

GOD'S COSMIC PLAN

BIBLE BASIS: I Thessalonians 5:111

BIBLE TRUTH: God's plan of salvation is embodied in the divine plan for all creation, which is directly related to Christ's return to earth.

MEMORY VERSE: For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

LESSON AIM: That your students will reflect on how the assurance of Christ's return impacts our commitment to love and care for others.

TEACHER PREPARATION

MATERIALS NEEDED: Quarterly Commentary, Adult Quarterly, Adult resources—charts, worksheets, and other teaching tools, Bibles (several different versions)

OTHER MATERIALS NEEDED / TEACHER'S NOTES:

LESSON OVERVIEW

LIFE NEED FOR TODAY'S LESSON

To restate Paul's comments regarding Christ's return, and explain his analogy of "sleep."

BIBLE LEARNING

In today's lesson, Paul explained to the Thessalonian Christians that because the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night, they were to live as though they expected Christ to return at any moment.

BIBLE APPLICATION

In our society, we must be prepared to use God's Word to comfort those who are worried about the economy, wars, terrorism, and the general state of the world.

STUDENTS' RESPONSES

Students will develop a strategy to encourage another person based on the knowledge of Christ's return.

LESSON SCRIPTURE

I THESSALONIANS 5:111

- 1. But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you.*
- 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 an 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.

LIGHT ON THE WORD

In the second portion of I Thessalonians 4, Paul corrected a misunderstanding about the return of Christ by the Thessalonian Christians. Apparently, at least some members of the Thessalonian church believed that at the time of Christ's return, only those Christians who were alive at the Second Coming would have the possibility of sharing in the kingdom of God. They evidently held various non-orthodox beliefs that Paul wanted to correct.

Some felt that their Christian friends and relatives, who had died since Jesus' execution, might miss out on His return or they might appear at a later time. Some felt that those who had recently died may have forfeited their salvation because of their death. Still others may have believed that through their baptism, they and their fellow Christians should have

become immune to death, and thus they misunderstood the meaning of eternal life.

TEACHING THE BIBLE LESSON

LIFE NEED FOR TODAY'S LESSON

AIM: That your students will recognize the importance of Christ's return.

INTRODUCTION

Knowing the Time

Along with "that day," this theologically significant phrase, "the Day of the Lord," appeared frequently in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. They usually used the phrase to identify events that would take place at the end of history (Isaiah 7:1825). The key to understanding the phrase is to note that it always signified a span of time during which God personally intervened in history, directly or indirectly, to accomplish some specific aspect of His plan. Generally, the phrase refers to a time when God will judge the world and punish the nations when Christ returns to establish His kingdom (Joel 2:111; Zephaniah 2:1415; Isaiah 12:1221). The New Testament's epistles refer to "the day" in many different ways. These include: "the day of . . . the righteous judgment of God" (Romans 2:5), "the day of the redemption" (Ephesians 4:30), "the day of the Lord" (I Thessalonians 5:2; II Peter 3:10) and "the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16).

In the case of today's passage, the purpose of "that day" is to bring about the end of human history and begin the reign of Christ on the earth.

BIBLE LEARNING

AIM: That your students will develop an appreciation for knowing that Christ will return.

I. THE DAY OF THE LORD (I Thessalonians 5:13)

The concern of the Thessalonians was focused on their friends and relatives, who had died and might not have been truly saved and went directly to hell. Paul referred to the dead euphemistically as "those who have fallen asleep" (4:14-15, NIV). The point he made is that they are not dead and gone; rather, their bodies are asleep awaiting the Lord's call to get up. The apostle was anxious to assure the Thessalonians that once a person is saved, he or she is guaranteed to be present when Jesus comes again.

Paul Explains the Cause of Hope (verses 13)

1. But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you.

All these previous chapters of Thessalonians point to why Paul said to his "brethren" that about these "times and seasons," "ye have no need that I write unto you." Evidently Paul, whether through his own preaching or through the ministry of delegates like Timothy, had thoroughly versed the Thessalonians in the words of Jesus—words like, "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (Matthew 24:44). As Paul's following words showed, the Thessalonians needed only to be reminded about Jesus' sudden and unexpected coming. But the other likely reason Paul expected the Thessalonians to know what is to come is that, in this very letter, he had just proclaimed to them again the glorious future with Christ that awaited them.

In 4:13-18, Paul spoke to an apparent concern among the Thessalonians about their brothers and sisters, who died before Jesus' return. He

encouraged them with the glorious truth about both the living and the "asleep": both will rise with Christ at His glorious return! In this light, there is surely little need to speculate on exact "times and seasons" (overlapping terms that together refer to extended periods [of tribulation, for example] or the precise moment of Christ's return). The overarching truth is that Jesus' imminent second coming will make all things well!

2. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.

In talking about this anticipated day, Paul used the language of the parable found in Luke 12:39 and Matthew 24:43, but connected the "thief" not with Jesus directly but with "the day of the Lord." This idea of the "day" or "day of the Lord," like many repeated themes in the Bible, can refer to more than one event—often even more than one event at once. This "day" was greatly anticipated by God's people, Israel, for it held the promise that He would rescue them by destroying any and all enemies threatening to destroy them. But the prophets before the exile turned the phrase around so that on that day God would do the unthinkable and judge His own people for the covenant breaking. This "day" came about in 722 B.C. for the northern kingdom and 586 B.C. for the southern. But like many biblical images, the "day of the Lord" has many fulfillments but, you might say, only one "Fulfillment," with a capital "F." So it is fitting that Paul, like Peter in II Peter 3:10, joined together the awesome and terrible "day of the Lord" with the long-awaited second coming of Christ. After all, on that day of all days Jesus will make all things right in His fallen creation, returning as Judge of the world but also as Saviour of His own.

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.

Paul now directed the Thessalonians to turn their gaze away from their own navels ("When will that day come? What hour?"), and toward those around them—toward the fate of a perishing world. The TVP New Testament Commentary has this to say about the phrase "peace and safety": "Paul's readers in Thessalonica ... would take his words as an attack on claims of earlier Roman emperors to have established peace and security (pax et securitas) throughout the empire. Teachings like this one sounded subversive and may have aroused persecution against Christians" (Acts 17:7; TVP New Testament Commentary, electronic ed.).

Both the "sudden destruction" and the "travail" (or "birth pains," NIV) described here call to mind the prophetic vision of Isaiah: "And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames" (Isaiah 13:8). Paul probably had Isaiah's words in his mind even as the apostle wrote through the Holy Spirit. While Isaiah saw the destruction of Babylon, the oppressor of God's people Israel, Paul saw the destruction of the new "Babylon," the great city whose ultimate downfall the book of Revelation prophesied (see Revelation 18:2).

Paul's vision here brought a revolution to the Thessalonians' thinking about the end: Don't speculate about the day or the hour, Paul counsels; rather, think on your standing, and the standing of the fallen world around you, since Christ will come as a reigning King. More to the point: The Lord will come as a thief, and

for those settled pride fully upon their own peace and safety, there will be no escape when He does.

QUESTION 1

What is the term Paul used to describe the period culminating in the return of Christ to rule and reign on the earth (I Thessalonians 5:2)?

(Answer) The Day of the Lord.

LIGHT ON THE WORD

The Assurance of Christ's Return

Like many believers today, the Thessalonian Christians were looking at the events of their world and pointing to these as signs of the end times. Paul cautioned them by explaining, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (I Thessalonians 5:2). Later, the apostle Peter would use this same phrasing in his second epistle (II Peter 3:10). The metaphor illustrates that the day of the Lord will begin when it is least expected. Jesus explained that only He and the Father knew the time of Christ's return: "For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:38-39). Just as the flood victims of Noah's time did not know when the time of their end would come, neither would the believers of Paul's time or anyone during the present time be able to predict the Second Coming.

Many people have tried to predict dates and times for the return of Christ, and all of them

have been proven wrong. Attempting to predict the Second Coming is foolish, so do not

be fooled by anyone whom claims to know the time. The world will be totally off guard when destruction comes upon them.

II. CHILDREN OF DARKNESS VS. CHILDREN OF LIGHT (I Thessalonians 5:47)

There is a vast difference between being ready to go to heaven and being ready to meet the Lord. The sacrifice of Christ did everything necessary to prepare us for heaven. John summed this up best with the phrase, "being ready to meet the Lord." He stated, "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (I John 2:28). Living expectantly means being ready to confidently meet the Lord, having our works judged, and expecting to hear the Lord proclaim, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21, NIV)

Paul Calls Out the Differences (verses 47)

4. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.

We might be tempted to wonder why Paul mentioned "darkness" in 5:4, for the first time in the passage, until we see that he is picking up on the word "night" which he used in verse 2. Paul returned his hearers to the mental picture of the helpless homeowner vulnerable to the thief's sneak attack—except that now the sun shines, the homeowner can see all around him or her, and the thief dare not try to surprise her or him. The word "day" here is not the same thing as the word "light" or "day" of verse 5; by writing "that day" Paul shows us that he is again referring back to verse 2, where he referred to "day of the Lord." So the full picture is that the

"thief," the great and terrible day of Christ's second coming, does in fact come; but this thief comes strolling down the road to the house, to be greeted like a welcome visitor, not dreaded like a dangerous intruder.

5. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.

We now learn further why the believer in Christ can and should welcome the day of Christ's second coming: His identity is forever tied to the brightness of the day, and not the slumber of the night. By using the phrase "children of" to describe his hearers' relationship to "light" and "day," Paul used a common New Testament phrase to express an unmistakable quality about a person. We can illustrate with Luke 10:6, where Jesus sends out His disciples into the homes of strangers with these words: "And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it [a house]: if not, it shall turn to you again." Just as the "son of peace" in Luke is one who peacefully welcomes those who belong to Christ, Paul's descriptions of "children of light" and "children of the day" share in the powerful presence of the "light of the world" (John 9:5), which dispels the foreboding darkness.

As mentioned above, the meaning of "day" changes from verse 4 to verse 5; the context provided in this verse shows that Paul did not mean to say that his hearers "belong to the day of the Lord," but rather that they "belong to the day" as opposed to the night, and the light as opposed to the darkness. How did the Thessalonians become part of this life giving "day"? Through faith in the Gospel of Christ. As Matthew Henry puts it, "They were the children of the day, for the daystar had risen upon them; yea, the Sun of righteousness had arisen on them with healing under his wings"

(Commentary on the Whole Bible, electronic ed.). The Thessalonians had not become "day people" by some heroic effort of watchfulness or self-denial; no, they stood firmly in the light as a result of their unshaken union with the risen Jesus.

6. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

Paul made it clear that there are "others" who do sleep; those who have not believed the revelation of Jesus in the gospel are truly asleep with regard to the coming day of the Lord. However, it would be a strange and unnatural thing for those of the day to doze as if they could count on "peace and safety" apart from the love and mercy of Christ. As Matthew Henry puts it, "Shall Christians, who have the light of the blessed gospel shining in their faces, be careless about their souls, and unmindful of another world?" (Commentary on the Whole Bible, electronic ed.)

If, then, believers live in the daytime, they should act like people do while it is light outside. For one thing, they should "watch," which is another way of saying, "be alert." Again, we must keep in mind that Paul spoke figuratively; he was not rebuking the Thessalonians for taking naps or nodding off in their easy chairs, but rather encouraging a spiritual state that lets nothing catch them off their guard. Combined with the command to "be sober," Paul's words pointed to the danger of sin, which, as the LORD reminded Cain in Genesis 4:7, "lieth at the door," ready to take advantage of heedlessness among the children of God. So we see that the calling to wait for Christ's appearing does not suggest inactivity, but rather active battle against those influences that belong to the night.

7. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.

The people described in this verse were doing the opposite of "watching" and "being sober." By reminding the Thessalonians of such people, Paul strengthened his appeal that they follow a different course, in light of their beautifully distinct identity. As we consider this verse, it is important to keep our focus on the context of these commands, which is the hope filled promise of Christ's return. You might say that the reigning Jesus will have one return, but that coming will be received in two different ways. To those in the day, those that are watching, the appearing will be gloriously happy. To those in the night, those sleeping, the appearing will be an unpleasant surprise. This is what Paul meant to convey by speaking of both "sleep" and "drunkenness," two conditions that make people utterly oblivious to the world around them. In this light, said Paul, how happily should Christians choose alertness and sobriety over spiritual unresponsiveness and the drunkenness that keeps them from looking for their Lord!

QUESTION 2

How did Paul describe the people of the world, who do not know Christ as Lord and Savior (verses 45) ?

(Answer) They are in darkness and asleep in their ignorance of what is to come.

LIGHT ON THE WORD

The Power of Knowing the Truth

Paul described the unbelieving world as living in darkness; believers are "children of the light" (verse 5, KJV) or "sons of the day" (NIV). As "children of the day" believers are not in the dark (unknowing, unable to perceive) , when it

comes to end time events. We eagerly anticipate the return of Christ and we live each day as though today will be the day. Unbelievers live as though they will never have to answer for their actions. Of them, Peter wrote: "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (II Peter 3:34).

III. WALKING IN READINESS (I Thessalonians 5:8—11)

In verse 8, Paul's wording had a military connotation: "But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." In contrast with the previous, transitional verse, with its imagery of sleepiness and drunkenness, Paul sets up imagery of a soldier who is commanded to stay alert on his post. So must we as Christians. In modern terminology, Paul instructed us to "saddle up" or put on our Christian armor and prepare for combat. First, we put on the "breastplate of faith" (verse 8). The breastplate, a metal piece worn defensively, is to guard our hearts. Wise King Solomon once advised us, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). Believers must not allow the world's situations to become issues that affect our hearts.

Be Prepared (verses 8-11)

8. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.

Paul now included himself ("us") in his continuing call to resist the stupor of the night.

However, his exhortation to "be sober" now carried a vivid battle related image that added color to our understanding of his command. Speaking in terms that would be understood both by those in Roman occupied territory (who frequently saw centurions and other soldiers arrayed for battle), Paul spoke of a "breastplate" and "helmet," but we quickly see that these are no ordinary, literal war related gear.

But what are these objects? Whereas Isaiah 59:17 speaks of a "breastplate of righteousness" Paul spoke of one carrying "faith and love." Whereas Isaiah spoke of a "helmet of salvation," Paul referred to "the hope of salvation" as the believer's helmet. What Paul seemed to be doing here is taking Old Testament language and applying it to New Testament Christians, in light of the full revelation of God in Christ. How is God's righteousness worked out through the church? It is worked out in faith and love. What does God's salvation bring to His people? It brings hope! So the believer's armor beautifully expresses the result of God's "battle" on our behalf. And this picture pointed back to the original cause of Paul's happy confidence in the Thessalonians: "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father" (I Thessalonians 1:3).

What does the apostle mean by the phrase "putting on" these things? It means, quite simply, to exercise faith in the Gospel of God, love toward fellow human beings (for this is how Paul usually used "love"—elsewhere, of course, we are told to love God), and a joyous hope resulting from the possession of Christ. And of course, the command to "put on" these

things implies that believers have such items in their wardrobe—which indeed they do, because they possess the riches of Christ.

9. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

The next two verses showed the heart of God's redemption for believers in Christ, and the reason that Paul could urge the Thessalonians to put on the armor of the light. Matthew Henry explained this verse best when he pointed out and suggested that we should "trace our salvation to the first cause, that is God's appointment. Those who live and die in darkness and ignorance, who sleep and are drunken as in the night, are, it is but too plain, appointed to wrath [God's punishment]; but as for those who are of the day, if they watch and be sober, it is evident that they are appointed to obtain salvation" (Henry, 2518). Thus, God's amazing mercy is the subject of I Thessalonians 5:9. Paul mentioned "wrath" because, among other things (for example death, sin, and hell), this is exactly the thing from which the Thessalonians have been saved. But they are saved not just through God's intention ("destined"), but also through God's action ("through our Lord Jesus Christ"). His atoning work on the Cross is what actually delivers salvation to those who are His, and gives them the hope to press on in their high and holy calling.

10. Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.

Paul now reinforced Christians' hope in their ultimate destiny by explaining the loving purpose and happy result of Jesus' death in the place of His people. The words "wake or sleep" might bring some confusion. After all, has not

Paul said that those who are "asleep" when Jesus comes back will find themselves in darkness and not in the light of His merciful presence? Indeed, if the word "sleep" here referred to such people, then the apostle would have contradicted himself. But Paul was actually looking back to an earlier use of the word "sleep"—found in 4:1318, meaning "dead." We know this because he was building on the comforting words of 5:9, and because nowhere does Paul link Jesus' death with anyone's destruction. Jesus' death was only for redemption. Paul is once again encouraging the Thessalonian believers with the knowledge that both they (who were alive at the time) and their loved ones, who had died, will be with the Lord. When will they "come to life"? It will be at the promised resurrection of all people, at the coming of Christ "like a thief," as both 4:1318 and our passage show.

11. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.

Just as he did in 4:18, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that the uplifting truths of the Gospel are never just for their own encouragement. A major part of "watching" for the Lord's second coming to come is sharing with one another the hope and glory brought about by His first coming—His incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension on our behalf. And so Paul called the Thessalonians to be generous toward one another in their proclamation of the Good News, even as God, through Paul and others, has generously proclaimed it to them. Since we also have had the Good News preached to us, we would do well to do the same.

QUESTION 3

What did Paul expect the Thessalonians (and us) to do as a result of his explanation of Christ's return (verse 11)?

(Answer) He expected us to comfort and strengthen (edify) one another.

LIGHT ON THE WORD

Geared Up

We put on the "helmet of hope and salvation" or better yet, hope in our salvation (I Thessalonians 5:8). We do not believe in the promises of our government, or the strength of our military, or the security of our paychecks. Our hope is in Christ and His promise to never leave us or forsake us. People, institutions, and people all fail; but the salvation of Christ is guaranteed for eternity.

BIBLE APPLICATION

AIM: That your students will be able to respond to Paul's admonition.

Living in Expectation

One night, Brandon and Bree decided to stay up to watch a little TV after their parents had gone to bed. After the program, the two children turned out the lights in the house and went upstairs. A few minutes after Brandon had gotten comfortably into bed, he remembered that they had forgotten to turn on the alarm system. He thought, if we've lived here all these months without anyone trying to break in, surely leaving it off for one night was not going to hurt. With that, he turned over and went to sleep.

Later that night, Brandon was awakened by what he thought was a sound in the house. He lay in his bed and listened carefully, and then he heard the sound of broken glass. He climbed

out of bed, tiptoed into his parents' room, woke his dad and whispered, "Dad, someone is in the house!"

There was another rustle of footsteps. Bryant pushed a nearby panic button wired to the alarm system. A blaring alarm sounded throughout the house. The intruder ran out the back door and a car was heard screeching away. When the police arrived, they asked why the family had neglected to turn on the alarm that night. Brandon confessed that he had gone to bed and was too lazy to go back downstairs to turn it on. He said that they had never had any trouble before so he felt that leaving the alarm off for one night would not be a problem. The policeman told Brandon that in his experience, thieves never showed up when people were looking for them; they always came when they were least expected.

In today's lesson, Paul explained to the Thessalonian Christians that because the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night, they were to live as though they expected Christ to return at any moment.

STUDENTS' RESPONSES

AIM: That your students will reflect upon the assurance they have in Christ's return.

This week, ask a couple of nonbelievers what they consider to be the biggest worries of the country. Then ask them how these issues affect them and their future. Use the response as a means of offering them the assurance of Christ. Then ask them to allow you to pray with them over these issues. Come to class next week prepared to share your experiences with the class.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, Thank You for the assurance of the return of Your Son, Christ Jesus. Help us to rest in knowing not only that Christ will return, but in responding by preparing ourselves with the hope that is ours through the salvation purchased by His blood. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Obtaining Salvation in Christ (I Thessalonians 5:111)

HOW TO SAY IT:

Thessalonians. thes'uhLOHneeuhnz.

PREPARE FOR NEXT SUNDAY

Read II Thessalonians 1:312 and study "Glory to Christ."

DAILY HOME BIBLE READINGS

MONDAY

The Day of the Lord (Joel 3:1116)

TUESDAY

Hearing the Word of the Lord (Acts 19:110)

WEDNESDAY

Watch for the Lord's Coming (Matthew 24:3644)

THURSDAY

Prepared for the Lord's Coming (Matthew 25:113)

FRIDAY

The Coming of the Lord (I Thessalonians 4:1318)

SATURDAY

Blameless at Christ's Coming (I Thessalonians 5:1224)

SUNDAY