

Prayers

To God

Father God, in Your wisdom You have made us so we are infinitely varied in capability and inclination. We love to go our own way; we love to pursue our own interests; we love to choose what we do with our time. Turn our hearts towards You so that our wills, hearts and minds are transformed, and help us to live together according to Your Word and to Your eternal plan, content with Your will, not our own. **AMEN**

For myself

Weekly theme: Food and eating

Today, bless the food you eat, as a way of saying thank you to God for being alive!

For others

Pray in earnest for the country of Syria; for many of you who have a list of daily prayer, this will not have been out of prayers for some time, but the killing goes on and the UN still struggles to serve its purpose and protect the interests of both the whole nation and the international community of nations. The prospects for greater and more far reaching wars in the Middle East continue to rise.

Meditation

He is the Lord, He is Christ our Saviour.

He is the Righteous Judge to whom we appeal for mercy,
who knows that truth will set us free.

He is the Counsellor whose caring support lasts forever;
who knows our mind, soul and spirit.

He is the Father who remembers His love for His children,
who places us in fellowship with others.

He is the Guide whose pathway and guidance is sure;
who is with us as we pass through trials.

He is the Covenant Lord, who loves us more than we know;
who knows our beginning and our end.

He is the God of power whose strength is always with us,
who always fights our enemies on our behalf.

He is the Lord, He is Christ our Saviour.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 5:6-11

⁶ So then, let us not fall asleep like others, but keep alert and sober! ⁷ Those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk do their drinking at night; ⁸ but we are people of the day, so let us be in control of ourselves, having already put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

⁹ For God has chosen us to find salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, not to receive His wrath! ¹⁰ Jesus has died on our behalf so whether we are awake or asleep when He comes we will still live together with Him. ¹¹ So encourage each other and strengthen each other, just as you are doing.

Review

This is a wonderful passage of Scripture, and the further we get to the end of this letter, more and more verses leap out of the page at us. This is because they express something of the vibrancy of faith Paul communicates so well, and we immediately sense the faith he expresses. The phrase '*we are people of the day, so let us be in control of ourselves ...*' (5:10) is highly energising for the spirit, and the very next phrase about '*the breastplate of faith and love ...the hope of salvation as a helmet*' (5:10), describes similar elements to what we know from Ephesians as the dynamic '*whole armour of God*' (Eph 6:13-17). This is inspiring and exciting reading!

In verses 9 and 10, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the focus of their faith, and he summarises this in what appears at first to be a classic manner. He appeals to them to remember their '*salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ*' (5:9) and then reassures his readers of their eternal destiny to be with Christ in glory (5:10). But as we read more closely, we will notice that Paul is not just commending the true faith, he also reinforces the important message his letter delivers about those who will meet Christ when He returns; '*whether we are alive or dead ... we will still live together with Him*' (5:10 - see study of 4:13-15).

Our passage closes with a wonderful brief sentence that deserves to be read many times over, especially in church; '*encourage one another and strengthen one another ...*' (5:11). Paul is obviously confident that the Thessalonians are in fact doing this, but his words are a challenge. Are we doing these things for each other today?

Going Deeper

An odd use of an analogy! (5:6-11)

We need to be a little careful, however, because if we did not miss this when we read it, we should spot the rather odd way in which Paul uses his analogy here. At the beginning of our text today, Paul compares sleeping at night with the sinfulness of humanity (5:6f.) and continues on to make a point about being awake and ready to do God's will (5:7f.). However, towards the end of the passage, he speaks of the equality of those who are 'awake' and 'asleep', because both will meet the Lord at His coming (5:10).

Obviously, in the first half Paul is using the language of 'asleep' and 'awake' to compare darkness and light, night and day, sinfulness and salvation. In latter part of the passage these two terms refer to Christians who have either died ('asleep') or are still alive ('awake') at Christ's return. Now, if we have read the letter with understanding then we will instinctively know the difference and interpret the terms correctly. There is only a problem if we read this passage without being aware of how the term 'asleep' can refer also to 'a Christian who has died'.

Being awake and alert as God's people (5:6-8)

Paul's first illustration calls God's people to belong 'to the day' (5:8) and be alert for the Lord's coming. The theme follows naturally from chapter 4, but it is very similar to Jesus' call to His disciples to 'be at work when the Master arrives' (Matt 24:46). Paul mocks those who 'sleep' when they should be 'awake' (5:6,7), and who are therefore ignorant of what God is doing and fail to join in with the Gospel call. He therefore appeals, 'let us not fall asleep as others do'. This text is calling for lively and energetic Christians to put their faith into action!

But if we think about this further, why should Paul say this? It seems a rather harsh judgement; so who is he speaking of? Have some Christians begun the pathway of faith and awoken to the glories of the Gospel, only to walk away from faith and fall asleep again? It is possible, and we know from other first century documents that this became a concern for the church in due course. However, I reckon that in this very early letter, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians in their faith, as he says later, 'encourage and strengthen each other' (5:11).

The Gospel delivers a moral message in which people are called out of the immorality that likes to keep in the shadows of social life - he specifies night drinking(5:6), but elsewhere in his writings Paul berates those who are adulterous and thieving under the cover of night, and more (e.g. Rom 13:12,). It is one of the first teachings of Christian faith; immorality has no part in discipleship; it must be discarded by one who is truly 'awake' in Christ. Remember, while Christ prayed before He was arrested, he said to His disciples, 'keep awake' (Matt 26:41)!

The armour of God (5:8)

One of the pearls of this passage is Paul's illustration, '... the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation' (5:8). This is an early reflection of Paul's, perhaps a memorable illustration coming from his preaching. Many years later, I writing his general letter to the Ephesians, the whole idea of protective armour in battle against evil had grown remarkably, and we know it as the 'whole armour of God' (Ephesians 6:14-18):

¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.

Notice however, that in Thessalonians, faith is linked with love to the breastplate, where in Ephesians, love is omitted, but faith is associated instead with the shield (Eph 6:16). But in both Thessalonians as well as Ephesians, the helmet is associated with salvation (Eph 6:17). Does this matter? We should perhaps be less legalistic about the connection between certain pieces of armour and the qualities of Christian life and faith. For it appears that as he preached this illustration, Paul changed things a little as the years went by! It is also likely that Paul developed his insight using a famous text in Isaiah; 'He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head' (Isaiah 59:17)

Apart from this, we should spot that in the spiritual 'armour' mentioned here, Paul speaks of faith, hope and love. These three qualities are featured outstandingly in Paul's famous hymn

to love; *'now faith, hope and love remain, but the greatest of these is love'* (1 Cor 13:13). Most agree this key Biblical text came from years of Paul's reflection and experience.

The basis of our faith (5:9,10)

Verses 9 and 10 confirm the glories of our faith in Jesus Christ. He includes the idea of our being 'chosen' as God's people. Paul was an evangelist who dared to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and Jewish preachers of the day criticised him for going beyond the people God had already 'chosen' for His own, the people descended from Abraham, the Jews. So what does Paul mean by being 'chosen'?

He only uses this as a 'theological' term twice, both here and also in Colossians 3:12, where he calls God's people, *'chosen ones, holy and beloved ...'* If we look deeper into Paul's writings about the connections between the Jewish people and the new church of God (especially Romans 4, and 9-11), it seems to me that when Paul called Gentile converts 'chosen' people of God, he did this to mark them out as God's new people. They had chosen to accept the message of the Gospel; of this, the stories in Acts are crystal clear. But in addition, God had chosen these people to be the first of His own to witness to the Gospel in the new age dawning, the age in which we now live before the Lord's return. In this sense, nothing has changed for us. We are still God's people, saved by faith from the wrath of God, and awaiting His coming whether we are alive at the time or have died in the meantime (5:10).

An example of practical faith (5:11)

Throughout the passage, Paul is positive and upbeat. He is confident about salvation in Christ (5:9), of victory in Christ (5:10), and of the preparedness of the Thessalonians to work together to do God's will (5:11). The armour of God is not a discipline to take up, but a gift of God already given by virtue of our faith (*'having put on the breastplate ...'* 5:8). Paul certainly knew how to encourage God's people!

His last advice here is positive and forward looking; the church of God lives by encouragement and strengthening! Certainly this should be the aim of any ministry that seeks to enable the church to grow. He was confident that the Thessalonians were doing what was required, and those of us who read the passage must rise to its challenge.

Discipleship

Application

Positive encouragement

The whole of this passage is about encouragement! Certainly, the closer we get to the end of Paul's letter, the more encouraging his message. Paul was intent on enabling the church he founded to overcome its problems and grow. The church is not about maintenance but about growth, as we might say today. But note how Paul encourages the Thessalonians; he seeks to maintain their faith by reminding them of the essentials of the faith they have received. This is true of our entire passage today.

There are many passages within Paul's letters that give a message similar to this, indeed, the last chapters of Galatians (Galatians 5 - the fruit of the Spirit) and Ephesians (Ephesians 6 - the whole armour of God), for example, hold words of immense encouragement to Christians of all generations. This brief passage (and the verses that come next in Thessalonians) contain helpful advice for all who seek to enable the church to grow through encouragement and strengthening.

Going forward, not backwards

Throughout my life I have wondered whether I have been truly ready for what God has required of me and been as positive in my faith as I might have been. I have often wondered, looking back, whether I have been as ready and prepared as I have felt, and wondered why it is that in hindsight, I feel I have been held up by meaningless issues and perhaps not done what I ought to have done. Such feelings do not help me grow!

However, although we cannot revisit the past, but we can learn from it. Texts like this help us re-evaluate our faith and the direction of our lives, so that we are in a position to go forward in faith and love. Being ready and 'awake' is often about being willing to move on with God into fresh challenges by faith and with zeal!

Ideas for what to do

- Consider the armour of God mentioned in this passage. Reflect on how faith and love may be likened to a 'breastplate' and how salvation may be likened to a 'helmet'. What does this mean for your fight against the enemy?
- Pray for the protection of God's people as they go about doing the work of the Gospel today. Many people feel under significant attack and find it hard to understand why they have difficulty when they place their trust in Christ. Pray that God will enable His church to grow and demonstrate the defeat of Satan

Questions (for use in groups)

1. To what extent are all God's people ready for Christ's coming in glory and the work of the Kingdom?
2. Discuss what the 'breastplate' and the 'helmet' of God's armour might mean to you?
3. How can we ensure that we remain ready to do the work of God, according to the call of Scripture?

Final Prayer

We offer You our love, Heavenly Father, for you have loved us with a love that is beyond our understanding. Cleanse our impurities and make us worthy of everything You have done for us, and continue to do this for us day by day. Accept our thanks, today and every day, and guide us into all truth. Thank You heavenly Father; AMEN