LET US BE SOBER

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Key Verse: 5:8

“But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”

What does it mean to be “sober”? It’s usually the opposite of drunk. But the word “sober” can also mean moderate, or realistic, or serious. Often people get drunk or silly or extreme because they’re trying to escape some pain or sadness, or because they’ve lost hope. In today’s passage Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to be sober. Why? It’s because Jesus is coming again. It may be the greatest promise in the Bible. Paul describes what that day will be like. To be ready for it, we need to be spiritually sober. In this study we want to learn what that means, and how and why we should be spiritually sober living in a world that’s not. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

In last week’s passage Paul taught us how to live in order to please God. He taught us to avoid sexual immorality, to love one another, and to work with our own hands. Now he turns to what at first seems to be only a theological topic. Look at 4:13. Here, “those who sleep in death” refers to those who died while believing in Jesus. For those who’ve never experienced the death of someone near and dear to them, this may not seem so interesting. But for those who’ve lost someone close, it’s very real. It’s so hard when someone we loved dies. It can make life seem meaningless. So Paul writes at the end of verse 13, “…so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.”

Why do people have no hope? It’s because death swallows up everything and everyone. If death is the end of everything, then there really *is* no hope. People try to create hopes, but they’re all temporary and kind of superficial. Then, when death becomes a reality in some way, it exposes the hopelessness of life. So people grieve. To “grieve” means to become very sad. It’s normal to grieve when a loved one dies. But the grief Paul is talking about here is rooted in hopelessness. Some people live their entire lives in an underlying deep sadness and sorrow because of some loss they’ve experienced. This hopeless kind of grief causes people to live in despair. They seek relief in some fleeting pleasure, like sexual immorality, or substance abuse, even though it doesn’t really work. It’s so hard to live in this world without any hope.

But Christians have hope. Why? Read verse 14. That Jesus died and rose again is the gospel, the good news. It’s not an old, irrelevant story—it’s the most important thing to each of us, whether we realize it or not. Because Jesus died and rose again, those who believe in him, even though they die, will also be raised from the dead. Our Lord Jesus promised us: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (Jn11:25,26a). He promised his disciples, “Because I live, you also will live (Jn14:19b). The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope, for ourselves and for our loved ones who believed. Funerals can be so sad. But for Christians, funerals remind us of the living hope we have in Jesus. Paul says, “…God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Earlier, he called them “his holy ones” (3:13). In the world these people don’t really matter. They’re so quickly forgotten. But to Jesus they are so important.

How important? Read verse 15. When Jesus comes again, the first thing that will happen is that all those who have died and believed in him will be raised from the dead. Read verse 16. It’ll be so dramatic. And all the focus will be on the resurrection of the dead in Christ. Why? It’s because Jesus will be coming as the Judge of the living and the dead. Both those who were right with God and those who were not right with God will be raised from the dead. Jesus will reward those who were faithful to him, but he’ll send to eternal punishment those who never repented and believed (Mt25:46; cf. Jn5:29). He’ll remember everything done out of love for him, and everything suffered for his sake. Revelation 14:13 says, “Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’” It means God remembers all their labor, all their suffering, all their deeds done out of love for him and for others. All their labor in the Lord is not in vain (1Co15:58). If there’s no justice, if God doesn’t remember those who lived for him, then there really is no hope. But because God remembers and God rewards, because he keeps his promise of resurrection for those who believe, there really *is* hope. One of our greatest hopes as Christians is to someday get to see all those who received Jesus’ grace and loved and lived for him. When Jesus comes again, they will be the star attraction.

Read verse 17. This describes what will happen to those who are alive and believing in Jesus when he comes. They’ll receive a glorious resurrection body as well, and they’ll join the great cloud of witnesses who went before them. Above all, they’ll get to be with the Lord Jesus forever. So in the end, the ultimate focus won’t be people; it’ll be being with Jesus. This is probably the biggest promise: we get to be with Jesus. Some people are so excited when they get to meet a celebrity, even for a few moments. But by God’s amazing grace we’re all promised to personally be with the Lord Jesus forever. Sometimes, being with a person too closely or too long can get really boring or irritating. But being with Jesus will never get boring or irritating. It’ll be eternal bliss, the greatest joy and happiness. Read verse 18. Often we don’t know what to say when people are grieving. When we see fellow believers feeling sad, or depressed, or lonely, or meaningless, we need to encourage them with these words of promise in Jesus. We need to be reminding one another of our great hope in Jesus. With this hope we won’t give up, we’ll keep on loving, keep on living for Jesus (cf. Heb10:24,25).

Look at 5:1. Here Paul mentions “times or dates.” He’s referring to the precise time when Jesus comes again. So many people in history have claimed to know when it will be. But even our Lord Jesus said, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mt24:36). Paul goes on. Read verse 2. The day of the Lord is the day when Jesus comes again. It’s predicted many times in the Old and New Testaments, and it’ll be fulfilled in Jesus. The Bible repeatedly says that Jesus will come again unexpectedly, like a thief in the night (Mt24:44; 2Pe3:10; Rev3:3; 16:15). How bad will it be? Read verse 3. In history many false prophets proclaimed “peace and safety” when in fact God was about to punish his people for their sins (Jer4:10; 6:14; Eze13:10). In the same way there are still many false prophets who try to lull people into thinking they can enjoy life without God and everything will be fine. But for those unprepared for his second coming, it’ll be a horrible day. The seeming pleasantries of a godless life will suddenly turn into the worst nightmare, but it’ll be an inescapable and eternal reality. Look at verse 4. “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.” Here, to be “in darkness” means to be ignorant of what’s going to happen. For believers, Jesus’ second coming is something we’re very aware of and waiting for; it’s the day of God’s justice and of final victory.

Paul goes on to emphasize the contrast between light and darkness. Look at verse 5. “You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.” When we receive Jesus’ grace, we come into his light. We become honest. We have a new hope. We have a new identity. We become children of the light and children of the day. What amazing grace! Ephesians 5:8–10 reads, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”

So how can we really live as children of the light? Read verses 6–8. Those who belong to the night either sleep or get drunk. In both cases they’re not in control of themselves anymore. But those who belong to the day stay awake and are sober. To live as children of the light, we need to stay awake and be sober, even when it’s night. Does it mean we should never go to sleep again, or never take a drink? No. It means we need to be awake spiritually, and sober spiritually.

But how? Read verse 8 again. Here Paul says that we’re right in the middle of a spiritual battle. It’s a battle between light and darkness. It’s not a fantasy movie—it’s real. The devil really does want to drag us back down into his darkness. He’s shooting arrows at us all the time, every day. He’s not messing around; he shoots at our hearts, and at our minds. If we’ve been shot in the heart or in the mind, it’s hard to survive. Likewise, our hearts and minds are so important in spiritual warfare.

To live as the children of the light, we need to put on the armor God gives us. Other places in the Bible describe this armor. But here, Paul says that faith and love are our breastplate, and the hope of salvation is our helmet. Faith and love protect our hearts, and hope protects our minds. But it doesn’t happen automatically. We have to “put it on.” It means we have to claim these things that are ours in Jesus. In Jesus we can be filled every day with faith and love. But we have to claim the faith and love that our ours in Jesus and put them on, to guard our hearts against doubt, fear or hatred. In Jesus we can be filled with the hope of salvation every day. But we have to claim this hope and put it on, to guard our minds against despair or meaninglessness. Earlier, Paul praised these new believers for these three things, faith, love and hope (1:3). Now he urges them to keep putting on these wonderful blessings from our Lord Jesus every day. When we’re full of faith, love and hope each day, we’re spiritually sober.

And, armed with faith, love and hope, we can overcome all kinds of darkness around us. It might be the darkness of unbelief, or the darkness of holding a grudge, or the darkness of feeling like nothing matters. The devil is always trying to lure us into any kind of darkness. But with faith, love and hope in Jesus, we can wake up spiritually and resist him. It’s the faith, love and hope in Jesus that keep us from giving in to the temptation to check out spiritually or to just pursue the pleasures of this world.

Read verses 9,10. We’re all nothing but helpless sinners, but the good news is, Jesus died for us to save us from our sins and bring us to live together with him. Ultimately, it’s his wonderful grace every day that enables us to live as the children of the light. Read verse 11. It tells us that we need one another in the Christian community for spiritual encouragement and growth. His grace calls us out of being self-centered to really caring for our Christian brothers and sisters.

Read verse 8 again. May the hope of Jesus’ second coming fill our hearts and enable us to be spiritually sober. May he help us each day to put on faith, love and hope, so that we can overcome the darkness, encourage each other, and ultimately bring others to his kingdom.