



8. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

Andrei Rublev

1 Thessalonians 5:1-5

¹Now concerning **the times and seasons**, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the **day of the Lord** will come like a thief in the night.

Paul takes the occasion to point out that whatever their expectations they do not know and cannot know the timing of '**the day of the Lord**'. This is a traditional expression for the day of God's triumph (see Amos 5:18 and Isaiah 13:6). Paul uses another traditional phrase, '**the times and seasons**', referring to the mysterious timing of God's providential will (see Daniel 2:21, Acts 1:7). Concern about the timing of God's final judgment or of the coming of Jesus is only an idle curiosity.

1 Thessalonians 5:3-5

³When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape. ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of the light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

Using an image which comes from Jesus himself, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord, the day of judgment when the world and every human being will have to face the consequences of our behaviour, will come unexpectedly, 'like a thief in the night' (see Matthew 24:43). Some will be caught off guard (see Luke 17:26-30), but not so 'you, beloved'.

I Thessalonians 5:6-11

⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of **faith** and **love**, and for a helmet the **hope** of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath [I:10] but to obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus the Messiah, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

It is the will of God that the Thessalonians remain vigilant (see Luke 12:35-40) and so avoid sin and its consequences (which is what Paul means by 'wrath', see 1:10). Their union with Jesus is proof that 'God has destined us for salvation' (see 1:10; 2:12,16), 'so that whether we are awake or asleep (whether we are alive or dead) we may live with him'. Death does not break communion.

Paul also draws from traditional sayings of Jesus to urge them to be 'children of the light' (Luke 16:8).

They are to arm themselves (see Isaiah 59:17) with faith, hope and love.

We should not miss the simple but profound statement that Jesus 'died for us'. Jesus' death was not simply something from which God raised him (see 1:10; 4:14). It was not only a murder perpetrated by people who sinfully resisted God's will. When his mission of love from the Father brought him up against the threat of death, he refused to stop loving to avoid it. He chose to cling to his Father's will, to continue to give his life in love, making even his death a 'giving of himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age' (Galatians 1:4).

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you **in the Lord** and admonish [νουθετοῦντας; putting thinking right] **you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work.**

Paul speaks of the leaders of the community. At this early stage, the community would still have looked for leadership to Paul himself. But they needed some organisation on the local level. On his earlier mission to southern Galatia, Paul set up an organisational structure modelled on the synagogue by appointing elders (Acts 14:23). In his letter to the neighbouring community at Philippi, he mentions those responsible for overseeing the life of the community ('bishops', Philippians 1:1). Here, he asks the Thessalonians to respect those who '**have charge of you in the Lord**'. The only specific function he mentions is that of admonishing (by correcting wrong ways of understanding; νουθετεω). Paul appeals to his readers to esteem them '**in love**'.

1 Thessalonians 5:13-14

¹³Be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the insubordinate

Peace (see 1:1) is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), a fruit which Paul urges them to welcome and to cultivate. In the community they need each other's help, which includes mutual correction. When Jesus tells us not to judge (see Matthew 7:1), he is telling us that we have no right to sit in judgment on other people as though we were in a position to decide motivation and guilt. He was not telling us to be unobservant or undiscerning.

admonish the insubordinate

Those who are failing to live up to the standards of Christian discipleship (the ‘insubordinate’; ἀτάκτος) are to be admonished. True love is not fragile; it does not need to hide from the truth or to pretend things are other than they really are. Since it matters how we behave, one who truly loves will care enough to correct us when we are wrong. We should not correct with anger or ill-will, and if we do not love someone, we would best leave the correcting to someone who does. If we correct humbly and out of love, only good can come from it.

encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak
be patient with all of them

Those who are especially fearful – partly, no doubt, as a consequence of the persecution that the community is suffering – are to be encouraged. The weak are to be helped, and, finally, they are to ‘**be patient** (μακροθυμew) **with all**’. This is another of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22), a sharing in the large-hearted and faithful love of the heart of Jesus that persists in love through whatever difficulties love may encounter. In his final plea (compare Galatians 6:9-10), the accent is on ‘always’ and ‘to all’, for Paul never tires of stressing the universal love of God. To some outsiders the young Christian community must have resembled the communities established by the Epicureans. These tended to separate themselves off from public life. Paul wants the Christians to reach out to their neighbours, seeking to do good not only to one another but to all.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

¹⁴Be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

The accent is on ‘**always**’ and ‘**to all**’, for Paul never tires of stressing the universal love of God. To some outsiders the young Christian community must have resembled the communities established by the Epicureans. These tended to separate themselves off from public life. Paul wants the Christians to reach out to their neighbours, seeking to do good not only to one another but to all.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

Rejoice always

The joy which Paul wishes for them is the joy that filled the heart of Jesus, whose desire it was 'that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11). It is the happiness of those who live by the beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12): those who recognise their dependence upon God and who look to their Father for everything; the gentle who sense the sacred at the heart of every situation; those whose hearts have been broken, but who, through the pain, have learned compassion; those who hunger and thirst for justice; those who show mercy to others; the pure in heart who see God; those who work for peace; those who share in the sufferings of Jesus and who continue to give themselves in love. It is a 'joy inspired by the Holy Spirit' (1:6; see Galatians 5:22).

1 Thessalonians 5:17

pray without ceasing,

They are to ‘pray without ceasing’. Prayer can be constant, because it flows from the discovery of the divine at the heart of activity as well as in solitude. As we dare to penetrate to the depths of our experience, we become more and more conscious of the mystery at the heart of it. Jesus experienced the need to go apart at times to taste in silence what he had touched in love. We have the same need, not just to live prayerfully, but to make space in which God can speak his Word to us and give us a share of his Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

**Give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in the Messiah Jesus for you.**

Paul exhorts them to be grateful. He witnesses himself to this quality, for the first half of this letter is filled with thanksgiving. However dark our situation may be, our faith tells us that God is present gracing us. It is essential to living a Christian life that we search our situation for signs of grace and that we allow our hearts, however burdened with sorrow, to turn to God full of gratitude.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-20

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit.

²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets,

Paul does not need to remind them that at the heart of Christian experience is the experience of Jesus' Spirit. They were, it seems, especially conscious of this. The stress in his letter has been on living one's ordinary daily life in communion with Jesus. Our whole life is to be lived in Jesus and so in his Spirit. Paul encourages them to be sensitive to the movement of the Spirit in the community, especially when Jesus speaks to them through the prophets among them, those who are especially sensitive and open to divine inspiration and who proclaim God's word in the assembly.

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good;

²²abstain from every form of evil.

However, while exhorting the Thessalonians to respect such utterances, Paul knows our human capacity for self-deception, and so he stresses the need for spiritual discernment (δοκιμάζω, see 2:4). Problems in community are largely due to failure in this regard. They must do all they can to ensure that it is the Spirit of their risen Lord who is the principle of their life in community.

²¹test everything; hold fast to what is good;

²²abstain from every form of evil.

Some of the criteria for discernment have already been mentioned in the letter. Movements are to be tested by their fruit: the fruits of faith, hope and love (see 1:3 and 5:8). If when we follow what we take to be the inspiration of God's Spirit our lives become more and more modelled on that of Jesus (see 1:6), more and more patient in suffering persecution (see 2:14), more and more (an expression found also in 3:12 and 4:1) in accordance with the values Paul is mentioning in this passage, then we can be confident in our discernment.

²¹test everything; hold fast to what is good;

²²abstain from every form of evil.

Another important criterion is our docility in being ready to learn from those who have a special gift for revealing to us the word of God (see 2:13, 3:2, 4:2) and for leadership (5:12).

In the present passage Paul is concerned to point out that one's own personal conviction that one is indeed following the Spirit of God is no substitute for the ordinary, humble process of 'testing everything', so that we may 'hold fast to what is good' and 'abstain from every form of evil'.

1 Thessalonians 5:23

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;
and may your **spirit** and **soul** and **body** be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

God's grace is meant to affect our life in the Spirit (our 'spirit'). It is meant to affect the way we think and feel as human beings (our 'soul'), and all the ways that our life finds physical expression (our 'body'). Every dimension of our being is meant to be transformed by God's sanctifying Spirit. Could one of the problems in the Thessalonian community have been that some members were stressing the sanctification of the 'spirit', but were overlooking or ignoring the need for sanctification of the 'soul' and the 'body'?

1 Thessalonians 5:24-28

²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and **he will do it.** ²⁵Beloved, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah be with you.

Paul's hope that they will be found blameless at the judgment is founded on his conviction concerning God's fidelity. Paul knows that we are always free to reject God's love; hence his exhortations. But he knows too that it is God's will that we all be saved. He knows that Jesus gave his life in order that we would be convinced of God's love and attracted to respond. He knows that God never goes back on his word. The Thessalonians can be assured, from God's side, of every grace needed to attain their goal. Paul's prayer and hope is that, knowing this, they will repent of what is sinful in their lives and cling steadfastly to the hope that the gospel has inspired in them.

The innocence of which Paul speaks often appears elusive. How often do we turn our attention away from our own efforts, with their partial successes and frequent failures, in order to recall that the One who is calling us **'is faithful and he will do it'**. Let us see ourselves in the leper (Luke 5:12-16), in the sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50), in the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32); and in the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). Let us allow the forgiveness of God to flow over us. Only when we are truly convinced of God's love will we dare to listen to God and to follow Jesus in humble trust. Only when we contemplate Jesus on the cross, and, with the beloved disciple, watch the life pouring from his pierced heart, will we **'with unveiled faces reflect the brightness of the Lord'** and **'be turned into the image that we reflect'** (2 Corinthians 3:18). Only then can we become **'imitators of the Lord'** (1:6).