

1 Thessalonians 5:5-7

PREFACE

Most of us are familiar with the way Scripture, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, uses the flesh (*sarx*) to represent man's fallen nature and sin.

Read Galatians 5:16-21.

"Night" and "darkness" are used in a similar fashion. There is nothing inherently evil about the darkness of night; it is part of God's creation to separate one day from the next, and afford man a time of necessary rest. But over time, beginning at least in classical Greek, these two terms—*nyx* (night) and *skotos* (darkness)—took on a meaning beyond just the physical absence of light.

Not surprisingly, the words translated "day" (*hemera*) and "light" (*phōs*), are used in a similar way. Even in classical Greek, *phos* is used figuratively to mean "the light of life, i.e., life itself, which is highly valued as something bright, and as being comparable with salvation, happiness, or military triumph. The bringer of salvation can also be referred to as *phos*." So Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, employs this imagery in His encouragement and instruction for the disciples.

Read Matthew 5:14-16.

And we hear all of this in our passage; it is clear that Paul is referring to something more substantial than just the time of day or night, or how bright or dim the illumination.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-7.

v5

When Paul writes that believers are "all sons of light and sons of day" he emphasizes our family ties. Elsewhere this turn "sons of" or "children of" can refer to behavior—i.e., what makes us a son is that we act like (look like) our father or Lord. In Ephesians 5 Paul writes,

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:6-10)

Paul can be saying that here in this first Thessalonian letter. But I also believe he also reminds us—because we do *not* always walk in the light, we do *not* always behave like our Lord—that, no matter what, the family tie remains.

Speaking personally, my walk with the Lord began—I became His "son"—when I was seven years old. Between then and now, there have been times of disobedience, times of rebellion—times when I was *not* behaving like my heavenly Father. But because I was in His family, the Holy Spirit would convict me, and draw me back into the light. I was His child, and He would not let me go. Paul is reminding the Thessalonians: *You may not always behave as if you are*, but "you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness." In other words: *Remember who you are.*

Based on that—based on who we are in Christ—Paul urges, in v6,

then let us not sleep as others do,

Just as with “night” and “day,” “darkness” and “light,” Paul uses “sleep” metaphorically. “Let us not sleep” is one word in the Greek: *katheudomen* [not the same word Paul uses as a synonym for death]. This word “represents the ethical insensitivity that besets people of the other realm” (Thomas). These people are “asleep” to all that is going on around them.

Let us not kid ourselves that this is simply moral laziness. Speaking just of the United States, for example, there *have* been periods during which the divide between societal light and darkness has been narrow, even marginal. The 1950s, for example.

But understand that that is no longer the case. For the last fifty years at least, there has been a concerted, systematic regimen in place to drive this nation deeper into darkness, so that today, the “ethical insensitivity” Thomas speaks of has been codified; generations have been raised, schooled, indoctrinated into this “sleep.” To them, the pitch-black bowels of darkness in which they dwell is the norm; it is, to them, light.

The word “others” in this text includes the idea of leftover, residue, refuse, and C. H. Spurgeon points out in one of his sermons on this verse, that the “sleep” in which the refuse of this world dwell is a “state of deplorable ignorance.”

Great events may have transpired in the world’s history but he knows not of them.

An earthquake may have tumbled a city from its greatness, or war may have devastated a nation, or the banner of triumph may be waving in the gale and the clarions of his country may be saluting us with victory—but he knows nothing—

Sidebar: This was perfectly illustrated, once again, Tuesday morning as I watched just a few seconds of a video of a late-night rally for Hillary Clinton. Michelle Obama was speaking. She was rattling off a laundry list of ills and suffering in our nation—people out of work, violence, women treated badly, one-parent families, ad nauseum—before she declared that Hillary was the one to fix all this. And I wanted to scream at her: “How *stupid* do you think we are, lady? Your husband has been in charge for the last eight years! What has *he* done about it—and why would this woman standing beside you in a million years be the one to fix all these problems?”

But then I answered my own question. She knew she could say things like this to their ignorant base, and even others, because she and the left have been systematically cultivating, for decades, the ignorance required to believe just such twisted logic.

Spurgeon continues: The sleeper knows not anything. Behold how the refuse of mankind are alike in this! Of some things they know much, but of spiritual things they know nothing! Of the Divine Person of the adorable Redeemer they have no idea. Of the sweet enjoyments of a life of piety they cannot even make a guess. Towards the high enthusiasms and the inward raptures of the Christian they cannot mount! Talk to them of Divine Doctrines and they are to them a riddle! Tell them of sublime experiences and they seem to them to be enthusiastic fancies. They know nothing of the joys that are to come! And alas, they are oblivious of the evils which shall happen to them if they go on in their iniquity! The masses of mankind are ignorant. They know not—they have not—the knowledge of God. They have no fear of Jehovah before their eyes. Blindfolded by the ignorance of this world, they march on through the paths of lust to that sure and dreadful end—the everlasting ruin of their souls.

And, of course, since this sermon was delivered on Sunday, November 15, 1857, Spurgeon reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun.

Paul himself tells us what he means when he says, “let us not sleep.”

but let us be alert and sober.

Just as “sleep” does not mean literal bedtime slumber, so “be alert” does not mean stay awake twenty-four hours a day.

be alert^{nasb, niv}, **let us watch**^{kjvs}, **keep awake**^{esv} = *gregoreo* (gray-gor-yoo'-o) = from <G1453> (egeiro); to keep awake, i.e. watch (literal or figurative) :- **be vigilant**, wake, (be) **watch (-ful)**.

(be) **sober, self-controlled**^{niv} = *nepho* = of uncertain affinity; **to abstain from wine** (keep sober), **i.e. (figurative) be discreet** :- be sober, watch. [Even in classical Greek, this could mean retaining “complete clarity of mind and its resulting good judgment.”]

Lange: What is meant is clearness of spirit, the freshness of the sharpened sense, vigilant waiting for the Lord, circumspection over against the enemy.

Albert Barnes: As [Christ’s return] may at any moment occur, why should they not be habitually sober-minded? Why should they not aim to be always in that state of mind which they know would be appropriate to meet him? Especially should Christians live with such vigilance and soberness as to be always prepared to meet the Son of God. *A Christian ought always so to live that the coming of the Son of God in the clouds of heaven would not excite the least alarm.* (emphasis added)

I think the best contemporary summation of “alert and sober” is *keep your wits about you*. This would *include* a proscription against dissipation, drunkenness, but not be limited to that. The context of this passage is staying alert and sober in anticipation of Christ’s return, but it is a sound and practical counsel for all aspects of the Christian life. Let’s quickly consider a few passages that require this admonition for them to work.

Read 1 John 4:1.

One cannot “test the spirits” unless one is informed, sober, alert, and has one’s wits about him. And in many respects the Bereans—more than the Thessalonians—were a model for this:

Read Acts 17:11.

When one is awake, alert, sober, one is equipped to examine Scripture for oneself, “to see whether these things were so.” To the Corinthians Paul established an order to worship:

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29.

Let the prophets speak, then the rest of you “pass judgment” on what they said. That cannot be done by Christians who are sleeping through their faith. In the Second Chapter of the Revelation, to the church in Ephesus Jesus said,

Read Revelation 2:2.

They had their faults, but the Ephesians were alert and sober to what they were being told by so-called prophets. Finally, further down in Chapter Five of 1 Thessalonians, Paul tells the church flat-out,

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Finally, let’s read what Jesus Himself said about keeping alert—specific to His return.

Read Mark 13:32-37.

v7

In v7 Paul illustrates how he is using the metaphors of night and darkness by describing what often takes place there.

For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

Paul closed v5 by stating that, “We are not of night nor of darkness,” meaning that those in Christ have been transferred—at the moment of conversion—to the kingdom of light. But in the Day of the Lord, this promise takes on a new and miraculous meaning.

Read Revelation 22:5.

In the 1980s Walt Harrah wrote a song that captures the wonder and promise that awaits those who are in the eternal light of Christ. I close with the words of that song.

No More Night

The timeless theme, earth and heaven will pass away
It's not a dream, God will make all things new that day
Gone is the curse from which I stumbled and fell
Evil is banished to eternal hell

See all around, now the nations bow down to sing
The only sound is the praises to Christ, our King
Slowly the names from the book are read
I know the King—so there's no need to dread

No more night, no more pain
No more tears, never crying again
And praises to the great, "I AM"
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb

See over there, it's a mansion prepared for me
Where I can live with my Savior eternally

No more night, no more pain
No more tears, never crying again
And praises to the great, "I AM"
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb
(Walt Harrah, ©1984 Word Music ASCAP)