

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonian 5: Eschatology and Final Admonitions

The last chapter of 1 Thessalonians treats in inverse order (sometimes called a “chiastic” arrangement) the themes of the two previous chapters. Paul begins by offering some more general reflections on eschatological hope that frame the attention in the previous chapter to the issue of the recently deceased (5:1–11). He then appeals to the community to act as they have been called, repeating some important themes from his earlier admonitions (5:12–24). He then concludes with standard epistolary formalities (5:25–28).

More on Eschatology (5:1–11)

Paul had just discussed what he anticipated would be the scene at Christ’s return to earth. His sketch of that scenario did not mention when it might take place, although Paul seemed to anticipate that it would happen in his lifetime (4:15). Here he introduces a word of caution about such particular expectation about the “times and the seasons” (v 1). He says that he really does not have to write about the subject because of what the Thessalonians know. In rehearsing, what he had probably taught them about their eschatological hope, Paul echoes sayings found elsewhere in early Christian literature.

The reference to the decisive end time event as the “day of the Lord” derives from prophetic predictions about God’s intervention into human affairs (Isaiah 2:17; 4:2; 7:18, 20; 13:9, 13; 26:21; 27:1; 28:5; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; Amos 5:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Malachi 4:5), which early followers of Jesus readily appropriated (1 Corinthians 1:8; 2

Corinthians 1:14). A saying attributed to Jesus (Matthew 24:43–44; Luke 12:39–40) warned his disciples to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man, which will happen at an “hour” they do not suspect. They are like a householder who does not know when a “thief” might try to break into the house. Matthew (24:42) frames that saying with an explicit warning that the disciples do not know “on what day” the Lord will come. Paul’s version of the warning makes the same connection between the image of the thief in the night and the coming “day” found in Matthew. It is unlikely that he knew the Gospel of Matthew, but he certainly knew of the sayings tradition underlying it.

Some Christians have overlooked the reticence to specify a time for the realization of eschatological hope found in the Jesus tradition and in Paul. Among more modern interpreters, Dispensationalists of the early nineteenth century have tried to read the apocalyptic texts of the Old and New Testament as a series of datable signposts to the End Times. Such Christians were probably inspired by the book of Daniel, with its calculation of the time when the defiled Temple would be restored (Daniel 7:25; 12:11–13) or by symbolic temporal calculations of the book of Revelation derived from Daniel (11:3; 12:6; 13:5). The failure of such efforts to succeed in identifying the date of Christ’s return has not prevented others from pursuing the effort to do so.

Efforts to date the second coming of Christ with some precision took place from the earliest days of the Christian movement. Like the sayings of Jesus, Paul here warns that any attempts to predict the future are likely to prove futile. He, however, focuses on another problem: the effort to deny the possibility of any imminent judgment. Predictions of “peace and security” (v 3), an echo of Jeremiah 6:14, are not to be trusted, since those who confidently predict such conditions will find themselves in the midst of

“destruction.” The thrust of this warning to take seriously the possibility of coming judgment also resembles the eschatological teaching of Jesus (Matthew 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–33). Quite apart from the prediction of end-time events, Paul’s words are a salutary reminder that conditions can change rapidly and unexpectedly, a phenomenon abundantly attested in recent history.

The image of a woman in labor (v 3) appears in Isaiah 13:8 as a metaphor for agony that people will feel as the day of the Lord approaches. The eschatological sermon of Jesus (Mark 13:17) echoes Isaiah’s language but in terms of a “woe” on those who are actually pregnant in those days. Images of a woman in labor, with different metaphorical twists, appears in other early Christian treatments of the end (Rev 12:1–6; John 16:21–22).

Paul has no hesitation about mixing his metaphors and jumping from one symbolic sphere to another. He does so now, alluding to the proverbial wisdom of the Jesus tradition. He begins by picking up the contrast of darkness and light inherent in the image of the thief in the night (v 2) and applies the contrast to his addressees. He tells them that they are not in darkness, so as to be surprised by a thief (v 4). Instead, the Thessalonians are “children of light” and “children of the day.” Here Paul evokes other sayings of the Jesus tradition about the light that shines from (Matthew 5:14; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16; 11:33; John 11:10) or upon (John 8:12; 11:9; 12:35–36) his disciples, who can be called “children of light” (Luke 16:8).

Paul quickly moves (v 6) to make a hortatory point, telling his addressees not to fall asleep. In doing so he alludes again to the parabolic saying of the householder or to the summons of Jesus to “keep awake” (Matt 24:42; Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; cf. 1

Corinthians 16:13). Paul continues the play on the image of the servants at night, adding a moralizing twist: keeping awake is tied to being sober (v 6). He adds a brief explanation that sleep and drunkenness are phenomena of the night (v 7). The combination of sobriety and nocturnal watchfulness is probably also proverbial and appears in the famous saying of 1 Peter 5:8 to “be sober, be watchful” (NRSV: “Discipline yourselves, keep alert”) because the devil goes about like a roaring lion.

Assuring his audience that they are not drowsy drunkards, Paul shifts his metaphorical gears once again, now introducing martial language (v 8). The Thessalonians are to don military equipment that looks like the three virtues with which Paul begin. The “breastplate” is one of *faith* and *love*, and the “helmet” consists of the “*hope* of salvation.” Perhaps reflecting some time spent watching gladiatorial games, Paul deploys a general metaphor of spiritual arms in Romans (13:12) and 2 Corinthians 6:7, and 10:4. The specific equipment mentioned here appears again in the most elaborate development of this metaphor in Ephesians 6:11–17.

The bottom line of the intricate pattern of images is a message of hope and that God wills the salvation of his people, a goal made possible by the death of Christ (vv 9–10). Paul ties the reflection of this chapter to the presenting issue that occupied him in chapter 4, the fact that some Thessalonians have died. His message of hope is that whether “awake or asleep,” i.e., either alive or dead, we “live with him.”

Final Exhortation (5:12–23)

A series of discrete bits of advice focuses not on general issues of ethical behavior but on aspects of the life of the community. Paul first asks the Thessalonians to respect

those who “labor among you” and “have charge of you” (v 12). The Thessalonians, like other Pauline communities were not simply egalitarian communes, but had some organizational shape. Paul hints at some of the functions that were involved in his depiction of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:10–11, 27–30. Many functions seem to be “charismatic,” i.e., simply a result of the gifts and graces that people had for healing, teaching, preaching, and meeting other community needs. But among those who had gifts and graces were people who “have charge”; or as the Greek literally puts it, “stand in front” of the community (v 12). The church does not yet have the offices of bishops and deacons that Pauline communities will soon acquire (1 Timothy 3:1–13); but, not surprisingly, it does have people assuming leadership roles, perhaps a group of elders (presbyters). Paul asks that they be respected (v 13).

Paul’s admonition to be “at peace among yourselves” (v 13) recognizes the possibility of dissension that in fact marked various Pauline communities, and indeed most other human groups. The advice to “admonish the idlers” (v 14) points to an issue that will loom larger in 2 Thessalonians (3:6–12). Here it is a part of series of suggestions about helping those in who need encouragement, the “faint-hearted” and “weak.” The admonition echoes the call of Isaiah to support the faint-hearted in the face of God’s coming intervention into human history (Isaiah 35:3–4). The admonition not to return evil for evil recalls the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38–42) and frames this set of recommendations in balance with the call to be at peace.

Paul had earlier highlighted joy as a hallmark of his own experience of faithful community (3:9). He returns to the theme here with a call to “rejoice always” (v 16). Prayer (v 17) and thanksgiving (v 18) should be hallmarks of the community “in all

circumstances.” The term for “giving thanks” (*eucharisteite*) is the word from which the Christian sacred meal derives its name. While the celebration of a daily “eucharist” is not likely to have been part of the church’s life at this point, the later tradition of doing so is one way of fulfilling Paul’s summons in these verses.

Paul’s communities understood themselves to be “spirit filled,” and the description of worship at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11, 12, and 14 provides a glimpse into what that meant for Paul’s converts. Paul values the spontaneity and enthusiasm that was part of early Christian assemblies and does not want that Spirit to be quenched, although he himself will try to enforce some discipline on expressions of the Spirit among the Corinthians. Here he focuses on “prophets” (v 21), by which he probably means people who deliver words of exhortation in the communal meetings, the kind of people to whom he refers in 1 Corinthians (11:5; 14:3, 24, 29–32). Yet even what such inspired preachers have to say needs to be “tested” (v 21) and subject to judgment about what is good and evil (v 22).

Benediction and Farewell (5:23–28)

The concluding verses of the letter display common language of prayer, although Paul makes one final allusion to eschatological hope in asking that the community be kept “sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord” (v 23).

One special note in Paul’s farewell is the call to greet all the brothers and sisters “with a holy kiss” (v 26), a practice that Paul mentions at the conclusion of several of his letters (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12 and see 1 Peter 5:14). The “holy” kiss is probably a ritualized version of a normal, friendly greeting. Such

greetings are part of many Christian liturgies to this day, a tangible sign of the kind of solidarity for which the epistle as a whole pleads.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

David May, “‘You Cannot Hide the Soul’: 1 Thessalonians 5:12–22,” *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999) 277–85.

Thomas W. Currie, “1 Thessalonians 5:1–24,” *Interpretation* 60 (2006) 446–49.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The hope for the future that Paul expresses in 1 Thessalonians is not simply about the survival of the individual and restoration to life; it is also about the community and its fate. What kind of hope for the future do you have? Is that hope tied to a scripturally based timetable?
2. Paul’s use of imagery in this chapter is striking. Are there ways in which you find the images of light and darkness or of the life of virtue as a military enterprise to be particularly useful for thinking about Christian belief and practice?
3. Paul’s advice about how to behave as a Christian community relies heavily on the language of being “spirit filled.” What exactly is he talking about? Does the language make sense in a contemporary environment?