

## **Awake and Sober (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)**

**Matthew Williams**

Early in his classic tale, *The Hobbit*, J.R. R. Tolkien writes, “There they all sat glum and wet and muttering, while Oin and Gloin went on trying to light the fire, and quarrelling about it. Bilbo was sadly reflecting that adventures are not all pony-rides in May-sunshine, when Balin, who was always their look-out man, said: ‘There’s a light over there!’ There was a hill some way off with trees on it, pretty thick in parts. Out of the dark mass of the trees they could now see a light shining, a reddish comfortable-looking light, as it might be a fire or torches twinkling.”

When I first read that passage to my boys last year, I don’t recall them thinking much of it, let alone interrupting the story. For all they knew, everything was fine. Just another dreary night with the dwarves on a journey to find their lost gold. This week, however, when we started the *Hobbit* all over again (having never finished it last year), I read the same passage again and their reaction was strikingly different.

After a brief pause, my oldest son’s eyes lit up with evident alarm. He remembered something and suddenly realized that what seemed fine and well to the dwarves was anything but peace and security. He blurted out, “Oh, Dad! You can’t stop there. This is the part where...what are those creatures called? GOBLINS! Yes, where the goblins get them.” Then his brother chimed in, “Yeah, dad. They capture them and decide whether they should eat them on toast!”

My boy’s response was different because this time they knew what was coming next. And what they knew about the future – the next chapter in the story – completely changed their assessment of reality in the present. What made perfect sense the first go around – move toward the fire; it’s a cold night – now made no sense at all. “Don’t do it, Bilbo. Something’s about to happen. Look out. Be prepared. Don’t be surprised.”

I am not saying the second coming of Christ is akin to a goblin ambush (though to be fair, they were actually trolls). I am simply observing that knowing what will happen in the future instinctively changes our perspective on the kind of choices that make sense in the present. And that, my friends, is exactly what Paul is doing in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

These verses are all about something called “the day of the Lord.” Evidently, it wasn’t the first time Paul taught them about it. He says in verse 1, “You have no

need to have anything written to you.” What he’s about to tell them regarding the “times and seasons,” was something he had told them before. The facts were not new. So why repeat them? Because they needed encouragement to live accordingly. Paul wanted them to keep living with the end in view. Our need is no different, my friends.

The day of the Lord has deep roots in the Old Testament. The prophets consistently point to a coming day when God will destroy His enemies and deliver His people. Fast forward to the New Testament, and we learn the long-awaited day of judgment and deliverance, has finally arrived in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus is the one who judges God’s enemies. Jesus is the one who saves God’s people.

The Bible tells us that Jesus isn’t just a good man. Jesus isn’t just a religious teacher. Jesus is God. Jesus is Lord. Thus, the “day of the Lord,” the day of Yahweh spoken of in the Old Testament is ultimately the day of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:8), and in particular, the day when Jesus returns to earth as our ascended Lord to judge the living and the dead. He will bring the kingdom of God to pass on earth as it is in heaven, implementing in full the victory He won over sin and death at the cross.

The day of the Lord, King Jesus’ return, isn’t a future possibility. It’s a present certainty. Jesus is coming back. Revelation 22:20, “Surely I am coming soon.” The Thessalonians knew that. But they, like us, were prone to forget it and stop living with the end in view. So Paul reminds them. Paul encourages them. The day of the Lord is a present summons to spiritual sobriety. There are two primary reasons for this:

### **1) THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BE AN UNEXPECTED TERROR FOR MANY**

Look at verse 2. “For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them...”

What people are saying today is exactly what people have always said. “There is peace and security.” All’s well. Everything’s fine. Sure, we each face hardships of various kinds. But there’s no need to freak out about some kind of divine judgment or get all worked up about the “condition of my soul.” Besides, ever since the beginning of the world, haven’t things been going on like they always do? Why are you so concerned about this “day of the Lord”?



There's a reason Paul says the day of the Lord will come, "like a thief in the night." It will be unexpected. It will be surprising. It will be unwelcome. Speaking of his return, Jesus Himself said in Luke 12:39-40, "But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Yet there's more. The day of Christ's return will be unexpected. It will also be utterly terrifying. It will not be a momentary fright we pay to experience in a movie theater. It will be a day of fear and destruction. Verse 3, "...then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." Who will not escape? Who will find no way out, no refuge from the holy wrath of God against our sin? All who have rejected God's offer of mercy in Jesus and chosen to go their own way.

You don't think it will happen. You don't think you will be held accountable. You think you can do whatever you want and be just fine. Peace and security. Friend, you have embraced a lie. As labor pains suddenly seize a pregnant woman by no choice of her own, so too will be the day of the Lord for all who fail to bow their knee to him in this life. He is not waiting for your approval. He will not ask for your permission. He will not give you a second chance. He will return. He will judge, and you will be eternally condemned. Of that outcome, friend, you should be utterly terrified.

So I beseech you. I plead with you. Don't wait. Don't be surprised. Don't be destroyed. Tend now to the welfare of your soul. Stop running. Stop bargaining. Stop delaying and postponing what you very well know your Maker requires of you today. Humble yourself and come to Jesus. Cast the weight of your life on Jesus. Cry out to Him for deliverance. Cry out to Him for salvation. See in His blood shed for you the only sufficient sacrifice to make you right with God.

J.C. Ryle is right. He says, "Satan cares not how spiritual your intentions may be, and how holy your resolutions, so long as they are fixed for tomorrow. Oh give no place to the devil in this matter! Tell him, 'No, Satan! It shall be today. Today!'"

Last month, I visited the Pompeii exhibit at the Science Museum of Virginia. It was sobering, to say the least. In 79 AD, all seemed well in the city of Pompeii and the surrounding region. People were buying and selling, building and farming. It was a prosperous local. Then without warning, Mt. Vesuvius erupted, burying thousands

of people under “a 100-mile-per-hour surge of superheated poisonous gas and pulverized rock,” followed by millions of tons of volcanic ash. Centuries later, archeologists discovered the buried city, including the bodies of men and women who were still in the exact position they were when they died. The final room in the exhibit contained plaster molds of two of them – a woman and a slave, hands covering their faces.

As I stood there in the darkened room, I thought about the coming day of the Lord. For on that day, friends, the world will not run from falling mountains and rocks. They will call out to them, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Revelation 6:15-17.) Either you will flee to Jesus or you will flee from Jesus. Either way, you can’t avoid dealing with Jesus. The day of the Lord will be an unexpected terror for many, but it doesn’t have to be so for you, friend. Flee to Jesus.

## **2) THE DAY OF THE LORD IS AN ORIENTING COMFORT FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

When Aliza and I were backpacking in New Zealand, we came across a large cave system. I watched her headlamp disappear and wondered how long it would take for her to return. A few minutes later, I heard her call out, “Hey, babe!” to which I replied, “I’m right here!” Evidently, when she turned back, she noticed there were multiple tunnels that she didn’t see on her way in. She needed the sound of my voice to get oriented and know which one led to the entrance.

Friend, if you are a Christian, that’s what the day of the Lord is meant to be in your life. Not a threat. Not a cause for fear. An orienting comfort. Verse 4, “But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.” For a Christian, the day of the Lord is not hidden like a thief. We know Jesus is coming back. His resurrection guarantees as much. His return doesn’t surprise us. It orients us, just like my voice in the cave, keeps us sane, and urges us to do at least four things in the present.

### **Remember our identity (verse 5)**

There’s a simple reason Paul argues we shouldn’t be surprised by the day of the Lord. It’s not about what we already know. It’s about who we are. Verse 5, “For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.” Remember, Paul’s speaking here to Christians. So we have to ask, “In

what sense is a Christian, a child of light, a child of the day, and NOT of the night or of the darkness?" Let me give you three answers, each of which is connected to the other.

First, a Christian is a child of light in the sense that they perceive what is actually true, namely, that no one is more beautiful or satisfying than Jesus. You know is the treasure in the field. You recognize he is the pearl of great price. The spiritual reality of His glory is not hidden from your eyes. To the contrary, it thrills your soul. The ability to see that, to know that, and to love Jesus accordingly is a gift from God. 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Second, a Christian is a child of light in the sense that we belong to the realm of the light, the kingdom of God, as his adopted sons and daughters. When we think "kingdom," we think a physical land under the authority of a monarch. When the Bible speaks of God's kingdom, it's a little different in that the emphasis is relational. To be part of God's kingdom is to be under His redemptive rule. It's what happens when you turn from sin to follow Jesus. When you become a Christian, you exchange loyalty to the kingdom of this world, life under the rule of sin and Satan, for loyalty to King Jesus. You become part of the Kingdom of God.

Being a child of the light vs. a child of the dark is about which kingdom you're in and which king you're living for. But there's a third sense, a sense in which we are also children "of the day." As Christians, we have already entered into the life of the age to come. The reign of Christ Jesus over all things on the day He returns in a physical sense has broken into our lives in the present in a spiritual sense. Many will be surprised on that day, the day He returns. We will not. Why not? Because we already experience the goodness and blessing of His redemptive rule in our hearts.

We are children of the light, children of the day, both in terms of who we are and what we perceive as a result of who we are. We have a new identify. We're no longer part of the kingdom of this world. When Jesus returns, we will not dread Him as our judge. We will welcome Him as our king. His coming kingdom and our membership in it define who we are. The day of the Lord orients us by urging us to remember our identity.

## **B) Walk in sobriety (verses 6-8)**

If verse 5 reminds us who we are, verses 6-8 describe the kind of life we should live as a result of who we are. For make no mistake, there is a kind of life that is consistent with who you are, Christian, and a kind of life that is inconsistent with who you are. As children of the light, children of the day, our behavior must conform to the moral stands of the day (obedience toward God), not the moral standards of the night (disobedience toward God).

Notice Paul isn't yoking the Thessalonians with some kind of legalistic backpack. He's urging them (and us) to embrace the reality of our identity in Christ. Verse 6, "So then, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober..."

When you're asleep, what's true of you? You're unaware of what's going on around you. To sleep "as others do," in a spiritual sense, is no different. It means you're ignorant, apathetic, or dull to the truth about Jesus and His coming kingdom. In contrast, being awake, in a spiritual sense, means you are aware and affected by the things of God. Spiritual sensitivity to the glory of Jesus and His claim on your life is visible in your life. You're not passive. You're not chilling. You're active. You're pursuing God and passionate about God. He isn't just someone you know. He's someone you think about and love. He's impacting how you live.

When you're drunk, what's true of you? You're completely oblivious. You're numb. You're desensitized. You have no self-control. You're not under the influence of the Spirit. You're under the influence of alcohol. People who sleep or get drunk usually do it at night in a literal sense. But you belong to the day not the night, Christian, in a spiritual sense, so clothe yourselves with spiritual sobriety.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Jesus is coming back. All will give an account for the condition of their soul. So stop acting like you're blind to that reality. Fight to live in a way that's consistent with who you are and makes sense in light of the coming day of the Lord. Remember, you're in a spiritual battle. Don't get distracted or desensitize your mind and heart to what's true. Be sober-minded and arm yourselves with faith (trust in God and His word), love (toward God and one another), and hope (confidence that your trust in Jesus will not be disappointed).

We need to examine ourselves – not with morbid introspection, but in order to see what God sees. Are you spiritually awake? Are you giving daily attention to the affections of your heart, to the condition of your soul, anticipating the day you will

meet your Maker? Are you feeding your soul through the study of God's word, prayer, and conversation with other believers? Or are you numbing your heart, dulling your spiritual awareness with hours of entertainment that isn't inherently wrong, but leaves you cold toward God and anything but mindful of His return?

Being "drunk" isn't limited to consuming alcohol. Any one of the many "cares of this life" (work, school, friends, kids) can distract us from loving and following Jesus. Luke 21:34, "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap." The day of the Lord orients us by urging us to walk in spiritual sobriety.

### **C) Anticipate our destiny (verses 9-10)**

It's possible to read verses 6-8 in isolation and think, "Man, I'm a mess. I'm more asleep than awake. I'm more drunk than sober (in a spiritual sense). I've got a lot of work to do." You may very well have a lot of work to do, friend. Narrow and hard is the way that leads to eternal life. Jesus doesn't summon you to follow Him because it's easy. He calls you because He's good.

And because the Lord is good, because the Lord is faithful, He comforts us in verses 9-10 by reminding us that following Jesus isn't about living the Nike commercial. "Just do it." It's about cooperating with the work God Himself has done, is doing, and will complete in us through the power of Christ Jesus. Why should we be sober, fighting to walk in faith, love, and hope? Verse 9, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him."

The Father has a goal for your life, Christian. It's salvation. According to the Bible, salvation isn't just something that happens to us in the past. It's something that's happening to us in the present and something that will happen to us in the future. We often speak of whether someone is "saved." By that we mean whether they have decided to trust and obey Jesus. But the Bible talks just as much about the hope of being saved or of obtaining salvation (in the future.)

Why? Two reasons. First, because only those who persevere to the end in trusting and obeying Jesus will be saved from the wrath of God. Second, because it is not until the day Jesus returns that our trust in Him will be fully rewarded. For now, we enjoy, we taste in part, every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. On that day,



we will enjoy our salvation in full. You will be summoned before the throne of God. You will be declared righteous in the sight of all because of Jesus. And you will receive the reward of eternal life with the Lover of your Soul.

God's goal? Salvation. God's agent? Our Lord Jesus Christ. God's means? His substitutionary death on the cross. The long-awaited result? Life with Jesus – forever. It's not a vague hope, Christian. It's a certain future affected by the saving work of Christ. Salvation isn't just a possibility for those who are in Christ Jesus. It is your divinely ordained destiny, whether you are "awake" (alive) when he returns or "asleep" (have already died) before he returns. It is the future Jesus died to secure for you.

Hebrews 9:27-28, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him." The day of the Lord orients us by urging us to anticipate our destiny.

#### **D) Practice community (verse 11)**

Verse 11, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." It is so easy for the concerns of the day, the month, or even the last decade to erode and dull our awareness of the day of the Lord. We forget our labor is not in vain. We forget our hope will surely be rewarded. We lose sight of the promise that one day we will live with the Lord Himself in the new heavens and new earth. The spiritual fall-out of our apathy is deadly.

We need brothers and sisters in Christ to remind us. We need brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage us. Left to ourselves, the day of the Lord will fade into a mirage. When we practice community, when we pursue community as covenant members of a local church, we help each other keep the day of the Lord in view. And when it does, we find ourselves comforted, oriented, and equipped to walk in spiritual sobriety.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The day of the Lord will be an unexpected terror for many, but it is a tremendously orienting comfort for the people of God. I've earnestly prayed this week that all of you listening to me would number yourselves among the latter. That day can feel





so far off, even for me as a pastor. God knows the nights and mornings we doubt whether it will actually come to pass. To the degree that's you, hear the word of the Lord.

Isaiah 55:10–11, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." When Jesus says, "I am coming soon," He means it.

Take heart, friend. The day of the Lord is fast-approaching. It is no less sure than the laws of nature. What God said, He will do. What God has promised, He will accomplish. Trust Him on the days you believe His word. Trust him on the days you doubt His word. Place your hope not in the ups and downs of what feels true in any given moment. Place your hope in what your Creator says is true. Place your hope in Jesus.

There is nowhere else we can go, friends. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Until the day we see Him face to face, may the certain hope of his return compel you to walk in spiritual sobriety whether you're young or old, whether you feel weak or strong, on the days when following Jesus is easy and especially on the days it's hard. Your labor is not in vain. Let's pray and ask for God's help.