

Exegetical Brief: 1 Thessalonians 5:10 Whether We Are Awake Or Asleep

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When the last Sundays of the church year roll around, the preacher has opportunity to present what God's Word declares concerning the last times. Pericopes provide texts that dwell on our Lord's return in judgment and on the call to watchfulness that his return sounds. While good textual preaching on the end times is always important, perhaps this year it takes on an added importance as God's people seek the truth about Judgment Day amid all the tabloid theories spawned by the end of the millennium. The exegetical question we consider briefly here comes from the second lesson appointed for the Second Sunday of End Time, November 7, 1999. That lesson is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, in which Paul both teaches and comforts the Thessalonians concerning their questions about the Last Day. Specifically we focus on verse 10 and what the inspired apostle means when he writes εἴτε γρηγοροῦμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν. The question is how to understand Paul's ideas of waking and sleeping in this verse, especially as they relate to the immediate context and to the general context of the rest of Scripture.

Most translations render the two verbs in question quite literally: "whether we are awake or asleep." Consider the immediate context as found in the NIV: "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, *whether we are awake or asleep* (εἴτε γρηγοροῦμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν), we may live together with him" (vv. 9,10). A few translations render these subjunctive forms of γρηγορέω and καθεύδω metaphorically, interpreting Paul's choice of verbs to be terms for living and dying. Both the TEV and Amplified Bible translate "whether we are alive or dead." Almost without exception every commentator consulted by this writer understood Paul's use of the verbs metaphorically. They all link the "asleep" mentioned in this verse to the "asleep" mentioned back in 4:13. In that familiar section (the second lesson for the Third Sunday of End Time) Paul is clearly speaking of the sleep of death: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." However, it is important to note that Paul uses two different verbs for falling asleep in those two instances. Throughout the 4:13-18 section, where falling asleep clearly refers to death, Paul employs the verb κοιμάω. In the 5:1-11 section, where the sleep metaphor appears to refer to spiritual laxity (cf. vv. 6,7), Paul uses the verb καθεύδω. Add to the discussion the fact that ΚαθΕΥδω is rarely used in the New Testament to refer to death, and we wonder how Paul is using the word in 1 Thessalonians 5:10. Let us consider the three following possibilities for translating εἴτε γρηγοροῦμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν and the implications they present for interpreting and preaching this text.

"Whether we are awake or asleep" (literal sense)

We could understand these verbs as expressions of physical conditions. In this case, Paul's point would be that believers can be assured of living with Christ even if he returns at a time when they are physically asleep. The verb καθεύδω is normally used in the New Testament for physical sleep, and when γρηγορέω is thus paired with it we have a clear expression of being physically asleep or physically awake. Could this be Paul's point in this context? Were the Thessalonians concerned about whether they would be asleep in their beds as opposed to awake in their daily routine when Christ returned?

The possibility seems remote. The Thessalonians' concern about Christ's return appears to hinge on their Christian brothers and sisters who had died before the Parousia, not on whether they themselves would be asleep in bed at the second advent. However, Christ had made the statement that "on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left" (Lk 17:34). Paul could have been reinforcing this point with this phrase in an effort to comfort the Thessalonians with the truth that no matter what our physical state at the

time of Christ's return, we are assured through faith of our eternal life with him. But, in the immediate context, it would appear that Paul was writing about more than physical sleep and wakefulness.

"Whether we are alive or dead" (metaphorical sense)

This translation is obviously a metaphor since γρηγορέω and καθεύδω do not normally mean to be alive or to be dead. In fact, of the twenty-three times γρηγορέω used in the New Testament, it is difficult to argue that it is ever used as a term for living. Paul's basic term for "to live" would be ζάω; indeed, this is the verb he used for being alive in the previous section of his letter (cf 4:15,17). Furthermore, of the twenty-two times καθεύδω appears in the New Testament, there are only three occasions where it is definitely used as a metaphor for death, and those three times are the parallel accounts of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mt 9:24, Mk 5:39, Lk 8:52). We must also recognize that Paul has already established κοιμάω as his metaphorical verb for dying in the nearby context of 4:13-15. Therefore, to understand εἴτε γρηγοροῦμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν as "whether we are alive or dead" is to translate the two verbs in ways that are very rare in the New Testament and not consistent with the immediate context.

Yet there are still compelling reasons to understand this phrase as a reference to living and dying. While Paul may not have used γρηγορέω and καθεύδω in the previous section of his letter (4:13-18); the subject matter is certainly the same. Paul is addressing the Thessalonians' questions concerning the Last Day in both sections. There are several linguistic similarities between the two sections as well: compare the καθὼς...οἱ λοιποὶ of 4:13 to the ὡς οἱ λοιποὶ of 5:6; the identical ἅμα σὺν of both 4:17 and 5:10; the identical exhortation παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους used to close both sections in 4:18 and 5:11. These similarities are strong, and they tie the two sections together as far as their purposes are concerned. So then our phrase εἴτε γρηγοροῦμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν in 5:10 could be understood as a summary thought wrapping up Paul's main thought in 4:13-5:11, namely, that deceased believers will not be at a disadvantage on the Day of the Lord.

"Whether we are (spiritually) awake or asleep" (moral sense)

Perhaps this third option is the easiest to support exegetically but the hardest to defend hermeneutically. It translates the two verbs with a metaphor, like option 2, but it employs the metaphor that has already been used for γρηγορέω and καθεύδω in the most immediate context. In 5:6,7 Paul uses the same pair to refer to spiritual readiness for the Lord's return in contrast to spiritual laxity: "Let us not be like others who are asleep (καθεύδωμεν), but let us be alert (γρηγοροῦμεν) and self-controlled." Would Paul use the same pair of verbs a few verses later but change the metaphor? It seems unlikely, especially since he had already established κοιμάω as his sleep-verb metaphor for death back in 4:13-15. The most natural exegetical way to take the verbs in 5:10 would be to continue the metaphor Paul had begun in 5:6. In that case the verbs would refer to spiritual watchfulness and slumber.

But is that idea something the apostle would be expressing to God's people? Many commentators point out that taking γρηγορέω and καθεύδω to refer to spiritual alertness and sloth would militate against the exhortation Paul is giving throughout this section of his letter. They suggest that Paul would be nullifying his own call to preparedness if he then says, in 5:10, that whether we are spiritually prepared or not, it does not matter, for we shall live with the Lord at his second coming. Nor would we preacher/exegetes want to give our hearers the impression that our security through faith in Christ is a license to spiritual unwatchfulness. But there is a way we can understand the idea correctly. If the Thessalonians were so concerned about End Time questions even to the point of speculating about "times and dates" (5:1), there is a good chance they had overburdened consciences that doubted their readiness to meet the Lord. If that were the case, we can certainly see why their spiritual father Paul would write of the absolute security we can have in Christ, whose sacrifice upon the cross, and not an individual's degree of readiness, is the sufficiency to be focused upon as we consider Judgment Day.

In conclusion, what implications does our exegesis of εἴτε γρηγορῶμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν in 1 Thessalonians 5:10 have for our preaching on the Second Sunday of End Time? There are two:

a) Paul's use of "whether we are awake or asleep" may certainly be understood as a reference to physical life or death. The greater context of this whole section of Paul's letter (4:13-5:11) allows us to understand γρηγορέω and καθεύδω in this way, and the preacher can be confident in applying these words as a metaphor for life and death. In that case the inspired writer would be emphasizing that our returning Christ is Lord of both the living and the dead (cf. Ro 14:8,9).

b) Paul's use of "whether we are awake or asleep" may also be understood as a reference to spiritual readiness for the Second Advent or lack thereof. This interpretation is in keeping with the immediate contextual use of γρηγορέω and καθεύδω as well as their metaphorical use throughout the New Testament. In that case Paul would be emphasizing that true spiritual preparation for the Last Day is focusing the eyes of our faith on the Christ who died for us, and not on our own level of sanctification. This understanding should in no way be used as a license for spiritual laziness, however.

God bless your study of this text as you prepare to proclaim the truth about the End Times to your hearers.