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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

STAY ALERT • The Return of Christ

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

I Thessalonians 4:13

The discourse on Christ's return is precipitated by a discussion on how appropriate it is for Christians to grieve – there must be a better way to say this – over dead believers. Certainly, we should be sad at the loss of a loved one but, Paul suggests, our grief should be different from the world's grief, for we will surely be united with them at Christ's return.

I Thessalonians 4:14-17

Paul, who writes with far more tact than I do, thoughtfully avoids the phrase “dead believers” and instead uses the term “fallen asleep.” But this could lead, and has led some, to the idea that our soul sleeps when we die and does so until Christ returns. Not so. In Philippians 1:22-23 and elsewhere, Scripture clearly states that when we die our souls or spirits immediately go into the conscious presence of the Lord. We do not sleep or nap, rather our bodies, so-to-speak, do. It is at Christ's return that all believers (those who have died and those still alive) are clothed in new bodies – bodies fit for our everlasting inhabitancy.

In I Corinthians 15:42-48, Paul discusses the issue of our new resurrection bodies. This passage would be good to read in preparation for the study. In this passage Paul helps us to avoid extreme continuity or extreme discontinuity as we imagine our resurrected bodies. Extreme continuity would be to picture our current bodies transplanted into a heavenly world – that's weird. Extreme discontinuity would be to picture our bodies as something ghostlike and entirely spiritual – that's weird too.

So he uses the analogy of a seed. As a seed goes into the ground (symbolizing death), it's transformed into something else. The seed is different from what it becomes, but it is related: organically connected, a transformed continuation.

The passage also describes the major events that are to accompany the return of the Lord. This imagery is the same as that cited by Jesus in Matthew 24:30-31. The Lord's return will be heralded by the shout of the archangel and the blast of the trumpet. The trumpet was sounded in Israel on two occasions: to summon the nation to battle and to worship. The call to battle seems in view here, much like the trumpet preceding the battle of Jericho. There, on the “seventh day”, it declared the Promised land to be the kingdom of God and of His people. Here, the entire earth is claimed: “The seventh angel sounded his trumpet...The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15).

At this point, the dead in Christ will receive their resurrection bodies, followed by those Christians who are still living, as they are “caught up” to meet the Lord.

What's the Big Idea?

The imminent return of Christ causes us to live with a sense of urgency and eternal perspective: awake (Rev. 16:15); alert (Mark 13:33); making the most of every opportunity (Eph. 5:16); laboring in the Kingdom (John 9:4); that we might speed the Day of His Coming (1 Peter 3:12).

What's the Problem?

Apart from encouraging one another with the teaching of Christ's return, our human focus tends to be earthly, temporal, material and asleep to spiritual reality.





Much of this language is symbolic or figurative, and thus unclear. That Jesus will return – and visibly so – is not.

I Thessalonians 4:18-5:3

Paul tells us to encourage one another with this teaching (4:18), and then goes on to alert us that the Lord will come like a thief in the night (5:2): an amplification of Jesus' teaching that no one will know the "day or hour" of His coming.

The study draws out the irony that the incessant predictions concerning Christ's coming have caused many believers to ignore the subject entirely. Who wants to be seen as an apocalyptic fanatic? These false predictions seem to be a strategy of Satan to keep Christians from "encouraging one another with this teaching." Yet in not talking about these things we end up suffering from the very lack of spiritual alertness this teaching was intended to foster.

I Thessalonians 5:4

In I Thessalonians 5:4, it says that the Day when Christ returns "should not catch us unaware." This is an important point. While Jesus is emphatic that we can know neither the day or hour, it should be possible to have a general awareness that the Day is approaching. In fact in Matthew 24, Jesus is asked what signposts would alert His followers to His coming. He gives several, but this study examines only one. In Matthew 24:14, Jesus states that the gospel must first be preached to all nations "and then the end will come." That is, Jesus ties His return to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Today, about 2/3rd's of the world have exposure, or are accessible, to the gospel message. In light of technology and globalization, I don't think there's an executive at Coca-Cola who doubts that somewhere between the years 2050 and 2075 everyone on the planet will both know about and have access to a can of Coke. I think the same is true for the gospel, and if not, shame on us. It is an amazing time to be alive and involved in the Great Commission. Of all the generations that have lived since Jesus uttered it, we alone live at a time of fulfillment.

I Thessalonians 5:4-11

In this last section, the apostle Paul looks at the application of all of this – that we, as Christians, should be alert and spiritually ready for the return of the Lord. He urges self-control, faith, love and hope as critical safeguards to spiritually "falling asleep."

Believe the gospel

This entire section is bookended with clear assertions of the gospel message (4:14 and 5:9-10). Our hope in Christ's return is rooted in the most foundational truths of the gospel:

He has gained victory over sin and death (alluded to in 4:14); He is seated in heaven with ultimate authority (alluded to in 4:14); He took the wrath due me (5:9); He is our inheritance (5:10); He loves us so much that he died for us; We are now His sons and daughters.

The application of this doctrinal grounding is found in 4:14 "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe . . ." As surely as the Lord died and rose, he is coming again. Believe it. Live in light of it. Anticipate it. Hope for it.

What's Our Response?

Hope is a major theme in I Thessalonians. You want your group to see that hope is centered in Christ: He will return and we will be resurrected with Him. Our hope is not a place (heaven) but a person. As we don't know what heaven will be like, we should not long for heaven; however, we can and should long for Christ.

The biblical teaching of Christ's return is almost always tied to the admonition to be alert and awake. That is, to live with a sense of urgency, making the most of our opportunities, and having an eternal perspective on our life and choices.

It also evokes a call to minister, to evangelism and to fulfill the Great Commission:

"As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4).

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14)

What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

LAUNCH

There's always something we're hoping will happen in our day, in our lives. What are some of the smallest and biggest things you're hoping for? If you think of the biggest thing you hope for, how does it affect your life? Are you ever scared to hope?

EXPLORE

Read I Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1. What question precipitates Paul's teaching on the return of Christ? How does Paul answer the question?
2. When Paul describes departed believers as having "fallen asleep" he speaks metaphorically. From these verses, what do we know about what happens to believers when they die?

II Corinthians 5:8

Philippians 1:22-23
3. In picturing future realities, we can either over-spiritualize (seeing it as too ethereal) or under-spiritualize (seeing it as too earthly). Read I Corinthians 15:42-48. What does Paul teach about our future bodies? How does he help us avoid these two extremes?
4. The sounding of the trumpet echoes the trumpet blasts that preceded the battle of Jericho. What is the connection between these two events?
5. What, if anything, of Paul's description do you think is meant to be taken symbolically? Why do descriptions of end-time events often feel less real to us?
6. In Thessalonians 4:18, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to "encourage one another with these words." Why do we tend to avoid talking about this topic?
7. How do you think Christians have been affected by

not talking about it?

Read I Thessalonians 5:1-11.

8. As best as you can remember, what were some of the signposts Jesus told His disciples to look for to alert them to His Coming (Matt. 24:1-35)?
9. In one of the more specific signs, Jesus says, "First, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then, the end will come." What's the importance of this signpost? Where are we in relation to its fulfillment?
10. Using similar imagery Rev. 16:15 says, "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake." What does it look like to live "awake" and "alert"?
11. Practically speaking, what are some ways that faith, hope, love and self-control (v. 8) serve as weapons against spiritually "falling asleep"?
12. As we wait, according to the end of v. 10, what ultimately are we anticipating? How does this differ from what the culture anticipates about heaven?
13. If you knew the Lord was to return in the next five years, how would you live differently?
14. Paul bookends this entire passage with two grand declarations of the gospel (4:14 and 5:9-10). What is it about the gospel that stirs our anticipation and hope in Christ's return?

APPLY

15. How have you found your heart indifferent to Christ and His return? In what ways would you say you've fallen asleep? Are you living for the present?
16. How does the return of Jesus stir your longing to be with Him?
17. Paul writes these things to keep his disciples alert and awake. How can we encourage our disciples to live with a more eternal perspective?
18. Read 2 Pet. 3:9-12. As you look forward to Christ's return how do you see yourself involved in speeding its coming?

What Are the Answers?

1. How appropriate is it for Christians to grieve for those believers who have died?

Great Commission. See notes on "5:4"
2. Our souls or spirit go immediately into the conscious presence of the Lord when we die.

10. Making the most of every opportunity. Living like the finish line is very close. A heightened eternal perspective.
3. It will be imperishable and glorious and suited for our heavenly dwelling. See notes under "4:14-17"

11. Allow the group to discuss.
4. The trumpet at Jericho signaled the Israelites to take possession of the land. The trumpet of Christ's return will claim the earth to be the possession of the Lord and His people.

12. In our culture, everything but Christ seems to be the focus of heaven. Streets of gold, mansions of glory, reunited with loved ones, angels, etc...
5. You're not looking for a right answer. Just get people to talk about how such imagery can affect them.

13. This question gets at the eternal perspective the thought of the Lord's return is intended to generate.
6. For fear of seeming fanatical or unbalanced. See notes "4:18-5:3"

14. Allow the group to discuss.
7. There is a loss of anticipation and an entrenchment in the here-and-now. A loss of eternal perspective.

15. This is where you want people to locate the ways in which they have been asleep to Christ, asleep to spiritual reality and living for today.
8. Some of the signposts include: wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, persecution, the gospel preached to all nations.

16. Allow the group to discuss.
9. This is the fulfillment of the

17. One application is by "encouraging one another with these words" (4:18).

18. In light of Jesus words "first the gospel must be preached to the nations" there should be thoughts and discussion about evangelism, missions and the Great Commission.

Memorize

So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

1 Thessalonians 5:6