Awake or Asleep…

But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him (1 Thessalonians 5:8-10).

This short passage written by Paul, intended to comfort the Christians at Thessalonica, causes some to speculate about its meaning. He addressed their questions in earlier verses, by referring to being “awake” as being diligent and sober. In chapter 4, he referred to being “asleep” as a metaphor for being dead. With both “awake” and “dead” used as metaphors, what could Paul mean?

A woman I know, outside the church, recently sent me an email saying she came across this verse (10) and has reread it several times and it appeared to her that no matter what, souls have salvation, since Christ died for lost souls. I replied that if this was the case, it would nullify the rest of the Bible.

Paul is comforting the Thessalonians concerning their questions about loved ones. 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. Two possibilities are: 1) Paul is either referring to literally sleeping when the Lord returns or, 2) someone who is already dead when the Lord comes. 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. Most likely Paul was reconfirming what he stated in 4:14.

What Paul cannot mean is a spiritual condition. Someone who is spiritually asleep (not in Christ), cannot live together with Christ without multiple contradictions throughout the New Testament.