

# 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4 in the Navajo Bible

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Nihik'isóó, dǫ́ áhodoonílgíí baa hodoolzhishgi ında beidoołkaałgi bee nihich'i' ak'e'doolchílgíí doo bee nihich'i' anáhóót'i' da. 2 Háálá t'áá nihí nihíł béeedahózin, t'ée'go ani'íihii yígháhigi át'éeego Bóhólníihii beidoołkaał, 3 áko diné, Hasht'ehodít'ée yee' áádóó yá'adahoot'éeéh, daanú nidi t'áadoo hooyání bee í'dooldíihii bik'i hwiidooleeł, asdzání i'niilchúhgo bił náhodínúgahígi át'éeego, áko ts'ídá t'áadoo bee yisdáhóót'i'í da doo. 4 Nidi nihik'isóó, nihíyee' doo chahaltheeł bii' naaldeeh da, áko Bóhólníihii nádzá bijíidi ani'íihii tsíhodiłhisígi át'éeego doo tsídadidoołyis da. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4)<sup>1</sup>

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, <sup>2</sup> for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

What makes this passage so interesting is the fact that it immediately follows 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, where in vs. 16 Paul says,

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

"Down from heaven," "loud command," "voice of the archangel," "trumpet call of God." What Paul describes with these words is anything but a secret. And yet here, in chap. 5, he says, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Is there a conflict here between what Paul says in chap. 4 and what he says in chap. 5? Or is there a way to harmonize the two accounts?

It is not just these two accounts. There are other passages as well. Below I also bring Matthew 25 into the discussion. The question is not what one passage says, or one author, but what the New Testament teaches. The issue is what position God is trying to convey by inspiring His servants to say what they do. It is never safe to build a doctrine on isolated verses, however true they might be when taken by themselves. We want to know, not the mind of Paul, but the mind of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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## Two Second Comings?

### 1 Thessalonians 5

Some say that there are two second comings – one secret, the other loud and glorious. Does the present passage lend support to this model? No. In fact it is proof that such a model cannot be sustained, because here Paul is very obviously describing one set of events in chaps 4 and 5. He didn't put the chapter numbers where they are. He wrote with one thing in mind. Others came later and put in chapter and verse numbers to help us find things. So Paul is saying one thing here, but he's saying it in two ways. Both descriptions (4:13-18; 5:1-4) have only one set of events in view, and it is the same set of events in both cases.

But why must we say so? Couldn't it be two sets of events after all? Why would this not be possible? The answer is in the text of passage. Consider vs. 3.

While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly [*t'áadoo hooyání*], as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:3)

We could say that talk of "peace and safety" might hide an event and make it secret, but we can't say that about the sudden destruction which follows such talk. When the destruction begins, it's not a secret any more. And I would say it never was a secret. Instead it would be more correct to speak of it as a surprise.

Consider an analogy. On September 11, 2000, when the twin towers in New York city were destroyed, that was a surprise. No one expect this to happen. But it was not a secret. I remember that morning and watched it all on TV. I personally saw the airplane's impact on the second tower. And it wasn't just me. The whole nation was watching. Whatever "secret" means, this is the opposite of it. But the events did occur suddenly. Or as the Navajo puts it so well, *t'áadoo hooyání* (without anyone knowing, i.e., without anyone knowing beforehand). The lack of awareness was real, but it only extended up until the events themselves began. Then, instead of no one knowing, everyone knew.

One might argue that, while this analogy has a certain immediacy, it isn't what Paul was talking about. True enough. Paul does not speak of 9/11. Instead, he speaks of a woman's labor pains when she is about to have a child. All other things being equal, roughly half my readers will be women. And some you who are women will have had a child. Being a man, I have not. So instead of making assertions, let me ask, When your labor pains began, were they a secret? Is it the case that you were having all these intense pains but didn't know it? I don't think so! I suspect that when the pains began you knew very well what was happening to you.

Although I have not a child myself, I was present when my wife gave birth to our daughter many years ago, and can testify that no part of the process was hidden from her. When our daughter was finally dried off and placed in her arms, her response was not, Oh, I didn't know! Trust me, she knew. And yet when the pains first began, they were a surprise. She might have thought, Oh, they're starting now. I didn't know it would be now. So they were a surprise, but not a secret. There's an important difference here.

## Matthew 25

What I'm saying here about 1 Thessalonians 5 applies equally to such other passages as Matthew 25:36-44. The same passage that says, "one will taken and the other left" (vss. 40, 41), also says,

For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:38-39)

Notice an important word in vs. 39. "And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away" (vs. 39). The word is "until." For 120 years Noah preached, telling the people what would happen, but when the events occurred they didn't know. They were surprised. However, when the earth started breaking apart under their feet and every force of nature was unleashed, tearing the earth to pieces and dumping unimaginable amounts of water on and around them, they knew. It was not a secret, but it was a surprise.

Why didn't the people in Noah's day know the flood would come when Noah had spent so long telling them? They didn't know, because they hadn't believed him. He said it would come, but they thought it wouldn't. So even though they had been forewarned, when the event occurred they were surprised. In the same way the crucifixion of Christ came as a surprise to the disciples. He had told them about this repeatedly and with emphasis, as in the following passage.

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death <sup>19</sup> and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:18-19)

But when the events occurred, the disciples were all caught off guard. The Jewish leaders had been planning to do something like this for much of the time Jesus had a public ministry. They knew it was coming (see Matthew 12:13-14). Jesus also knew this time would come. That's why He replies so harshly to Peter and tells him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me" (Matthew 16:23), when Peter tried to tell Jesus He should think of occupying a throne instead of a cross (see vss. 21-22). Another place where Jesus tells us He would be crucified is in Luke.

"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! (Luke 12:49-50)

The "baptism" Christ had to undergo was not His baptism. He had already been baptized when He said this. Instead it was His crucifixion. He had come here to die. That's what His life was for. Christ lived His entire life in the shadow of the cross. So removing the cross from His ministry removed more than the cross. It removed the ministry. But the disciples, although they loved Jesus, did not believe Him when He said such things. And when the event actually occurred, it was as though He had said nothing at all about it. For them the crucifixion was a surprise. Was it also a secret? Not hardly. The whole city came out to watch.

## One Second Coming!

### 1 Thessalonians

When Christ returns, it's all over at one stroke. There is no such thing as a secret coming that's separated in time and manner from His glorious coming. He comes. Period. When He does this, for many it will be a total surprise for almost everyone. Why? How could this be? Christians have been preaching the second coming for centuries, but it is a surprise to most people because they didn't believe the warning was real. They thought it was just talk. So when they see the events actually taking place before their eyes, it takes them off guard. They are not prepared for it. It is a surprise. But it's not a secret. "Every eye will see Him" (Rev 1:7); the wicked will be destroyed "by the splendor of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8); He will come "down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Oh, but that's His *glorious* coming! Not His secret coming referred to in other passages. Oh? When exactly do these glorious events occur? Paul tells us that in the passage we are studying. "Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you" (1 Thessalonians 5:1). Times and dates for what? What event are we getting times and dates for at the beginning of chap. 5? It is the glorious second coming described at the end of chap. 4.

In chap. 4 Paul tells how the second coming will occur. In chap. 5 he talks about when it will occur. There's a difference between how and when. How will Christ return? He will return "with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). When will He return? That is Paul's topic in the passage we're studying.

"[F]or you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4)

Just here is a point that would be easy to miss. The time when Christ comes is not known. It comes "like a thief in the night" (vs. 2). But notice carefully how Paul puts this. He says "it" will come like a thief, not "He" will come like a thief. What comes like a thief is not "the Lord," but "the day of the Lord." The reference to a time, not a person. The day comes as a surprise, but the Lord comes in glory. These two facts do not compete with each other. Both are equally true, but we must understand that they are two facts rather than one. The questions when, and how, are two separate questions. Does this same observation hold for other passages?

### Matthew 25

Let me quote from Matthew 25 now, with certain terms underlined for emphasis. Notice how many references there are here to time.

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing about what would happen until the

flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>42</sup> "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matthew 24:36-44)

This passage, which many use to show how Christ will come, actually shows when He will come. The time will be hidden until the event occurs. But the event itself will not be secret at all. How do you hide ten million angels? If any event in the history of our world has ever not been a secret, the second coming of Christ will very clearly not be a secret.

## Conclusion

The words *t'áadoo hooyání* ("without anyone knowing"), from 1 Thessalonians 5:3, explain something that was said in the previous verse. Verse 2 ends with the words *Bóhólníihii beidookáát*. This is hard to translate, but it has to do with the day of the Lord. It is an interesting construction. "The Lord" (*Bóhólníihii*) is the subject of the verb that follows (*beidookáát*), and yet the action the verb describes is not really something the Lord Himself does. The word *beidookáát* means "the day will come." So the idea is that the Lord will come, but the stem *-káát* has to do with the passage of time, rather than the actions of living things.

I suppose the translators could have said *Bóhólníihii jidoogáát* ("the Lord will come"), or something along those lines, but they didn't. Instead, by saying *Bóhólníihii beidookáát* ("the day of the Lord will come"), they capture Paul's meaning exquisitely. This is exactly what Paul is trying to get across. He is describing the time of the Lord's coming. He is telling us when (Christ comes at a time we can't know), now how (His coming is not secret). When Jesus comes, every eye will see Him, and every ear will hear Him, and every heart will recognize Him, because so often the Holy Spirit has spoken to each one of us saying, on Christ's behalf,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Many have refused to listen to the Holy Spirit and have gone their own way. They have done their own thing. But they heard that voice speaking to them, even if they tried to ignore what it said. And now they hear it again – piercing the ears of the righteous dead. When all the graves start to open, everyone will know. It will not be a secret. But it will be a surprise. It can't help but be a surprise, because "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). And so of course there are going to be passages that talk about something having to do with the second coming being unknown. The time is unknown. We don't know it yet. But the manner of Jesus' coming will be such that everyone will see it, and no one who does will ever forget it.