

CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIANITY

A STUDY OF 1 THESSALONIANS

STUDY NINE

“ . . . Like a Thief in the Night ”

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

A sensible and accurate study of prophecy is one thing; fakery is something else. We as Christians are to be informed and stable in our knowledge of the future.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WITHIN each of us is an insatiable desire to know the future. We might call it a curiosity itch. Oh, to be able to peel back the curtain of time and peek into tomorrow’s mysteries!

Edgar C. Whisenant attempted to do just that. In January 1988, the former NASA engineer and avid Bible student published his book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. His bestseller sold more than 4.5 million copies, predicting that the rapture would occur between September 11–13, 1988, during the Jewish holiday of Rosh-Hashanah. When Christ didn’t come, he recalculated and set a new date in 1989. Wrong again, so he set a date in 1993, and then 1994! Still no return of Christ.

Apparently, Mr. Whisenant overlooked Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about when He would return:

“The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know.” (Acts 1:7)

The Father keeps certain details about the future in a divine vault, and we shouldn’t try to pick the lock. Even so, we’re curious. Why? Because God created us with the itch.

God has “planted eternity in the human heart,” the writer of Ecclesiastes declared (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Something inside us longs for eternity. God has hardwired within us a desire to know Him and to be included in His plan for the future.



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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

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But we must proceed carefully—biblically—claiming only what Scripture clearly claims. In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we satisfy our curiosity about *some* mysteries—not all but just the ones God has chosen to reveal to us in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Paul prayed for his friends:

I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope [God] has given to those he called. (Ephesians 1:18)

Pray Paul’s prayer for yourself that the Lord will flood your heart with light and reveal the hope that He’s given you in His Word. Use the space below to write your prayer.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, which we examined in the previous *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, Paul addressed the believers’ *first concern*—that their dead loved ones might miss the blessings of Christ’s return. Paul revealed to them a “mystery.” When Christ appears, deceased believers won’t be forgotten. They will “rise from their graves” (1 Thessalonians 4:16), and those who are alive will be “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17). All Christians, both living and dead, face a bright and beautiful tomorrow together!

In our passage for this study, Paul addressed the Thessalonians’ *second concern*. They thought their persecution was a sign that the prophesied period of God’s judgment—the terrible day of the Lord—had begun.

In chapter 1, Paul had already assured them that Jesus has rescued “us from the terrors of the coming judgment” (1:10). Here he elaborated this point, saying that the day of the Lord hadn’t come yet. These horrible afflictions were reserved for unbelievers. Not everyone would have a bright tomorrow. For many, dreadful destruction awaits.

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Observation: The Day of the Lord

Read *1 Thessalonians 5:1–11* slowly and carefully. Observation is an essential first step to studying a text.¹ Read the verses in a couple of Bible versions. Don't try to decipher the meaning quite yet. Just read what the passage says, looking for metaphors, cause-and-effect statements, contrasts, and repeated words.

The Coming of the Day—1 Thessalonians 5:1–2

Given Paul's comments, "we don't really need to write you" and "for you know quite well" (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2), we can assume that Paul was clarifying what he already taught them when he established the church. How did Paul describe the coming day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2? Why do you think he used this metaphor?

Unbelievers and the Day—1 Thessalonians 5:3

Note the change in pronoun from "you" to "they" in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 NASB. Who was Paul talking about in this verse? What is their mind-set? What will they experience?

How does "as suddenly as a pregnant woman's labor pains begin" (1 Thessalonians 5:3) describe what awaits them, and how it will come?

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Believers and the Day—1 Thessalonians 5:4–11

Paul began his next verse with a contrast: “But you, brothers and sisters” (1 Thessalonians 5:4 NASB), shifting his focus back to believers. Review 1 Thessalonians 5:4–11. What metaphors did Paul use in 5:4–5? How did these truths bring welcome relief to the young church? What knowledge did he impart?

In 5:6–8, Paul issued a charge. What imagery did he employ? What responsibilities did they have? (See a parallel account found in *Ephesians 6:10–18*.)

Note Paul’s triad of virtues in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 NASB—“faith,” “love,” and “hope” (also in *1:3*). In this context, why are these virtues essential for spiritual wellbeing?

Paul concluded with security and encouragement. In 5:9–10, what two promises, one negative and one positive, could his readers expect? On what basis?

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How were the Thessalonians to respond, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:11? How does their response here mirror 4:18?

It is as real as birth following pain. It is as real as the sudden surprise of a thief who's invaded your home. That's the point. Convincing people in an easy day like today is almost impossible. But it's coming. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Prophetic Clarity and Distinction

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 5:1–11, the apostle Paul unveiled two prophetic events—the coming of Christ in the clouds and the day of the Lord. These events are also known as the rapture and the tribulation. In the following chart, write down the characteristics of these events along with Paul's descriptions of the people and the outcomes.

Verses	Event	People	Outcome
4:13–18			
5:1–11			

Now list the *differences* between the rapture and the tribulation.

You may not consider yourself a prophecy expert. But given the mysteries Paul revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4–5, you qualify as an authority compared with the unsaved world! What is the main principle, or eternal truth, you can draw from your interpretation of our passage?

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What a relief it is to know that, through Christ’s death and resurrection, “God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:9 NASB). This knowledge comforts us in our grief and encourages us to live for Christ today.

This is just called fantasy at best in the eyes of the unsaved. But you know there’s a way out of it not known by the unsaved world. You are awake; you are not asleep. You are getting this information. Tell it. Announce it. Offer it. Make it available. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Day of the Lord Versus the Day of Christ

The phrase *the day of the LORD* appears in numerous Old Testament texts (for example, [Ezekiel 30:3](#); [Joel 2:1–11](#)). This event is different from *the day of Christ*, a phrase found only in the New Testament and unique to Paul’s letters.

Read [Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16](#); [1 Corinthians 1:8](#); [2 Timothy 4:8](#), in which Paul mentions “the day of Christ” (NASB). Note how the NLT translates the phrase. Who is addressed, what is the common theme, and how does the tone in these verses differ from 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11?

What is the clear message for believers concerning the Lord’s imminent return?

If anyone ought to be on target and alert today, it ought to be the informed Christian. You know the Savior. You know of the cross and the empty tomb. And you know the offer of the gospel. You have enough to keep you at peace. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Application: Urgency and the Lord’s Return

Paul’s letter inspires us to “stay alert and be clearheaded” (1 Thessalonians 5:6), to remain vigilant, mentally active, and prophetically aware. Pastor Chuck leaves us with two messages about urgency: one for believers, the other for unbelievers.

First, *to Christians, don’t be indifferent because your tomorrow is secure.* There is work to be done today. We who know about the future and have a balanced view of it are intensely concerned about the lost. Indifference toward the lost comes from an inaccurate understanding of Scripture.

Second, *to non-Christians, don’t be fooled because your today seems calm.* Scripture is clear: a storm is coming tomorrow. You will not escape without Christ.

If you have placed your faith in Christ alone as your Savior, you are anchored in the hope of a secure tomorrow, regardless of God’s judgment to come upon the world. Share with the Lord in prayer your gratitude for His plan for your future. Tell Him the comfort and encouragement you feel.

Our hearts break for those who don’t know the Lord—perhaps a friend, coworker, or family member. Whom can you pray for to turn to Christ and receive hope? Tell the Lord your deep concern for him or her and ask the Lord for an opportunity to help this person know Christ.

If the Word of God declares that Jesus is coming, then Jesus is coming. If the Bible says disaster is on its way, then disaster is on its way. If Scripture says there is no way to escape the coming disaster apart from faith in Christ, it means just that. God doesn’t hold back. He tells us straight, and we’re so thankful He does.

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A FINAL PRAYER

Thank You for the hope I have in the Savior. May it not make me indifferent and distant from the lost but, on the contrary, sensitive, available, in touch, aware, in style with today, clearheaded, compassionate, willing to help. I'm grateful for the truth of Your Word and how it delivers me from error and needless fear. May I not become indifferent, having been carefully and well informed. I pray in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*"

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 1984, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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