

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding

Edward Caswell (1814–1878)

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!
"Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness,
all you children of the day!"

See, the Lamb, so long expected,
comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
one and all, to be forgiv'n;

So, when next he comes in glory
and the world is wrapped in fear,
he will shield us with his mercy
and with words of love draw near.

Honor, glory, might, dominion
to the Father and the Son
with the everlasting Spirit
while eternal ages run!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

1 Thessalonians 5 and the Rapture

Kevin T. Bauder

When answering a doctrinal question, competent theologians try to take account of everything the Bible says about that question. They will not, however, treat every relevant text equally. Some texts are more critical to a correct answer than others. Clear texts are more critical than ambiguous texts. Didactic texts are more critical than narrative texts. Importantly, texts that aim to answer the specific question are more critical than texts that simply touch on the subject incidentally.

All these factors come to bear upon 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 when discussing the timing of the rapture. This is a text in which the apostle Paul deliberately aims to answer questions about Christians' relationship to an eschatological event known as the *day of the Lord* (1–2). Paul is here borrowing language from Old Testament prophecies about an extended future event during which God will pour out His wrath upon human sin by sending temporal, earthly judgments (see Isa 13:9–11; Zeph 1:13–16). While the day of the Lord also likely includes elements of blessing (Zeph 3:14–15), God's temporal wrath precedes the blessings so that the arrival of that day must always be dreaded as a calamity (Amos 5:18–20).

Paul summarizes the calamitous nature of the day of the Lord by stating that it will arrive like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:2). The point of his analogy is that the arrival of that day will be both unexpected and catastrophic. He explains these points in the next verse: when people believe that they have peace and safety, the day of the Lord will overtake them like labor overtakes a woman giving birth (3). Babies do not schedule in advance the hour and day upon which they will arrive, and they never arrive without pain.

Nevertheless, Paul assures the Thessalonian believers that the day of the Lord will not overtake them as a thief (4). Why not? Because they are not in darkness. In other words, they are not in the night. How is that relevant? By definition, a thief in the night does not arrive during the day. People who are in the day do not have to fear a thief in the night.



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Paul is emphatic: believers are children of light and children of the day (5). They are not of the night or of darkness. The implied conclusion is that the thief in the night cannot touch them.

Since believers are children of the day (*therefore*, 5:6), then they must not sleep like the children of darkness. Instead, they should stay alert and keep their wits about them. The sleep of 5:6 is obviously not the same kind of sleep that Paul referenced in the previous chapter (4:13, 15). There, sleep was a metaphor for physical death (4:16). The word for sleeping was *koimao*, but in chapter 5 Paul uses the word *katheudo*. More importantly, the context clearly indicates that the sleep of chapter 5 contrasts with alertness and sobriety, and it is aligned with drunkenness (7). In chapter 5, Paul uses sleep as a metaphor for spiritual sluggishness and insensitivity. These practices characterize people who are children of night. Since Christians are children of day, they must not display these night-time characteristics. Instead, they should evidence sobriety as they don their daytime armor (8).

For Paul, imperatives typically grow out of the indicatives. Believers are children of the light (indicative), so they ought to live soberly and alertly (imperative). Then Paul strengthens the imperative by an appeal to another indicative: God has not appointed believers to wrath (including temporal, day-of-the-Lord wrath), but to deliverance (9). This statement reveals the reason why believers need not fear the thief in the night. God has already delivered them from the day of the Lord, and He has done it “by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In context, Paul is discussing God’s *temporal* wrath, demonstrated in the day of the Lord. All believers of all ages are delivered from God’s *eternal* wrath (condemnation in hell). Not all believers from all ages, however, have been or will be delivered from God’s *temporal* wrath. Some believers have in the past had to pass through temporal wrath that God sent upon unbelievers. Furthermore, those who come to faith during the Tribulation will still have to endure the remainder of its judgments. In 1 Thessalonians 5, however, the promise of deliverance appears to be made specifically to church saints.

And the promise is absolute. It applies to all church saints, whether they are spiritually alert (“whether we wake”) or sluggish (“or sleep”). Church saints have complete exemption from every manifestation of divine wrath, whether eternal or temporal. According to 5:9–10 this exemption or deliverance is grounded in the cross-work of Christ. In other words, it is a matter of gospel truth that church saints cannot enter the day of the Lord because they have been delivered from the temporal wrath of that day.

Of course, there are still questions among genuine Bible believers about when during the Tribulation the temporal wrath of God begins. Some believe that it begins with the opening of the very first seal, others that it begins at the halfway point, still others that it begins sometime during the

second half of the Tribulation, while others think that it does not begin until the very end of the Tribulation. Theories of the rapture will correspond to each of these views. This particular passage does not answer the question of when God’s temporal wrath will begin. What is clear is that whenever that will be, church saints must be raptured first.

This passage does disallow one view of the rapture. It categorically excludes a partial rapture in which obedient saints are taken to heaven while carnal believers are left to endure God’s wrath during the Tribulation. According to 5:9–10, the theory of a partial rapture constitutes a denial of the gospel. It is the one option that is genuinely heretical.

It is possible to establish when God’s wrath begins from other scriptures, but that is not the point of the present discussion. The point is that whenever God’s temporal wrath is set to begin, He has promised to deliver believers first. Furthermore, He has promised to deliver all of us, whether we wake or sleep. A partial rapture is not possible. This promise is both a comfort and a ground of exhortation as we think of the great eschatological events to come.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
