

THE MEANING OF "SLEEP" IN 1 THESSALONIANS 5:10

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Many exegetes do not engage in independent original study of every Biblical term they discuss. Such time-consuming study is reserved for passages where there is some indication that additional work will bear fruit. Further study of the term "sleep" in 1 Thess 5:10 does not seem to promise much return, since the commentators and lexicographers are virtually unanimous in stating that in this verse the term means "to be dead." Despite the opinion of the majority, 1 Thess 5:10 is not devoid of implications that it is worthy of original study. This verse, referring to Jesus Christ, states that he "died for us, that whether we watch or sleep we shall live together with him." To the reader of the English translation this seems clear enough; the verb "sleep" means the same as the verb "sleep" in 4:13. There it plainly refers to physical death. The verbs are not the same, however, in both verses. The verb *koimaō* is used in 4:13, but *katheudō* occurs in 5:10. The standard lexicons reveal that both verbs mean "to sleep" and both have such additional meanings as to be idle, to lack vigilance, to engage in sexual relations, or to be dead.¹

Since Paul has used a different verb in 1 Thess 4:13 (*koimaō*), and since *katheudō* is used in the immediately preceding context (5:6, 7) with a meaning other than physical death, there is an implication that such a meaning may not be correct for 5:10.

I. THE MAJORITY OPINION

Turning to the commentaries, one finds a great many who feel that *katheudō* in 5:10 means "to be dead." Alford, discussing the meaning of the verbs *grēgoreō* and *katheudō* in this verse, states that they are to be taken

surely not in an ethical sense. . . . If not in an ethical sense, it must be in that of *living or dying*, and the sense as Rom. xiv.8. . . . Thus understood, however, it will be at the sacrifice of perspicuity, seeing that *grēgorein* and *katheudein* have been used ethically throughout the passage. . . . So that the sense of live or die must, I think, be accepted and the want of perspicuity with it.²

Other commentators who believe that *katheudō* in this verse means "to be dead" include Ernest Best, C. J. Ellicott, G. G. Findlay, J. E. Frame, Oliver Greene, W. Hendriksen, D. E. Hiebert, H. A. Ironside, W. Kelly, J. P. Lange, H. A. W. Meyer, G. Milligan, Leon Morris, W. Neil, C. C. Ryrie and J. F. Walvoord. Lenski also, apparently, agrees with this view.³ Hiebert states that

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¹For example, see LSJ, pp. 852, 967.

²H. Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody, reprint 1958) 3. 279.

³R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937) 351.

it seems inconceivable that after the writers have been urging the duty of watchfulness they should now present it as a matter of little difference whether believers are spiritually vigilant or negligent.⁴

He concludes that "wake" and "sleep" in 1 Thess 5:10 mean "live" and "die." Kelly also believes that the words mean "to live" and "to die." He dogmatically states that only a mind perverted by "systematic divinity" could see so low a thought in this verse as physical waking or sleeping, and the lowest thought of all is to believe that this verb means the same as in vv 6 and 7.⁵ Ellicott feels that there is "some little doubt as to the exact meaning," but settles on the view that the meaning is substantially the same as in Rom 14:8.⁶ Frame agrees and refers to early Church fathers holding the view that

grēgorōmen and *katheudōmen* are to be taken figuratively for *zōmen* and *apothnēskōmen* (Rom 14:8), as indeed Th. Mops., Chrys., Ephr. and most affirm.⁷

Robertson and Vincent in their works also agree with the majority.⁸ Hogg and Vine, on the other hand, dissent from the majority opinion. They state that

grēgoreō is not used elsewhere in the metaphorical sense of "to be alive" and as *katheudō* means "to be dead" in only one place out of two-and-twenty occurrences in N.T., and never elsewhere in Paul's epistles (see notes on vs. 6), there does not seem to be sufficient justification for departing from the usual meaning of the words, i.e., vigilance and expectancy as contrasted with laxity and indifference.⁹

The well-known lexical authorities agree together with the view of the majority. Abbott-Smith states regarding *katheudō*: "Metaph., (a) of death (as Ps., Dan. 11:6); I Th. 5:10."¹⁰ Arndt and Gingrich comment "of the sleep of death. . . . So certainly I Th. 5:10."¹¹ Thayer agrees that *katheudō* means "euphemistically, to be dead: I Th. 5:10."¹² The discussion in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary* describes the verb as a "euphemism for death (I Th. 5:10)."¹³

⁴D. E. Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 225.

⁵W. Kelly, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* (London: Hammond, 1953) 62.

⁶C. J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Parker, 1958) 73-74.

⁷J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912) 189-190.

⁸A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931) 4. 35; M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, reprint 1946) 4. 47.

⁹C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, reprint 1959) 172.

¹⁰G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937) 223.

¹¹W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University Press, 1957) 389.

¹²J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint 1962) 313.

¹³A. Oepke, "Katheudō," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 436.

II. A WORD STUDY OF THE VERBS

In spite of such an impressive array of opinions, a word study and application of normal exegetical procedures reveals that Hogg and Vine are correct and the majority are not. A study of the classical and *koinē* usage of *katheudō* and *koimaō* supports the idea that they are synonyms, similar in usage to the English verb "sleep." A study of Biblical Greek, however, beginning with the canonical books of the LXX, reveals a significant difference. Allowing for variations in the different texts of the LXX, the verb *koimaō* occurs approximately 195 times.¹⁴ Of these occurrences, fifty-two refer to sexual relations and sixty-four to physical death. The remainder (seventy-nine) refer to physical sleep, lying down, or remaining in a certain place. As expected, in the LXX physical sleep or lying down is the most common meaning of *koimaō*. The meaning of physical death, however, is almost as common. There is no definite preponderance of references to sleep. If the fifteen occurrences that describe merely lying down or remaining in place rather than actual sleep are subtracted from the seventy-nine, the number of references to death (sixty-four) equals the number referring to sleep. This fact, that *koimaō* is used of sleep and of death approximately the same number of times, becomes significant in comparison with *katheudō*. In the LXX, while *koimaō* is a common term for death, *katheudō* is hardly used of death. Oepke's statement that *katheudō* in the LXX "is often used for death"¹⁵ is misleading. The two references he lists are the only two places this occurs. The verb occurs thirty times in the canonical books of the LXX.¹⁶ Twenty-seven times the word means to sleep or lie down; once it refers to sexual relations, and only twice to death.¹⁷ The overwhelming preponderance of meaning of *katheudō* is the concept of sleeping or reclining. On the basis of the LXX usage, *katheudō* is not the most probable choice to indicate physical death. However, *koimaō* commonly has this meaning.

The NT also reveals a consistent difference in the use of the two verbs. This difference harmonizes with the difference revealed in the LXX. The verb *koimaō* occurs eighteen times in the NT.¹⁸ Fourteen times it clearly refers to physical death.¹⁹ Thirteen of these instances refer to believers. The fourteenth, 1 Cor 7:39, seems to include any husband who has died, believer or not. The four occurrences remaining out of the eighteen refer to sleep. There is not one instance in the NT where *koimaō* is used in the ethical sense of a lack of vigilance. Pauline usage is

¹⁴E. Hatch and H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Graz: Akademische Druck-U, reprint 1954) 773-774. The occurrences in the apocryphal books made no significant difference in the findings. The references (depending on the text) divide as follows: five refer to sleep, three to sex and one to death.

¹⁵Oepke, *TDNT* 3, p. 435.

¹⁶The five references in the apocryphal books merely support the findings. Four refer to sleeping, while one refers to sleeping or sex.

¹⁷Isa 51:20 may be debated. It does not clearly signify death. Keil and Delitzsch regard it as referring to a "state of unconsciousness" or exhaustion (see *Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2, 293).

¹⁸W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963) 552.

¹⁹This meaning is clear in Matt 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess 4:13, 14, 15; 2 Pet 3:4.

consistent. Paul in his epistles uses the verb nine times. In every case it clearly refers to death. There is no question concerning any of the occurrences in Paul's epistles, including the use in 1 Thess 4:13. In the NT *koimaō* is most often used to refer to death.

The verb *katheudō* is used twenty-two times in the NT.²⁰ None of the instances unequivocally refers to physical death. Three of the twenty-two occurrences are parallel accounts of the same statement made by Jesus just before he raised the young girl from the dead (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52). Jesus describes the girl as not dead but *katheudei* (Mark 5:39). Although the girl is dead, Jesus uses *katheudō* in contrast to *apothnēskō*. His hearers understand him to mean that she is asleep. Jesus' statement involves a play on words, but it seems clear that he does not intend to use *katheudō* in the sense of death, since this would mean "she is not dead, but she is dead."

The other instance that may be questioned is Eph 5:14, where *katheudō* is used in a quotation and there not actually indicative of Paul's use of the verb. This quotation may be translated as follows: "Rise, sleeper (*katheudōn*), and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon you." At first glance *katheudō* seems to refer to death, since the following parallel clause says "arise from the dead." It is difficult to conceive, however, that someone would command a physically dead person to rise and then go on to state that Christ will illuminate him if he does so. This makes sense if it refers to the spiritually dead or asleep. Such a meaning fits the context and the deduction indicated by *oun* in the following verse. The verb *katheudō*, although referring to physical sleep, is contrasted with the idea of watching (Matt 25:5; 26:40, 43, 45; Mark 13:36; 14:37, 40, 41; Luke 22:46; 1 Thess 5:7). It is contrasted with *grēgoreō* in three of these passages, just as it is in the passage in question (5:10). The usage in 5:6 can hardly be as an exhortation to Christians to refrain from physical sleep until Christ returns. Therefore it is at least one clear case of *katheudō* used to mean a lack of vigilance.

III. CONCLUSION OF THE WORD STUDY

There seems to be a developing distinction between *koimaō* and *katheudō* in Biblical usage. The verb *koimaō*, in addition to its basic meaning of sleep, is used frequently in the LXX to refer to death, while *katheudō* is seldom used for death (twice) but in the great majority of instances refers to sleeping or lying down. The NT continues this distinction even more clearly, for *koimaō* is used consistently to refer to death, while there is no instance where *katheudō* indisputably has this idea. Apparently either the authors of the NT were greatly influenced by the LXX usage or, building on the Lord's use of the terms (John 11:11; Matt 26:45; etc.), the early Church developed a distinctive use of *koimaō* to refer to death, especially the death of believers, while reserving *katheudō* for the meaning "to sleep." This meaning may include the metaphorical or ethical sense of a lack of vigilance.

IV. APPLICATION TO 1 THESSALONIANS 5:10

The following arguments indicate that the majority opinion of the meaning of

²⁰Moulton and Geden, *Concordance*, 510.

katheudō in 1 Thess 5:10 is almost certainly wrong, and that Hogg and Vine are correct:

(1) The Biblical usage of *katheudō*, especially in the NT, definitely favors an interpretation other than physical death.

(2) The verb *grēgoreō*, which is contrasted with *katheudō* in the verse, is not used elsewhere to mean physical life. Why force an unheard-of meaning on it here?

(3) The verb *katheudō* has been used in the immediately preceding verses (vv 6, 7) without the meaning of death. In v 6 it refers to a lack of vigilance, and in v 7 it either means the same or refers to physical sleep. Why change meanings in the immediate context?

(4) The entire context (5:1-10) concerns vigilance. Why change to include the idea of physically living or dying, which was adequately covered in 4:13-18?

(5) Despite the objections of some that it is abhorrent to think that 5:10 could mean that believers will be with the Lord whether they are vigilant or not, this is precisely the teaching of the NT. Such an interpretation is in harmony with Scripture. The objections are not valid and are based either on faulty eschatology or misunderstanding of the event described in this verse. There are no valid objections to the view that *katheudō* in 5:10 refers to a lack of vigilance.

(6) The verse does not state that it makes little difference whether we are vigilant or not (see Hiebert's objection), but after exhortation to be vigilant in the preceding verses Paul concludes with a statement of the certainty of our hope. This hope depends on Christ's death, not on our watchfulness.

1 Thessalonians 5:10, properly interpreted, means "who died for us, that whether we watch or fail to watch we shall live together with him." This verse is contrary to a concept such as a partial rapture. Rather, it expresses the "blessed hope" that all believers, spiritual or not, will be caught up to meet the Lord when he comes for his Church. Whether we live properly or not, we will be with him. Believers are exhorted to watch but, watchful or not, Paul assures Christians that their hope is certain.