

LESSON 6

THE RETURN OF THE KING (1 THESS. 4:13–5:11)

The Place of the Passage

Having addressed the subjects of holiness (1 Thess. 4:1–8) and, more briefly, love (1 Thess. 4:9–10) and work (1 Thess. 4:11–12), Paul now discusses how our future should shape our present—that is, how our hope should affect our life.

The Big Picture

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, Paul fast-forwards to the future to discuss the return of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:13–18) and the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1–11)—and how Christians are to live in light of this breathtaking hope.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, the focus of this week’s study. Then review the following questions concerning this section of 1 Thessalonians and record your responses.

The Return of the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13–18)

Since Christians have such a stunning hope, does Paul expect us not to grieve (1 Thess. 4:13)?

Why or why not? How should our hope affect the way in which we grieve?

Summarize the sequence of events in these verses. Does the language of 1 Thessalonians 4:16 suggest that Christ’s return will be a secret event (recognized only by Christians) or a public event (recognized by all)?

According to 1 Thessalonians 4:16, deceased Christians will be raised in response to Christ’s “cry of command.” It is a bit odd to think of dead persons being commanded to do something they themselves cannot do. But what is the theological significance of this? For example, in what ways does 1 Thessalonians 4:16 correspond to the story of Lazarus in John 11? How about Ephesians 2:1–10?

As you read Paul’s description of your future in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, which words capture your heart most? Amid the clamor of archangels and trumpets and dead bodies being infused with life, do not overlook the end of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Why is this the most wonderful promise of the entire passage?

The Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1–11)

What is the relationship between the event in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and the event in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11? Is Paul describing two comings or one?

Read Matthew 24:36–51 and note from where Paul draws his language of the day of the Lord as being like a “thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). Will the day come as a sudden surprise for believers? Why or why not?

The day of the Lord will be sudden (1 Thess. 5:3) and surprising (1 Thess. 5:4) to those in darkness, preceded by confident declarations such as, “There is peace and security” (1 Thess. 5:3). Although the immediate cultural backdrop of Paul’s words was likely Roman imperial propaganda declaring the *pax romana*—the peace of Rome—the sentiment is still relevant today. Where in our current culture do you see the assumption that there is peace and security? Where are you most tempted to find peace and security outside of Jesus?

Beginning in 1 Thessalonians 5:4, Paul develops a contrast between children of the day (or light) and children of the night (or darkness). Every human being is in one group or the other; there is no third option. What beliefs and behaviors characterize each category? Which one best describes you?

Explain how 1 Thessalonians 4:8 harks back to 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Additionally, how should passages describing the “equipment” worn by the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 59:17; see also Isa. 11:5; 52:7) illumine our understanding of how Christians are equipped? Describe how 1 Thessalonians 4:8 is similar to Paul’s description of the believer’s battle attire in Ephesians 6:10–20? What differences do you notice?

1 Thessalonians 5:9 tells us what believers are not “destined” for. Where else in 1 Thessalonians have we encountered this word? How should we understand the relationship between the promises in these two passages—and how should we live in light of them? In what ways are eschatology and ethics “twin siblings,” according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Definition: Eschatology

The study of “last things,” typically referring to the events surrounding Jesus’ return at the end of time.

Gospel Glimpses

DESTINED FOR SALVATION. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10, we encounter gospel treasure shrink-wrapped in one sentence (see also 1 Thess. 4:14). Paul presents divine salvation as the divine alternative to divine wrath. We are rescued from God by God—from his justice, by his mercy. And this is not accidental; this was not “Plan B.” Before the beginning, the triune God “destined” a specific people for a specific end: salvation. If you are a repenting believer in Jesus, judgment will not have the last word in your life. It is not your destiny. God destined his Son for wrath instead of you. On the cross, Jesus was treated as if he had lived your (sinful) life so that, through faith in him, you could be treated as if you have lived his (sinless) life.

SUBSTITUTE AND FRIEND. In 1 Thessalonians 5:10, Paul declares that Jesus died for us so that we might live with him. Consider the order of those two prepositions and the relationship between them. What would happen if they were reversed? The declaration would become, “Jesus died with us that we might live for him.” Why would that be bad news? Here is why: If Jesus had only died with us (as our example), we might have been enabled to live for him (as his servant), but that would have been all. But because he also died for us (as our substitute), we can also live with him (as his friend). Praise God for the gospel!

Definition: Repentance

A complete change of heart and mind resulting in one’s turning from sin to faith in Jesus. Without it—without renouncing our sin and relying on Christ—there is no salvation. Repentance is both a command (Acts 3:19) and a gift (John 6:65; Acts 3:26; 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25), indispensable to spiritual flourishing. It both starts (justification) and marks (sanctification) the Christian life. Indeed, repentance is one of the main vehicles linking us to our Savior on a daily even hourly basis. True regeneration and conversion is always accompanied by repentance.

Whole-Bible Connections

LIGHT AND DARKNESS. From God’s light-creating word in Genesis 1:3 to his light-engulfing glory in Revelation 22:5, the theme of light and darkness pervades Scripture. Whereas light often represents God’s holiness (1 John 1:5) or guidance (Ps. 43:3; 119:105), darkness often signifies human rebellion (John 3:19) or confusion (Prov. 4:19). Indeed, God’s own character is marked by moral purity—light without any trace of darkness (1 John 1:5; see also Ps. 27:1; 104:2; Dan. 2:22; 1 Tim. 6:16). Most significantly, Jesus himself is the light of the world (John 1:4–9; 8:12), and his redeemed people—those who have been transferred from darkness to light (Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9) by seeing the light of his glory streaming through the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4, 6)—are called to live as shining witnesses in a dark and hostile world (Matt. 5:14–16; John 12:36; Phil. 2:14–16). The children of light (Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5) must dress themselves daily in the armor of light (Rom. 13:12).

DEATH AS SLEEP. Because of the certainty of our resurrection hope, the New Testament often likens Christian death to a long nap. Such “sleep” is temporary, for Jesus will soon return to raise the dead. Paul uses sleep language no less than four times in this passage (1 Thess. 4:13, 14, 15; 5:10) to underscore the impermanence of death and the certainty of resurrection life. And this way of speaking is not anomalous; we encounter the same hope-filled assurance on the lips of Jesus (John 11:11–13) and in the words of Matthew (Matt. 27:52); Luke (Acts 7:60; 13:36); Peter (2 Pet. 3:4); and, again, Paul (1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20).

Definition: Glory

The beauty of God gone public. The Scriptures are saturated with the theme of God’s glory—a glory that shines brightest in person and work or Jesus. The Bible testifies to the glory of God in eternity past (John 17:1, 4–5), in creation (Ps. 19:1; Isa 43:6–7, 21; Col. 1:16–18), in redemption (Ps. 79:9; Jer. 14:7, 21; Rom. 3:23–26; 2 Cor 4:4), and in eternity future (2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 5:9;

21:23). The Lord Jesus is magnified in our lives as we humbly follow (Ps 23:3; Matt 5:16; 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:10-11) and boldly proclaim him (1 Pet. 2:9).

Theological Soundings

THE RETURN OF CHRIST. One day, heaven's risen and reigning King will return—suddenly, physically, triumphantly—to the earth he made. He will extend justice to his enemies and mercy to his ex-enemies. All things will be made new. So Christians have always hoped and believed. But here the consensus screeches to a halt. Will Jesus secretly snatch away his church seven years prior to his climactic return? Will his return launch a thousand-year earthly rule before the final judgment and eternal state? Or is the so-called millennium happening now via his heavenly reign? These and other questions concerning the timing and sequence of events associated with Christ's return abound. Some who espouse a "pretribulational rapture" believe that he will return twice—first in secret for his church and again seven years later publicly to inaugurate his millennial reign. Putting 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 alongside 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, however, this theory becomes difficult to sustain, for it appears that the return of the Lord (described in 1 Thess. 4:13–18) and the day of the Lord (described in 1 Thess. 5:1–11) are the same event. This becomes even clearer at the outset of 2 Thessalonians, where the coming of Christ to save believers and to punish unbelievers is a single, simultaneous event. In fact, in contrast to the notion that Christ's return to save precedes his return to judge by a period of seven years, in 2 Thessalonians his punitive action is mentioned first (see 2 Thess. 1:6–7).

SOBER-MINDEDNESS. Twice in this passage, Paul summons Christians to be sober, for we belong to the day rather than to the night (1 Thess. 5:6, 8). What does this mean? Throughout the New Testament, moral and spiritual sobriety—clearheadedness—is held forth as an indispensable virtue for believers (Rom. 12:3; 2 Tim. 4:5; Titus 2:2; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8) and a basic qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8, compare 1 Tim. 3:11). Such sobriety is often associated with a posture of alertness—of watchfulness—since the enemy is fierce (1 Pet. 5:8) and the end is near (1 Pet. 4:7; see also 1 Thess. 5:6–8). Rather than being drunk with worldly wisdom or substances such as wine, then, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), controlled and led by him (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord based on the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

As you Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of 1 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

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