

SESSION 6

THE GREATEST RETURN

Leader pages on pp. 124-127

THE POINT:
JESUS WILL RETURN ONE DAY, AND WE SHOULD BE READY.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-5:8

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷ Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

.....
¹ About the times and the seasons: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you.

² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

³ When they say, "Peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the dark, for this day to surprise you like a thief.

⁵ For you are all children of light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness.

.....
⁶ So then, let us not sleep, like the rest, but let us stay awake and be self-controlled.

⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

⁸ **But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation.**

MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

Dead in Christ...(v. 16)—Paul wrote to clear up misunderstandings about believers who had died before the second coming.

The day of the Lord (v. 2)—This expression appears in both the Old and New Testaments. Meaning a point in time in which God intervenes in history to display His sovereign power.

Not in the dark (v. 4)—God's children are to be people of light (1 John 1:5).

The armor of faith and love (v. 8)—Putting on armor is figurative language for obedience to God's instructions in the Scriptures. As armor was essential for a soldier, so faith and love are essential characteristics of a Christian.

HOW DOES JESUS'S RETURN IMPACT THE WAY WE LIVE?

Many of us have seen footage of the person walking the city streets or perhaps in the stadium adorned with a sign saying: "The end is near." Catastrophic events and seasons of dramatic change always seem to increase speculation that we are living in the last days. Our world has certainly experienced our share of these types of events in the last few years, but a 2022 survey of U.S. citizens revealed some interesting insights about the end times.

39% of adults said we are living in the end times, while 58% do not. 29% of non-Christians believe we are in the last days and 92% of Protestant Christians believe that Jesus will return.¹¹

Pew Research Center conducted an additional study which revealed that the percentage among the Black community is much higher than other ethnic groups. In all, 76% of Black Christians believe that we are living in the end times and this is matched by 68% of all African Americans believing the same.¹²

Of course, Jesus did promise His disciples and all those who follow Him that He will return for His bride one day and take her home. He did not give the date, but He did give a description of what that day will be like.

Live Encouraged //

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

Paul wrote the letter titled 1 Thessalonians to believers in the seaport city of Thessalonica, in what is modern-day Greece. He and Silas were there during Paul's second missionary journey recorded in Acts 17. The church had begun amidst persecution that continued throughout its early history.

The Thessalonians had questions about "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:2). The confusion ran the gamut with questions about when Jesus would return to some individuals being concerned that they may have even missed it. Believers were passing away, and they feared the departed missed the day. Thus, Paul provides an explanation of what would happen on the day of the Lord, so people wouldn't be uninformed.

In verses 16-18, Paul laid out the sequence of the Lord's return:

- The Lord Himself descends.
- There's a commanding shout.
- There's a trumpet call.
- The dead in Christ are raised.
- Those living meet them and Jesus in the air.



THE POINT: JESUS WILL RETURN ONE DAY, AND WE SHOULD BE READY.

Paul used the word *parousia*, which meant the glorious coming of a deity or the official visit of royalty to a city. The inauguration of the Lord's eternal kingdom is so important that the Lord Himself would return to initiate it. He won't send anyone ahead of him; He Himself will be leading the charge. The Lord will usher in the end of the age.

Jesus will descend from where He has been residing, seated at the right hand of the Father after His resurrection from the dead (Acts 7:55-56). "With a shout" (v. 16) carries the idea of a loud command. The Lord's shout is certainly not a comment or mere suggestion. It represents a command from God stating that He has the authority to rule over everyone's actions and behavior. The command will have the power to raise the dead, not just a few but all who have died in Christ throughout history, all "who have fallen asleep" (v. 14).

The archangel's voice will accompany the Lord's loud command. No name is attached to the archangel, but Jude refers to Michael by that title in his epistle. He has traditionally been seen as the highest-ranked of all angels and the commander of heaven's army. It seems plausible the voice of the Lord Himself signals the angel to dispatch heaven's army with a war cry.

Paul assured his beloved Thessalonians that their loved ones who had died in Christ would not miss the Lord's Day. They won't remain in their tombs and lose the opportunity to receive their sovereign Lord; instead, they occupy a place of privilege in this grand meeting.

When you think about the return of Jesus, what do you most look forward to or what are you most concerned about?

We who are still left will be caught up to meet them in the clouds. The "we" gives us a reflection of Paul's hope either that Jesus would come in his lifetime, or he was just identifying himself as a follower of Christ. We would be caught up, snatched, or carried away. The Latin version of this idea is *rapio*, which is where the word "rapture" comes from. And we would meet Him. This meeting reflects the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary.

The church is the official delegation to meet Jesus at His return, with the departed believers at the front of the line. Jesus's return will unite all believers with their glorious King. What a wonderful day that will be! Paul ended this section by challenging the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the truth that the day of the Lord will not be missed by anyone and will itself be a "can't miss" day.

Live Expectant // 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

"About the times and the seasons" (v. 1) refers to another question brought to Paul concerning the Day of the Lord. The first was about



DIGGING DEEPER JESUS THE BEST MEDIATOR

The description of Jesus's second coming has some thematic parallels to God's encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). At Sinai, there was thunder, clouds, and a trumpet sound, and the Israelites feared encountering God firsthand. Instead, they wanted Moses to be their mediator and speak to God for them (Ex. 20:19). In a similar fashion, Paul described Jesus's second coming as an event that will also contain a trumpet sound, clouds, and a cry from heaven. However, instead of God's people fearing their encounter with God, they will join Him. While the Israelites feared speaking with God because they thought it would result in their deaths, Paul explains that those who are in Christ need not fear death. This is because Christ is a better mediator than Moses. Moses attempted to plead with the Israelites to convince them that God was on their side, but he failed (Ex. 20:20-21). Jesus did not fail but protects us from the wrath of God through the power of his death and resurrection.

What are some things that cause anxiety and fear that you need to surrender to Christ?



how those who have passed away will participate in that day. This question referred to in this reference deals with those still living when Christ returns. In a sense, Paul answered, "You know what I know." There was nothing else he could share. Apparently, he had already thoroughly instructed them about the times and seasons. There was nothing else to add.

"Times and seasons" refers to when and what the times will be like at the Day of the Lord. It was a question of both *chronos*, when is the actual day, and *kairos*, when will it be just the right time. This question of the timing of Jesus's return isn't just theological but practical. The common belief was that Jesus would return within their lifetimes. So, should they cease and desist with normal life in anticipation for the impending day? If He were coming quickly, what is the use of going to your job and living life as normal?

The Day of the Lord is mentioned throughout the Bible. It's a day that ushers in a new era. It will be a day of judgment upon the ungodly and salvation for those made righteous by Jesus Christ. There will be victory over sin and death, restoration and a time of making things right once again.

It will be inescapable and terrible for the ungodly but welcomed and comforting for the saints. It's not profitable to speculate upon the times and seasons of the coming day. Paul's instructions echo Jesus's answer to the same question posed by His disciples.

Paul's analogies of a thief and childbirth depict the day as both sudden and inevitable.

- **Sudden.** Like a thief who comes in the night with no advance warning. When a thief strikes, the sleeping victim has no time for escape.
- **Inevitable.** Paul likens the day to childbirth and the pains that precede it. One knows the day is coming, and even though speculations of the day and date can be made, no one really knows the exact moment.

Not knowing the exact time of His coming is a call to live each day as if it might be that day. There's only one thing you can know for certain about the timing of the Day of the Lord: You can't know for certain! It's inevitable but unpredictable.

Destruction is to be understood as separation from God, a state of complete and hopeless ruin. There's no coming back from this; you can't rebuild. For those not ready when the day comes, there will be no time or way to escape the judgment. It will be both a sudden and inevitable day of reckoning.

HOW DOES JESUS'S ANTICIPATED RETURN PROVIDE MEANING TO OUR DAILY ACTIVITIES?

Live Empowered //

1 Thessalonians 5:4-8

Paul turned the focus to his brothers and sisters, united by the saving work of Christ. He employed a wordplay to draw a contrast between how believers and unbelievers will face the Day of the Lord. While unbelievers will be in the dark, the believers will be different. He assured them this day would not overtake them as a thief in the night might catch them unaware.

How could Paul have confidence that the Thessalonian believers wouldn't be overtaken or surprised by the Day of the Lord? He told them that they are "children of the light and children of the day" (v. 5). "Children of. . ." means a group of people closely related or together participating in something significant. Children of light are those who have been transformed from death to life, darkness to light, or night to day, by the saving work of Jesus Christ.

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Paul changed his focus in verse 6; his language went from “you” to “us.” This change is in keeping with addressing the Thessalonian believers as brothers and sisters. He reminded them they were family and going through this together.

Children of the day must stay awake and be self-controlled. For those who have been transformed by Christ, there must be a change in attitude and behavior. To stay awake is to be alert. The gift of salvation carries with it a call to obedience, to act as we now are.

The call to no longer sleep, but to be alert and to have self-control is in relation to the Day of the Lord. Since the day isn’t known, the believer should always live in anticipation as if today could be the day. The believer stands prepared for the climatic event of history by living each day on guard, alert, and self-controlled because when you least expect it, you should expect it.

Paul assured the Thessalonians that they are no longer children of the night but of the glorious day. He reminded them that they are soldiers and to always be vigilant. The great triad of Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope are to be the armor every Christian soldier adorns themselves with.

WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL STEPS WE CAN TAKE TO STAY AWAKE AND BE SELF-CONTROLLED?

DID YOU KNOW?

Christians are children of the day, and a thief of the night cannot sneak up on someone surrounded by light. Sometimes, modern conversations about the end of times do not lead people to be more encouraged but distressed. Paul wants Christians to use their knowledge of the end to encourage each other (4:18; 5:11). Some spend countless hours trying to understand how the events of the world might be paralleled to Biblical signs. While this part of the conversation does help Christians stay engaged and aware, it might also keep us from the work before us. On both sides of his explanation, Paul highlights how believers should be people who work diligently (4:11) and “admonish the idle” (5:14). Christians can look at the end of history and use this as motivation to live better, more meaningful lives here. This is one way we bear witness to the hope of Christ in a hostile world.

Biblical Truth: “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown” (Rev. 3:11).

What are some specific examples of how your knowledge of Christ’s return impacts your motivation to live better now?

LIVE IT

Can you trust the process long enough to achieve the results?

Jesus will return one day, and we should be ready. No person enjoys being caught off guard. They would always choose to prepare for something if they knew it was coming. Christians should prepare for Christ’s return just like an athlete trains during the off-season. A good athlete knows that all the small workouts will matter in the long run, even if they don’t appear to matter in the moment. Below are some suggestions of small things that can help prepare us for Jesus’s return:

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- **Be alert.** Look at your calendar. Regardless of what you’ve got planned for the week ahead, consider each day as if Jesus could return. What would you change?
- **Be self-controlled.** Take time in the middle of each day next week to see how you’re doing. Redirect or reorder your calendar if you’ve gotten off track.
- **Warn others.** Consider how you can winsomely remind others this week that Jesus is coming back. You might consider beginning the conversation with a question: “What would you say to Jesus if He came back for you this week?”

DAILY READINGS

1. RAPTURE PRACTICE // REVELATION 1:7

Growing up attending church youth rallies and services, the Master of Ceremonies occasionally would yell at any random point of service, "Rapture Practice!" This would elicit a response of thunderous praise among the congregants, practicing how they'd react when Jesus returned. Jesus promises the believer that He will return, and when He returns, it will be with fanfare. Every eye will see Christ, and as a result, His followers will praise Him for fulfilling the promise of returning to take us with Him to glory.

Take time today to have "rapture practice" and praise God for the promise of His return.

2. REMAIN UNTIL HE COMES // 1 JOHN 2:28

Cold brew coffee is a delicious treat for coffee lovers. The process of making a cold brew includes coffee grounds being soaked in water for at least 12 hours, as opposed to the making of regular coffee that includes hot water poured over coffee grounds and steeped for 5 minutes or less. The process of a cold brew coffee gives the drink a deeper and richer flavor. Similar to this process, believers should "soak" themselves in connection to God. Believers are instructed to remain in Christ so that we are transformed when He returns. The promise of Christ's return evokes an earnest desire to steep in the knowledge of Him, knowing that by "soaking" in Christ, our faith and resemblance to Him will mature.

Lord, give me a desire to "soak" in your presence so that our relationship can grow deeper and richer.

3. STAY READY // MATTHEW 24:42-44

One of my favorite motivational quotes is, "Stay ready, so you don't have to get ready." This quote points to the importance of being prepared. Jesus is coming back; however, we do not know when He is returning. Keeping this in mind, it is vital for His followers to live with the expectation of His return.

We are instructed to be alert, not knowing when Jesus will return (Matt. 24:42). Our expectation of Christ's return results in us living a righteous life. The Bible gives us instructions on how we should live and indicates the benefits of living according to God's directives. When we live righteously, we stay ready because when Christ returns, it will be too late to get ready.

When we live in line with God's Word, we're always prepared for Him to return.

4. EMPOWERED BY CHRIST'S RETURN // 1 THESSALONIANS 5:5,8

Christ's promise of His return empowers His followers to live confidently in Him. Believers can trust that He is faithful to His word, and this assurance strengthens us to live boldly. When we come to know Christ, we transition from children of darkness to children of light (1 Thess. 5:5). Our decisions are guided by His promises, particularly the assurance of His return. The promise of Christ's return enables us to live holy lives, knowing that we serve a God with all authority (Matt. 28:18). In this confidence, we can live each day empowered by His truth and His eternal plan.

Thank you, God, for giving us confidence to live in Him through His promise of returning for us!

5. RETURNING FOR ALL! // TITUS 2:11-15

Christ died for everyone (John 3:16). This sacrifice symbolizes His love for us, and His return further proves that point. The knowledge of Christ's imminent return should inspire believers to evangelize. We are commanded to proclaim the gospel while waiting for Him to appear. Heaven is not for churchgoers or "good" people. But heaven is for all people who confess Christ as Savior, as God had everyone in mind when He sent His Son. We should evangelize to those who are lost so that they can receive salvation and join us in awaiting His return.

Lord, help me to evangelize to those who are lost so that they can await Your return.



Life Interrupted

BY MARK CROSTON

As I reached my mid-40's, my children were in or moving to college, and my wife of 26 years, at that time, and I were beginning to look forward to an empty nest, extra resources, new travel opportunities and more we would do in that new phase of life. And then it happened. A cancer diagnosis, treatment protocols, a myriad of medicines, declining health, and within a year—death.

All those dreams were shattered. Everything stopped, twisted, wrenched and turned. My life, and the lives of my children, had been invaded and interrupted in ways I could not have imagined. As we traverse through life, we all meet interruptions, some are minor ripples, others rock us to the core. For me it was cancer,

for another an unplanned pregnancy, a lost job, an expensive repair, a prison sentence, a financial loss, an anguishing affair, a divorce, an injury from an accident, a special needs child, a parent with Alzheimer's—the list goes on.

Change is one of the constants we have in life. Depend on it. Look for it. Expect it. There is an old Yiddish adage “Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht.” My late mother-in-law used to say the English version of this to us all the time, “Man Plans, and God Laughs.”

Since life can be so turbulent at times, and change so inevitable, should we even plan at all? What are the eternal truths we need to remember about life's interruptions.

First know that God is a planner. I often hear people talk about the Holy Spirit, who is part of the triune God, as if He does everything at the last minute. This could not be farther from the truth. Think about it. God completed the plan of salvation before He laid the foundations of the world. “For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph. 1:4-5).

How else could we possibly explain how Jesus came down through forty-two generations, of the lineage of David, foretold by the prophets, announced by an angel, to be born of a virgin, celebrated by a star, sought by a sovereign, soothsayers and shepherds, in the City of Bethlehem. God is a planner.

Second, God has a plan for our lives. Growing up in my church youth group I can remember hearing over and over again, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. I could not see it or understand it then, but now looking back over the years I see it plainly.

God is intimately involved with his creation and none of us are an accident or after thought. “For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope (Jer. 29:11).

Third, we all need a life plan. We only get one earthly life with a limited number of days. “Since a person’s days are determined and the number of his months depends on you, and since you have set limits he cannot pass” (Job 14:5). Also know there is an evaluation at the end.

“And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—” (Heb. 9:27). Thus, it is important we live life in productive ways. Hence, we are instructed in Proverbs 16:3, “Commit your activities to the LORD, and your plans will be established.” Also in Proverbs 21:5, “The plans of the diligent certainly lead to profit, but anyone who is reckless certainly becomes poor.”

Fourth, God uses interruptions to bring us into alignment with His eternal plan. An interruption to us is not and interruption for God. Some interruptions are the self-inflicted wounds of our sinfulness. Some are the natural course of life, but others may be the nudge of God. God uses all of these, when we are willing, to bring us into alignment with His eternal plan.

God interrupted the lives of Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, Mary, Elizabeth, Peter, James and John. My plan was to be an engineer; God interrupted and made me a Gospel preacher.

Interruptions can make life seem herkie jerky, but God works His plan through it all. “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

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STUDY 2 HOW TO HANDLE LIFE'S INTERRUPTIONS

INTRODUCTION

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Obey God and Deny Self.

Our response to life's interruptions is a good indicator of who is in charge of our lives. This study pushes us to obediently trust God rather than our own plans.

Writer Bio

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A STUDY ON HOW TO RESPOND WHEN INTERRUPTIONS HAPPEN

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Interruptions don't care about our plans, desires, schedules, or goals. They can be rude and imposing such as:

- A car breaks down on the freeway while you're miles from your destination.
- After dressing your baby and self for church, the baby wets through their diaper all over themselves and you requiring clothing changes making you late.
- After months of preparing an important presentation, your computer crashes and you're left without the work you have labored so hard over.

Interruptions come in all shapes and sizes, often disrupting our paths causing discouragement and doubt, unless we learn to handle these potholes realizing they're really for our good. But these interruptions are also opportunities for spiritual growth and alignment with God's greater plan. This study explores how unexpected moments refine

our faith, reveal God's sovereignty and plans, and transform our perspective to trust that "... all things work together for the good for those who love Him" (Rom. 8:28). Interruptions in our plans are inevitable and are ultimately reminders we're These events that can be used to determine the depth of our trust in God.

Over six sessions, we'll look at the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and others who are examples of lives interrupted. Their stories are accounts of people impacted in unexpected, frightening, unjust, and sometimes unexplainable ways.

To discover we're not alone in our challenges, it's important to take time to investigate other satisfied customers and discover how their reviews of life while walking with God are an assurance we too can be victorious through life's disruptions.

By seeing God's invitation in the interruption, He can turn it into an on-ramp to new opportunities, deeper faith, and greater intimacy with Him!

Week 6 – Wisdom and Worship

Scripture Readings: Psalm 1; Psalm 23; Proverbs 1:1–7; Ecclesiastes 12:13–14; Song of Songs 8:6–7

The wisdom and poetry books reveal the full range of life with God—worship, wisdom, suffering, and love. Psalms teach us to pray and worship in every season. Proverbs calls us to live skillfully, anchored in the fear of the Lord. Ecclesiastes wrestles with meaning and concludes that fearing God is true purpose. Song of Songs celebrates love and intimacy as God’s gift. Together, these books remind us that God is present in both our questions and our praise, in joy and in pain.