

May 20, 2001 by Steve Brandon



The Return of Christ - In Relation to Those Who Are Living (Part 1)

1 Thessalonians 5:1-8

Paul uses seven illustrations to describe teach us regarding the "times" and "epochs" of Christ's return.

- 1. Thief in the Night (verses 2,4)**
- 2. "All is Well" (verse 3)**
- 3. Birth Pangs (verse 3)**
- 4. Light/Darkness (verses 4,5)**
- 5. Day/Night (verses 5,7)**
- 6. Alert/Sleepy (verses 6,7)**
- 7. Sober/Drunk (verses 6,7,8)**

Down through the ages, there have been many who have predicted when Jesus Christ would return to redeem and judge the world. Let introduce you to a few examples of this, who have become quite infamous for their prediction of Christ's return. (This is by no means exhaustive).

The first is a man named Mechoir Hoffman. He was an early Anabaptist in the 1500's. He gained quite a following in the 1530's when he was preaching that the "New Jerusalem" would be established in Strasbourg and that the day of the Lord was coming soon upon the world. This man caused such a political upheaval that he was arrested by the city authorities.

Upon his arrest, a man named Jan Matthys took his lead and quickly declared that Hoffman was wrong. It was not Strasbourg where God would establish the "New Jerusalem," but it was Muster. His message was clear: destruction was soon to descend upon the rest of the world, but the Anabaptists who were in Munster, the city of refuge, would escape the coming cataclysm.

Jan Matthys overtook Muster by mere persuasion and power. He exerted great control and manipulation over his followers. Many have called his dynasty which he set up, the Munster kingdom. He was an ancient David Koresh, if you will. But unfortunately, for him, anyway, like David Koresh and his followers, he was captured by the city authorities and executed along with many of his followers.

Much of his following was obtained through his claim of a special anointing and knowledge that he had. His preaching was apocalyptic and filled with future details of the coming of Jesus Christ - which was soon.

Another man in history came along in the 1840's. His name was William Miller. He came to the conclusion that Christ would return by March 21, 1844. He had more than 50,000 followers of his mis-interpretation of Daniel 8:14 (which speaks of 2300 days until Christ would cleanse the sanctuary). March 21, 1844 came and, as you know, Christ didn't return. Many of these people were left disillusioned and deceived. His preaching was the foundation for the ministry of Ellen White, which developed into the Seventh-Day Adventist church.

Lest you think that this is an old phenomenon, know that even within our lifetime, there have been many that have thought that the return of Israel into the land in 1948 was a key event and that the next generation (within 40 years) would see Jesus return. In Korea, one man predicted that Christ would return in 1992. In America, there was a man who predicted that Christ would return in September, 1994. Many were caught up in following both of these men.

The world is full of people who want to know when the end of the world will come. If somebody comes and preaches a message that says that Christ is coming back on a certain date, there are often many who will follow these people.

But listen, know for certain, that if anybody tells you exactly when Christ is coming back, don't believe them, because you will know for sure that the day stated is for sure NOT going to be the date in which Christ returns. Jesus said, "Of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Matt. 24:36).

But even Jesus' plain statement that nobody knows the day and hour hasn't prevented people from asking the question: When is it all going to take place? The Thessalonians were no different. They had the exact same questions.

Look in chapter 5:1, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren,"

Again, like in other issues that were raised from Timothy's visit to the Thessalonians, they asked the question, "when will these things take place?" The Thessalonian believers were no different than the disciples of Jesus, who asked Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things be?" (Matt. 24:3). On another occasion, they asked Him, "Is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

As I have demonstrated, down through the ages, there has always been those who have tried to predict when these things will happen. Their followings have been great. I believe that the reason why there have been so many followers to these people is because we are like the disciples. We are like the Thessalonians. We would like to know when Christ will return.

Well, I have news for you, which should encourage you to pay attention to this particular passage we are considering this evening. The news is this: Paul will tell us in this passage everything that we need to know concerning when these things will take place. Some of you may not like the answer that is given, but you need to be content with the answer that Paul gives. (We shall see that his answer closely parallels the answer our Lord gave when asked the same questions).

Last week, we looked at Paul's instruction to the church of the Thessalonians with regards to the return of Jesus Christ. We looked at the first half of his instructions. Tonight, we look at the second half of his instructions. This entire section runs from chapter 4, verse 13 through chapter 5, verse 11. Allow me to read the passage for us this evening.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of [the] archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. 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. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of [the] day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

You remember last week how Paul answered their inquiries with respect to those Christians who had died. It seems as if the Thessalonian Christians were concerned that they would miss the return of Jesus Christ to the earth, or at least that they would miss the splendor of His return. You remember that Paul instructed them with respect to the condition of those who had "fallen asleep" in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14).

In Paul's instructions to them, he told the Thessalonians that those who had died are actually in a better state than those who were living. Paul said that when God comes back, it is the dead in Christ who will rise first (4:16).

This past week, I was reading Pilgrim's Progress and ran across a scene in which John Bunyan, the author of that well read work, made the same point Paul made here. In that scene, Christian and Faithful are about to enter the city of Vanity-Fair and Evangelist, their friend prophesies to them that one of them would die in that city. But he comforted them by saying, "He that shall die there, although his death will be unnatural, and his pain, perhaps, great, he will yet have the better of his fellow; not only because he will be arrived at the Celestial City soonest, but because he will escape many miseries that the other will meet with in the rest of his journey."

Furthermore, you remember that Paul's emphasis was upon the sequence of end time events.

1. The Lord Himself will descend from heaven.
2. The dead in Christ shall rise first.
3. Those who are alive will be caught up with them in the clouds.
4. We shall always be with the Lord.

Your eschatology doesn't get any better than that. Admittedly, there are other events involved with respect to the end of the world, but I believe that these are the essentials. (Repeat the above order).

With that as a review, tonight we come to chapter 5, verse 1, where Paul writes, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren." The word Paul uses for "times" is *cronoV* (*chronos*), which addresses "the chronology" of events (i.e. what happens next). The word Paul uses for "epochs" is *kairoV* (*kairos*), which addresses "the seasons" of events (i.e. when will it happen). The first word is more of a specific, detailed word. You might think of it as a clock. The second is more of a general, big-picture word. You might think of it as a calendar.

At any rate, Paul says, "Now as to the chronology and the seasons of Christ's return." Paul concerns himself both with what will happen when these things take place and with when will these things happen. Notice what Paul says, "You have no need of anything to be written to you." He goes on to say in verse 2, "For you yourselves know full well (... and then he goes on...)."

It is very interesting to note here that Paul's instruction to them will be along the lines of a reminder to them, not a teaching of something new. Paul is going to remind them of what they know. We have seen him do this at other locations in this epistle. In fact, much of the epistle is all about reminding them what is true. Notice how many times Paul is simply reminding the Thessalonians about what is true.

1. With regard to Paul's life

"For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake" (1:5).

"For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition" (2:1-2).

"For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed -- God is witness" (2:5).

"For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, [how] working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and [so is] God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we [were] exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father [would] his own children" (2:9-11).

2. With regard to Paul's exhortations

Note the several times in which he prefaces his exhortations with "you don't really need to know this, let me simply remind you."

"We request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more" (4:1).

"Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (4:9).

"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" (5:1,2).

Similarly, tonight, we are going to look at the things that the Thessalonians "know full well."

As I attempted to outline this passage, and found it difficult. In this passage, Paul seems to meander around, bringing up similar themes and reasoning in a circle (like John does in 1 John), rather than being distinctly organized like he was in the previous section. So, tonight, rather than having a strict outline, I would like to look at the illustrations that Paul uses in describing to the Thessalonians what they need to know concerning the "times" and "epochs" of Christ's return.

In this passage, Paul uses seven illustrations to teach us regarding the "times" and "epochs" of Christ's return. Many of these illustrations weave into and out of one another. Like a wicker basket, with many strands flowing in and out of each other, so are each of these illustrations.

Tonight, we will only get to the first three, which teach us of His Return. Next time, we will look at the last four, which teach us of Our Response.

Let's look at the first illustration. We read in verse 2, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night." Paul says that Christ's return will be like a ...

1. Thief in the Night (verses 2,4)

Think with me for a moment how a thief comes to rob a house. Most likely, it will happen at night, when most are sleeping and when those who aren't cannot detect an intruder. A thief will probably look for his greatest opportunity of weakness in the one he is stealing from. That is why we use light timers when we go on vacation. We want a potential thief to pass our house by, because we look like we are at home.

I have heard mentioned to me several times that people are most likely to have their homes robbed during a funeral or a wedding -- because the whole family is going to show up to the funeral or wedding and not be at home. Not only will everybody be gone, but you are telling the world when you are going to be gone. I remember that our neighbors had some relatives that were robbed in this very manner -- they all were off at a funeral and our neighbor's relatives came home only to find their house had been ransacked.

A thief will come when you least expect it. A thief will come when you are least prepared for it.

A few years ago, I remember being in bed at night. It was about 3am and our doorbell rang. I went to the door and didn't want to answer it, lest it be a thief or a robber. But I also wanted to open the door, in case it was somebody in distress, needing help. So, I turned on the lights and checked through the window to see if anyone was there. Nobody was so I opened the door to make sure that nobody was there. And indeed, nobody was there. I had been the victim of a teenager's game, "ding-dong-ditch-em."

But it really struck me that we were very vulnerable. Here was somebody at my front steps in the middle of the night and I had no clue of this person's presence. I must admit that I had a difficult time sleeping that night. It kept running through my head how vulnerable our home was. And so will be when Christ returns.

There will be many who will be totally caught off-guard and will be unprepared for His return. But, there will be others, who will won't be caught off-guard. Paul picks up the illustration in verse 4 - "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief."

See, there are two type of people. One type will be totally caught off guard and unprepared. The other type will be totally ready for Christ's return.

Paul says, "the day of the Lord will catch many off-guard and unprepared, but not so for the Christians." Though many will be unprepared their will be others who anticipate His coming. These will be those who, may I say it this way, have their "times" and "epochs" correct. (We will continue to elaborate on this a bit more. But if you want to have your "times" and "epochs" correct, you simply need to be ready for Christ's return. In fact, you demonstrate that you understand the "times" and "epochs" properly if you are prepared for his return).

Note well, church family, that Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 24:42-44:

"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think [He will]."

My exhortation to you all is this: you need to be ready for His return. If you want to know how to be ready, let me simply exhort you to dwell upon the return of Jesus and what it will mean.

For those of us who trust in Jesus wholly, "We who are alive will be caught up together with [Him]. ... and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). We can become so content here upon the earth, where we live, that we forget that we are going to a better place. The heavenly reality is unchanging, but upon the earth, our certainty is uncertain at best.

For those who are not savingly joined to Christ, He will come with destruction. He will come with judgement. He will say, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:41). God will deal out "retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

Thinking upon either of these truths will only help to prepare your heart for the return of Jesus Christ.

Well, not only is Jesus going to return as a thief in the night (verses 2,4). But, He will also return, ...

2. When "All is Well" (verse 3)

Look at verse 3, "While they are saying 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly." Not only will Christ's return "catch many off-guard and unprepared," (like a thief in the night), but it will also be "unexpected" (when things are going well).

Christ will return during a time of well-being, which Paul calls, "peace and safety." Nothing sets our hearts on the things of the earth like a little creaturely comfort. When we as a nation have experienced 50 years of undiminished economic growth, we can easily be persuaded that "all continues just as it" has always been (2 Pet. 3:4). In fact, "Things are better than they have ever been before." And that is the very circumstances surrounding Christ's return. Jesus described it this way,

"Just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all" (Luke 17:26-27).

In the days of Noah, things were going well. Jesus compared His coming to what things were like then. Jesus also used Sodom as an example.

"It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: They were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:28-30).

Things were going well in Sodom: they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building. Jesus said that this is what it would be like when He returns! There will be this thought in the minds of many that things are going well and things are always going to go well. But that is a lie.

Today, we hear the message of "peace and safety" from our political leaders. "World peace" is the sounding cry today. I am all for "World peace." However, realize that "world peace" will dull many to the realities of our returning King, Jesus.

Paul and Kay Friederichsen were missionaries in the Philippines during World War II. We have distributed to you all to read, "[Key Friederichsen's Philippines Jungle Diary](#)," which is Kay's journal during the few months before they were assigned to a Japanese concentration camp. If you have read it, you will remember how they longed for Jesus, because they had no earthly comforts. In fact, they were in danger of starvation. But when we are comfortable and lack none of the comforts of life, it helps to put the return of Jesus out of our minds.

The message of many religious leaders today -- health, wealth, and prosperity -- is along the same lines. It actually dulls us to Christ's return. It is precisely in these circumstances when Jesus will return -- when things appear to be going sooooo well.

In the times of Jeremiah, things were the same. Jeremiah lamented to God, "Ah, Lord God! ... Look, the prophets are telling them, 'You will not see sword nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place.' Then the LORD spoke to Jeremiah: "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds." (Jer. 14:13,14).

But when there is much talk and discussion about peace and safety, it is then that "destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3), which brings us to our third illustration.

Jesus will return as a thief in the night (verses 2,4) and catch many unprepared. He will also return, when "all is well" (verse 3) and thus, will be unexpected. Thirdly, Jesus will return suddenly, ...

3. Like Birth Pangs (verse 3)

... and none will escape. A few interesting observations concerning birth pangs.

1. You know that they are coming.

Any expectant mother knows of the things to come.

2. When exactly they begin, you don't know.

I remember with our first dear child, Yvonne was sleeping one night and suddenly, something started to happen. In fact, her words to me were, "Steve, wake up, something's happening." When Christ comes, He will come "suddenly" (verse 3).

3. Once they begin to come, they will not stop until the job is done.

This is the perfect illustration for the Lord's return. His return is expected, but exactly when, we don't know. When Christ comes, "they shall not escape" (verse3).

Like the other illustrations Paul uses, this one isn't original with him either. Paul is simply repeating what Jesus said on another occasion:

"Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (Matt. 24:5-8).

Listen, the day of the Lord is the day in which God pours out his wrath upon the unbelieving world.

Once it has begun, there will be no escaping it. The perfect picture is found in Isaiah 2:12-22 or its parallel in Revelation 6:12-17.

Isaiah 2:12-22

For the LORD of hosts will have a day [of reckoning]

Against everyone who is proud and lofty,

And against everyone who is lifted up,

That he may be abased.

And [it will be] against all the cedars of Lebanon that are lofty and lifted up,

Against all the oaks of Bashan,

Against all the lofty mountains,

Against all the hills that are lifted up,

Against every high tower,

Against every fortified wall,

Against all the ships of Tarshish,

And against all the beautiful craft.

And the pride of man will be humbled,

And the loftiness of men will be abased,

And the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

But the idols will completely vanish.

And [men] will go into caves of the rocks,

And into holes of the ground

Before the terror of the LORD,

And before the splendor of His majesty,

When He arises to make the earth tremble.

In that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats

Their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
Which they made for themselves to worship,
In order to go into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs,
Before the terror of the LORD and the splendor of His majesty,
When He arises to make the earth tremble.
Stop regarding man, whose breath [of life] is in his nostrils;
For why should he be esteemed?

Revelation 6:12-17

And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth [made] of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they *said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?"

This day will come unexpectedly upon those not looking for the return of Jesus Christ.

John Bunyan told of how Christian came upon three men who were "fast asleep, with fetters upon their heels. The name of the one was Simple, another Sloth, and the third Presumption." Christian attempted to awaken them by warning them of the coming destruction. But they loved their sleep. Simple said, "I see no danger"; Sloth said, "Yet a little more sleep"; and Presumption said, "Every vat must stand upon its own bottom." Then, all three rolled over and went to sleep again.

May the LORD awaken our eyes to see the dark and dreary fate of all those who are not prepared for the return of Jesus Christ. We need to have in our minds the awfulness of this day. Destruction will come suddenly and those not prepared will be unable to escape.

4. Light/Darkness (verses 4,5)

5. Day/Night (verses 5,7)

6. Alert/Sleepy (verses 6,7)

7. Sober/Drunk (verses 6,7,8)

It won't take us much time to look at the last four illustrations, because these are so simple and straightforward. Each of these responses are a contrast. Each contrast basically communicates the same thing. One is bad and the other is good. For instance, we are either in the light (i.e. we understand) or in the darkness (i.e. we don't understand). We either walk in the day (i.e. unashamed at our behavior) or in the night (i.e. sinful in our behavior). We are either alert (i.e. ready and prepared) or sleepy (i.e. inattentive and unresponsive). We are either sober (i.e. clear minded) or drunk (i.e. not thinking clearly).

Obviously, we are exhorted to be alert and sober, like those of the light and the day. In each of these illustrations, we need to be ready! When asked the question, "When will Christ return?" the proper answer is "be ready!"

Some may not like this sort of eschatology, but I believe it to be thoroughly biblical. It is sort of like the question that Paul poses in Romans 9:19: if God has mercy on whom He has mercy and if God hardens whom He hardens, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" Paul gives the answer, which is basically, "be quiet! Let God be God!" Or, to use Paul's words, "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?" (Romans 9:20-21).

Similarly, when Paul answers the question, "When will Christ return?" the answer he gives is "be ready!" This is Jesus' answer also.

Matthew 24:42-44

"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think [He will]."

Date setters are wrong. Those who are ready are right.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 20, 2001 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.