

**Encourage Each Other in Readiness**

**1 Thess. 5:1-11**

**Background:** What people believe about the future has a profound impact on how they live and act. For example, in the present economic recession, most people are spending less and saving more because they think that hard times are going to be around for at least a few years. How much more important is the question of what happens to people in the ultimate sense. Most people in the ancient world believed that life on this earth would simply continue as it always had, many thinking that it was like a cycle that kept being repeated again and again. Time is eternal, and death is final. There was very little incentive to “live in light of eternity.”

The Jews and early Christians had a very different view, in which God would bring time as we know it to an end and create a new and eternal existence for his people. This remarkable view is the topic of this week’s passage in 1 Thessalonians. In last week’s text Paul responded to Christians who feared that their loved ones who had died would be left out of the joy of Jesus’ return. This week’s passage still deals with the Second Coming; but Paul seems to be answering the question, What should those of us who are still alive need to be thinking and doing with regard to the coming Day of the Lord?

**Text:** As we have found with most of 1 Thessalonians, this week’s passage is not difficult to understand. The teachings and themes are familiar ones in the NT. In fact, almost everything in this section echoes the words of Jesus: not knowing when Jesus will return, the thief in the night, the woman in labor pains, people of the light and people of the darkness, the sleeping and drunkenness of the wicked, the need for Christians to stay awake and sober, and the coming resurrection of those who are asleep.

Paul seems to suggest that the Second Coming and judgment might be near, so he tells his readers to be prepared at all times. However, he makes it very clear that no one knows when the Lord will come and that speculation about “times and dates” are counter-productive. The gist of verse 1 is that no one knows how long it will be before the big event, and no one knows what events will signify that the time has come. God has not revealed this information (and in fact even Jesus did not know, according to Mark 13:32). It is surprising that there are as many “prophecy seminars” and other lectures and writings in which Christians claim to have specific knowledge of the coming events. In fact, in every generation since the time of Christ there have been those who have been sure that they are living in the last days.

Yet Christians do know a few things about the “day of the Lord,” according to these verses. First, it will be sudden and unexpected, like a thief breaking into a house. Second, it will be a day of destruction for the ungodly. Furthermore, those who are promising “peace and safety,” such as the Roman officials, are kidding themselves. (This was the greatest promise offered by the Romans to the subject peoples of their empire.) Human authorities could certainly offer no peace and safety, since Jesus is to return and establish his kingdom. Paul goes on to remind his original readers (and us) that no one will escape the judgment with its accompanying destruction.

Having spoken of destruction, Paul turns his attention to the salvation of Christians in verse 4, where he shifts from the unexpectedness of the thief to the fact that thieves most often are people of the night and darkness. People of the night spend their time sleeping (a metaphor for unpreparedness, failing to “stay awake”) and getting drunk (an example representing various ungodly behaviors). People of the day, on the other hand, are good soldiers (another common Christian metaphor) who keep on their breastplates and helmets (faith, love, and hope).

In verses 10-11 Paul switches metaphors again, returning to the common euphemism of death as “sleep” (see 4:13-18). Those who are alive or have died in Christ (“awake or asleep”) are “appointed” to “receive salvation.” The point is not that God has chosen some and not others but rather that all those who are in Christ have been given salvation as a gift; and they can be sure that God will carry through with this gift.

## Discussion Questions

1. Although it is not unusual for those of us who have been raised Christian, we should probably admit that our view of the future is quite remarkable, especially in our scientific age. Why do we accept this view, and why does it make sense of our lives?

2. Many Christians spend a lot of time and spill a lot of ink speculating about the return of Jesus. In fact, even some of us have said something like, "I can't believe that God will let this world continue much longer." How valuable or harmful is this speculation? How should we deal with the natural desire to speculate about the end?

3. Is fear of judgment an appropriate motivation for doing what is right? Is that what Paul is doing here? Do Christians sometimes need to be reminded that evil will be punished?

4. What does it mean to put on the breastplate of faith and love and the hope of salvation as a helmet? How does doing so help Christians remain awake and sober?

5. The judgment of all people outside Christ is a troubling doctrine to many. How do you deal with it?

6. Honestly, after almost 2,000 years, most of us believe that we will die rather than live to see the return of Jesus. Is this a bad thing, a good thing, or a neutral thing? Should we believe other than the way that we do? Is it roughly the same to say that we could die at any minute as it is to say that Jesus could return at any minute?

7. How important and central is the New Testament teaching about the future? How might the failure to believe in the Second Coming impact Christian practice and belief?