



Sunday School Lesson for April 25, 2004.
Released on: April 23, 2004.

Study 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Coming of the Lord
Questions and answers below.

TIME: A.D. 51
PLACE: from Corinth

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.
14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.
15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.
16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:
17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.
18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 5:2-11

2 For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.
3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.
4 But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.
5 Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.
6 Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.
7 For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.
8 But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.
9 For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ,
10 Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.
11 Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.

Introduction

Two Views of Death

Cemeteries tell stories. In some cultures, people were buried with important objects from their lives. In America of a bygone era, gravestones often listed the relatives and accomplishments of the deceased. Today the practices may be different, but the messages persist. To one gravestone mourners attach a deck of cards, a bottle of whiskey, and a pack of cigarettes—mementos of a life of hopeless indulgence. Beside it stands another marker with the simple inscription, "In hope of the resurrection of the dead."

How we look at death determines how we look at life. If death is the end of our existence, then at best life is, as one writer put it, "the unpleasant interruption of nothingness."

But the Bible teaches something different. God is faithful to His people even in death. Death for the Christian is not the end. It means being with Christ in an even greater way than we have been in this life. And at Christ's return, all of His people, those who have died and those who are still alive, will be reunited. The sting of death is gone!

Lesson Background

We find a special emphasis and some play on words in this week's lesson texts. Paul began by saying that Christians should not be ignorant concerning those who are "asleep," referring to believers who had died. Their bodies had turned to dust, but their souls were with Jesus in heaven. They will come back with Him, be reunited with their resurrected bodies, and join those still alive in being caught up in the air to forever be with the Lord.

Paul then shifted his focus back to earth to instruct living believers on how they should behave. Unlike the children of darkness, his term for sinners, believers were called children of light and of the day. They were not to be sleeping—here in the sense of being unaware of Christ's coming. They were to be watchful and sober as they anticipated that event.

Putting on the breastplate of faith and love and wearing their hope of salvation as a helmet, they were to do battle for the souls of men, for only by coming to Christ can people be saved from the wrath that will come upon sinners.

Paul closed his thoughts about sleep by stating that it did not matter whether believers were awake or asleep, this time meaning living or dead, as long as they had life in Christ. They were to use these thoughts to comfort and edify one another in their faith.

Reunion at Christ's Return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

1. What specific issue did Paul not want his readers to be ignorant about (1 Thessalonians 4:13)?

We are not told whether there had been a problem causing confusion or misinformation regarding the destiny of believers who had died, but Paul felt it was a subject he needed to address. As we note in verse 13, he did not want the Thessalonian believers to be ignorant about those who had fallen "asleep," a

euphemism for dying. Such ignorance could bring them grief like that of unbelievers, who had no hope regarding the destiny of family members and friends who had died.

Paul's remark about "sorrow" must be carefully understood. He does not criticize the Thessalonian Christians for the natural sadness that they feel over the death of fellow Christians (Philippians 2:27). Rather, their grief is not to be like that of the pagans, who have no hope of ever seeing their deceased loved ones again. When Christians lose a fellow Christian to death, they will grieve the loss as they feel the void that has been left in their lives. But their grief will be tempered by the assurance that God will reunite them.

2. Why was the resurrection of Jesus significant to the destiny of His followers (v. 14)?

Paul was convinced that belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus laid the foundation for believing that those who followed Jesus would also live again following their deaths. This is clearly presented in I Corinthians 15:20-22: "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

Paul also wrote that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (II Cor. 5:8). He said that departure from this body would cause him to be with Christ in heaven (Phil. 1:23).

In I Thessalonians 4:14 Paul stated that those who had fallen asleep in Jesus would come back with Him. Their bodies had remained in their graves here on the earth, but their souls had obviously gone to heaven to be with Christ. A great reunion of bodies and souls is scheduled to take place at the rapture.

3. If Christians have such a wonderful after-death hope, why is it most of us don't want to die? And why do we so often cry at funerals?

Death is still our enemy even though Christ has overcome its worst consequences. Death won't be completely vanquished until Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26). Death is still an unnatural rending apart of soul from body, and loved one from loved ones; it creates physical and emotional pain.

We should not be made to feel guilty when we shed tears as a result of these hurts, but we must balance our grief with hope. We know that our Lord Jesus Christ will reunite our spirits and our bodies, and will reunite us with loved ones who have died in the Lord. Although death is followed by judgment, we know the Lord has already taken our sins upon Himself, so the "sting of death" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57) and the "fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14,15) have been removed. The horrors of death are mitigated only for believers, however.

4. Did Paul make this stuff up in his own mind (v. 15)?

Paul wanted people to understand that what he was teaching was not something originating in his own mind. The word of the Lord had come to him regarding this matter. Christians who are alive at the time Christ comes will not rise to meet Him before those who have fallen asleep. The word "prevent" in verse 15 in modern English actually means "precede."

5. What audible phenomena will accompany the coming of Christ (v. 16)?

The Lord Jesus is going to descend from heaven into the earth's atmosphere. Shouts and trumpet blasts-what a celebration at Christ's return as the voice of a mighty archangel proclaims the victory! Christ's victory will be complete with the unfolding of this great event, and no one will be able to mistake it.

Paul stresses that "the dead in Christ shall rise first." So in what sense will they then "rise"? Many believe that the spirits of the faithful live without bodies in the presence of Christ until His return; at that time, their spirits come with Christ to take possession of their new bodies-bodies fit for the life of eternity. Others believe the dead have "spiritual bodies" until the time of Christ's return; at that time those bodies will be glorified in various degrees.

6. When will the believers still living be caught up to meet the Lord (vs. 17,18)?

If we are still living when Christ comes, we shall not taste death as all previous generations of believers have. We will be caught up together with those who have just been resurrected and transported into the clouds to meet the Lord Jesus in the air.

There are honest differences of opinion regarding the second coming of Jesus. The position taken here is that it will occur in two stages. First He will come in the air to rapture the saints; then He will return to the earth itself at a later time to defeat the antichrist and set up His millennial kingdom.

Note that the same kind of language is used in I Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11. In both cases Paul said that what he taught should be used to comfort one another. Here he said his description of the rapture could comfort his readers, and that closed one unit of thought. Now he was ready to move on to another unit of thought that included what will happen to unbelievers as well as believers. These truths too should bring comfort to God's people.

7. Many Christians seem to think the study of the end times is pointless. They say, "The subject is too hard," or "God will work things out whether I understand them or not." How would you convince them that at least a basic understanding is necessary?

Paul commands the Thessalonians (and us) to encourage one another with his teachings about the end (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11). That is impossible to do if we don't know the Bible's foundational teachings about death, the Second Coming, resurrection, judgment, rewards, punishments, and the new heavens and earth that await.

Understanding God's ultimate plan is crucial in keeping our perspective (every choice seen in light of eternity and judgment), our priorities (earthly vs. eternal things), our excitement about His coming, our purity (are we ready?), our power to persevere (hope produces endurance), and our urgency about evangelism (everyone will spend eternity somewhere!).

Awareness

(1 Thessalonians 5:2-8)

The New Testament's teaching about Jesus' return revolves around two poles. One is that Jesus could return at any time. The other is that His return may take longer than His people expect or hope. Both of these ideas appear in the passage before us. Together, they urge Christians to live with expectancy and endurance.

8. What is usually meant by the term "the Day of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:2)?

Paul has just stated that he has no need to teach the Thessalonians about "the times and the seasons" (5:1). By this he does not mean that they know the time of the Lord's return or can figure it out (Matthew 24:36). Paul's whole discussion insists that the time of Jesus' return is unknown. Rather, he is stressing that they should be able to understand that the times and seasons call for alertness, a sense of urgency, and a readiness to remain faithful through difficulties.

What was vitally important was that the Thessalonian believers be aware that the Day of the Lord could come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. "The Day of the Lord" is a term used for a specific time of judgment. It is often used, as it apparently is here, to refer to the judgments of the end times, from Christ's second coming to the final judgment of all sinners and the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth.

Ignorant and unrepentant people will claim that they live in "peace and safety;" but they will be mistaken (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Sudden destruction, likened here to the intense and inevitable labor pains of a pregnant woman, will descend upon them. They will try to escape the judgment poised to fall upon them, but there will be no place to flee and be safe.

9. Why will the children of light not be overtaken by judgment (vs. 4,5)?

Verses 4 through 8 emphasize the contrast between children of darkness and the night and children of light and the day. Paul said that the Thessalonian believers were not in darkness. They lived in a different realm as a result of turning to Christ (1:9b). Consequently, they would not be overtaken by the Day of the Lord but would, like all Christians, be kept from that judgment.

Paul called believers "children of light" and "children of the day" (5:5). They "are not of the night, nor of darkness." This was simply two ways of saying the same thing—that Christians no longer belong to the kingdom of darkness and unbelief.

10. Why is it important for Christians to continually alert (vs. 6-8)?

Paul therefore urged the Thessalonian believers not to be lulled into sleep like others but to be watchful and sober. The term "sober" carries with it the concept of being composed, calm, and collected. The apostle obviously was not suggesting that Christians get no rest or a good night's sleep. He merely meant for them to be in a state of continual alertness while they were awake and going about life's normal activities.

Verse 7 appears to describe unbelievers, who remain in their state of spiritual lethargy and continue doing the same things as usual, ignorant of the certain judgment to come.

Then in verse 8 Paul turned his attention to two important pieces of Christian armor that are needed to fulfill the role to which believers are appointed.

The first is the breastplate of faith and love. Just as real body armor protected the heart and other vital organs, so Paul thought of faith and love as protecting believers

from penetration by Satan's darts (Eph. 6:14-16). The second is the helmet of hope of salvation. This is also mentioned in Ephesians 6:17 along with the sword of the Spirit, which refers to the Word of God, the only offensive part of the Christian's armor.

Appointment

(1 Thessalonians 5:9-11)

11. To what has God appointed believers, and how can this be used to comfort and edify us (vs. 9-11)?

In saying that God has not appointed believers to wrath, Paul was saying that God did not choose them to have a destiny of judgment and eternal torment. Instead, He chose them to obtain salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 9). The salvation here is probably the fullness of salvation we will experience when Christ returns.

Paul described the Lord Jesus Christ as the one "who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him" (v.10). When Jesus was crucified and voluntarily yielded up His spirit, He knew that death would have only a temporary hold on Him and that He would rise again on the third day afterward. Since He represented the firstfruits of the resurrection, it is certain that His followers will find that death has only a temporary hold on them as well.

Just as Paul closed his comments on the rapture with the suggestion that believers should comfort one another with his words (4:18), so he closed his comments on believers' appointment to salvation with the suggestion that they should comfort, or encourage, one another. This time, however, he went beyond the concept of comfort to the concept of edification. He was pleased that they were already edifying, or building up, one another and exhorted them to continue doing this.

Such edification was probably done in various ways. Believers could have been praying for one another, sharing testimonies of God's dealings with them, searching the Scriptures together, and sympathizing with those bearing different burdens. These are all ways by which Christians today can edify one another as well.

It is sad to realize that people in some churches seem to spend more time disagreeing and arguing with one another than in building up one another. That kind of factionalism can tear a church apart and cause it to lose God's blessing.

The remainder of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians contains a rapid-fire succession of concise commands, each of which would contribute to mutual edification if carried out.

CONCLUSION

Christ will come for His saints, and the Day of the Lord will begin. This is reality! As Christians, we should be alert and ready for the next great event in history. Are your students ready to meet the Lord?

PRAYER

Father, bring to our minds again the hope to which we have been called. Empower us to live in light of that hope! In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"We believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

"Comfort one another with these words."

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Like the Thessalonians, we have been chosen to obtain glory. A thorough reading of II Thessalonians 1:1 through 3:18 will prepare students for next week's lesson.

I hope you enjoyed this week's lesson !