pronouns to “we” and “us.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:5b-6.

Then in v7 he returns to the unsaved (by implication; admittedly it is true that believers, too, sleep at night—and might even get drunk as well).

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:7.

Finally, in vv8-11, he is back to speaking to and about the redeemed church, with the pronouns “we,” “us,” “our” and “you.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8-11.**v1**

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.

The first thing that strikes me about v1 is how pleasant and affirming it would be to hear this from a pastor or teacher. Replace “the times and the epochs” with a blank, and insert any topic you like; how encouraging it would be to hear the words,

“You don't need to hear any more about living righteously.”

“You don't need to hear any more about the holiness of God.”

“You don't need to hear any more about peace within the church.”

Sadly, but not surprisingly, this is not usually the case. In most instances we all need to hear again—and again—about most any pertinent topic. And I'm amused to discover that Paul is like most teachers: He begins by stating that the Thessalonians don't need to hear any more about "the times and epochs"—then he proceeds to tell them more! With this remark we understand that Paul had spoken to the church about this topic when he was with them.

times and epochs

times = *chronon* = **a space of time** (in general, and thus properly distinguished from <G2540> (*kairos*), which designates a fixed or special occasion; and from <G165> (*aion*), which denotes a particular period) **or interval**; by extensive an individual opportunity; by implication delay :- + years old, season, space, (x often-) time (-s), (a) while.

epochs, seasons, dates = *kairon* = **an occasion, i.e. set or proper time** :- x always, opportunity, (convenient, due) season, (due, short, while) time, a while. Compare <G5550> (*chronos*).

Jesus Himself employed these two words in some of His final remarks to His disciples.

Read Acts 1:6-7.

Jews and well-taught Christians in the first century, would immediately associate this phrase with eschatological matters: the end times. Here is how Robert L. Thomas describes the difference between the two words.

"Times and dates" are well-known words describing the end times from two perspectives. The former (*chronon*) conceives more of elapsed time and hence a particular date or dates when predictions will be fulfilled. The latter word (*kairon*), while including some reference to extent of time, gives more attention to the character or quality of a given period, i.e., what signs will accompany the consummating events. [Hence the NASB "epochs" and KJVs "seasons," which emphasize the *nature* of the period, and why "dates" is a little thin.]

So we might paraphrase this, *as to the precise date and nature of the end times, you have already been well-schooled.*

v2

For you yourselves know full well...

Verses 1 and 2 make me wonder if the apostle Paul knew, even as he was writing these letters to the new churches, that they would be retained for posterity in one form or another. He may not have been so bold as to imagine them included in the canon of Scripture, but he surely knew they would reach an audience well beyond the immediate church or region.

I conclude this because what he is doing in these two verses is a common dramatic device. The character being spoken to already knows the information being expressed by the speaking character, *but the audience doesn't*. So the speaking character informs the audience by telling the other character—usually prefacing it with something like, "As you already know..." or "Like I told you before..." I think that is what Paul is doing here: he is informing the wider audience.

that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

By using the phrase “the day of the Lord,” Paul refers to far more than just the initial moment of the Rapture. That phrase is used to refer to and include

- the ultimate overthrow of God’s enemies, which can include the idea of judgment (Isaiah 2:12; 1 Corinthians 4:3 [same word translated “day” in 1 Thessalonians, translated “court”]);
- a day of national deliverance for Israel;
- a day of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:9);
- the day of God’s wrath against His enemies (Isaiah 13:6-11);
- the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:20-21 with Jeremiah 30:7-8);
- Christ’s second coming (Revelation 19:11-21).

So “the day of the Lord” is *initiated* at a moment in time known to no one but God the Father (Matthew 24:36-41), but, depending on context, can include the entire end-times process—not a 24-hour day, but from the rapture through the tribulation and Christ’s millennial reign, through the establishment of the new heaven and new earth.

Sidebar: You may wonder, as did I, if the label “thief” is the best choice when referring to the Lord when He returns. Well, that’s the word Peter used, not to mention Jesus Himself.

Read Revelation 3:3.

v3

In v3 Paul switches from the church to painting a picture of how “the day of the Lord” will be experienced by unbelievers—those “in darkness.”

While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

Again, remember that the “day” spoken of here refers to more than just the Rapture, the opening event of the end times. Verse three speaks from the perspective of the unregenerate—those *not* in Christ—and describes what they will experience just before and just after Jesus removes believers from the earth.

When it opens (just before the Rapture), everyone is feeling pretty good about their life: things are going well, money in the bank, a new car in the drive. What could possibly go wrong?

then destruction will come upon them suddenly...and they will not escape.

We do not know how much time will pass during these sequential events, but Scripture seems to indicate that God will waste no time. In “the twinkling of an eye” both the dead and living in Christ will be removed from the earth. This will mark the beginning of the Tribulation, and for those that remain behind, there will be no escape—at least for seven years. During this period, some will believe, and ultimately they will be with Christ, but unless they are martyred during it, they will still experience this time of tribulation. What they and the stubborn unbelievers alike will experience is caught in that word “destruction.”

destruction = *olethros* = from a primary *ollumi* (to destroy; a prolonged form);
ruin, i.e. death, punishment :- destruction. [*“utter and hopeless ruin, a loss of everything worthwhile,” causing the victims to despair of life itself (Thomas)*]

like labor pains upon a woman with child,

I confess to having no personal experience with this, but Paul's reference here seems to be the fact that labor pains come on suddenly, without warning, and with a painful intensity—just as the opening moments of the Tribulation.

Rapture vs. Second Coming

David Guzik speaks of the contrast for the populace of earth between Christ appearing for the Rapture and His second coming in judgment.

David Guzik: This sudden coming, in a time when many say “Peace and safety!” must be distinct from the coming of Jesus described in Mat 24:15-35. The coming of Jesus described in Mat 24 happens at a time of great global catastrophe, when no one could possibly say “peace and safety!”

Let me interrupt Guzik to point out what he refers to in Matthew 24. We will look at this in greater detail during our study of 2 Thessalonians 2, but for now let's just look at two brief passages from Jesus' so-called Olivet Discourse—which was His answer to the question from His disciples, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

Read Matthew 24:21, 29-30.

Now back to Guzik

David Guzik (continued): Comparing passages like this shows us that there must be, in some way, two aspects [**? phases**] to Jesus' Second Coming.

- One [**phase**] of His coming is at an unexpected hour, the other is positively predicted.
- One coming is to a business as usual world, the other to a world in cataclysm.
- One coming is meeting Him in the air (1Thessalonians 4:16-17), the other is Him coming with the saints (Zechariah 14:5).

So this moment described in v3—“While they are saying ‘Peace and safety!’”—cannot be the post-tribulation second coming, but must be the pre-tribulation Rapture.

v4-5A

When Paul says that “the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night,” he, of course, is not saying that it will be necessarily dark when the Lord comes for His church. Throughout this passage he uses the image of night or darkness to represent several things:

- the time of slumber
- a time of dissipation and evil
- a state in which we can be caught unawares
- the unregenerate state

Switching pronouns again, in v4 Paul returns to speaking about what believers will and will not experience. And in this verse we have a more complete picture of what he means by the word “thief.”

Read vv4-5a.

By using “thief” Paul means more than just the element of surprise or intrusion—which is how it could be interpreted in v2. In v4 we learn, I believe, that he means it quite literally.

thief = *kleptes* = from <G2813> (klepto); **a stealer** (literal or figurative) :- thief.

A thief is not just someone who catches you off-guard; he is someone who *takes* something from you.

overtake^{nasb, kjvs}, **surprise**^{niv, esv} = *katalambano* = from <G2596> (kata) and <G2983> (lambano); **to take eagerly, i.e. seize, possess**, etc. (literal or figurative) :- apprehend, attain, come upon, comprehend, find, obtain, perceive, (over-) take. **Vincent: laying hold of so as to make one's own; hence, to take possession of.**

“Surprise” (in the NIV and ESV) is too thin. Since no one but the Father knows the day and hour, *everyone* will be surprised by the Rapture of the church. But this is not just a day of rescue; it is a day of judgment.

In the day of the Lord, unbelievers will have much taken away from them: their supposed security and safety, their self-styled pleasure, their smug attitude of superiority, their peace, their joy.

In contrast, in the same moment believers will have much *given* to them: relief from a world governed by Satan; relief from sickness, loneliness and pain; a new, immortal body. Best of all, every believer, living or dead, will be given a relationship with the Lord no longer restricted to the spiritual, but now physical: face to face.

There is, nonetheless, an element of “surprise” in this moment. Those in darkness, those left behind will be surprised out of their wits. This will be unpleasant in the extreme, and the very last thing they expected.

But for those taken, those who have been living in the light, the “surprise” will be pleasant—and anticipated. It will be something welcomed. It will be a day of rejoicing.