

## Comfort for the sorrowing: the return of the Lord Jesus.

I want to consider a little of what has been revealed about the next great event marked down on God's calendar, namely, the coming of our Lord Jesus for us, His people.

And our reading comes from the well-known section in chapter four of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians; first, picking up verse 9 and then running from verse 13 through to the first verse of chapter five.

### SCRIPTURE READING

But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another ...

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that many godly and well-read students of biblical prophecy differ enormously in their views of what is to happen in the future.

Not that there is any shortage of information in your Bible about the subject. Far from it.

But, for His own reasons, God has not seen fit to map out in any one place a precise and detailed programme of future events. Indeed, the teaching Scripture does give on the subject is largely imbedded in very practical settings, leading me to conclude that the Lord's concern lies more with affecting the way I live in the present than in satisfying my curiosity about what lies in the future.

Speaking for myself, in trying to fit the little I know into a meaningful picture of future events, I have long believed that our Lord's coming *for us* will *precede* those events which fall in what, for convenience, are often spoken of as 'Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week' and 'the Great Tribulation', events which, if I have it right, will be followed by our Lord's Advent as the glorious warrior King to establish His manifested kingdom here on earth.<sup>2</sup>

But my views on prophetic matters do not affect this present study because the study focuses on the teaching of the Scripture passage above.

### THE BACKGROUND

By way of background, I note that, although (i) the church at Thessalonica was a young church and (ii) the apostle Paul had spent a relatively short time there,<sup>3</sup> he had taught them quite extensively about prophetic matters. Indeed, in this, his first known letter to them, he refers to such matters towards the close of each chapter:

#### 1 Thessalonians 1. 9-10

... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and ***to wait for His Son from heaven*** ...

### **1 Thessalonians 2. 19**

What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you *in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?*

### **1 Thessalonians 3. 13**

... that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.*

### **1 Thessalonians 4. 16-17**

For *the Lord Himself will descend from heaven* ... and thus we shall always be with the Lord.

### **1 Thessalonians 5. 23**

... may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at *the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Christians at Thessalonica were therefore familiar with much of what the Lord had revealed about future events. Indeed, Paul pays them tribute in the closing section of chapter 1 that it was public and widespread knowledge, not only that they had turned to God from their idols to serve Him, but also that they were 'waiting with patient expectation'<sup>4</sup> for His Son to return from heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Not that the Thessalonian church was alone in its faith in the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. We know that the same was true of the early churches in general, as witness the following texts:

### **Romans 8. 23**

We ourselves groan within ourselves, *eagerly waiting for* the adoption, *the redemption of our body.*

### **1 Corinthians 1. 7**

... as you *eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ* to be revealed.

### **Philippians 3. 20**

Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also *eagerly wait for the Saviour*, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Titus 2. 12-13**

... denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, *looking for the blessed hope* and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

### **Hebrews 9. 28**

To those who *eagerly wait for Him* He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.

From what Paul says in our passage, it seems likely that the Thessalonian believers fully expected that the Lord would return *during their lifetime* and that they never imagined that any of their number would die before His coming.

But, clearly, that is just what had happened, and the remaining saints feared that the believers who had died would thereby be disadvantaged and somehow 'lose out'.

I gather from Paul's words in verse 15, 'this we say to you by the word of the Lord', that, up to that time, they knew nothing of that which the apostle then made known.

## **PAST AND PRESENT INSTRUCTION**

The apostle knew that, although there was no need for him to give the Thessalonians any further instructions (i) '*concerning* brotherly love'<sup>6</sup> or (ii) '*concerning* the times and the seasons',<sup>7</sup> he *did* need to inform them of God's agenda (iii) '*concerning those who have fallen asleep*'.<sup>8</sup>

And, truly, 'those who have fallen asleep' is a lovely way to speak of Christians who have died, being adopted originally, I suspect, on account of the similarity between the restful appearance of a sleeping *body* and that of a dead *body*. And I stress that word '*body*', because, according to both the Old and the New Testaments, it is only the believer's *body* which sleeps, and certainly not his soul or his spirit.

Note, for example, the following three references:

**Daniel 12. 2**

Many of those who ***sleep in the dust of the earth*** shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.

**Acts 7. 59-60**

They stoned Stephen as he was praying and saying, 'Lord Jesus, ***receive my spirit***' ... and when he had said this, ***he fell asleep***.

**Acts 13. 36**

David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, ***fell asleep***, was ***buried*** with his fathers, and ***saw corruption***.

## LEGITIMATE SORROW

**'Lest you sorrow ('lest you grieve') as others ('as the rest') who have no hope'.**

We must not misunderstand what Paul is saying.

Grief over the loss of loved-ones, with the inevitable pain of separation and ensuing loneliness, is perfectly consistent with the hope of the Christian.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the man who wrote these words spoke later of the 'sorrow' into which he would have been plunged had the sickness of his fellow-worker, Epaphroditus, proved terminal.<sup>10</sup> And, perhaps more to the point, we know that the Lord Jesus Himself 'wept' in sympathy with the mourners at the grave of His friend Lazarus.<sup>11</sup>

The problem was that the believers at Thessalonica were sorrowing, not merely over *their* loss, but over the loss which they supposed had been sustained by *those who had fallen asleep*.

## THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN HOPE

**'For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in ('through', 'on account of') Jesus'.**

It is important to note that the Christian confidence of which Paul wrote was not the result of human or philosophical speculation. It was based on a rock-solid and historical foundation; namely, that the Jesus who had died had also risen again.

I observe, in passing, that, although the Lord Jesus has transformed 'death' *for the Christian* into 'sleep', *He Himself* experienced the full horror of death as *death*.<sup>12</sup> He 'tasted death'.<sup>13</sup>

And, yet, 'He rose again', with His resurrection's being spoken of here, as on several occasions by Himself, as His *own* work. Compare His words:

**John 2. 19**

Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days ***I will raise it up***".

**John 10. 17-18**

Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life ***that I may take it again***. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and ***I have power to take it again***.

And the resurrection of Christ was the evidence that death had been conquered and that it provided the Christian with the guarantee and pledge of his or her hope.<sup>14</sup> As Paul repeatedly affirms, our Lord's bodily resurrection carries with it the promise of the resurrection to life of all who believe in Jesus.<sup>15</sup> For example, he assures the Corinthians:

*'knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus'*.<sup>16</sup>

But, in our passage, Paul does not focus on the believer's resurrection (for that was not the point at issue at Thessalonica, as it was later at Corinth) but rather on our faith that 'if ... Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus'.

## 'WILL BRING WITH HIM' – HOW?

For my part, I understand the apostle's expression '**bring with Him**' to be a reference to the Second Advent, to the return of the Lord Jesus in the glory of His coming manifested Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> That is, the words point on to 'the coming<sup>18</sup> of our Lord Jesus Christ *with* all His saints',<sup>19</sup> when He will be 'revealed from heaven ....to be glorified in His saints and admired in all who believe'.<sup>20</sup>

It seems to me that (i) the believers at Thessalonica were concerned that, somehow, 'those who sleep in (better, 'through') Jesus' would be deprived of their share in that kingdom, and that (ii) Paul was at pains, therefore, to assure them that 'the dead in Christ' will certainly *not* miss out in any way – that they (complete with resurrected bodies) will accompany the Lord Jesus out of heaven when He returns to reign.

'But how', someone might then ask, 'can God possibly bring them with the Lord Jesus if their bodies still lie buried in the ground?' Hence, verses 15 to 17 of our passage, which serve to explain (on the very highest authority: 'the word of the Lord') how this is to be brought about.

### THOSE 'ASLEEP' NOT DISADVANTAGED AT THE LORD'S COMING

**'For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming<sup>21</sup> of the Lord will by no means (the expression is emphatic: 'will in no wise'<sup>22</sup>) precede those who are asleep'.**

The *time* of our Lord's return from heaven is among those 'secret things' which 'belong to the Lord our God'<sup>23</sup> and which God jealousy guards to Himself:

He said to them, 'It is *not for you to know* times or seasons *which the Father has put in His own authority*'.<sup>24</sup>

It has been well said that such statements, 'should have put an end to theological weather forecasting that involves date setting'.<sup>25</sup>

And it is clear that even the apostle Paul himself had no inside information on the subject. For (i) sometimes he aligns himself (as here) with those who will be *alive* at the coming of the Lord Jesus, who look forward to having their 'mortal' bodies 'changed',<sup>26</sup> and (ii) sometimes he aligns himself with those who will have fallen *asleep* before He returns, whose 'corruptible' bodies are then to be raised up.<sup>27</sup>

For examples of the latter, we can refer to the confidence which Paul expressed in both of his letters to the Corinthians:

**'God** both raised up the Lord and **will also raise us up** by His power',<sup>28</sup> and

**'He** who raised up the Lord Jesus **will also raise us up** with Jesus'.<sup>29</sup>

If I understand my Bible correctly, our Lord's return to reign in glory *with* His saints will be preceded by a host of spectacular happenings and signs which will be witnessed by all alive at the time.<sup>30</sup>

But I read of *no* warning events or special signs before His coming to 'catch up' His completed church.

Many years ago, I came across the story of a young boy who

'was playing in his grandmother's house near a large grandfather clock. Noontime was approaching, and when both hands of the old timepiece reached twelve, the chimes began to ring. As he always liked to do, the boy counted each gong as it sounded. This time, however, something went wrong with the clock's inner mechanism. Instead of stopping at 12, it kept right on chiming ... 13,14,15,16 times. The boy couldn't believe his ears! He jumped to his feet and ran into the kitchen, shouting, "Grandma! Grandma! *It's later than it's ever been before!*"<sup>31</sup>

Without knowing it, that young boy expressed a great truth, for, most certainly, it *is* '*later than it has ever been before*'.

Almost two millennia ago, the apostle Paul said much the same when he informed the saints in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome that the full enjoyment of 'our salvation is *nearer now* than when we first believed'.<sup>32</sup>

And you and I can properly say no more than that. For the fact is that we simply do not know when our Lord will come. But we do know that He will come.

## THE RETURN<sup>33</sup>

**'The Lord Himself will descend from heaven'.**

The word '*Himself*' stands in the position of emphasis in the Greek text, stressing to us that the Lord Jesus is not going to commit or delegate this task to another.

### **(a) Not an angel.**

Yes, it is true that 'an angel of the Lord' once 'descended (the same word as in 1 Thess. 4. 16<sup>34</sup>) *from heaven*' – to roll away the stone from our Lord's then-empty sepulchre.<sup>35</sup>

It is also true that, in the figurative language of the Book of the Revelation:

(i) a 'strong angel' will 'descend<sup>36</sup> *from heaven*' to announce that there will be no more delay before the sounding of the seventh trumpet, which will signal the long-awaited kingdom of God and His Messiah,<sup>37</sup>

(ii) an angel will 'descend<sup>38</sup> *from heaven*' to declare the fall of 'Babylon the great', and

(iii) an angel will 'descend<sup>39</sup> *from heaven*' to bind the devil for a thousand years and to cast him into the abyss.<sup>40</sup>

But it will be **no angel** who 'will descend from heaven' to greet the Lord's completed church!

Yes, it is true that the coming of the Lord Jesus will be accompanied by 'the voice of an archangel'.

But it will be no deputising archangel who will 'descend from heaven' to meet the Bride of Christ!

It will be '**the Lord Himself!**'

Paul knew, and taught, that, on the occasion that the Lord Jesus comes in power and glory at His Second Advent, He will be 'revealed from heaven with His mighty angels'.<sup>41</sup> But here, when speaking of the time when the Lord Jesus comes to take His people home, the apostle makes no mention of any angels being in attendance.

And you and I know well that the awaited 'coming of the Lord' will not be the first time that our Lord Jesus will have 'descended' from heaven!<sup>42</sup>

### **(b) The shout of command.**

**'The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout'**, with, that is, 'a call, summons, shout of command'.<sup>43</sup>

The actual word occurs only once else in the entire Greek Bible. This is in Proverbs 30. 27, which reads:

'The locusts have no king, yet at the word of command<sup>44</sup> they march in rank'.

Interestingly, outside of Scripture, the word was used of a command given:<sup>45</sup>

- (i) **by a master of a ship to his rowers** (*Aeschylus and Euripides*),
- (ii) **by a huntsman to his dogs** (*Xenophon*),
- (iii) **by a chariot-driver to his steeds** (*Phaedrus*), and
- (iv) **by a commander to his troops** (*Thucydides*).

The apostle does not actually claim that the 'shout' will be that of the Lord Jesus, but I suspect that it *will be*. And, in saying this, I have my eye especially on His words to the Jews:

'the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves shall hear His voice and come forth ...'.<sup>46</sup>

### **(c) An archangel's voice.**

**'With the voice of an archangel'**. The title 'archangel' is not to be found anywhere in the *Old Testament*. And it appears in only one other place in the *New Testament*, where we read concerning '*Michael* the archangel'.<sup>47</sup>

Scripture does not tell us, in so many words, that there are other heavenly beings who occupy the exalted rank of 'archangel' but the description of '*Michael*' as 'one of the chief princes' in the Book of Daniel<sup>48</sup> suggests that there may well be. In any case, the emphasis in our verse is on the nature of the voice, rather than on either (i) the identity of the speaker or (ii) what is said.

### **(d) God's trumpet.**

**'And with the trumpet of God'**.

It is at least *possible* that

(i) the 'shout' will rouse *the sleeping saints* (just as our Lord's 'loud voice' once roused Lazarus of Bethany from his 'sleep' of death<sup>49</sup>), and

(ii) the 'trumpet of God'<sup>50</sup> will summon and gather *the living saints* (just as trumpets have been used in the past and will be in the future to gather together the nation of Israel<sup>51</sup>).

But that is only a suggestion. What we know for sure is that both the sleeping and the living saints will respond instantly to the Lord's return and its accompanying sounds.

And I note that, as we would expect, Paul's words are in perfect accord with our Lord's own words, spoken to Martha prior to His raising her four-day-dead brother back to life:

'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live (that is, 'the dead in Christ will rise first'); and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' (that is, 'we who are alive and remain shall be caught up').<sup>52</sup>

I like to link the words of the apostle:

'The Lord Himself will **descend** from heaven with a shout ... and with the trumpet of God'

with the words of one of the psalms of Asaph:

'God has **gone up** with a shout, Jehovah with the sound of a trumpet'.<sup>53</sup>

We can, perhaps, say, therefore, that it is with a shout and a trumpet blast that God goes up and the Lord comes down!

But, in any case, we can safely say that the Church Age, which began with a loud sound,<sup>54</sup> will most certainly end with some fairly loud sounds!

## **THE RESURRECTION**

**'And the dead in Christ will rise first'**. So that, far from their being placed at any disadvantage when the Lord comes, believers who have *died* will then be *raised* in advance of believers who are *alive* being *changed*.

But, although there will, therefore, be an *order* (a sequence), there will be no perceptible *interval*. For we are assured elsewhere that all will be accomplished 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye'.<sup>55</sup>

## **THE RAPTURE**

**'Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up'**. The expression, 'caught up', translates a word which is used here with much the same sense as it is in both (i) the case of

the ascension of the Lord Jesus<sup>56</sup> and (ii) the case of the transportation of the apostle Paul to the third heaven.<sup>57</sup>

The word often implies (and may well do so here) the use of a sudden force to snatch something or someone away.<sup>58</sup> We know such to be true, for example, of both

(i) the action of the Evil One in our Lord's parable of the Sower and His Seed, when he 'snatches away' the 'word of the kingdom' which is not understood,<sup>59</sup> and

(ii) the action of the Spirit of the Lord when He 'caught away' Philip from the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza.<sup>60</sup>

The Latin Vulgate translation renders the word translated 'caught up' as '*raptus*', from which (surprise, surprise) you and I get our English word '*rapture*'.

Many believers, therefore, use the word 'rapture' as shorthand to describe the coming of the Lord for His church as described in our passage.<sup>61</sup> Personally, I have no great problem with this. The fact that, as far as English goes, '*rapture*' is not a biblical word doesn't bother me, any more than does the fact that words such as 'Trinity', 'sovereign' or 'mission' are not biblical words either.<sup>62</sup>

## THE REUNION

### 'Caught up together with them'.

The words, '***together with them***', depict a wonderful prospect to the hearts of bereaved saints! But more wonderful still is the prospect which Paul holds out to all saints in the next chapter; namely,

'that whether we wake (are among those then alive) or sleep (are among those then in death), we should live (should enter into life in all its fullness) ***together with Him***'.<sup>63</sup>

Small wonder that Paul adds there, as here, the words, '*Therefore comfort* (or 'encourage') *one another*'.<sup>64</sup>

'**In the clouds**', in similar fashion, that is, as:

(i) our Lord Himself ascended to heaven in 'a cloud',<sup>65</sup> and

(ii) God's two outstanding witnesses during the Great Tribulation will ascend up 'to heaven in a cloud'.<sup>66</sup>

## THE MEETING

'**To meet the Lord**'. Both (i) 'the dead in Christ' and (ii) those 'who are alive' are scheduled to meet the Lord simultaneously. At that glad moment, we shall all 'be gathered together *to Him*'.<sup>67</sup>

We 'gather together' to Him now<sup>68</sup> and we will be 'gathered together' to Him then.

And I can tell you that, when the ransomed host are caught up to '*meet*' Him, there will not be one among them who will be tempted to imitate the inhabitants of the town of Gadara, who

'came out to *meet* Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart'.<sup>69</sup>

'**In the air**'. This is, clearly, a reference to the space between earth and heaven above 'the clouds'.

The description which Paul gives of the devil as 'the prince of the power of the air'<sup>70</sup> may suggest that 'the air' is regarded as enemy territory. *If* that is so, we might say that the very choice of meeting place between the Lord and His saints (being the sphere from which Satan conducts his present operations) serves to underline our Lord's glorious triumph over 'the god of this age'.<sup>71</sup>

I imagine that the experience of meeting the Lord there and then will be even more enthralling (i) for those 'who are alive and remain' than it will be (ii) for 'the dead in Christ', in that the latter will have previously enjoyed the experience of being 'with' Him.

#### **Philippians 1. 23-24**

I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire **to depart and to be with Christ**, which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

#### **2 Corinthians 5. 8**

... willing rather to be **absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord**.

### **THE CHRISTIAN'S HOPE**

**'And thus we shall always be with the Lord'.**

Nothing is said explicitly in our passage to indicate where the Lord and His united people will go after their meeting 'in the air', whether, together with them, the Saviour continues His descent, or whether, as I believe, together with them, He returns to heaven.

To me, the very expression, 'always be with the Lord' strongly suggests (in the words of another) 'that both dead and living Christians will return to heaven with the Lord, not only to enjoy continuous fellowship with him, but also, in terms of verse 10 of chapter 1, to be saved from the coming wrath of God'.<sup>72</sup>

Nor is anything said in our passage about the necessary change to be made to the bodies of both (i) 'the dead in Christ' and (ii) those 'who are alive and remain'. But 'change' there will certainly be!

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but **we shall all be changed**—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed'.<sup>73</sup>

For all of us, the Lord's coming will mean, not only

(i) **the fulfilment of His promise**,<sup>74</sup> and

(ii) **the enjoyment of His presence**,<sup>75</sup> but also

(iii) **the exertion of His power**, a power which will not only **raise** the bodies of the dead<sup>76</sup> but will also **transform** the bodies of the living.<sup>77</sup>

### **THE PRACTICAL CONCLUSION – 'COMFORT'**

But the apostle says nothing in our passage concerning either (i) our destination or (ii) any necessary change we are to undergo. His concern is to demonstrate how groundless were the worries of the Thessalonians about those of their number who had died. Hence, his exhortation, **'Therefore comfort one another with these words'**.

And so we find that, according to our New Testament, the hope of the believer is:

(i) a **living** hope (1 Pet. 1. 3).

(ii) a **blessed** hope (Titus 2. 13).

(iii) a **good** hope (2 Thess. 2. 16).

(iv) a **firm** hope (Heb. 6. 19).

(v) a **purifying** hope (1 John 3. 3).

(vi) an **encouraging** hope (Heb. 10. 25).

(vii) a **stimulating** hope (1 Cor. 15. 58).

(viii) a **comforting** hope (1 Thess. 4. 13-18).

### **A STARK CONTRAST**

And Paul's closing words stand in marked contrast to words which we find in a pathetic papyrus letter which has come down to us from the following century.



That letter was written by a well-to-do lady named Irene, conveying her sympathy to bereaved friends. The letter runs:

'Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas [one of her own immediate family] ... And all things whatsoever were fitting, I have done ... But, nevertheless, *against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another.* Fare well'.<sup>78</sup>

As the translator of that letter points out, it is clear that Irene

'experiences the difficulty of those whose business it is to console and who have *no consolation to offer* ... Who could help feeling for the helplessness of this woman ...?'<sup>79</sup>

But, in splendid contrast to Irene's plain and ineffective sentiment, 'Therefore comfort one another', the apostle concludes:

'Therefore comfort one another ***with these words***'.<sup>80</sup>

And what tremendous consolation '*these words*' (pulsating as they do with distinctive Christian hope) convey to us today.

### **JESUS 'THE COMFORTER'**<sup>81</sup>

But you and I have *even more* than '*these words*'!

For, when faced with the death of those we love, we have, not only the ***promise*** of our Lord's return *in the future*, but also the ***assurance*** of His presence with us here and *now*.

And, in closing, we remind ourselves that

'He is the same in heaven to-day as He was on earth in the days that are past. His circumstances indeed have vastly changed ... He has laid aside for ever the garments of humiliation, He has put on the majestic robes of glory ...

But ***though He has changed His circumstance, He has not changed His heart.*** Many crowns are His, and we delight to crown Him Lord of all; but no crowns that will ever adorn His head will ever change His heart.

The love that could weep with *Martha and Mary*<sup>82</sup> has not changed one whit.

The heart that had compassion on *the widow of Nain*<sup>83</sup> still beats in sympathy with sorrowing saints.

The tender love that sustained the broken-hearted *Jairus*<sup>84</sup> can still say with infinite compassion to a broken-hearted saint, "Be not afraid, only believe"<sup>85</sup>.

**Blessed Lord!**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The New King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> It follows that the manifested kingdom on earth will not be established by evangelism. As I see it, the manifested kingdom will be introduced only by the direct intervention of God's Messiah. If it were true that the world is to be gradually converted first (and the earth is to undergo first the events foretold in Matthew 24 and Revelation 6-19), then the return of the Lord Jesus cannot be viewed as imminent.

The event outlined in 1 Thessalonians 4 is markedly different from that spoken of by our Lord Jesus in Matthew 24. True, both events (a) deal with the general subject of our Lord's coming, (b) refer to the sounding of a trumpet, and (c) refer to a gathering of God's people. But, by way of contrast:

(a) Matthew 24 speaks of the sign of the Son of man; in 1 Thessalonians 4 it is 'the Lord Himself'.

(b) Matthew speaks of signs in the heavens, affecting the sun, moon and stars; Thessalonians makes no mention of signs or portends.

(c) Matthew speaks of judgements, warnings of the Abomination of Desolation, and instructions to flee; Thessalonians makes no mention of any of these.

(d) In Matthew, the tribes of the earth mourn; in Thessalonians, there is no mourning.

(e) In Matthew, the angels gather God's elect; in Thessalonians, no mention is made of angels gathering the church.

(f) Matthew makes no mention of resurrection; Thessalonians does.

(g) In Matthew, it is a blessing to be left behind when others are taken for judgement; in Thessalonians, the blessing is to be 'caught up' to be with the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17. 1, 10.

<sup>4</sup> 'The word carries with it the suggestion of "waiting" with patience and confident expectancy', W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, the article 'Wait', 'ἀναμένω'.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thess. 1. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 9.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Thess. 5. 1.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 13; literally, '*the ones sleeping*', with the sense either of 'those who are lying asleep' or 'those who fall asleep from time to time'. It is noticeable that the apostle employs '(a)sleep' three times in verses 13 to 15.

<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes claimed that the following poem, 'Divine Sympathy', was written by Lady (Theodosia) Powerscourt after the death of her husband, Viscount Powerscourt (Richard Wingfield), in 1823, the year following their marriage. If this were so, Lady Powerscourt was then only 23 years of age; she died at the age of 36.

(Accessed at <http://biblecentre.org/content.php?mode=7&item=1205>. See also ... <http://www.uplook.org/1994/02/theodosia-lady-powerscourt/>)

But the same poem/hymn is also attributed widely to Horatius Bonar; for example, at ... [https://hymnary.org/text/jesus\\_my\\_sorrow\\_lies\\_too\\_deep.](https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_my_sorrow_lies_too_deep.))

***Jesus, my sorrow lies too deep***

***For human ministry;***

It knows not how to tell itself  
To any but to Thee.

Thou dost remember still, amid  
The glories of God's throne,  
The sorrows of mortality,  
For they were once Thine own.

Jesus, my fainting spirit brings  
Its fearfulness to Thee,  
Thine eye at least can penetrate  
The clouded mystery.

And is it not enough, enough,  
This holy sympathy?

***There is no sorrow e'er so deep  
But I may bring to Thee.***

*Whichever* of these spiritual giants penned those words, the words speak volumes to the aching heart.

<sup>10</sup> Phil. 2. 27.

<sup>11</sup> John 11. 33–35.

<sup>12</sup> Our Lord is never spoken of as 'sleeping' in death. He is, however, said to be 'the firstfruits of them that have fallen asleep', 1 Cor. 15. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Heb. 2. 9; cf. Matt. 16. 28; John 8. 52.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Pet. 1. 3.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 6. 14; 15. 20.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Cor. 4. 14.

<sup>17</sup> I am encouraged to see that this is how many others understand the reference. For example: (i) 'In this passage the coming of Jesus is not presented in the act of our gathering together to Him, when we go to meet Him; but in the act of our coming with Him from the Father's house, after having been in His presence. It is that moment which will shew whether we are unblameable', J. N. Darby, '*Notes on the Epistles to the Thessalonians*', Collected Writings, Volume 27, page 297; (ii) 'The manner in which this is connected with the coming of Christ here is very noticeable. He supposes it to be flowing out of love, and going on in holiness, proceeding unbroken, until the saint finds himself at last in the display of glory; not when Christ comes to take us up, but when God brings us with Him', William Kelly, '*Introductory Lectures on the Epistles of Paul: 1 Thessalonians*'. So also, among many, Gerald B. Stanton, '*Kept from the Hour*', J. Dwight Pentecost, '*Things to Come*', and T. B. Baines, '*The Lord's Coming, Israel and the Church*'.

<sup>18</sup> 'Parousia'; see note 21 below. I understand 1 Thess. 3. 13 to refer, in particular, to that period which follows the actual descent from heaven of the Lord Jesus for the church (as expounded in 1 Thess. 4. 15-17) and which includes the Judgement Seat of Christ.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Thess. 3. 13.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Thess. 1. 7-10.

<sup>21</sup> Literally, '*parousia*'. It seems that, when used prophetically, '*parousia*' refers to the period beginning with the descent of the Lord from heaven into the air and ending with His revelation and manifestation to the world.

The word '*parousia*' signifies 'a being with', 'a presence'. 'Not infrequently it is so rendered. It thus denotes a state, not an action. We never read of a *parousia to*, always of a *parousia with*. Paul tells the Philippian converts of his confidence that he will be with them "for their progress and joy in the faith, that their glorying may abound in Christ Jesus in him through his presence, his *parousia*, with them again". Further, he exhorts them as they have been obedient during his presence, his *parousia*, so much more in his absence, his *apousia*, to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 1. 26; 2. 12). In a Greek document of almost the same period as that in which the New Testament was written, a person states that attention to her property necessitates her *parousia* in a certain city. These examples suffice to show that, while, of course, the initial act of arrival is essential to a *parousia*, the word signifies the more or less prolonged period following the arrival', W. E. Vine, '*Touching the Coming of the Lord*', chapter 5.

<sup>22</sup> Paul uses the expression only four times outside of Old Testament quotations, and each time for emphasis; see Leon Morris, '*The New London Commentary*', on 1 Thessalonians 4. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Deut. 29. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 1. 7; cf. Mark 13. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Witherington III, '*Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not*'.

<sup>26</sup> In the epistle to the Philippians, written probably about ten years later, where His advancing years (cf. Phil. 2. 24 with Philemon 9) and the threatening nature of his circumstances made clear to Paul the possibility that he might die before the Lord's coming, Phil. 1. 21-25, he still spoke of 'heaven, from which we also *eagerly wait for* the Saviour, who will change our lowly body', Phil. 3. 20.

And even in the Pastoral Epistles (in which he uses language which reveals his anticipation of speedy execution, 2 Tim. 4. 6-8, he still speaks of '*looking for* the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ', Titus 2. 13.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 52-54.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 6. 14.

<sup>29</sup> 2 Cor. 4. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 24. 14-31; Luke 21. 24-31.

In contrast to his teaching concerning the coming of the Lord for His saints, Paul taught that certain events must precede '*the day of the Lord*'. '*That day will not be*', he said, 'except the falling away (literally, "the apostasy") come first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, he who opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God', 2 Thess. 2. 3-5.

A suggested summary of the events surrounding our Lord's Second Advent can be found in three articles which I wrote for the Precious Seed magazine in the year 2000 (the year which many ill-informed people had forecast to bring the end of the world!). The articles are entitled, '*The Coming of the Son of Man*', and can be accessed at:

[https://www.preciousseed.org/article\\_detail.cfm?articleID=358](https://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=358), [https://www.preciousseed.org/article\\_detail.cfm?articleID=340](https://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=340), and [https://www.preciousseed.org/article\\_detail.cfm?articleID=315](https://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=315).

<sup>31</sup> '*Our Daily Bread*', August 26, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Rom. 13. 11.

<sup>33</sup> For this and the following three capitalised headings, I am indebted to John R. W. Stott, '*The Message of Thessalonians (The Bible Speaks Today)*', pages 102-104.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek word, '*καταβαίνω*'.

<sup>35</sup> Matt 28. 2.

<sup>36</sup> The same Greek word as in 1 Thess. 4. 16.

- <sup>37</sup> Rev. 10. 1, 6-7 with Rev. 11. 15.
- <sup>38</sup> The same Greek word as in 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>39</sup> Again, the same Greek word as in 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>40</sup> Rev. 20. 1-3. The exact same expression ('καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ') is used by John in Rev. 10. 1; 18. 1 and 20. 1
- <sup>41</sup> 2 Thess. 1. 7; cf. Matt. 25. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> John 3. 13; 6. 33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58; cf. Eph. 4. 9-10 – in each case, the same Greek word as in 1 Thess. 4. 16, 'καταβαίνω'.
- <sup>43</sup> W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', the article 'Shout', 'κέλευμα'.
- <sup>44</sup> Translating 'κέλευμα', the word of 1 Thess. 4. 16.
- <sup>45</sup> For the detailed references, see John Eadie, '1 and 2 Thessalonians' on 1 Thess. 4. 16, and the 'Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon' (article, κέλευμα).
- <sup>46</sup> John 5. 28.
- <sup>47</sup> 'Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"', Jude 9.
- <sup>48</sup> Dan 10. 13.
- <sup>49</sup> John 11. 43-44 with John 11. 11-14.
- <sup>50</sup> Presumably, one and the same as 'the last trumpet' of 1 Cor. 15. 52.
- <sup>51</sup> For example, see Exod. 19. 13; Num. 10. 8-10; and, for the Second Advent, Matt. 24. 31.
- <sup>52</sup> John 11. 25-26. 'The words of the Lord correspond to those of the apostle, and the meaning of the earlier utterance is made clear by the latter. "He that believeth on me, though he die [literally, 'even if he were to die'] yet shall he live", stand over against "the dead in Christ shall rise first". "Whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die", is explained by, "We that are alive that are left unto the presence [marg.] of the Lord", W. E. Vine, 'Touching the Coming of the Lord', page 43.
- <sup>53</sup> Psa. 47. 5.
- <sup>54</sup> Acts 2. 2.
- <sup>55</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 52.
- <sup>56</sup> Rev. 12. 5.
- <sup>57</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 2, 4.
- <sup>58</sup> 'This verb conveys the idea of force suddenly exercised', W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', the article 'Catch', 'ἄρπάζω'. Cf. W. Foerster, 'Theological Dictionary of the New Testament', volume I, page 472.
- <sup>59</sup> Matt. 13. 19.
- <sup>60</sup> Acts 8. 39. See also its use in the sense of 'seize' in John 6. 15; 10. 12, 28, 29; Jude 23.
- <sup>61</sup> The English language uses the word 'rapture' with two very different meanings; (i) of ecstatic delight and (ii) of transporting someone from one place to another. Both of these meanings derive from the Latin 'raptus', meaning 'to be carried away'. Some older hymns use the word with meaning (i); for example, the second verse of Fanny Crosby's hymn, 'I shall know Him', begins with the line, 'Oh, the soul thrilling rapture when I view His blessed face'.
- <sup>62</sup> That is, none of these words are found in the King James Version or the Revised Version; the words 'sovereign' and 'mission' are found in many modern translations and paraphrases.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Thess. 5. 10.

<sup>64</sup> 1 Thess. 5. 11 (*ἑαυτοὺς ἀλλήλους*).

<sup>65</sup> Acts 1. 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> Rev. 11. 12.

<sup>67</sup> 2 Thess. 2. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Matt. 18. 20.

<sup>69</sup> Matt. 8. 34.

<sup>70</sup> Eph. 2. 2.

<sup>71</sup> 2 Cor. 4. 4.

<sup>72</sup> C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)*, on 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>73</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 51-53. 'I once came across the words of verse 51, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed", printed on a birth congratulation card! My memory of nights when my children were very young endorses the application of the text to such nocturnal events', *Studies in First Corinthians (Precious Seed Publications)*, page 273.

<sup>74</sup> John 14. 3.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 17.

<sup>76</sup> 1 Cor. 6. 14.

<sup>77</sup> Phil. 3. 21.

<sup>78</sup> The full text of the letter reads:

'Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermouthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another. Fare well. 28 October'.

Papyrus number is P.CtYBR inv. 32 in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,  
Papyrus Collection, Yale University.

It is known also as Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 115 (P. Oxy 115).

<sup>79</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, page 176.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 18.

<sup>81</sup> The Lord Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as 'another Comforter', John 14. 16 KJV.

<sup>82</sup> John 11. 34-35.

<sup>83</sup> Luke 7. 11-13.

<sup>84</sup> Mark 5. 35-36.

<sup>85</sup> Hamilton Smith, '*Thou Remainest*', Scripture Truth, Volume 13, page 74; accessed at ...  
<https://www.scripture-truth.org/ST1-50/ST13.pdf>.