



# *Returning!*

God holds all people accountable for their actions.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

The coach stepped away for a moment. As soon as they thought he was gone, a group took over and misbehavior reigned. Some stood in the corner out of fear for when the coach returned, but others went wild. To the surprise of the class, the coach was watching the whole time. He stepped back into the gym, and everyone knew that it was time to be held accountable for their actions. Some today might think that Jesus is absent and not aware of our actions. The reality is that He is aware, and everyone will be held accountable when He returns.

**Tell about a time when someone's absence opened the door for misbehavior that was eventually discovered.**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Paul’s first Letter to the Thessalonians carries a positive tone. Unlike letters to some other congregations, the apostle had no real complaints or corrections for the believers in Thessalonica. He recalled both their faithful service to others and their loving support of him (1 Thess. 3:1-10), and he encouraged them to continue growing in love and maturing in ministry (3:11-13).

Paul gave them practical instructions for living an effective Christian life. He urged them to embrace personal sanctification each day (4:1-8). This included sexual behavior but also extended to their relationships with all believers—and even with unbelievers. Paul urged them to love others well (4:9-12) and pointed out they were doing this already.

Paul’s greatest concern was that the Thessalonians would live with an eye toward the future—specifically the day Jesus would come back (4:13-18). Apparently, some Christians were afraid that dying before Jesus’s return would disqualify them from the resurrection. Paul assured them this was not the case. He emphasized three truths: Christ would come back as promised, those who had died will meet Him first, and those who are alive will unite with them in the air. A proper understanding of Christ’s return was foundational for the Thessalonians as they grew in their faith and encouraged one another.

Paul also knew there was another side of the coin regarding the second coming. What brought joy and hope to Christians would bring judgment on unbelievers (5:1-11). Instead of being lulled into a false complacency, he challenged the Thessalonians to stay alert for Jesus’s return and to work as if He could come back at any moment—which He could.

**Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, noting the things Paul compared the return of Jesus to. How do these comparisons point to being held accountable?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## WARNING ISSUED (1 THESS. 5:1-3)

<sup>1</sup> About the times and the seasons: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you. <sup>2</sup> For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> When they say, “Peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

### VERSES 1-2

Paul told the church they did not *need anything* written to them *about the times and the seasons*. Despite some misunderstandings and questions, the Thessalonians knew and accepted the basics. Instead, the Thessalonians needed to dig deeper into the second coming’s implications for their lives and ministry.

Paul taught that *the day of the Lord* would come *like a thief in the night*. Paul used an analogy. No one knows when a thief might approach in the middle of the night, and no one knows when Christ will return. Therefore, it is wise to prepare for and live daily in anticipation. Those who are living in anticipation of Christ’s return do not need anything written to them about this because they are ready.

**What factors drive people to want to know the exact time of Christ’s return? How do we see God’s wisdom in Him not revealing the exact day and time of His return?**

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. (See Acts 1:7-11.)

### VERSE 3

The pronoun **they** in verse 3 references those outside the church who are not living in anticipation of Jesus's return. Many had been lulled into a sense of complacency. These individuals will accept claims of **peace and security**, believing that all is well. Paul noted their **sudden destruction**, which is prominent in the Greek construction of the sentence. The word *destruction* does not mean annihilation. Instead, it indicates continued and ongoing ruin. This word is associated with divine punishment in other passages in the New Testament. Paul did not speculate concerning this divine punishment but rather stated it as a fact.

The suddenness of Christ's coming will produce divine judgment as surely as pregnancy produces the physical anguish of **labor pains**. In contrast to the peace and reunion promised to believers at the return of Jesus, unbelievers' lives will be thrown into chaos.

Paul summarized the surety of this judgment: **they will not escape**. This statement is written in the emphatic and is a clear warning to those outside of Christ. When He returns, their opportunities to accept His offer of salvation will be gone. Their destiny will be sealed.

**How does the promised return of Jesus produce both dread and anticipation?**

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### ALERTNESS REQUIRED (1 THESS. 5:4-8)

<sup>4</sup> But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the dark, for this day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then, let us not sleep, like the rest, but let us stay awake and be self-controlled. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation.

VERSES 4-5

Those who have a personal relationship with Jesus are **not in the dark** concerning the day of the Lord. The word *darkness* in this verse suggests a state of continued ignorance or error concerning a particular subject matter. Paul used this same word when he told the church at Rome, “you are a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness” (Rom. 2:19).

Paul went on to inform the church that they are **all children of light** and **do not belong to the night or the darkness**. Both of these phrases communicate present realities for believers. Paul did not call them to strive to become these things. These realities were true for the church at Thessalonica, and they are true for those today who have a relationship with Jesus.

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Compare and contrast Old Testament and New Testament references to the day of the Lord.*

When talking about the second coming, Paul referred to the “day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:2). Study selected Old and New Testament passages listed and compare/contrast how each writer used the term: Isaiah 13:6-9; Joel 1:15-20; Joel 3:14-16; Zephaniah 1:7-14; Malachi 4:1-5; Acts 2:16-21; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4; and 2 Peter 3:8-13. How would you summarize the significance of the term “the day of the Lord”?

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VERSES 6-7

Given the fact that the believers in Thessalonica were not blind and were children of the light, Paul called them to specific actions. First, he told them to **not sleep** but rather to **stay awake**. The word *sleep* as

used here means to remain ignorant toward matters of importance. Those who are outside of Christ remain uninformed regarding the day of the Lord. Paul did not want this to characterize those within the church body.

Instead, Paul called on the Thessalonian believers to be continually alert to things that were currently happening. God reveals Himself through His Word, and He also may reveal Himself through His people and circumstances. Believers are to be alert to what God is saying through these avenues. We are able to do this only when we are alert to things that are taking place around us. If, however, we were to remain asleep to these things, then we will be unable to fulfill our calling to lead those who are blind to these matters.

Not only did Paul call the church to be aware, he also called them to ***be self-controlled***. Those who practice self-control do not allow their circumstances to dictate their responses. Instead, they seek to anticipate pending circumstances because of an existing alertness.

**What practical steps can you take to be more spiritually vigilant? What obstacles will you need to overcome?**

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## VERSE 8

Awake and self-controlled, the church was to prepare for battle. The phrase Paul used regarding putting on ***the armor of faith and love*** is rich with meaning. The image is similar to what he penned in his Letters to the Romans and Ephesians (see Rom. 12:11-14; Eph. 6:11-12), calling on believers to be prepared for spiritual battle as a soldier prepares. Paul wanted the church to understand that this preparation was not simply a one-time occurrence. They would need to put on this armor daily.

When a soldier was heading to battle, the first piece of armor he would put on was a breastplate. The breastplate protected the vital organs, the most important being the heart. Paul told the church that the breastplate was one of *faith and love*.

The next piece of battle attire was the ***helmet of the hope of salvation***. If faith and love reside within one's heart, then the hope of

salvation resides within one's mind. Both the heart and mind need to be protected within the battle.

**How is putting on the armor of God a function of being light, awake, sober, and self-controlled?**

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**FUTURE DEFINED (1 THESS. 5:9-11)**

**<sup>9</sup> For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup> who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.**

**VERSES 9-10**

Scripture is clear that the day of the Lord will be a day of judgment and **wrath**. Paul encouraged the church by stating God did not appoint the church to wrath. We must understand this in the context of his letter. Some had entered the church saying that the rapture already had occurred, and that the persecution the church was experiencing was evidence they had missed the rapture. Paul reiterated that this was not the case when he stated that they were not appointed to undergo God's divine judgment in this manner.

Instead, those who believe in Christ **obtain salvation** through Him alone. The word *obtain* means to be given something or to receive something. Salvation cannot be earned or purchased. Salvation is a gift of grace from God so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

The result of obtaining salvation is that those who know Christ will be able to **live together with him** throughout eternity. The believers in Thessalonica were able to live in hope, even in the midst of extreme persecution, because they knew eternal and abundant life with Jesus awaited them.



## VERSE 11

Paul concluded this section by giving two specific commands. Both commands were to be embraced by all the believers. Furthermore, Paul expected the church to live them out in the present and continually. The church need not form a committee to determine what their next steps should be. The apostle left no doubt as to the next steps.

First, they were to **encourage one another**. The word *encourage* in the original language means to come alongside someone. It is easy to encourage someone when things are going well. However, our challenge is to come alongside one another when things are not well.

***Our challenge is to come alongside one another when things are not well.***

Second, he called them to **build each other up**. Paul had told them to encourage each other, but he goes the next step here. This phrase means to strengthen one another, even when one feels like giving up. The church was feeling discouraged as the result of difficult times. Paul wanted them to come out of that discouragement, and the way to do this was to build each other up no matter the circumstances. They were to go beyond simply walking beside each other; they were to engage in ministry to one another.

Finally, Paul affirmed the church by telling them they were **already** fulfilling both commands. If someone calls us to do something that we have not done before, we might feel apprehensive or nervous. If, however, someone tells us to keep doing what we are already doing, we might feel emboldened or even excited. The church at Thessalonica was faithful in coming alongside one another to strengthen each other in the midst of difficult times.

**What is the difference between encouraging and building up others? How do the two actions work together?**

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Jesus will return just as He promised.
- Believers are to live as light while waiting for the return of Jesus.
- Hope for a future is based on the resurrection of Jesus.

**Rate your level of confidence in the return of Jesus. How does this passage raise your level of confidence? What can you share from this passage with others to help them grow in their confidence of Jesus’s return?**

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**Discuss with your group actions that can be taken to more readily be light, awake, sober, and self-controlled. What role does the group play in helping each other put on the armor of God daily?**

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**Reflect on the hope you have as a result of Jesus’s resurrection. Write a prayer thanking God for the sure salvation provided through faith in Jesus.**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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