

1 Thessalonians 5:1-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/1thess/1thess-5/1-thessalonians-51-7/>

Jesus will return unexpectedly, so believers should always be ready for His arrival.

Paul has just clarified to the Thessalonians that at some point Christ will return and believers who have died will join Christ in the air and be caught up to heaven with Him. The Thessalonians were worried that if any of them died physically before Christ's second coming, then they would remain dead and miss out on being with the Lord. Paul assured them that the dead will come back to life when Jesus returns, and will even join Him in the air. Paul notes that those who have died with Christ will meet Jesus in the air and be taken up to heaven prior to still-living believers being caught up (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Thus Paul described the "Who" and the "How" of the coming of Jesus in the air. Now he moves on to the "When" of Jesus's physical return to earth. He tells them *Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.*

This is similar language to Jesus's response to a question asked by the 11 disciples after Jesus's resurrection. They asked Him if it was, at last, the time when He would restore the kingdom to Israel. In asking this, they were asking whether Jesus intended to take up the throne of Israel now, and reign as the Son of David, as prophesied (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). Paul uses the same language, referring to the Thessalonians' desire to know the *times and epochs* pertaining to the Lord's return to earth.

The Bible repeats here that we are not told, and do not know when Jesus will return, only that it will happen. We should be prepared for this to occur at any time. Even though we cannot anticipate a specific date, we are instructed to anticipate it as an imminent certainty. This is because *the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night*, when it is not expected. Therefore, we should always be expecting His return to meet us in the air.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they *have no need of anything to be written* to them explaining when Jesus will return. He taught them when he was with them that *the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night*. It will be unexpected. Generally, robberies occur when people are not expecting it, especially in the *night* when everything is dark and people are asleep. But just like a *thief* breaking into a house without warning, Jesus will appear suddenly and at a time we are not anticipating.

The phrase *day of the Lord* refers to a time where God brings judgment. The phrase occurs twenty-three times in twenty-one verses in the NASV translation. It sometimes refers to an imminent judgment, as in Joel, which speaks of the impending invasion of Israel by Babylon (Joel 2:1). In the same passage, Joel also predicts a "great and awesome day of the Lord" that likely refers to the last and final judgment (Joel 2:31). This is acknowledged in Acts 2, where

Peter says the visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit was what was “spoken of through the prophet Joel,” and quotes Joel 2:28-32, which includes:

“THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS
AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD,
BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME.
‘AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD
WILL BE SAVED.’”

(Acts 2:20-21, quoting Joel 2:30-31)

The thing that was “spoken of through the prophet Joel” that Peter specifically referenced in Acts 2 was Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28, which says that “in the last days” God says that He will “pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind.” So it seems from this that:

- There was a *day of the Lord* when Babylon invaded Israel (in the sixth century BC)
- We are currently “in the last days” spoken of by Joel
- The “last days” will be a time when the Holy Spirit dwells within believers (that includes a time from Acts 2 until any time prior to the catching up of the church).
- There is still a “great and awesome day of the Lord” yet to come (Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20).

Paul adds that Jesus will return to execute the *day of the Lord* at a period of time when people are *saying, “Peace and safety!”* This would indicate that people have an illusion that they are free from concern of a looming judgment. Given what we are told in Daniel and in John’s Revelation, it could be that the *peace* referred to is gained in the world through a global peace treaty, made by the beast/antichrist who is made all-powerful, and the *safety* that is granted could come through a complete loss of religious and economic freedom (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 13:15-17). In this *safety*, everyone is “safe” so long as they follow the dictates of the beast.

At that time, for those who think they are safe, *destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.* The increasing emphasis on safety in modern times could be a sign that the “last days” we are in are approaching the end. It could also be *labor pains*, a sign of the coming end of the age, but not necessarily its fruition. The *labor pains* that a pregnant *woman* experiences do not mean the baby will be born that very second, but they are a strong, clear warning from her body that the baby is coming soon. End time events have and will continue to happen, and be like harder and harder “contractions,” until the actual “birth” occurs.

Upon whom will *destruction* come? Who is it that *will not escape* (judgment) in this *day of the Lord*? What is the nature of the *destruction*? Paul uses the term *they* and *them* to describe who is saying *peace and safety*, those who will be caught unprepared for this ultimate and final *day of the Lord*. Paul makes it clear that believers should not allow themselves to be caught unprepared. He says *But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief.* The *day* Paul refers to here is the *day of the Lord* that is the final and ultimate day of judgment.

This indicates believers can be unprepared. Paul reminds the *brethren* in Thessalonica of their new identity in Christ, that they *are all sons of light and sons of day.*

The contrast to *sons of light and sons of day* is the *night and darkness*, which Paul declares decidedly that *We are not of*, we do not belong to blindness and ignorance. He includes himself in this statement by using *We*. Believers in Jesus should *not sleep as others do*, rather we should *be alert and sober* relative to the coming end of all things. All of Paul's language here infers that believers can be overtaken unawares by the day of judgment; we could *sleep as others do*, we could act as though we were of the *night* and of *darkness* and not have clear vision about the reality that there is a looming end to all things as we know them.

Believers are not immune to forgetting. We can forget that there is a destiny, a finality to our lives on earth. We can forget our true identity in Christ, and be deceived into loving the world (1 John 2:15-17). It is possible for us to sin, to slacken, to lose the perspective that Jesus is returning and that He wants us to be ready when He does. It is possible for us to forget that all rewards offered by this world will fade away, and that our faithfulness determines the rewards we receive in the next life—rewards that will never fade away (Matthew 6:19-21).

Of course none of us are guaranteed another heartbeat on this earth. Each moment can be our last, then we will meet Jesus and meet our judgment. When we die, or are caught up, and have completed our lives on earth, we will then be judged for the deeds we have done (2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:11-17; Romans 14:12). Which is why Paul urges the Thessalonians to remember their identity as *sons of light and of day*, to be awake and clear-headed, not to be caught asleep when Christ returns (or when they otherwise meet Christ): *For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night*.

It is *at night* that we can't really see well. We can't navigate well. If we are *drunk* we can't think straight. As believers, we want to choose to walk as *sons of light* and see clearly, as living in the *day*. We do not want to live in oblivion, as does a drunk man. We want to be *sober* and *alert*.

How are we to stay *alert* and *sober*? Paul has just encouraged the Thessalonians in the previous chapter to pursue sanctification, because it's the will of God (1 Thessalonians 4:3). He describes this sanctification as choosing to live in sexually purity, to treat one another with love, to work hard and not be a burden on anyone. It is in following God's commands, adopting His perspective of reality, and seeking fulfillment through love and service that we can walk as *sons of light and of day*. God's word is a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). His ways are the ways of reality, and clarity. When we follow God's will, and pursue His ways, we are also prepared to meet Him.

The reason to be industrious, to strive for sanctification, and to endure persecution is because we don't want to be found wanting when we meet Jesus. We want to be like the faithful servants who received a great reward of increased responsibility in the kingdom, working in the joy of their Master, Jesus (Matthew 25:21, 23). Pursuing sanctification prepares us for Jesus when He comes back, or when we meet Him prior to His return, through our death.

Biblical Text

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief

in the night. 3 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. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. 7 For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.