

SESSION 6

for-certain hope

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

1 Thess. 4:13–18

BUILDUP THEME



LEARN DOCTRINE

God wants us to anticipate Christ's return to resurrect dead believers and rapture living believers.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

Students will understand how the promise of Christ's return can affect their lives.

MEMORY VERSE

"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" (1 Thess. 4:17).

Teacher Preparation

- ☐ According to the Pew Research Center, about 17% of Americans do not believe in the afterlife and 39% of US adults believe people who don't believe in God can enter Heaven. Misunderstandings about the Rapture, resurrection, and the afterlife are nothing new.
- ☐ Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The Thessalonians were worried about fellow believers who had died before Jesus' return. As Paul clarified the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and the Rapture, he expressed the hope of Heaven, a promise for all believers.
- ☐ Some of your students may have doubts, fears, or wrong ideas about what will happen at death or at Christ's return for His church. Use this session to help your students understand the doctrines of the resurrection and the Rapture. Be mindful of any students who have lost a close friend or relative recently. This session can help those who are grieving as well as those who fear death. If you have students who need to trust in Christ for salvation, use this session to present the believer's hope. Emphasize the believer's assurance of salvation and eternal life.

Session Summary

The Thessalonians were grieving over fellow believers who had died. But the believers could have hope during their grieving because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul offered them comfort by teaching them about the resurrection of believers and Christ's return. First, Christ will return from Heaven with believers who have died. Those believers will receive their resurrected, glorified bodies. Christ will then rapture living believers to meet Him and the newly resurrected believers in the air. All believers will be with Christ forever. Believers are responsible to comfort each other with the truths concerning Christ's return.

Session Starters

Option 1—Death and Taxes

Steps

1. Read the paragraphs about Benjamin Franklin and discuss certainties in this life and beyond.

"Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." Benjamin Franklin wrote that sentence in a 1789 letter to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, his French scientist friend. Franklin included that his own strength was failing and that he didn't think he would live much longer. Five months later, Benjamin Franklin was dead.

We don't know whether Franklin was a believer. He seems to have left his deist beliefs from his youth and recognized Jesus as the Savior and the Bible as God's inspired Word. If so, he was certain of a blessed afterlife.

ASK: When was the last time you talked to an unbeliever about death?

ASK: What certainties, if any, did the unbeliever hold on to?

ASK: What are your certainties about death?

2. Transition to the Bible study.

In Christ we have hope of a never-ending life in God's presence. Whether we die in Christ or are alive at the time of the Rapture, we will spend eternity with the Lord. Paul shared a true hope. This session will help you understand the events at Christ's return and will encourage you with the promise of eternal life.

Option 2—Afterlife Confusion

Gather

- Note cards and pen.

Steps

1. Talk about confusion concerning the afterlife.

According to the Pew Research Center, about 73 percent of all US adults believe in Heaven and 62 percent believe in Hell. Surprisingly, 4 percent of people who call themselves evangelicals don't believe in Heaven and 9 percent don't believe in Hell. There is, then, a lot of confusion concerning the afterlife.

ASK: What have you heard unbelievers say about the afterlife? (Q1)

ASK: How has your understanding of the afterlife changed over the course of your life? (Q2)

2. Transition to the Bible study.

Confusion over the afterlife is nothing new. The Thessalonians were confused and even sad about their future when they should have been hopeful. Paul taught them the truth about Christ's return and the afterlife. This session will help you clarify some truths about death and find comfort in the promise of Christ's return.

Bible Study

Gather

- End-Time Events poster.

I. The Believer's Sure Hope (1 Thess. 4:13–15)

The Thessalonians knew enough about the Rapture to be confused. Paul wrote to give them certainty and hope.

A. Hope for the grieving (4:13)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Timothy's report to Paul included the Thessalonians' misunderstandings about end-time events. The Thessalonians were worried and grieving about fellow believers who had passed away. The living believers were unsure of what would happen to their dead friends and relatives when Christ returned to take believers out of the world at the Rapture. They assumed that believers who die won't take part in the Rapture. They were also unclear on the resurrection and the fate of departed believers. Some thought believers would rise again but not at the time of the Rapture. They feared fellow believers who had preceded them in death would have an inferior afterlife compared to the experience of living believers.

ASK: What will fear about the afterlife do to a believer? (Q3) *It will keep the believer from concentrating on serving God well and sharing the gospel with confidence and clarity.*

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to be ignorant about the Rapture and resurrection. Their ignorance could lead them to grieve like their Greek neighbors who had no sure hope of a pleasant afterlife. The Greeks made a great show of their grief by wailing, shaving their heads, cutting their skin, tearing their clothes, putting dust on their heads, and sitting in ashes. They even hired professional mourners to howl and shriek for the loss of loved ones. Perhaps the Thessalonian

believers were still practicing some of the pagan expressions of grief. Paul wanted to correct their wrong thinking about Christ's return, the resurrection, and the Rapture.

Paul didn't mean the Thessalonians wouldn't experience grief. But as Paul taught them the sure hope of resurrection at Christ's return, they would grieve as those with a sure future. A believer's grief for saved loved ones should testify of his or her faith in God. The lost should notice hope in the believer's grieving.

It is not wrong to grieve or to express sorrow at someone's death, nor does it show a lack of faith. Jesus mourned the death of his friend Lazarus, even though He would soon raise Lazarus back to life (John 11:33–35). Grieving allows us to process the loss of a loved one, but our faith in Christ provides hope during our grief.

ASK: Recall a funeral or memorial service for a believer. How did the service offer hope during the time of grief? (Q4)

B. Hope from God (4:14, 15)

1. Hope in Jesus' work (4:14)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

If we only have hope in this life and not for the afterlife, we are miserable, and our faith is in vain, Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:17–19). Because Christ was raised from the dead, those who have died in Christ will also be raised. He is the "firstfruits," the guarantee of the resurrection of the believers (1 Cor. 15:23). Because of Christ's resurrection, believers have victory over death and the grave (1 Cor. 15:54–57). In fact, Jesus' resurrection means the bodily resurrection of believers must happen.

ASK: To what might you compare the certainty of the bodily resurrection of believers? (Q5)

Paul used "sleep" to refer to the believer's state after death. He didn't mean that believers go into a soul sleep after death. He meant that death, like sleep, is a temporary state. To be absent from our physical, earthly bodies is to be present with the Lord in Heaven in a conscious state (2 Cor. 5:8).

ASK: What do those in the Lord's presence now enjoy? (Q6)
Complete peace, joy, freedom from pain, absolute contentment.

What kind of body believers have in Heaven before their resurrection isn't clearly revealed in Scripture, though any temporary body would be recognizable and free from any sin or physical problems. We can be sure departed believers are enjoying Heaven, interacting with Christ, and anticipating their coming resurrection, the uniting of their soul with their physical, glorified body.



DISPLAY: End-Time Events poster. Point out that when a believer dies, his or her soul immediately goes to Heaven. Refer to the poster as appropriate throughout this session.

Believers who have died will join Christ on His return at the Rapture. They greatly anticipate being reunited with believing loved ones.

2. Hope in Jesus' word (4:15)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

Paul assured his readers that the teaching of the believer's resurrection hope had come from the Lord, so believers had no reason to worry about those who had preceded them in death. Those who remain alive until Christ's return will have no advantage over those who have died. Those who have gone on to Heaven will by no means miss out on the blessings of Christ's return.

Paul apparently thought his generation would be alive at Christ's return. He said "we" who are alive and remain. Every generation of believers should expect Christ to return in their lifetimes, though no one could ever claim Christ will for sure return before his or her death.

ASK: What is the danger of living as if Christ won't return for many more years? (Q7) *We fail to sense the urgency to live for Him now; we take for granted the time we have to serve Him; we don't feel compelled to witness to the lost.*

ASK: How have you grown to anticipate Christ's certain return as you have studied 1 Thessalonians? (Q8)

II. Christ's Certain Coming (1 Thess. 4:16, 17)

To confirm his teaching of the resurrection of the dead, Paul offered more details of Christ's return.

A. Christ's return to the air (4:16)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Christ will leave Heaven, where He has been since His ascension (Mark 16:19; Acts 7:55, 56), to return to the sky in fulfillment of His promise to come again for believers (John 14:1–3). His descent to the sky above the earth will be accompanied by three sounds. A great shout or cry will summon the believers who have died, as if awakening them from sleep. The cry will be a shout of command, like that of a general calling his troops into battle. The voice of an archangel and the blast of the trumpet of God will also sound. In the Old Testament, the sound of a trumpet often signified the Lord's presence (Exod. 19:16; Ps. 47:5) or the coming of the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1), which begins with the return of Christ for His church. These sounds may occur separately or all

at once to produce one great noise. Either way, Christ's return will be unmistakable for believers!

ASK: What is God communicating to us by sharing that there will be a loud shout, a voice, and a trumpet blast at Christ's return to the air? Why all the noise? (Q9) *That the return of Christ is of supreme importance, that God is greatly anticipating the event, and that the event will be powerful and unmistakable.*

B. Resurrection of Church-age believers (4:16)

After Christ's return to the sky, the dead in Christ will rise. "Dead in Christ" refers to the bodies of Church-age believers who have died. All of them will have been living in Heaven since the time of their death. Paul specifically corrected the Thessalonians' misunderstanding that their dead loved ones were at some sort of disadvantage compared to living believers. Church-age believers who have died will return from Heaven with Christ (4:14) and will receive their glorified, permanent bodies immediately before the rapture of living believers. Their new bodies will be recognizable and permanently perfect.

C. Rapture of Church-age believers (4:17)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Living believers will be caught up, meaning God will grab or seize them suddenly to take them away from earth. We refer to this event as the Rapture of the church. Raptured believers will meet resurrected believers in the clouds.

Raptured believers will immediately receive their glorified, perfect bodies. We will all be changed (1 Cor. 15:51) in that our bodies will no longer be subject to spiritual or physical corruption. Yet we, like those raised from the dead, will all be recognizable. And since our glorified bodies won't age for all eternity, we could perhaps assume we will all appear as healthy young adults.

ASK: What will not plague believers' glorified bodies? List some examples. (Q10) *Physical problems, disease, anguish over sin, regrets over missed opportunities, unresolved conflicts with other departed believers, pain.*

D. Reunion of Church-age believers (4:17)

Raptured believers and resurrected believers will meet Jesus in the air somewhere above the earth. Paul used a word for "meet" that referred to celebrating an honored guest or greeting an important visitor outside a city and welcoming the guest in (Acts 28:15).

ASK: Suppose you're alive when the Rapture happens. What do you think you will say to Christ? (Q11)

ASK: What might you say to the person who led you to trust in Christ as your Savior? (Q12)

Every raptured believer will be glad to see Jesus and glad to have a new, glorified body. That same gladness should characterize our lives now. We should be living every day as if we are on our way to meet Jesus in the air.

READ: Titus 2:11–14. **ASK:** How might you anticipate the blessed hope and glorious appearing of Jesus? (Q13)

Once Church-age believers have joined the Lord, they will not be separated from Him again. We will remain with Him forever.

ASK: Why is it difficult for us to comprehend life with no end? (Q14) *We have only experienced life within the realm of time. All life on earth has a definite beginning and a definite ending.*

III. The Believer's Compassionate Duty (1 Thess. 4:18)

READ: 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

Believers should use the truth of Christ's return to comfort and encourage each other. They were to grieve with one another but with the sure hope of seeing believing loved ones again. We should do the same. Our grieving should be supported by our sure hope in the Lord. Christ promised the resurrection of the dead and the reunion of all believers. As we grieve, we can rely on the Spirit to comfort us with these promises.

Paul's teaching can also comfort us as we contemplate our own deaths.

ASK: Why might we fear death, even as believers? (Q15) *It is an unknown experience; it means leaving loved ones behind; events leading up to it might be painful, sorrowful, or scary.*

Most people don't like to think about dying. Everyone wants a chance to live a full life, and many fear the possible events leading to death as well as the experience itself.

But believers have nothing to fear. We have trusted in the Lord, and our sins have been forgiven. He has promised to be with us through any circumstance leading to death; nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:35–39). And because of Christ's victory over death, we will overcome death too and will forever "be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:14, 17). Whether we see Jesus through physical death or through the Rapture, we can anticipate meeting Him with joy.

Session Application

Steps

1. Talk about anticipating Christ's return.

ASK: What do you anticipate the most about Christ's return? (Q16)

ASK: Which believers are you looking forward to meeting for the first time? (Q17)

ASK: With which believers are you looking forward to reuniting? (Q18)

2. Challenge your students to prepare for the return of Christ.

ASK: How can we prepare for the return of Christ for His church? (Q19) *Be sure of our salvation; make living for Christ our priority; deal with any ongoing sin problems in our lives.*

ASK: How can we help others prepare? (Q20) *Lead unbelievers to Christ; comfort and encourage those who have doubts and fears.*

3. Close in prayer, giving thanks to God for His sure promise of Christ's return for His church.

SESSION 7

self-controlled alertness

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

1 Thess. 5:1–11

BUILDUP THEME



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS

God expects believers to live with spiritual alertness in anticipation of the coming Day of the Lord.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The students will determine what spiritual alertness means for their lives.

MEMORY VERSE

“Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober”
(1 Thess. 5:5, 6).

Teacher Preparation

- Paul knew God would begin to pour out His judgment at the dawning of the Day of the Lord and that unbelievers would be taken by surprise. He gave important instructions to the Thessalonians about this future event.
- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11. Some believers may not think too much about God’s judgment on the world during the Tribulation. After all, believers will be in Heaven enjoying God’s presence instead of on earth enduring His wrath. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians not to be apathetic about God’s coming wrath. Believers must not “sleep.” They must be watchful, expecting Christ’s return and pointing others to the gospel so that they, too, can be safe in Heaven.
- Use this session to increase your students’ awareness about the coming Day of the Lord and God’s accompanying wrath. Help them see their responsibilities to warn the lost and encourage their fellow believers to live for God.

Session Summary

The Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unannounced. It will begin with the Rapture of believers and will include God’s wrath on unbelievers over a period of seven years. As believers, we must be faithful to shine the gospel light and alert unbelievers to God’s coming judgment on their sin. To maintain a strong testimony, we must practice self-control under the Holy Spirit’s power. Furthermore, we must put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation to guard against Satan’s attempts to render us useless. Finally, we must encourage each other as fellow believers and build each other up in the faith.