

Like A Thief in the Night!

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There are two events to the Second Coming of Christ. The first is called the Rapture. This first is Christ's coming for His Church. Christians who are alive and those who have died in Christ will be taken up to be with the Lord. "For the Lord himself has come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The Rapture will take place in the air and He will not be seen in bodily form. The second event is when Jesus comes with the saints and everyone will see Him. He shall come as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Satan will be bound and Jesus will rule the world for a thousand years before the next event (Revelation 19 and 20).

The Rapture of the Church is the blessed hope of the Christian. Every believer anticipates this event. Even the darkest hour could give could give the Christians hope, thereby enabling him to be faithful, committed and loyal.

Our God is a God of revelation. He has revealed to us through His Word, the events that will precede as well as the nature of the Rapture. He is not One who keeps His people in ignorance. Therefore, Paul addresses this subject for our benefit in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. The Thessalonians were concerned as to when the rapture will take place.

THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE

"Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2).

The Thessalonians can know when, by the events that take place in the world. Paul reminded them that the exact "time" of the Lord's return cannot be known. This is only known by the Father (Mark 13:32). Paul teaches the importance of having a certain kind of lifestyle that will help us to be ready when Jesus comes. He proceeds to tell us why.

1. Like a Thief in the Night (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2).

Our Lord uses this simile in His own teachings (Matthew 24:42-43; Luke 12:34-40). The unexpectedness of the coming of the thief and the unpreparedness of those whom He comes are the essential elements conveyed through this simile. In Revelation 3:3 and 16: 15, He used this simile to warn believers not to be caught sleeping.

Since we do not know when the Lord will return for His people, we must live a constant attitude of watching and waiting, while we are busy working and witnessing. His emphasis here is simply that the believers are "in the know" while the non-believers were living in ignorance of God's plan. The suddenness of Christ return will reveal to the world its ignorance of divine truth.

2. Like an Expectant Mother (1 Thessalonians 5:3-5)

"While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day..."

The non-believers will be enjoying a time of false peace and security just before these cataclysmic events occur.

Note the contrast between "they" and "you" in this portion of Scripture, "they" referring the non-believers. "They" will say "Peace and safety!" but "we" will say, "Jesus is coming!"

The world is caught by surprise because men will not hear God's Word or heed God's warning. The Bible records some examples for us. God warned that the earth will be destroyed by waters, yet only eight people believed and were saved (1 Peter 3:20). Lot warned his family that the city would be destroyed, but they would not listen (Genesis 19:12-14). In fact, Jesus used Noah and the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as examples (Matthew 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-36).

Christians are the "sons of the light" and therefore are not "in the dark" when it comes to future events. Non-believers ridiculed the idea of Christ's return. Paul compared the coming judgment to "labour pains of a pregnant woman" (5:3). The prophet Isaiah used this same picture in Isaiah 13:6-13. Birth pangs are real and painful. They come with the muscle contraction that enables the mother to give birth to the baby.

What truth do Isaiah, Jesus and Paul teach us? The truth that out of the "Day of the Lord" will come the birth of Christ's kingdom. When God's judgments are finished, God's Son will return "with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).

WHAT SHOULD THE LIFESTYLE OF A CHRISTIAN BE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S COMING?

Live expectantly. Believer's who live in expectation of the Lord's return will certainly enjoy a better life than Christians who compromise with the standards of the world. In 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8, Paul points out four characteristics of the believer's lifestyle:

1. Be awake and not asleep

Many times in scripture the word “sleep” is used to describe a negative or careless attitude. Here it means to live as if there will never be a judgment day. Jesus warned us about such attitude in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. We need to live with our eyes open.

2. Be watchful and alert

We are to maintain constant vigilance in the presence of threatening enemies. Both spiritual and moral alertness is indicated. In Matthew 24:42-51, Jesus exhorts us to be watchful servants, faithful until the “lord of the house” returns.

3. Be sober and self-controlled

This means we need to live soberly and righteously. We are to be filled with spiritual and moral earnestness; we should be clear minded and disciplined (1 Peter 4:7). We are not complacent, but neither are we frustrated and afraid. We know our future is secure in God’s hands, so we live each day creatively, calmly and obediently. Outlook determines outcome and our outlook is the uplook, then our outcome is secure.

The non-believers live differently. They are like drunken men enjoying a false sense of security. When the Holy Spirit first filled the first Christians at Pentecost, the non-believers accused the believers of being drunk (Acts 2:13). In reality, it is the non-believers who are living like drunken men.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, faith, hope and love are described as an armour to protect us in this evil world. Faith and love are like a breastplate that covers the heart: faith toward God and love toward God’s people. Hope is a sturdy helmet that protects the mind. The unsaved fix their minds on the things of this world while dedicated believers set their attention on the things of God.

WILL CHRISTIAN GO THROUGH THE TRIBULATION?

Believers do not have to fear the future judgment because it is not part of God’s appointed plan for them. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 seem to support this. Christians have always gone through tribulation, since this is a part of Christian living (John 15:18-27, 16:33). But they will not go through the Tribulation that is appointed for the godless world because:

1. Christ is the Head of the Church (Col. 2:17-19)

When He died for us on the cross, He bore for us all the divine judgment necessary for our salvation. He has promised that we shall never taste any of God’s wrath.

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

2. Christ’s coming is to claim what he purchased on the cross for us (1 Thess 5:10).

“He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” We are bought with a price. We are His bride and He will come and claim us for Himself before He sends judgment on the earth.

3. Christ’s coming is to bring comfort, not fear.

“Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess 4:18).

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11).

The truth about the Lord’s return and resurrection of deceased believers is to be an encouragement and comfort for Christians. When we see things from God’s perspective, we receive comfort.

HOW ARE WE BLESSED WHEN WE LIVE IN THE TRUTH OF HIS IMMINENT RETURN?

1. Keep ourselves pure (1 John 3:3)
2. Faithfully do whatever work He has assigned to us (Luke 12:41-48)
3. Attend Church regularly (Hebrews 10:25)
4. Persevere in times of difficulty (2. Cor 5; 1-8)
5. Win the lost (2 Cor 5:9-21)

Many believers have such a comfortable situation here on that earth they rarely think about going to heaven and meeting the Lord. They forget that they must one day stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ where we will be rewarded for our faithfulness and obedience. It sustains and builds up when we recall that Jesus is coming soon again. This blessed hope is ours. Maranatha! Even so come Lord Jesus!