

Second Coming 1 Thessalonians 5:1—9

Having compared the Rapture at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4 with the Second Coming at the beginning of chapter 5 in previous lessons, it is striking at how different the two events will be. It's noteworthy that Paul included himself with those who would be alive when the Lord comes back to catch him home to heaven while referring to them as the ones who will be going through the Tribulation followed by the Second Coming when Christ comes back like a thief in the night.

Light and dark

Paul makes a strong distinction between us, as being in the light, and them, in darkness. Many interpret this to mean that we are saved and therefore in light but they are unsaved and in darkness. They would say those who are in the light (believers) will be the ones who are not surprised when the Lord comes back to set up His Kingdom. But those in the dark (unbelievers) will be caught by surprise at His coming. However, I think Paul, through the Holy Spirit, had something else in mind, and was actually contrasting this age of Grace with the age to come after the Rapture.

A careful reading of this section of Scripture will show that light and dark are not metaphors for saved and unsaved. Previous lessons have shown that 1 Thessalonians 5 is not a continuation of the Rapture of chapter 4, but instead speaks of those who will experience the Day of the Lord, including the Second Coming. This group includes the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, saved and unsaved. Those saying "peace and safety" in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 will be Israel once the peace treaty is signed at the beginning of the Tribulation (Daniel 9:27; Ezekiel 38:8, 10—11, 14). This treaty will be broken in the middle of the Tribulation with the Abomination of Desolation and a military attack on Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15—28; Luke 21:20—24). This sudden destruction is not the Second Coming when the Lord comes and reaps unbelievers off the face of the earth (Matthew 13:30, 39).

When Jesus came into the world, He was characterized as light in a dark world (Matthew 4:16; John 1:4—9; 9:5). He warned the Jews that they needed to walk in His light because when He leaves they will experience darkness (John 12:35—36). Obviously He was talking about a spiritual darkness, not a physical darkness. I believe Jesus was warning them about the spiritual darkness that was prophetically scheduled to ensue in the Tribulation not long after He ascended into heaven. Here is some evidence that Paul is speaking of the spiritual darkness of the Tribulation in 1 Thessalonians 5.

First, notice that in context Paul is contrasting the Rapture in chapter 4 with the Second Coming in chapter 5. This contrast is carried over in the use of the terms light and dark or day and night.

Second, the Tribulation is characterized as a time of darkness (Isaiah 60:1; Amos 5:20; Joel 2:2; Zephaniah 1:15). As mentioned above, this is a spiritual darkness rather than a physical dimming of the sun (Matthew 24:29).

Third, the Disciples are pictured in a boat at night in a storm. This is a representation of them going through the Tribulation (Matthew 14:22—32). The Lord will bring the believing Israelites safely through the storm of the Tribulation. As a side note, another illustration of this concept is that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego surviving being thrown into the furnace that was made seven times hotter (Daniel 3:19—30). Job is also a picture of the

remnant of Israel making it safely through the Tribulation. Although tormented by Satan, he made it through to the end and was blessed richly (Israel going onto the Millennial Kingdom).

Fourth, the thief coming at night refers to Jesus Christ coming at the end of the Tribulation. We are not of the night but of the day therefore we are looking forward to the Rapture and not the Second Coming.

Fifth, it is night when one will be taken and another left (Luke 17:3).

Sixth, Jesus characterizes the time when He leaves this earth as night (John 9:4). During the Tribulation God will be hiding His face from Israel, thus there will be intense darkness that will overcome them (Deuteronomy 31:17—18; Micah 3:4; Ezekiel 39:29). Note also that Job (as mentioned above) and David are both pictures of believing Israel going through the tribulation (Job 13:24—28; Psalm 13; 27:8—10; 44:33—26). This picture of God hiding His face from Israel is seen when the Disciples were in the boat in the storm with Jesus fast asleep as if He were not there (Matthew 8:23—27). Another picture is given in Mark 6:45—51 as the Disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee. It is night and a storm arises but Jesus is not with them. However, He is able to see them from His vantage point on land. As far as they are concerned, Jesus is not with them, but in reality, He is watching them to make sure they arrive at their destination safely, just as He will during the Tribulation.

Seeing Paul contrasting this present Age of Grace as light and the coming Tribulation as dark helps open up the meaning of this chapter. When Paul says that we are not in darkness so that that day should overtake you as a thief (verse 4) he is again contrasting this age with the coming age. He was explaining that we, in the Body of Christ, are not in the darkness of the Tribulation. Instead, he continues, we are children of light (since we are believers and are connected to the ultimate source of light, who is the Light) and therefore we have nothing to do with those who will be going through the period of darkness called the Tribulation.

Since we are of the day, instead of sleeping, we need to stay alert and sober (carefully thinking things through) (verse 6). The days (of this Grace period) are short and we need to make the most of every opportunity before the Lord calls us home at the Rapture (Ephesians 5:15—17; Colossians 4:5—6). Paul continues in verse 8 with instructions for believers in this Age of Grace, to be sober (clearheaded) and to put on the breastplate of faith and love. When we are renewing the mind we have put off the things of the old nature and have put on the new (Ephesians 4:22—24). By renewing the mind (present tense, continual action) we are allowing Jesus Christ full control of our life. We have reckoned the old man dead (Romans 6:11) and have presented ourselves as a living sacrifice, fully usable to God (Romans 12:1—2). We have also put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:12—17). Putting on the breastplate of faith and love is not about salvation, rather, it is a demonstration that a person is saved. We will be able to stand firm when Satan attacks because of our understanding that we are secure in Christ. It is called the breastplate of faith and love because our faith is built on and comes out of Christ's love for us. The helmet is also an important item of protection. In this case the helmet protects the mind in knowing that we will be saved from going through the fiery trials of the Tribulation. Although many use verse 9 to show that we were elect from ages past to be saved, it is the Tribulation that is in view here, and as believers in the Body of Christ, we were chosen to be caught up in the Rapture and miss the wrath that is to come in the Tribulation because we are blameless and will not come under any condemnation (Romans 8:1; 5:9; Colossians 1:22).

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