

Session 6



The Greatest Return

THE POINT

Jesus will return one day, and we should be ready.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Many of us have seen footage of a person walking the city streets or perhaps standing in a stadium, adorned with a sign that says, “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 its share of these types of events in recent years, but a 2022 survey of U.S. citizens revealed some interesting insights:

- 39 percent of adults surveyed said we are living in the end times.
- 58 percent said they do not believe we are living in the end times.
- 29 percent of non-Christians believe we are in the last days.
- 92 percent of Protestant Christians believe that Jesus will return.¹

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

What Scripture reveals is interesting, especially in light of the survey. This week we’ll dive into Paul’s encouragement for a group of Thessalonian believers who, like many of us, were looking for the day of the Lord’s return.

QUESTION 1:

When has a sequel to a movie or book been better than the original?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-18

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.

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

The Thessalonians had questions about "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:2). Their confusion ranged from uncertainty about when Jesus would return to concern that they may have already missed it. Believers were passing away, and they feared the departed had missed the day. The context of this passage is Paul's explanation of what would happen on the day of the Lord, so that believers would be informed. In verses 16-18, Paul laid out the sequence of the Lord's return:

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

Paul used the word *parousia*, which referred to 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 will return to initiate it. He will not send anyone ahead of him; He Himself will lead the charge.

The Lord's shout is certainly not a comment or mere suggestion. It's a command from One with the authority to rule over the actions and behaviors of others. This command will have the power to raise the dead—not just a few, but all the dead throughout history, "who have fallen asleep" (v. 14) in Christ Jesus.

Nothing of importance was done in Rome without the trumpet call. This trumpet call will usher in the end of one age and the beginning of a new one.

Paul assured his beloved Thessalonians that their departed loved ones in Christ will 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.

We who are still alive will be caught up to meet them in the clouds. The use of “we” either reflects Paul’s hope that Jesus would come in his lifetime, or that he was just identifying himself as a follower of Christ. We will be caught up, snatched, or carried away. The Latin term for this idea is *rapio*, which is where the word “rapture” comes from. And we will 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.

QUESTION 2:

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

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-3

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.

“About the times and the seasons” (v. 1) refers to another question Paul received concerning the Day of the Lord. The first question was about how those who had passed away will participate in that day. This one deals with those still alive, prompted by several factors:

- When will it happen? They wanted to know if there was a certain day they should mark on their calendar or signs to look for that would signal its arrival.
- How do we live in light of this coming day? Should life as we know it stop?
- How long will we have to endure this persecution? The suffering caused them to long for the day to arrive even sooner.

- When will these persecutors face judgment? It was discouraging to see them go unpunished.

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 both when the Day of the Lord will occur and what that time will be like. It was a question of both *chronos*—the actual day—and *kairos*—the right or appointed time.

This question of the timing of Jesus's return wasn't just theological but practical. The common belief was that Jesus would return within their lifetimes. So, should they cease and desist all normal activities in anticipation of the impending day? If He is coming quickly, what is the point of going to work and living life as usual?

The Day of the Lord 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.
- **Inevitable.** Paul likens the day to childbirth and the pains that precede it.

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.

While the world said people were safe and secure, the phrase "the day of the Lord will come" (v. 2) could be seen in contradiction to Augustus's *Pax Romana*. Augustus declared the world was safe and secure because of the Roman Empire's dominance. Just when the world thinks it has everything under control, it will suddenly realize it never did.

Today, childbirth and labor pains are generally not seen as dangerous or life-threatening, but in those days, they very much were. Many young women died while giving birth.

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.

QUESTION 3:

What makes you think the Lord's return could happen in our lifetime?

1 THESSALONIANS 5:4-8

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.

Engage

CONFIDENCE IN HIS COMING

Rate yourself on this scale, where 1= "I don't (yet) believe this." 3= "I don't fully believe it, but I want to." 5= "I sometimes believe this but it doesn't change how I live." 8= "This is what I generally believe." 10= "I have full confidence in this and it affects how I live."

**Believing that Jesus died and rose again gives me confidence
that I too will be raised. (1 Thess. 4:14-15)**

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

**Whether we are alive or dead when Jesus returns, after He comes,
we will always be with Him.**

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

The certain return of Jesus is a great encouragement to me. (1 Thess. 4:18)

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

**His return will come like a thief, like destruction, like labor pains.
(1 Thess. 5:2-3)**

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

**I am a child of the light, able to be self controlled, hopeful,
and alert for His coming. (1 Thess. 5:5-8)**

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Paul turned the focus to his brothers and sisters, united by the saving work of Christ. He employed a wordplay to draw a contrast of how believers and unbelievers will face the Day of the Lord. While unbelievers will be in the dark when that time comes, believers will be different. They are not in the dark. He assured them that this day would not overtake them like a thief in the night.

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways to prepare for Christ's return?

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.

This saving work has implications. The work of Christ in the lives of believers necessitates a change. Paul framed this contrast of light and dark, night and day, in a way that his readers would recognize and remember.

In verse 6, Paul shifted his focus, changing his language from "you" to "us." This shift reflects his emphasis on 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 according to who we are now.

Sleep is a metaphor for death—specifically spiritual death, moral indifference, and the state of those who fall into temptation. None of us want to be spiritually asleep. Instead, we are challenged and called to be alert and self-controlled.

This call 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.

Paul continued the word play, describing two nighttime activities: sleeping and drinking. Sobriety and alertness characterize life during the day. Night and darkness are associated with a variety of sin and evil. Those who sleep and get drunk won't be ready for the Day of the Lord, but 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 must always be vigilant. The great triad of Christian virtues—faith, love, and hope—are the armor that every Christian soldier should adorn themselves with.

QUESTION 5:

What can we know for sure about the return of Jesus?

LIVE IT OUT

Jesus will return one day, and we should be ready. Choose one of the following applications.

- **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 win-somely 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?"



1. Jeff Diamant, "About Four-in-Ten U.S. Adults Believe Humanity Is 'Living in the End Times,'" Pew Research Center, December 8, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/08/about-four-in-ten-u-s-adults-believe-humanity-is-living-in-the-end-times/>.



“HOPE” IN PAUL’S LETTERS: A WORD STUDY

By Hal Lane

Over 150,000 Jewish graves are on the side of the Mount of Olives, facing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Jews commonly bury their loved ones here, with their feet facing the temple. They believe that when the Messiah comes, the resurrection of the dead will begin here, and those buried here will be among the first to enter triumphantly into the holy city.



Hope, along with faith and love, form the great triad of Christian virtues (1 Cor. 13:13). Love is the greatest of the three, and without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Hope also describes an essential component of the believer's life in Christ. Paul summed up the present motivation and future expectation of the Christian life when he said, "we have fixed our hope on the living God" (1 Tim. 4:10, NASB).

The purpose of this article is to provide a word study for the Greek verb *elpizo* ("to hope") based on occurrences in secular Greek, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and Paul's letters. The focus will be on determining the specific meaning of hope based on biblical concepts and usage.

Human hope is integrally linked to the dimension of time. Hope involves a present perspective based upon a future expectation. Secular Greek writers used *elpizo* to describe man's anticipation of future events both good and bad. Philosophers like Democritus (lived in the 4th–3rd centuries BC) saw the benefits of hope to comfort people experiencing difficulties. Writers such as Pindar (also 4th–3rd centuries BC), though, warned of the uncertainty of hope!¹ First-century Gentiles familiar with secular religious and philosophical Greek literature had no basis for a certainty regarding a future salvation and were, according to Paul, "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

A proper understanding of Paul's use of *elpizo* does not come from secular Greek usage but Septuagint usage. Septuagint translators used *elpizo* to translate a number of Hebrew verbs meaning "to hope," "to trust," and "to endure."² In contrast to usage in secular Greek, *elpizo* in the Old Testament is never neutral, anticipating either a good or evil result. Hope in the Old Testament is always positive (Eccl. 9:4).³

Hope can be disappointed when placed in an unreliable source. In Isaiah 20, God warned Judah against putting their hope for protection against Assyria in the nations of Cush and Egypt (Isa. 20:5). The lesson the Old Testament repeatedly emphasized is that hope and faith are effective only if they are placed in the Lord. Placing our hope in someone or something else is vain and destined to fail.

Hope for the righteous is certain in the Old Testament because God is the object of hope. Jeremiah described the Lord as the "Hope of Israel" (Jer. 17:13). The book of Psalms frequently promises blessings for those who put their hope in the Lord (Ps. 31:23-24; 37:9; 38:15; 42:5). Faithful believers who obey the Lord can be assured of His help in the future, and this faith sustains them in the present. Hope is certain because God is faithful and always keeps His promises (Deut. 7:9).

The concept of hope takes an unusual turn in rabbinic thought leading up to first-century Judaism. Old Testament promises of a Messiah create a strong anticipation of His coming, but individual hope of salvation dissolves in uncertainty. Rabbinic sources recount how leading rabbis expressed uncertainty about their salvation on their deathbeds.⁴ This was a natural result of the casuistry or belief in salvation by works. The problem with salvation by works is we can never be sure if we have done enough to be saved. Into this type of religious environment Jesus Christ appeared.

The verb *elpizo* and the related noun *elpis* occur rarely in the Gospels. Matthew 12:21 (a quotation based on Isa. 42:4) contains a significant use of *elpizo*. Following the Jewish religious leaders rejecting Jesus, Matthew quoted Isaiah 42:1-4, which promises the Messiah will bring hope to the Gentiles. Matthew identified Jesus as the promised Messiah and the focus of hope for all



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who put their faith in Him. All other New Testament references to hope in salvation focus on the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ and His future return.

In the New Testament, Paul used the verb *elpizo* and related noun *elpis* more than any other writer. We will now consider the different nuances of the word group in his letters. With Paul, as in the Old Testament, God is the Source of the believer's hope.

First, according to 1 Timothy 4:10, to “put our hope in the living God” is the equivalent of placing our faith in Him for salvation (see also 1 Tim. 1:1). The hope of salvation is not uncertain because, unlike the legalistic salvation many of the religious leaders of Jesus's day taught, salvation is by grace through the finished work of Christ. We do not have to wonder if we have done enough to be saved, but we rejoice that Jesus's death guarantees salvation for believers. In this grace we stand (Rom. 5:2).

Interior of the Flavian Amphitheater, also known as the Colosseum in Rome. Upon its completion, the Romans had 100 days of celebration, which are said to have included the slaughter of 9,000 wild beasts and 2,000 gladiators. Many Christians were martyred here during the period of persecution, which lasted until Emperor Constantine.

Hope willingly and patiently endures suffering, convinced that present suffering is not to be compared to future glory.

Second, for the believer, hope then becomes a distinctive Christian virtue related to faith. Hope, like faith, is based on belief in the yet unseen promises of God (8:24). Hope provides strength for the believer facing present difficulties. Paul encouraged the suffering Christians in Rome to study the Scriptures to gain hope that would lead to perseverance (15:4). Just as the author of Hebrews encouraged believers to remember the outcome of faithful believers in the Old Testament (Heb. 11), Paul encouraged believers to do the same based on hope.

Third, hope also plays an important role in Paul's understanding of the end of the age. He referred to Christ's return as "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). Creation and believers will be gloriously transformed when Christ appears. Paul stated that "the creation was subjected to futility . . . in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God's children" (Rom. 8:20-21). This refers to the removal of the curse placed upon creation following the sin of Adam (Gen. 3:17-18).

Paul also linked the return of Christ to the acquisition of resurrection bodies by believers. He told the Thessalonians that they were not to grieve concerning loved ones who died as believers in Christ, in contrast to those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). He promised that the dead in Christ would rise with resurrection bodies and those alive at Christ's return would then be caught up and transformed (vv. 14-17). This hope of resurrection provided great comfort for believers as they faced their own deaths or the deaths of loved ones.

Hope in Paul's writings focuses on the future blessings that believers obtain by faith in Christ and the realization of His love for us in salvation. Paul wrote to believers who had experienced various kinds of losses. The loss of health, a loved one, and persecution are just some of the challenges that may have led some in Paul's day and may cause some presently to question God's love. In the wake of all of these losses, believers maintain a hope that rejoices despite the tribulations of this life (Rom. 12:12). Hope is linked to the essential characteristic of endurance (1 Thess. 1:3). Hope willingly and patiently endures suffering, convinced that present suffering is not to be compared to future glory (Rom. 8:18). By grace through faith, we are saved and walk daily with our God. In love we grow in our knowledge and relationship with God and others. In hope we endure hardship and keep our eyes fixed on God. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word" (2 Thess. 2:16-17, NASB).

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1. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 519–20.
2. "Hope" in *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 500.
3. Bultmann, 522.
4. Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *TDNT*, 527–28.