



RETURN OF THE KING • Christ's Second Coming

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

The topic of Jesus' second coming can be a difficult and confusing one to tackle, with so many different viewpoints and interpretations and Scripture references that seem vague and hard to understand. But Paul made it a point to teach the new believers in Thessalonica about Christ's return during the very short time he had with them. It was obvious that this subject was of high importance to him and he thought it relevant to their lives.

The point of this study is not to dissect the specific order of events surrounding Christ's return, or to talk in detail about things like the Rapture, Tribulation or Judgment Seat of Christ. Instead, it is to highlight the relevance of the reality of Jesus' second coming on our lives and encourage us to live accordingly. It seems that this was Paul's primary purpose as well.

Hope in Grief

Paul starts on this topic by addressing issues troubling the Thessalonians: what happens to people who die before Jesus returns? Where do their bodies go? Would they miss the second coming? Scripture makes it clear that when a Christian dies he consciously goes to be with Jesus immediately (Phil 1:22-23, 2 Cor 5:8). Here, Paul explains how the dead in Christ (those "asleep") will be brought with Jesus and be united with the living at His return. Their bodies will rise, and both the dead and the living will receive new, imperishable bodies (1 Cor 15:52).

Paul affirms their grief over lost loved ones, but tells them not to grieve as unbelievers, who don't share our hope. Our grief is tempered by the hope of reuniting.

Staying Alert

Paul moves on to tell the Thessalonians that they shouldn't be surprised, as the world will be, when these things happen. He uses four contrasting images to describe the difference between believers and nonbelievers: light and darkness, night and day, asleep and awake, drunk and sober. These are meant to show that we ought not to be surprised but alert and ready.

Some of the ways we can be alert and ready are to be watching and reading the signs of the times, pursuing sanctification by walking closely with God and living for eternity rather than worldly and temporal things – storing up treasures in Heaven, investing in people and in sharing the gospel, using wisely the gifts and treasures God's given us. In both Matthew 24 and Luke 21, Jesus describes

What's the Big Idea?

Jesus will return, suddenly and unexpectedly, so we can have hope in grief, alertness in living and encouragement in knowing that our salvation will be made complete. This doctrine is relevant to our daily lives as believers in Christ.

What's the Problem?

If we are unprepared for Christ's return or confused about the ramifications of His second coming, we are unprotected from the grief that accompanies the death of our loved ones.



some of the signs preceding His return, and, just as Paul does here, follows this teaching with instructions to be watchful and alert and to be faithful and wise servants (Mt 24:42-25:30, Lk 21:34-36). This teaching is given to motivate us to faithful service and good stewardship because of the eternal rewards in store and the joy of being commended by Christ for our service.

In v. 5:8, Paul mentions putting on faith and love as a breastplate and hope of salvation for a helmet. From chapter 1, faith produces work and love prompts labor (toil, sacrifice) – this is the opposite of idleness and laziness, so you could say that faith and love provide motivation to be self-controlled and prepared. The hope of salvation put on as a helmet reminds us that our salvation is secure because it's in Christ and protects us from doubt or any attack by the evil one to take our salvation or hope away. These pieces of armor show we're ready.

Encourage One Another With These Words

Twice Paul gives instruction for the church to encourage one another with this teaching (4:18, 5:11). There are several ways this teaching can encourage us. First, it reminds us that Jesus does have a plan and an end in sight, that our salvation will be made complete (5:9); so our sacrifice and pursuit of sanctification are worth the effort. The hope that comes from His return keeps us focused and moving forward. Also, it motivates us to lift our eyes from the cares and pursuits of the world, instead fixing our eyes on Jesus and living for eternal pursuits. In 4:17 and 5:10 Paul refers to our always being with the Lord, both now and after He returns, which also ought to motivate and encourage us to persevere and live for Him.

Signs of the Times

Jesus tells of many signs of the nearness of His return in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. These signs are all visible today – Jesus could literally return right now! One specific sign is that the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world (Mt 24:14). A great majority of the world has access to the gospel message, and the number of unreached people groups is diminishing quickly. Churches are multiplying rapidly and flourishing in parts of the world that have previously been unreached. Technology enables a faster spread of the gospel, through radio, TV, film and the internet. The *JESUS* film, a film produced by Campus Crusade in the early 1980's, has been translated into over 1,000 languages and viewed over 6 billion times! And who knows what may happen as a result of your summer project – where a new believer may go with the gospel, what groups of people who've never heard of Jesus may be reached. We live in unprecedented times. It is encouraging that we can be a part of helping to finish the Great Commission, and motivating that Jesus' return may be at anytime.

What's Our Response?

Living in light of Christ's return brings great hope in our grief over lost brothers and sisters in Christ. It also gives us motivation to persevere in spite of affliction and to pursue sanctification. We can be encouraged by the truth that our salvation WILL be made complete, therefore our perseverance and sanctification are worth the sacrifice.

We ought to examine how we are living in light of the return of Christ. Are we alert and prepared or unmindful? Do our values and lifestyles show we are living for eternity, being good stewards of what God's given us, or are they more reflective of someone living for the world's values – personal gain, financial security, wealth and possessions? This is a call to live as one ready – walking with God, sharing the gospel, storing up treasures in Heaven, persevering with hope.

What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

LAUNCH

What are the most important things we can teach the believers here, before we head home?

EXPLORE

1. What are some observations about this chapter? What themes are present? What is the main point Paul is trying to make?
 2. What questions was Paul addressing in talking about the return of Christ?
 3. What do we learn about Christ's return from this passage?
 4. What contrasting examples does Paul use in I Thess. 5:4-7? What is his point in using these metaphors?
 5. What are some ways to "keep awake and be sober"?
 6. How does being aware of Christ's impending return encourage us to live as faithful servants of Christ?
 7. What parallel is Paul trying to make by referring to a breastplate and a helmet? What is he trying to encourage?
 8. Paul has mentioned Jesus' return a few other times in this letter, and we can surmise that he taught about it during his time in Thessalonica. Why would Paul teach on this subject to a group of such young believers?
 9. What are some of the things described in Scripture as precursors to the return of Christ? How do you see these occurring today?
 10. One of these precursors, in Matthew 24:14, is the gospel being proclaimed throughout the whole world, to all nations. How close is this to being fulfilled?
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APPLY

11. Why did Paul give the instruction to "encourage one another with these words" (4:18, also 5:11)? How does this teaching encourage you?
12. How can you live more as one alert and ready for Christ's return?
13. How might this summer project have a lasting impact by helping to finish the Great Commission?

What Are the Answers?

1. See "What's the Big Idea?"
2. What happens to people who die before Jesus returns? Where do their bodies go? Would they miss the second coming?
3. Jesus will descend from Heaven, bringing believers who had "fallen asleep"; there will be a cry of command, trumpet blast and shout of an archangel; living believers will be caught up in the air with the Lord and dead believers; it will be sudden and unexpected; destruction will come to the world.
4. Light and darkness, night and day, asleep and awake, drunk and sober. We ought not to be surprised, as the world will be, but watchful and ready.
5. See "What Do I Need To Know About the Passage?"
6. It draws our focus to eternal things, motivation of eternal rewards and commendation by Christ (Mt 25:21), brings hope, perseverance in hardship, motivates evangelism.
7. Faith, hope and love produce self-control, preparedness and security in our salvation in Christ.
8. It's relevant because it brings hope, motivation, perseverance and encouragement – all things young believers need, especially those in persecution.
9. Matthew 24, Luke 21, 2 Tim 3:1-9 are a few passages where some signs are found.
10. See "What Do I Need To Know About the Passage?"
11. Let the group share. Hope that comes from His return keeps us focused and moving forward and allows us to live with an eternal perspective.
12. Let the group share; look for specific application, see "What's Our Response?"
13. Dream a bit, cast vision for lasting impact of the project.

Memorize

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

I Thessalonians 5:8