

# The Significance Of The Phrase The Day Of The Lord In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 : An Exegetical Analysis

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**Abstract** - This study investigates the theological import and semantic scope of the expression "the day of the Lord" as articulated in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. Employing historical and literary analysis, it evaluates Paul's depiction of this event as abrupt and unforeseen, in deliberate contrast to the subsequent eschatological elaborations found in 2 Thessalonians. The research further situates the phrase within its Old Testament prophetic origins and examines its reinterpretation within the New Testament corpus, thereby elucidating its implications for Christian theology and ecclesiology. Through the application of the historical-grammatical method, the paper aims to illuminate both the continuity and the development of this pivotal eschatological motif.

**Keywords:** The day of the Lord, Eschatology, Theology, and Ecclesiology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

During his second missionary expedition (approximately A.D. 49–51), the Apostle Paul sojourned in Thessalonica, engaging in synagogue proclamation over the course of several Sabbaths. However, opposition from certain Jews forced him to flee to Beroea, leaving behind Silas and Timothy. According to Luke, Paul's ministry led to the founding of the Thessalonian church. Thessalonica, a major city of approximately 200,000 and the capital of Macedonia, became the setting for his proclamation of the gospel to both Jews and Gentile God-fearers.

Paul's correspondence with the Thessalonian community exhibits a pronounced eschatological orientation, with each chapter of 1 Thessalonians culminating in a reference to the parousia of Christ, designed to provide consolation and encouragement to a congregation enduring persecution. At the heart of this thematic framework lies 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, wherein Paul delineates the parousia of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. This eschatological discourse is further developed in chapter 5, which affirms the assurance of believers' deliverance from the impending divine wrath.

A conceptual tension arises between 1 Thessalonians 5:2, which underscores the abrupt and unforeseen nature of the “day of the Lord,” and 2 Thessalonians 2:2, which asserts the necessity of identifiable precursory events—namely, the apostasy and the unveiling of the “man of lawlessness.”<sup>1</sup> This tension contributed to confusion in the Thessalonian church, with some believing the day had already arrived. Paul corrects this view, urging continued faithfulness until the true fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

This study centers upon the expression “*the day of the Lord*” in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (*αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται*), which accentuates the sudden and unanticipated character of Christ’s parousia.<sup>3</sup> The research explores the biblical origins, development, and theological significance of the phrase in both Testaments. Three guiding research questions structure this study:

1. What is the Old Testament understanding of “the day of the Lord”?
2. How does the New Testament use this phrase?
3. What theological and practical implications does it hold for the church?

The aim is to examine the diachronic development of this expression and its implications for Christian theology and eschatology. Given the varied interpretations within contemporary theology, this study seeks to contribute toward a clearer and more unified biblical understanding. The scope is limited to exegetical and theological analysis of 1 Thessalonians 5:2, supported by comparative study of relevant biblical texts. The methodology employed is the Historical-Grammatical approach, interpreting the text within its original historical and linguistic context.

## II. THE HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE DAY OF THE LORD

The concept of the Day of the Lord in biblical theology reflects both divine judgment and salvation. In Israelite belief, Yahweh was seen as a God of both mercy and justice, rewarding the faithful and punishing the wicked. This duality was demonstrated historically through events such as the conquest of Canaan and the exile of both Israel and Judah due to apostasy.<sup>4</sup> The *Day of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris and Donald Guthrie, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 98.

<sup>2</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 196–99.

<sup>3</sup> English Standard Version (ESV), 1 Thess. 5:2.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob M. Myers, *Invitation to the Old Testament: A Layman’s Guide to Its Major Themes* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 98–99.

*Lord* is thus depicted as a climactic juncture of divine intervention, characterized simultaneously by acts of judgment and of salvation.

#### A. *The Day of the Lord in OT*

Within the Old Testament, the designation "*the day of the Lord*" occurs on sixteen occasions, while cognate expressions—such as "*on that day*" and "*day of wrath*"—appear with notable frequency. Entire prophetic compositions, including the books of Joel and Zephaniah, are devoted in substantial measure to the proclamation of this motif. The prophets describe this day as a time of purging judgment against idolatry, pride, and injustice, often carried out through foreign invasion or natural disasters (e.g., locust plagues). Despite its harshness, prophetic literature also offers hope for the faithful remnant, anticipating vindication and restoration.

The Day is often heralded by celestial signs and trumpet blasts, symbolizing divine presence and action. These motifs have roots in events like the siege of Jericho and the Sinai theophany. Thematically, the Day functions as both judgment upon sin and assurance of God's ultimate justice.

#### B. *The Day of the Lord in the New Testament*

In the New Testament, the *Day of the Lord* is intrinsically linked to the Second Coming of Christ and is designated by various appellations—such as "*the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor. 1:8), "*the day of Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 1:6), and, more succinctly, "*the Day*" (1 Cor. 3:13)—each denoting the consummative moment of final judgment and reward.. This eschatological hope retains the Old Testament tension between doom for the unrepentant and salvation for believers.

Paul and other apostles affirm the certainty and nearness of this day, even as they acknowledge that certain signs—such as apostasy and the appearance of the "man of lawlessness"—must precede it (2 Thess. 2:3). While believers are assured exemption from God's wrath (1 Thess. 5:9), they are also warned of impending judgment for the unrighteous (Rom. 2:5; Jude 6). The Day will be marked by dramatic cosmic events, including fire and celestial disturbances (2 Pet. 3:10–13; Rev. 6:12), culminating in the renewal of creation and the establishment of divine justice.

### III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF 1 THESSALONIANS 5:2

This section examines the prominent Old Testament motif designated as "*the day of the Lord*." As noted by Hughes and Laney, the expression constitutes a central theme within prophetic literature, exemplified in passages such as Isaiah 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15; and Zephaniah 1:14–18. They describe it as a divinely ordained period in which God enacts judgment upon both Israel and the

nations, accompanied by ultimate deliverance. According to the apostle Peter, the consummation of this divine intervention entails the dissolution of the present heavens and earth in anticipation of the inauguration of a new creation (2 Pet. 3:10–13; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul's treatment of "*the day of the Lord*" is distinguished by its pronounced focus on the event's implications for unbelievers rather than for the faithful. As Gordon Fee observes, Paul frames the eschatological warning primarily in terms of its impending threat to the ungodly. This perspective informs the subsequent admonitions within the epistle. The metaphor of a "*thief in the night*" serves to underscore the sudden and alarming character of the event, particularly for those outside the sphere of faith.

Moreover, Paul does not elaborate on the "times and seasons" in 1 Thessalonians 5, as he had previously addressed these matters. Fee explains that Paul uses an explanatory "for" to indicate that such details require no repetition, as the Thessalonian believers are already well-informed. The phrase "you yourselves know full well" carries a tone akin to parental instruction—a reminder of something previously and repeatedly conveyed.

This chapter offers an exegetical examination of 1 Thessalonians 5:1, organized into five principal components: the presentation of the Greek text, an English translation, a literary analysis, a phrase-by-phrase commentary, and a concluding summary. Particular attention is devoted to the clause "*αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται,*" as previously introduced within the scope of this study.

### **Text and translation**

1 Thessalonians 5:2 *αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται.*

The translation:

1 Thessalonians 5:2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (ESV).

#### *A. Literary Analysis*

This section provides a literary examination of the passage, encompassing its placement, genre, structure, chapter arrangement, and immediate context.

##### *1). Placement of the Passage*

The passage engages with the third question raised by the Thessalonian believers concerning the advent of the *Day of the Lord* (5:1–2). As Green notes, this concern—together with questions regarding the chronology of eschatological events—occupied a central place in the

Thessalonian church's reflections, particularly as the community contended with persecution and misleading teachings about the timing of the Lord's return. Paul's reply is embedded within a broader paraenetic framework that encompasses a series of reminders and exhortations throughout chapters 4 and 5:

- 4:1: (a) "Just as you received from us"
  - (b) "Just as you are also walking"
  - (b) "That you do so all the more"
- 4:2: (a) "For you know what commandments we gave you"
- 4:6: (a) "Even as we told you before"
- 4:9: (a) "You have no need for us to write to you" (a) "For you yourselves are 'God taught'"
- 4:10: (b) "For you are doing this very thing"
  - (b) "Abound in it all the more"
  - (a) "Even as we have commanded you"
- 5:1: (a) "You have no need for us to write to you"
- 5:2: (a) "For you yourselves know these things"
- 5:11: (b) "Even as you are also doing"

## 2). *Literary Type*

The genre of 1 Thessalonians is most accurately characterized as that of a composite or mixed-type letter. Green categorizes it as a form of correspondence incorporating a range of rhetorical elements, including thanksgiving (1:2–3; 2:13–16), commendation (1:4–10), apologetic discourse (2:1–12), amicable exchange (2:17–3:13), admonition (4:1–12; 5:12–23), and consolation (4:13–5:11).

## 3). *Literary Structure*

From a rhetorical standpoint, 1 Thessalonians is composed of the following sections:

1. Epistolary Prescript (1:1)
2. Exordium (1:2–10)
3. Narratio (2:1–3:10)
  - First Part (2:1–12)
  - Digressio (2:13–16)
  - Second Part (2:17–3:10)
4. Transitus (3:11–13)
5. Probatio (4:1–5:22)
6. Peroratio and Epistolary Closing (5:23–28)

Wanamaker notes that after reaffirming his bond with the Thessalonian church through the narratio, Paul transitions to the parenetic section with a concluding prayer and moral exhortation (3:11–13), which serves as the thematic hinge leading into chapters 4 and 5. Bruce, drawing on Rigaux, delineates a tripartite thematic arrangement in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11: (1) the *Day of the Lord* (vv. 1–3), (2) an exhortation to vigilance (vv. 4–8a), and (3) the shaping of Christian life in view of eschatological hope (vv. 8b–10), with verse 11 functioning as a concluding summary.

#### 4). *Chapter Structure*

Malherbe argues that chapters 4 and 5 form a cohesive parenetic unit following the personal and narrative sections of the letter. These chapters transition from encouragement regarding individual morality and community relationships (4:1–12) to eschatological concerns (4:13–5:11), and then back to ethical instructions for community order (5:12–22). The placement of the Day of the Lord discussion within this unit suggests its function as both theological instruction and practical exhortation. Jewett emphasizes that Paul masterfully weaves pastoral care and eschatology into a seamless appeal for readiness and mutual edification.

#### 5). *Immediate Context*

The immediate context of 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 is shaped by the preceding discourse in 4:13–18, which responds to concerns regarding the fate of deceased believers at the Parousia. Transitioning from this pastoral reassurance, Paul broadens his focus to issue a general admonition and encouragement concerning the unexpected arrival of the *Day of the Lord* and the appropriate conduct of those who live in anticipation of it. Marshall points out that Paul's logic flows naturally: since believers will be with Christ whether alive or dead (4:17–18), they must therefore live as "children of the day" (5:5–6), embodying sober and vigilant lives. This flow reinforces ethical living as the fitting response to eschatological hope.

#### B. *Verse-by-Verse Analysis*

Frame argues that the Thessalonians' inquiry about "times and seasons" (5:1) likely originated from the fainthearted among them who were anxious about both deceased believers (4:13–18) and their own salvation. Paul's response underscores the sudden and unforeseen character of the *Day of the Lord* for unbelievers, while assuring the faithful that, as children of light, they do not reside in darkness and therefore need not be overtaken unawares (vv. 4–5a). He subsequently exhorts them—shifting from the second-person plural ("you") to the first-person plural ("we")—to sustained moral vigilance, symbolically represented by the armor of faith, love, and the hope of salvation (vv. 5b–8).

Green adds that Paul had already provided teaching about the Day of the Lord during his initial ministry (v. 2). Therefore, he sees no need to elaborate further. The phrase "times and seasons" (tōn chronōn kai tōn kairōn) signifies an undefined future period, used synonymously in the Hellenistic era.

### C. Theological Implication

The *Day of the Lord* occupies a pivotal position within the eschatological framework of 1 Thessalonians. Wood and Marshall explain that while Paul affirmed the significance of eschatological awareness, he discouraged speculative immediacy regarding the Parousia. Rather, he emphasized its ethical ramifications—urging readiness and holiness in anticipation of Christ's return. Although uncertain about whether he himself would be alive at the Parousia, Paul presented it as both a comfort and a call to holy living, heralding the final victory over evil.

Green concludes that the precise timing of the Day of the Lord remains unknowable, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32–37; Acts 1:7). Consequently, a posture of continual readiness is imperative (cf. 1 Thess. 5:4–6; 2 Pet. 3:10–11). The event itself will transpire with suddenness, akin to the coming of "a thief in the night."

The eschatological focus of 1 Thessalonians 5:2, concentrated on the expression "the day of the Lord," discloses significant theological concerns within the early Christian community. It embodies both continuity and progression within the trajectory of redemptive history. Originating in Old Testament prophetic literature—where the Day of the Lord denoted a decisive act of divine intervention characterized by judgment and deliverance—Paul's adaptation of the term within a Christian framework accentuates its consummation in the *parousia*, the second advent of Christ.

Moreover, the deployment of apocalyptic metaphors—such as "a thief in the night" and "labor pains"—conveys both the suddenness and the inevitability of the eschatological event, while simultaneously intensifying the summons to moral and spiritual vigilance. In this framework, eschatology functions not as a matter of speculative futurism but as an urgent ethical imperative for present conduct. Believers are exhorted to conduct themselves as "children of light," thereby distinguishing their way of life from those who dwell in darkness and remain unprepared.

From a theological perspective, the passage reflects a dynamic interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. While the precise timing of the Lord's return is both undisclosed and unknowable, the assuredness of His coming necessitates a continual posture of faithfulness and holiness. This eschatological hope shapes the identity of the early Christian community in ways that are transformative rather than escapist, informing their ethical practice, communal relationships, and spiritual self-understanding.

Furthermore, the inseparable unity of God's judgment and love is manifest within this motif. The Day of the Lord represents both a moment of divine reckoning and the culmination of God's redemptive purposes. For believers, it constitutes the consummation of salvation; for unbelievers, it signifies a day of destruction. This inherent duality compels a missional orientation within the church, urging the proclamation of the gospel in the light of imminent divine judgment.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The formative influence of Hellenism, Greco-Roman culture, and Judaism exerted a profound impact on the development of early Christianity. In the first century, Greek functioned as the lingua franca, facilitating both everyday communication and theological discourse. While Christianity emerged within a thoroughly Jewish milieu, it progressively forged a distinct identity, particularly through its confession of Jesus Christ as the Messiah—a claim rejected by mainstream Judaism. Although numerous theological and cultural continuities persisted, this fundamental christological divergence significantly contributed to the eventual separation between the two traditions.

The expression "*the day of the Lord*" constitutes a major eschatological motif with deep roots in Old Testament prophetic literature, subsequently appropriated by the nascent Christian movement. Within the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, the phrase denotes the *parousia*, or second coming of Christ. This text represents the earliest occurrence of the phrase within the Pauline corpus and presupposes that the Thessalonian believers were already conversant with its theological implications. Paul employs this terminology not only to offer encouragement but also to issue ethical exhortations, stressing the necessity of vigilance and spiritual readiness.

The concept of "*the day of the Lord*" encompasses an inherent duality, uniting themes of divine judgment and deliverance. This dual emphasis reflects continuity with its Old Testament usage, where it signified a decisive act of divine intervention in human history. In the early Christian reinterpretation, the motif became inextricably associated with the return of Christ and the ultimate consummation of God's redemptive purposes. Within Pauline theology, designations such as "*the day of the Lord*," "*the day of Christ*," or simply "*the day*" consistently refer to this climactic eschatological event.

Although the precise timing of this event remains undisclosed, Paul underscores the imperative of perpetual preparedness. He reassures the Thessalonian believers that the day will not overtake them unexpectedly, owing to their spiritual vigilance. The metaphor of a *thief in the night* vividly conveys the sudden and unforeseen nature of the event, particularly for unbelievers who remain unprepared. Consequently, the passage functions not only as a theological affirmation

but also as a summons to sustained spiritual watchfulness, enabled by the Holy Spirit, in anticipation of Christ's return.

In sum, 1 Thessalonians 5 articulates the early Christian understanding of the *day of the Lord* as both a moment of decisive divine intervention and the fulfillment of eschatological hope. Paul's pastoral objective is to comfort and exhort the community, urging them to live in continual readiness—marked by hope, alertness, and moral integrity—in light of this impending reality.

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