

The Church Is United in Hope

Summary and Goal

This session will outline the characteristics of Christian hope and uncover the nature and purpose behind our waiting. In exploring how the destinies of those in Christ and those apart from Him differ drastically, we will receive an indisputable urgency to share the good news of Christ in hopes that many will come to know Him and escape the destruction that awaits those apart from Him. We will discover that living in light of Christ's assured return produces a profound unity within His church and transforms how we live our everyday lives.

Session Outline

1. The church hopes in the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
2. The church prepares for the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:1-3).
3. The church lives in light of the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:4-11).

Background Passage: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Session in a Sentence

Christ's imminent return is the hope of the church and the motivation to live with faith and love.

Christ Connection

Jesus told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them but that He would come again (John 14:3). When Christ returns, He will make all things new and purge every stain of sin's curse. Christ's imminent return gives the church hope and motivation to share the gospel with urgency.

Missional Application

Because Christ has conquered sin and death, we maintain hope in all of life's circumstances and share the gospel with others, knowing that the return of Christ is at hand.

Date of My Bible Study: _____

Group Time

GROUP MEMBER CONTENT

Introduction

EXPLAIN: Use the paragraphs on page 121 in the DDG to talk about the physical and mental difficulties inherent in exercising and to highlight the need for perseverance.

When someone incorporates exercise into their life for the first time or after a long stretch of not doing it, they experience the expected physical barriers of pain and soreness. But probably even more challenging is the mental aspect. Voices in your head mock your plans for persistence. Comparing yourself to others who are further along convinces you that your dreams are unrealistic. All the reasons why exercise is too hard tempt you to fall back into unhealthy habits. Shame assaults you with the reminder that you let yourself get this far gone when you could have prevented it.

But despite all the hindrances in their way, some refuse to give up. They continue to show up and push through the pain, the mocking voices, the comparisons, the temptations, and the shame. Their hope of getting to the other side drives them. Persevering now in light of the vision they have for themselves is more fulfilling than being overcome by indulgence and instant gratification, so they press on.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



Have you ever stuck with something even though it was challenging? What did you feel when you came out on the other side? *(be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)*

SAY: The pursuit of a healthy lifestyle and a vision of an ideal self are great, but the ultimate hope for believers in Christ is far greater and everlasting.

SUMMARIZE: This session will outline the characteristics of Christian hope and uncover the nature and purpose behind our waiting. In exploring how the destinies of those in Christ and those apart from Him differ drastically, we will receive an indisputable urgency to share the good news of Christ in hopes that many will come to know Him and escape the destruction that awaits those apart from Him. We will discover that living in light of Christ's assured return produces a profound unity within His church and transforms how we live our everyday lives.

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Point 1: The church hopes in the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

READ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (DDG p. 122).

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are 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.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 122) to point out that believers still grieve death, but we don't grieve as the world does.

Death has a complex and profound effect on people because it is antithetical to who we are as image bearers of God. We were not created to know death. This explains why we are shocked, saddened, angered, perplexed, and frightened by death when it strikes. We all mourn and grieve over death because it is unnatural.

- We were created to dwell eternally with God. But when sin entered the world, death followed, just as God had promised it would in consequence for Adam and Eve's transgression (Gen. 2:16-17; Rom. 5:12).
- Paul's charge to the Thessalonian Christians not to grieve like people who have no hope was not a license to be cruel or to lack empathy. He was not granting permission to scoff at the tears cried over an unbeliever who has died. Nor was he proposing that we abstain from longing for the kindness or laughter of an unbelieving parent or that we avoid reminiscing about the creativity and silly antics of an unbelieving friend. Paul was distinguishing between the way unbelievers deal with death and the way believers should deal with death.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



How can the common tendency to grieve over death open doors for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ? (facing the death of someone forces people to evaluate their worldview regarding the nature of death and what comes after; an unbeliever may become curious why a believer grieves death differently; the death of a believer or a church member's loved one often evokes the love and care of the church for those who are grieving, giving a demonstration of the love of God and the power of the gospel)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 122) to emphasize why believers have hope in the midst of grief: the second coming of Christ.

We find healing in missing, honoring, and reminiscing about a loved one who has died, but our hope cannot rely on these memories. Our hope in the midst of grief should look to the future, to the second coming of Christ, when we and those who have died in Christ will be raised and restored in the likeness of Jesus' resurrection for all eternity.

- Those who live and die apart from Christ do not hope in Him and therefore don't know the consolation that comes from anticipating Jesus' return. Knowing that people were Christians when they died produces a peace within us we would not have if we were unsure of their spiritual state or certain of their unbelief. We find relief and rest not just in the fact that they are no longer at war with sin or suffering from illness, pain, anxiety, depression, or heartache but most importantly that they now reside in the presence of their Creator, a place far better than the one we continue to inhabit (Phil. 1:23). True love wants what's best for others, and there is nothing better than being with the Lord.
 - The Son of God's first coming to earth was characterized by meekness, gentle like a lamb. He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, no beauty that we should desire Him (Isa. 53:2). But when He comes again, He will make quite an entrance, descending from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God (1 Thess. 4:16). No one will miss it. When that day comes, those who are in Him by faith, whether long dead or still alive, will be with Him always, raised and restored together in the likeness of our resurrected Savior (v. 17). Believers know that nothing can compare to the coming completion of our salvation when Jesus comes again.
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INSTRUCT: Ask group members to use the two scales in their DDG (p. 122) to personally consider and compare the reasons for their anticipation of the second coming. Note that Jesus should be our priority and loved ones a close second.

When considering the second coming, who receives most of your attention?



None

Loved Ones Who Have Died

All



None

Jesus, Who Died and Was Raised

All

Point 2: The church prepares for the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

READ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 (DDG p. 123).


¹ Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 123) to show that constant awareness of Christ’s return prepares us for Christ’s return.

Like the Thessalonian believers, we don’t know when Christ will return. But we do know that when He comes again, it will be sudden and swift. Therefore, we must prepare for His return by maintaining an acute awareness of it. If you wait to prepare for a thief once he is already robbing you, it’s too late. Similarly, we must maintain a state of preparedness for Christ’s return, not because He is going to steal our stuff but so we are ready to meet Him with joy and in peace.

- Properly readying yourself for the return of Christ need not be understood as the equivalent to doomsday bunkers and stockpiles. Continuing to contribute to a retirement plan or a toddler’s college tuition fund, planning a family vacation two years in advance, going out to karaoke with your friends, and excelling in your career are not confirmations that you’ve lost touch with your heavenly purpose. Jesus can be glorified in all these things as long as He is your center, the driving force from which you operate.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

 What are some ways believers can prepare for Christ’s return? (be intentional about placing Jesus in the center of all our activities; read and study the Word of God, which points to Jesus and teaches about Jesus’ second coming; pray and develop our relationship with the Lord so that we know and love Him more and more; imitate Jesus in the ways He sacrificed of Himself to serve others; share the gospel, which will remind us that our salvation from beginning to end is the work of Christ in our lives)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 123) to emphasize that unbelievers' experience of God's wrath in hell will be eternal.

Talking about the reality of hell might seem harsh, extreme, and even unloving, but hell does exist, so we must speak humbly and truthfully about it. The gospel is good news because it tells us of the only way we can escape an eternity of experiencing God's wrath in hell for our sin and instead have true and eternal peace, security, and fellowship with God. Therefore, we cannot ignore the reality of hell if we would have people understand their dreadful estate as sinners and the beautiful promise of salvation through faith in Jesus.

Voices from the Church

"We dwell among people who dangle above the flames of hell by a spider web. We have among us in our churches and our homes people who are clinging to the driftwood of sin who will find out that that wood does not float when the flood of God's judgment comes."¹

—Thabiti Anyabwile

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- The gospel message itself is offensive by nature. The light of Jesus exposes the sin and darkness that people love (John 3:19-20) and presents the ultimate ultimatum: turn from sin and trust in Jesus for salvation or continue on the path to destruction in hell.

Application: In an effort to promote God's "love," some preachers and teachers have tried to strip the gospel of its offensiveness, focusing only on "positive" Scripture passages and doctrines. But a diluted gospel is no gospel at all. It is unloving not to warn someone of the danger you know awaits them. Instead, we must plead with unbelievers boldly in compassion, humility, and truth as we share the good news and make plain the consequence of hell for those who refuse to repent and believe in Jesus.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 123).

Nature of Hell: For those who are not found in Christ at the time of their death, the Scriptures say that God's **condemnation** remains upon them and that they will be judged according to their deeds done on earth. The punishment that awaits unbelievers in hell is an eternal, never-ending **suffering** that comes from sins committed against an infinite God. In hell, sinners are forever **separated** from God.

Essential Doctrine "Nature of Hell": For those who are not found in Christ at the time of their death, the Scriptures say that God's **condemnation** remains upon them (John 3:36) and that they will be judged according to their deeds done on earth (Heb. 9:27). The punishment that awaits unbelievers in hell is an eternal, never-ending **suffering** that comes from sins committed against an infinite God (Matt. 25:41,46). In hell, sinners are forever **separated** from God.

Point 3: The church lives in light of the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:4-11).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11 (DDG p. 124).

⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 124) to encourage your group members to live as “children of the day” because we live in light of Christ’s return.

Hoping in, preparing for, and living in light of Christ’s return are all by-products of our new identity in Christ. Through faith, we no longer belong to the darkness as we once did. Having been made alive in Christ, we are now “children of the day” (v. 5). If we are living every moment for our Savior, then whenever Christ comes back, we won’t be surprised because we will be expecting Him. The lights will be on in the homes of our souls and we will be awake, anticipating His arrival with joy. This is what it means to walk in the light (1 John 1:5-7).

- The physical connection we have with this world can cause us to overlook the spiritual realm we also exist in. We are in constant danger of being lulled to sleep by the here and now, forgetting the dangerous consequences that come from trying to satisfy the lusts of our flesh. So the world tempts us, and internally our sinful nature wages war against us (1 Pet. 2:11-12). But we are not left defenseless. In our flesh, we are weak, but God has given us His Holy Spirit, so now we have the freedom and the power to exercise self-control. We can say no to the sin that was once our master. We can choose to repent and turn away from our sinful desires. We can walk in the light and no longer be plagued by shame.
- Believers have also been equipped with full body armor to cover our new self with protection against the flaming darts of our enemy: faith, love, and the hope of salvation (1 Thess. 5:8; see also Eph. 6:10-18). We were not appointed to wrath but salvation through Christ (1 Thess. 5:9). So when in the midst of tragedy, trial, struggles with sin, and the testing of our faith, we can hold firmly to the promise that we lack nothing in Christ, and through His Spirit, He has equipped us with everything needed for life and godliness as we await our Savior’s glorious arrival (2 Pet. 1:3).

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 124).

Second Coming of Christ: The Bible is clear that one day Christ will return in **bodily** form to rule and reign over all creation. Scripture gives no timeline as to when it will occur, only assuring that it will be **unexpected** and glorious. The **imminent** return of Christ is the hope of every Christian, knowing that when Christ returns, all things will be made **new**.

Essential Doctrine “Second Coming of Christ”: The Bible is clear that one day Christ will return in **bodily** form (Matt. 24–25) to rule and reign over all creation. Scripture gives no timeline as to when it will occur (Acts 1:7), only assuring that it will be **unexpected** (Matt. 25:8-10) and glorious (Matt. 24:30). Because of the mystery surrounding these events, several views have emerged in Christians’ attempts to understand everything the Bible teaches about this return and His millennial reign. One view holds that upon His return, Jesus will begin a literal 1000-year reign on earth. Another holds that this millennium occurs in this church age, to be followed by His return. Another still holds that the millennium symbolically represents Christ’s reign in heaven and in the hearts of God’s people while we wait for His return. Despite these differences, all views agree that the **imminent** return of Christ is the hope of every Christian, knowing that when Christ returns, all things will be made **new**.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 124) to highlight the responsibility of believers to encourage and strengthen one another while we wait for Christ’s coming.

It is important that we as believers remain focused on our Father’s work, but not for the sake of busyness. If a fire is not tended, it will die out. As humans, it is in our nature to forget and to grow bored and weary. This is why we must be diligent to walk in the light. But the benefits are not just for ourselves; our own spiritual health reinforces and encourages the spiritual health of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

- As we shine each other’s armor and straighten each other’s helmets, as we align ourselves in the harmony of our shared hope in Christ, we create a secure fortress that helps to preserve the spiritual survival of the individual through strengthening the unit. Our encouragement to one another in the church is rooted in our eternal destiny bought for us by Christ.
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



How have you been encouraged by other believers to live in the light and be self-controlled? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

My Mission

EXPLAIN: Our lives on this earth are but a vapor, but that is not our end. Eternity awaits us, and faith in Christ determines whether we will spend eternity satisfied in His presence in heaven or apart from Him in utter torment in hell. For those in Christ, our debt has been paid, right standing with God purchased, and the curse of sin removed; now we wait for the fullness of joy we will experience when Jesus returns and we are with Him forever. Everyday, we are to live in light of this glorious destiny that awaits us, preparing for His return and sharing the gospel so others will be ready too. Exercising and encouraging one another in the church in this hope draws us closer together as one body and enables us to be present and active where the Lord has sovereignly placed us.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 125), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God's Word.

Because Christ has conquered sin and death, we maintain hope in all of life's circumstances and share the gospel with others, knowing that the return of Christ is at hand.

- **What steps will you take to prepare yourself for death and the second coming of Christ?**
- **What are some ways your group can encourage one another in the midst of grief and in preparation for Jesus' second coming?**
- **Who in your life is dealing with grief? How will you encourage that person with the truth of the gospel?**

Voices from the Church

"Christians have a duty to protect the power of eternal hope. The sweet-by-and-by is not a psychological pacifier as the culture preaches; it is a guarantee that God has sworn by Himself to fulfill."²

—K. A. Ellis

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Jesus, our Savior, our Lord, we praise You for the salvation You won for us on the cross, giving Your life in place of ours so we might know eternal life. You have promised to come again for Your people, and we eagerly look forward to that day in faith and with a sure hope that You will do it. Until then, help us by Your Spirit to walk in the light as children of the day, as faithful examples and bold witnesses of Your salvation. Amen.

PACK ITEM 14: HOME: Cut out these bookmarks and pass them out to group members to remind them that believers should live for our eternal home that will be found when Jesus comes again.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 126-128), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 129) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God's Word.

Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 126-128) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 129) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 126-128) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 3** as a part of point 1 in the session: **Christ's promise that He will come back for His people and we will be with Him always is not meant to function as a bandage but as a balm to provide deep healing.**



Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** "As the family of God, we don't just live unto God for the benefit of ourselves but also for the benefit of each other."
- **Day 4:** "Just as death can strike at any moment without warning, so too the return of Christ will be sudden and inescapable."



Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 129) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to focus on the definitive hope we have in Jesus and His return to bring an end to the world's evil and suffering.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

Additional Commentary

Point 1: The church hopes in the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

“Paul first deals with the issue of whether and how deceased Christians will participate in the second coming (4:13-18) and then reassures the Thessalonians that they are destined for salvation rather than wrath (5:1-11). Paul responds to the main problem facing the young church. They lacked detailed knowledge about what happens to Christians who die, because Paul did not have the opportunity to complete his teaching there (3:10) on account of being forced to leave (2:15,17; Acts 17:5-10). Consequently, the Thessalonians did not have the understanding to cope with the recent deaths of some community members, and so they responded with bewildered hopelessness.”³

“That *God will bring with Jesus* the dead does not mean that somehow they will come down from heaven with him but that they will be raised from the dead and *have fallen asleep* in him (a first-class conditional sentence in Greek in which, assuming for the sake of argument the reality of the first clause, the truth of the second clause necessarily follows). Of course, since Paul knew and assumed his belief about this was true, the thought really is that the necessary effect of God raising Jesus is God subsequently raising all who have identified with Jesus! But why doesn't Paul merely say it this way in the first place? Why does he insert the notion of belief? The likely reason is that, while Paul certainly affirms the theological reality of the statement, here he is concerned that *they* believe it with all their hearts, so that it would affect their responses to life's vicissitudes, especially the death of other saints. Therefore, we have hope even in the midst of death because those who die 'in Christ' will live again. Physical death is not the end of our existence nor that of our loved ones and friends who are believers. Those who believe that this is the only life there is must despair and grieve without hope because there is no hope apart from Christ.”⁴

Point 2: The church prepares for the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

“The Thessalonians were reminded that the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night. The image of the thief also occurs as a description of the coming of the Lord in the Gospels (Matt. 24:36-43; Luke. 12:35-40) and in 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 3:3; 16:15. The most consistent element in these passages is the call for constant readiness, since the specific timing of the coming is unknown. The meaning of the image in 5:1-12 is best seen in the literal statements of v. 3, which apply the image. It will be unexpected (destruction will come suddenly upon people whose bywords are 'peace and security'). Also Paul did not apply the implication of the thief analogy to believers. They were, in fact, specifically excluded. The Lord's coming will not be as a thief in the night for members of the church (v. 4). Believers expect it, though they do not know when the day will arrive. Only unbelievers will be taken by surprise by the fact of the Lord's return.”⁵

“**Times** and **seasons** mentioned together refers to the end times (Acts 1:7). The phrase **day of the Lord** often signifies a time of God’s wrath and judgment poured out in an uncommon way. Here the day of the Lord refers specifically to the end-time period of God’s judgment on the unbelieving world known as the great tribulation (Mal. 4:5; Acts 2:20; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). The description of the day of the Lord coming as **a thief in the night** emphasizes that it will come unexpectedly (5:4; 2 Pet. 3:10). Just before the day of the Lord when people think they have peace and are secure, **sudden destruction** will come upon them. The comparison of this destruction to the **labor pains** of a pregnant woman speaks of the increasing intensity of God’s judgment and the certainty of its coming (Matt. 24:8).”⁶

Point 3: The church lives in light of the return of Christ (1 Thess. 5:4-11).

“Evil and thieves appropriately choose to work in the darkness of the night when others are sleeping or drinking (5:6-7). However, the children of God are *sons of light and sons of the day* (5:4-5), so they should not be found sleeping or drunk when that day comes. Instead they should be in full control of themselves, spiritually vigilant and standing ready dressed in ‘the armour of light’ (5:8; Rom. 13:12; see also Eph. 6:10-17). The breastplate and helmet they wear are designed to defend vital parts of the human body. Faith and love are like a breastplate in that they guarantee life (John 3:16; Rom. 10:9) ... Hope protects like a helmet by making them certain of their ultimate salvation when Christ will gather his people and will judge the ‘man of lawlessness’ (2 Thess. 2:3-8). Because they are justified in Christ, believers have no need to fear destruction and the future wrath of God (5:9-10). They know they will live in him. Until that day comes, Christians should live with and for God (Col. 3:23-24). They should help each other to do this by encouraging one another and building each other up—two verbs that mean much the same thing, but are both used to emphasize how important this support for each other is.”⁷

“Let us honor this sacred day, the day on which the author of our salvation appeared. Whom the wise men revered as an infant in his crib, let us worship [him] as all-powerful in heaven. Just as they offered to the Lord mystical kinds of gifts from their treasures, let us bring forth from our hearts things that are worthy of God. Although he himself bestows all good things, he nevertheless asks for the fruit of our effort. For the kingdom of heaven comes not to those who sleep but to those who work and watch according to the Lord’s command. If we do not render his gifts ineffective, we may deserve to receive what he promised through the very things which he has given.”⁸

References

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2. K. A. Ellis, “Protect the Power of Eternal Hope,” The Witness, June 29, 2016, thewitnessbcc.com/protect-power-eternal-hope.
3. Colin Nicholl, “1 Thessalonians,” in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2309, n. 4:13–5:1; n. 4:13–18.
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8. Leo the Great, Sermons 32.1, in *Ancient Faith Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2019), 1487, n. 5:6.