



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 5:1–5

October 2, 2013

Introduction

The doctrine of the rapture provides a great and blessed hope for all born-again Christians. We do not have to fear death or worry about those who have died before us. In the end, all church-age believers will be resurrected, given glorified bodies, and be forever with the Lord (1 Thess 4:18). But a second issue arises involving the end times. What is the relationship of Christians to the Day of the Lord and specifically the Tribulation judgments? Paul takes up this issue in the first several verses of chapter 5.

Exhortations Regarding the Day of the Lord (5:1–11)

In the midst of their own tribulations, the Thessalonians were wondering if they were enduring the end-times Tribulation period which Paul taught them about. When Paul addresses the issue in this chapter, he is treating it as a corollary to what he said about the rapture. He will further correct their understanding regarding their relationship to the Day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2. The point he is emphasizing here is that they had *not* missed the rapture, and hence are *not* enduring the Day of the Lord judgments.

The Day of the Lord

The Scriptures are replete with passages addressing the subject of the Day of the Lord. It is mentioned repeatedly in the Old Testament, especially among the major and minor prophets. The term itself is not used to describe a specific 24-hour day, but rather an extended period of time involving the Lord's judgments. There are three poignant questions we should consider before studying the topic: 1) What is the character of the Day of the Lord? 2) How many such days are there? and 3) When does the future Day of the Lord begin?

The first question addresses the issue of judgment and blessing. Does the Day of the Lord involve *only* judgment, or *both* judgment and blessing? The evidence seems to point toward the latter. Although the

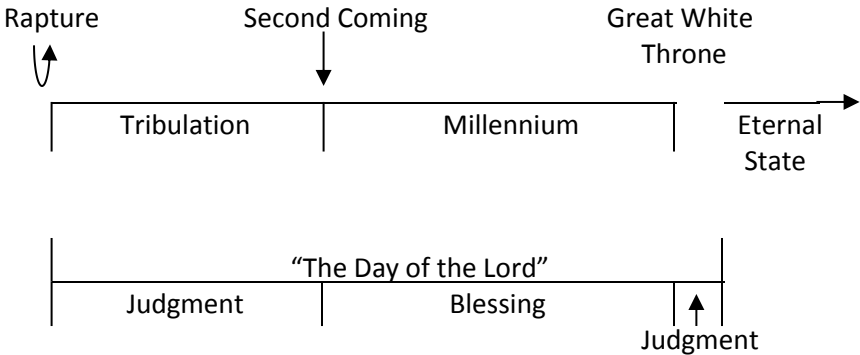
bulk of the passages seem to involve judgment, there are several passages where the Day of the Lord judgments are interspersed with promises of divine blessing (e.g. Obad 15–21; Joel 3:1–2, 9–17, 18–21; Zeph 3:6–8, 9–20).

The second question is not as easy to answer as the first. There are two positions suggested: 1) Some have suggested there are multiple days of the Lord, referring not only to future times of judgment, but also to past judgments — the Assyrian invasion and captivity of the Northern Kingdom (Amos 5:18–20), the Babylonian invasion and captivity of the Southern Kingdom (Lam 2:22; Ezek 13:5), the Tribulation (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2), and the events preceding the eternal state (2 Pet 3:10). 2) Others see only one Day of the Lord, referring to an event that is exclusively eschatological (in the end times). It begins with the Tribulation (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2), continues through the Millennium, and concludes with the destruction of the present creation prior to the bringing in of the eternal state (2 Pet 3:10). Strong cases can be built for either position, but the second is slightly preferred. The technical expression “Day of the Lord” is never used to describe a past event. Furthermore if blessing is a constituent element of the Day of the Lord, it should be noted that none of the historical judgments include this aspect — at least in terms of how the prophets have described this future blessing.

The third question involves the specific timing for the beginning of the Day of the Lord. The debate centers around four passages (Joel 2:31, 3:14; Mal 4:5; 2 Thess 2:2–3). Some have suggested that this period begins at some point in the middle of the Tribulation. They see certain Tribulation events as precursors to the Day of the Lord beginning. Others see the Day of the Lord starting at the beginning of the Tribulation. To settle this question, it is helpful to note how the two halves of the Tribulation period are described: the first half is called the “beginning of birth pangs,” whereas the second half is called “the great tribulation” (Matt 24:5–8; cf. 24:9–21). Applying this distinction to the Day of the Lord judgments, they can likewise be divided into two halves. The first half is referred to by the simple expression “the Day of the Lord,” while the second half is referred to as “the great and terrible Day of the Lord.” This answers the questions raised by Joel 2:31 and Malachi 4:5. Additionally, the two events triggering the Day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 are the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness. The former refers to the falling away from the gospel of

professing Christendom following the rapture of the church and just prior to the Tribulation. The latter refers to the revelation of the Antichrist — *not* when he breaks his treaty with Israel at the midpoint of the Tribulation, but when he makes his covenant with Israel at the beginning of the Tribulation (Dan 9:24–27). As such, it is best to see the Day of the Lord as starting at the beginning of the Tribulation period.

Putting all of this together, we can illustrate it in this fashion:



The Basis for These Exhortations (vv. 1–5)

Paul gives several exhortations to believers in verses 6–11. But those instructions do not come out of a void. In the first five verses of this chapter, Paul establishes *why* they should obey his words. As believers, we will not endure the Day of the Lord judgments. That being the case, we also should not *live* like those who will endure those judgments. In other words, we are not free live just any way we so desire. Throughout this passage, Paul maintains a contrast between believers and unbelievers — not only in terms of their destinies (vv. 3, 9), but also in terms of their conduct (vv. 4–8).

The Thessalonians’ Knowledge of the Facts (vv. 1–3)

Verse 1 begins with the same textual marker we saw in 4:9. Paul uses the terms *peri de* (περὶ δὲ) — “now concerning.” This introduces a new topic that was in a sense the opposite of what was previously discussed. In 4:9 there was a transition from warnings against immorality to an exhortation of its opposite — brotherly love, in the following verses. Similarly, Paul transitions from what his readers *will* participate in (the rapture) to what they *will not* participate in (the Day of the Lord judgments). This transitional marker also contrasts with the preceding section where clarification was needed. In the present section, they did

not need anyone to teach them on this topic. Despite this fact, there was still confusion so Paul goes on to teach them anyway. The “seasons” refers to visible evidences or signs that indicate what is about to occur. The “times” refers to the end-times events spoken of by Paul and the prophets, specifically the Day of the Lord events (v. 2). Paul’s instructions are intended to encourage us as believers in our daily lives. In contrast to unbelievers, we are to live upright. Clear thinking about the end-times is meant to help us live as true believers in the present.

The coming of the Day of the Lord is compared to a thief in the night (v. 2). This is *not* a statement of immanency, as we saw with the rapture. Rather, it is saying that it will be sudden, surprising, and unexpected. The nighttime is when people are unsuspecting and most vulnerable (cf. Matt 24:43; Mark 13:34–37).

The subject of verse 3 must be supplied by the context. “Peace and safety” is what unbelievers will say following the rapture. The rapture is described in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 as the removing of God’s restraining work through the church.

Sidenote: We should again note our previous discussion of the rapture. If the post-tribulation view were true and the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation, how is it that people will be proclaiming “peace and safety?” That view does not agree with this verse.

The point of this verse is that *none* of the people who proclaim “peace and safety” after the rapture will be able to escape the Day of the Lord judgments which bring destruction. These are world-wide judgments which will befall all of humanity living at that time. Paul’s point of view here is in the brief period just after the rapture but before the start of the tribulation. This period will last a matter of days or weeks at most.

The Thessalonians’ Position as Believers (vv. 4–5)

In verse 4 Paul begins with another adversative term “but.” This draws a contrast between what the unbelievers will face (vv. 1–3) and what the believers will not face (vv. 4–5). The term “in darkness” is used figuratively to describe a believer’s spiritual understanding. Christians have a standing in the sphere of the gospel, as opposed to unbelievers who have a standing in the sphere of darkness (cf. 2 Cor 4:6; 6:14). One

of the results of having a positional standing in the light is that this day — the Day of the Lord (v. 2) — will not overtake us.

Notice again some differing interpretations of the contrast in this verse:

Post-Trib View: The contrast is between those who are surprised by the Day of the Lord (unbelievers — v. 2) vs. those who are not surprised (believers — v. 4).

Pre-Trib View: The contrast is between experiencing the Day of the Lord (v. 3) vs. not experiencing it (v. 4).

The point of tension involves the expression “like a thief” (v. 4). At first glance a post-trib reading may appear valid. But notice three problems with this interpretation:

- 1) In verse 2, the Day of the Lord unequivocally *comes* as a thief in the night. This puts verse 4 in conflict with verse 2.
- 2) This additionally puts verse 4 in conflict with verse 9. Both sides recognize that the Day of the Lord judgments represent wrath.
- 3) This interpretation appears to pit the post-trib view against itself. Do believers avoid divine wrath or not?

In the end, the pre-trib interpretation makes better sense and is consistent with the more immediate context.

In verse 5, Paul answers a very important question: “Why will the Day of the Lord not overtake believers?” The term “sons” is used in a metaphorical sense of someone who shares in the characteristics identified — specifically, light and day. Paul uses light as a metaphor for divine righteousness in which all true believers share. “Day” is a metaphor for sons living in spiritual light in parallel with his previous description. In effect, Paul is describing his readers as those who share in the truth and righteousness of God’s family as believers in Christ.

So why is it that the Day of the Lord will not overtake us? It will only overtake those who are in darkness! This should offer us a great comfort as believers. Not only will Christians be resurrected and reunited with others at the rapture, we will not have to endure the awful world-wide judgments set to come upon a godless fallen world. This should also motivate us in our daily living as we’ll see next time in verses 6–11.

~AWB