

# **Light and Darkness**

MJCF July 25, 2021

I Thessalonians 5:1-24

There are people who think that the world is about to end. Disasters are happening all around us. The biggest has been the pandemic, which has changed the lives of people all across the world. We also are in the middle of one of the worst wildfire seasons on record. Experts believe this is a direct result of climate change, and the result of our failure to control greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels such as oil and gasoline. We hear of political unrest, especially south of the border, as well as in other parts of the world. Constant bad news and the fear of things possibly getting worse adds stress to our lives. Online, many of us are easily drawn to videos giving more details of terrible things happening, and warnings of worse things to come. And, we search and search for more information in an effort to learn something that may help us make it through. We think, if we could just get a bit more control, we could maybe keep away from the darkness, and avoid any potential suffering. Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has something to say about the end of the world. It also has some good ideas for how we can respond when the darkness of various troubles are all around. How do we fight against the darkness? What can we do?

Paul talks about "the times and seasons." This was an expression that usually represented the end-times. "The day of the Lord" would come. Jesus would return and everyone would experience the final judgement. Many people are curious as to when this end-time judgement will be. Throughout history, many have tried to predict this event. Of course, so far any predictions of end-time dates in the past have all been wrong. After Jesus' resurrection, the disciples ask if Jesus will set up his new kingdom on earth, in Acts 1:6. They likely wanted to know if the long-awaited end of oppression come. But, Jesus answers, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority." In other words, only God knows when the end will come. It be a surprise, like a thief coming in the night. Those who "live in darkness" will be the ones who are caught off guard. They will think "there is peace and security" but then they will experience sudden destruction. That idea of peace was likely the "Pax Romana," peace made possible through the Roman rulers and their powerful military. Sure, the people no longer needed to fear foreign invaders taking over. But, this kind of peace came at the expense of brutal violence against anyone who would oppose Rome. In other words, it wasn't a true peace. The darkness of evil was hidden in the background.

But, to the followers of Christ, Paul says, "you, beloved, are not in darkness...you are all children of the light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness." With this assurance, we are encouraged to stay awake, and keep sober, not fall asleep, or get drunk. It's not saying we're supposed to try to stay awake all night and never sleep. These are metaphors with a spiritual meaning. We are to keep alert. Twice, we are encouraged to be sober. It is possible that the literal meaning of avoiding getting drunk is also implied here. We need to be ready for Jesus to come at any time, and not act like a servant who gets drunk every night, thinking that the master will never return home. It's important to know where we stand, and if we accept that Jesus Christ is who he says he is – the Son of God.

If we have given our lives to Christ, we walk in the light. So, what does it actually mean to be sober and walk in the light of Christ? What do we need to do? Part of it means joining with God to fight against the darkness of evil all around us. But, how do we do that? Unfortunately, many people think we need to "fight fire with fire." That kind of thinking suggests that if someone shoots a family member with a pistol, you need to get a bigger gun and shoot back. Many nations function this way. They place a high importance on having more bombs and fighter jets than other countries, so they can be the ones in control. That's the Roman way. It's a forced kind of peace, not the way of true peace found through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us how to fight the darkness. In verse eight he says, "...put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." This image likely comes from Isaiah 59:17, where the prophet describes an image of God's judgement against opposition using these spiritual weapons.

Breastplates and helmets are things worn by soldiers going into battle. Sharing God's light, and working for peace are not always easy. It doesn't just mean sitting back and not worrying about anything. (I know I often have a tendency to do this). In fact, are we ready to give up some of our comfort in order to take steps and follow God's call to share the light of Jesus Christ?

The powers of darkness are all around us. These forces of evil are in systems that oppress the poor in favor of the rich. They are the systems that keep black or indigenous people on a lower economic level than others. These same systems keep men and women from being treated equally. The systems are hidden in the background. Those who have money can gain a lot of power over others including governments. This works directly against the idea of everyone being equal and deserving equal treatment. In politics, we see leaders influenced by those with a lot of money, and greed plays a huge part in our culture. Conflicts are all around. On the outside, things may look fine, but sometimes there is darkness hiding in the background. As a response, it's easy to start getting angry with seemingly "misguided" people who have opposing ideas, but if we do that, we'd just be creating more darkness. Instead, we need to speak in a way that comes from the spirit of our faith, love, and hope.

Like in today's scripture passage, Paul also talks about the spiritual armor of God that we are to use against the powers of darkness in Ephesians six. He clarifies in verse 12 that it's not against people that we fight. "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers all represent the spiritual realm of evil.

So, how do we who are in the light fight against the darkness, against evil systems that cause leaders to declare war, and against all forms of oppression. Well, the first thing to remember is that our fight is not against people, but against the evil spiritual forces. This is the reason we need to use spiritual weapons such as faith, love, and hope. If we use literal weapons such as violence against people, we'll be increasing the evil rather than overcoming it. One of the first TV shows I ever remember liking was called "Get Smart." It was a comedy about a secret agent, Maxwell Smart and his partner, named "99." Usually, there is a lot of shooting and a lot of "bad guys" are killed. In one episode, they trick the evil villain by giving him an exploding cigarette, and he falls off a cliff. Ninety-nine looks down the cliff and says, "Oh Max. How horrible! Sometimes I think we're no better than they are, the way we kill, injure, and destroy!" Max replies, "Why Ninety-nine, we have to kill, injure, and destroy...in order to preserve everything that's good in the world!..." Something just doesn't add up here, yet there are many people who see no problem with killing people in order to stop them from killing people. Anyway, violence may often seem to solve problems, but the resulting "peace" is only temporary. Violence usually causes more violence.

Instead, Paul encourages us to use the spiritual weapons of faith, love, and hope. Jesus said we are to love our enemies, and he showed this through his life, and in his sacrifice on the cross. He won against the darkness of sin's violence and death, not by force, not by stronger violence, but by sacrificial love. As we pray, and work for peace, and as we bring the light of Christ's love to the dark places of the world, we have the hope that this can stop the evil. The extreme possibility is that we may still be killed by our enemy, but at least the enemy's family won't be looking for revenge, because we haven't attacked back. By not retaliating, we'd be stopping the cycle of violence.

So, how do we put on our faith, love, and hope? Have you ever had a time when you were able to face the darkness of a problem with love? What was the result? Proverbs 15:1 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. An attitude of love will affect how we listen and how we speak with others. Wrath is connected with the darkness. People who live in the darkness of greed, may experience God's wrath, which in other words could mean experiencing the natural effects of their sin. If we follow Jesus, we need not fear wrath. In Thessalonians 5, verse 9 and 10 Paul continues, "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him." Here, the

meaning is whether we live or die, we have the hope of the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised to life, we too will be raised with him. Paul continues, saying we are to “encourage one another and build up each other...” with this knowledge.

I’ve been talking a lot about the darkness of evil all around us. On a smaller scale, as individuals we experience different sorts of darkness in our lives. One area I thought about is loneliness. I remember when I first moved to Japan in 1995. After a number of months, I had a few key friends in Tokyo that were supporting me, but they were all older people. Without friends that were closer to my age, I felt lonely. This was a hint of darkness, which added some tension to my life. At the time, I was living with mission workers, Peter and Lois Voran at the Tokyo Anabaptist Centre. They had become good friends. At mealtimes when Peter prayed, I often felt the light break through my personal darkness. As he prayed that we would “rest in God’s care,” I could relax. I sensed his faith inviting in the light of God. Here, I could see how faith and prayers brought light into the darkness of various tensions.

One other example I thought of is more recent. While I was serving at Emmanuel Mennonite church in Abbotsford, I connected with one member who had moved to Surrey. James had lost his wife to cancer a few years ago, and now he was struggling with serious health issues. Since he had moved to Surrey he was feeling pretty isolated, with no friends nearby. I think it was someone at Emmanuel who suggested that maybe I could connect with him, and maybe even give him a ride to church, since I often drove there anyway. So, I occasionally offered to give him a ride on Sunday mornings.

Sundays were always the most intense and busy time for me since I would spend all morning serving at Emmanuel church, come home, quickly eat, and then rush off to MJCF, connect with people here, often preach, have meetings and so on. For me, as an introvert, Sundays took a lot of energy. Normally, I would appreciate the time alone driving back and forth from Abbotsford. It’s a little embarrassing for me to say, but it wasn’t always easy to share that time visiting with James. It also meant that I had to get up ½ hour early in order to pick him up. Since his health was uncertain, I sometimes worried about what I would do if he were to have a medical emergency on the way to or from Abbotsford. I should say that, James was actually no real problem at all. He was very gracious and a good friend, never pushy, and didn’t even ask for a ride very often. My challenges and struggles were all inside myself. I know that even though I was most comfortable travelling alone on Sundays, something inside me felt that it was very right to offer rides to James. He was always very appreciative, and others at Emmanuel often thanked me for giving him a ride. I realised that if I didn’t give him a ride, who could? If I didn’t connect with him, who would? James seemed to be experiencing a personal darkness. It really felt like God gave me an opportunity to share the light of my faith and love with James. It was such a small thing, but it still felt important. The experience of James coming with me to Abbotsford also brought more light into the darkness of my own self-centred ways, and I felt more alive. I know I still have a lot of room to grow, though.

If we walk in the light of Christ, it means we are equipped with spiritual weapons and armor. Let us use these gifts to encourage and build up others. Please join me in prayer.

Gracious God, through your Son Jesus, we have received such an abundance of spiritual gifts. Thank-you for the spiritual armor we have through you. Fill us with a deeper faith, a stronger love, and a living hope that can stand in the face of darkness. Thank-you that we need not fear the darkness that surrounds us, knowing that your light is stronger. O Lord, we live in challenging times, and it’s easy to worry about the future. How long will the pandemic last? How much more homes will be destroyed before the wildfires are under control? What will happen in our government and society? Will we someday lose our freedoms? Help us to not become overwhelmed or complacent, but instead grant us the courage to step out share your gifts to us. Working against the darkness of selfishness and sin, may we share your light, even if it means possibly losing some of our comforts. May your kingdom grow, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.