

1 THESSALONIANS 4:15a "The Coming of the Lord and the Rapture of The Church"

As we continue with our study in 1 Thessalonians let me remind you of what Paul's encouragement to the church in Thessalonica has been in connection with those Christians in that church who had died.

Many of the Thessalonians may have grieved over, not only the loss of a loved one, but also over what they may have felt was a disadvantage for these Christians who had died, as it related to the second coming of Christ.

As I mentioned last week the feeling in Thessalonica, evidently, was that the dead in Christ were at a disadvantage because they would not be present at the return of Jesus when He came back to catch His people away.

Having been taught about the resurrection they felt that the dead in Christ would eventually be raised, but as we see in our text the real issue was how it transpired in time. And there seemed to be some misunderstanding.

Their thought must have been that if you were alive at Christ's coming you would not miss any of the thrill and majesty of the King of kings coming back for His people as you experienced heaven opened up, seeing Jesus, the light of the world, radiate His love and glory right before your very eyes.

To see the host of heaven accompanying the risen Lord and all of the celebration that would usher in such an event; standing shoulder to shoulder with fellow believers and singing praises before your Lord. What an awesome time that would be.

And it was undoubtedly this kind of anticipation which left the Thessalonian Christians with a bitter sweet joy, thinking that their friends and relatives who died in Christ might miss this momentous occasion as the living got to experience it first-hand.

Paul says to them, 'I don't want you to be uninformed about this and grieve over your loved ones like the rest who have no hope. I want you to know that just as sure as Jesus rose from the dead, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.'

In other words, they're not going to miss out on anything, any more than our friends and loved ones who have died in the Lord will miss out on Christ's coming back. Whether they've been dead for a year, 50 years, or 2,000 years, it won't make any difference because they too will experience the same event at the same time when Jesus comes for us.

In fact, Paul goes so far as to say in verse 15, "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep."

Again, notice how Paul is, himself, in anticipation of the Lord's possible return even in his own lifetime. "... we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord."

It's interesting too, how Paul drives home his point and how this must have been a comfort to the Thessalonians, when he derives the authority for this information, not from himself, but from the Lord God. "According to the Lord's own word."

What words of the Lord could Paul be referring to? Well, we know that our Lord Jesus did speak concerning His second coming. We see this in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus was asked by His disciples about future events.

Matthew 24:1-2 ^{NAU} Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. ² And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."

The context has Jesus declaring that the temple would be destroyed, where not one stone will be left upon another. This led to a natural question from his disciples.

Matthew 24:3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

In the mind of the disciples the destruction of the temple and the end of the age are tied together. For a Jew at this time in history nothing could be more terrible than that the one icon, the temple, the place where the Lord met with His people, that defined the nation of Israel, would be destroyed, which in their minds was the

end of the world, or at least the end of their world as they understood it.

This would be the ultimate judgment for the nation of Israel and would have demonstrated to them that God had taken his presence from them. And this prophetic word from our Lord came to fruition when the Roman armies destroyed the temple in 70 AD, where not one stone was left upon another.

But this prophetic word included, not just the destruction of the temple, but also spoke to the end of the age as God defined it. And this is where Jesus reveals how God's judgment on Israel will ultimately include the entire world.

MAT 24:30-31 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."

Make no mistake, every eye will see. The whole world will be made aware of Christ's coming. But his coming, we are told, will be like the days of Noah.

MAT 24:37-41 "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."

In essence, Jesus is saying, in those days everyone will be conducting business as usual, just as in the days of Noah where they anticipated nothing extraordinary. The flood took all of those people by surprise. Certainly, they had been warned but they didn't believe it. They thought Noah was a "nut'.

And so they continued living as though nothing would happen, until the flood came and they were shocked into reality. This, says Jesus, "is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."

This section of Matthew has a lot going on and we just don't have the time to deal with every aspect of God's judgment that is

contained in this portion of Scripture. But it is intrinsically tied to our text today in 1Thessalonians as it relates to the subject of the rapture of Christ's church.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 ¹⁵ 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Now, again, don't lose me here because all that we saw in Matthew 24 is directly tied to the same time frame in our text which says, ¹⁵ 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep. (**1 Thessalonians 4:15**)

The coming of the Lord is the issue and the coming of the Lord was always the issue with the disciples who, you'll remember, were told by the angel at the ascension of Jesus Christ, ¹¹ "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (**Acts 1:11**)

This coming in Acts 11 is the same coming in our text. It is implied that just as Jesus was taken up bodily into heaven, He will return bodily from heaven. But when He returns He will do a number of things and one of those things is what the disciples were interested in, in light of the context of the return of the Messiah, to set up and rule the world on the eternal throne of David.

And so, as we saw in Matthew, the disciples pose the question to Jesus.

Matthew 24:3 ... "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Note carefully what the disciples were asking of Jesus. They wanted to know of those things happening that are associated with the coming of Christ and the end of the age. In other words, they understood that when the Christ comes it will come at the end of the age, which is another way of saying, the end of the world in judgment.

Every Jew understood this language and Jesus utilized this language earlier in the gospel of Matthew.

^{NAU} **Matthew 16:27** "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.

What Jesus is referring to here is what is known as The Day of the Lord, and it will be a day of judgment of the entire world. The Old Testament has many references to this particular day.

Isaiah 13:9-11 ⁹ Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. ¹⁰ For the stars of heaven and their constellations Will not flash forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises And the moon will not shed its light. ¹¹ Thus I will punish the world for its evil And the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless.

If this language sounds familiar it is because Jesus utilizes this very language when describing the coming of the Son of Man.

Matthew 24:29-30 ²⁹ "But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.

All of this was foretold by the prophets and Jesus acknowledges that He is the fulfillment of all that is spoken of concerning the judgment of the world in that final day, the day known as the Day of the Lord.

Joel 3:13-16 ¹³ Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and moon grow dark And the stars lose their brightness. ¹⁶ The LORD roars from Zion And utters His voice from Jerusalem, And the heavens and the earth tremble. But the LORD is a refuge for His people And a stronghold to the sons of Israel.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 ¹⁴ Near is the great day of the LORD, Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. ¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶ A day of trumpet and battle cry Against the fortified cities And the high corner towers. ¹⁷ I will bring distress on men So that they will walk like the blind, Because they have sinned against the LORD; And their blood will be poured out like dust And their flesh like dung. ¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold Will be able to deliver them On the day of the LORD'S wrath; And all the earth will be devoured In the fire of His jealousy, For He will make a complete end, Indeed a terrifying one, Of all the inhabitants of the earth.

“The Day of the Lord” is “The coming of the Lord” in our text of 1Thessalonians as it is also in Matthew 24. And it is this coming that the disciples were interested in because they knew that when the Messiah comes He will come in judgment as He will then establish His kingdom forever. And we know that this Messiah has been given all authority to judge all men.

^{NAU} **Acts 17:31** because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

To suggest that this “Coming” is anything other than what Scripture claims it to be, that of final judgment, is simply to miss the mark of sound hermeneutics, by suggesting that it is a secret coming as in the rapture prior to judgment.

The disciples knew what they were asking when they approached Jesus about His coming and the end of the age and Jesus knew what they were asking and answered appropriately by speaking of this judgment.

Matthew 24:4-6 ⁴ And Jesus answered and said to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. ⁵ "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. ⁶ "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for *those things* must take place, but *that* is not yet the end.

The end of what? The end of this present age. What’s interesting about this description of the end of the age is that the apostle Paul

references a condition of the church at the end of the age, called the apostasy.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 ^{NAU} Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ² that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

What apostasy is Paul addressing and what is apostasy as it relates to the church? Well, it is a turning away from the faith of Jesus Christ. It is a denial of the one true gospel delivered to the saints according to the word of God.

So, what Paul is saying, is that regarding the coming of Christ, which is the Day of the Lord, something must first happen that will be a sign leading up to Christ's return.

And that is the apostasy of the "church" of Jesus Christ. Well, how is that possible since we are told by Jesus Himself ¹⁸ "... upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. (**Matthew 16:18**)

The gates of Hades will not overpower Christ's church, but the apostasy will be allowed by Christ to distinguish the true church from the false.

There is an outward appearance of the church that we see all over the world, what is commonly called the visible church. But everyone knows that simply surrounding yourself with the four walls of a church or an organization called the church does not make it the true church.

The true church, that is a true believer, is one who is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and has embraced, by faith alone, the gift of God found in Christ alone. Ultimately, only God knows the hearts of those who belong to Him, thus this church is regarded as the "invisible" church, because it is ultimately only visible to the eyes of God.

Paul is telling us to look for the apostasy of the church to happen before the return of Christ. The apostasy will be characterized by

those who not only turn away from the faith but speak out against Christ and set themselves up as above Christ by their very actions; what Paul calls the man of lawlessness.

This is what Paul is speaking of in his second letter to the Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 ³ Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

The man of lawlessness is not limited to any one individual any more than the anti-christ is limited to only one person. In fact, John makes the case that the one who goes out from the body of Christ, which was a reference to an apostasy, is an antichrist.

1 John 2:18-19 ¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

1 John 2:22 ²² Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

Those who went out apostatized and proved themselves never to have been true Christians. And notice too, that John places this type of thing in the context of the last hour. We've been living in the last hour for some time now, but we are some 2,000 years closer to that last hour coming to a close.

But when we speak of the apostasy we are also speaking of what Jesus refers to as the abomination of desolation that Daniel prophesied. That was realized in Israel in 70 AD when the Roman General Titus sacked Jerusalem. In the process he profaned the temple by sacrificing a pig near the entrance into the holy place.

Despite the fact that the book of Daniel uses language that addresses Israel and the sacrifices, Jesus is dealing with future implications regarding the church, not national Israel, as we see throughout the New Testament where there is only one people of

God, the Israel of God of whom Paul speaks when writing to the Galatians.

Galatians 6:15-16 ¹⁵ For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

And so, when Jesus speaks of the abomination of desolation He is referring to the temple of God in a New Covenant setting. And we know what that temple of God is.

John 2:18-21 ¹⁸ The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.

So, how does the abomination of desolation fit in with the body of Jesus Christ?

We know that in three days that body was raised victoriously and gloriously from the grave defeating sin and death. But we also know that those who are in Christ by faith alone share in that resurrection life and therefore are identified with that temple in an intimate way.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

Paul uses identical language in his second letter to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 6:16-17 ¹⁶ Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. ¹⁷ "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.

Often times we will use this second letter and the context of this passage to urge Christians not to be bound to unbelievers in marriage or business dealings. And while we may certainly agree with warnings against such arrangements it can also be argued that

we should not be bound with an organization that has a form of godliness but denies the power thereof of the true Messiah.

In other words, the apostasy of the church has already begun to rear its ugly head and unbelievers have begun to take up primary residence in many of the halls of what we call “the church.” They may be religious people, but in their denial of the word of God and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it results in what is arguably an abomination of desolation, as they mock and smear the true sacrifice for sin, Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 6:14-15 ¹⁴ Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?

If we relegate the abomination of desolation to the rise of a rebuilt Jewish temple with daily sacrifices then we miss the most important aspect of Christ’s revelation and that is that He came to fulfill the law and abolish the old covenant in favor of the new covenant in His blood.

Galatians 3:24-29 ²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. ²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

We are no longer under a tutor, therefore we are no longer under the law, therefore the old covenant and everything associated with it; the temple, the sacrifices, the Aaronic priesthood, the new moons, the Sabbaths, the dietary laws, everything that was designed by God to be a shadow of the true sacrifice, will never be reestablished because it all pointed to Christ and He fulfilled it all.

To reestablish any form of the old covenant is a slap in the face to the finished work of Christ and that is an abomination that should not be tolerated. Nor should we tolerate the abomination by declaring that God is less than God when He speaks the truth. And this is what many in the “church” are doing today.

They know better than God when they bow the knee to science and conclude that God did not mean that He created the world in six literal days, because everyone knows that “science” proves otherwise.

How dare they read into those plain words of God and eisegese those passages to be twisted into a meaning that was never intended by the Creator of heaven and earth.

How dare the seminaries around the world teach and promote a gospel that waters down the shed blood of Christ, or how they deny the miraculous works of Christ and still promote themselves as leading institutions of truth when they are full of dead men’s bones.

The abomination of desolation is in full swing and it is only a matter of time before true Christians in the western world will not be welcomed in Christ’s church and it will be dangerous to be a born-again believer in this world. Ask the believers in China or many who reside in parts of the Islamic world.

Back to our text. So, where was I? Oh yeah.

1 Thessalonians 4:15 ¹⁵ 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 not precede those who have fallen asleep.

The coming of the Lord is nothing short of the Day of the Lord, the last trumpet that Paul alludes to in our text in verse 16 that we’ll look at next week. I know we didn’t get very far today in our text, but I think you can see that it was important that we set the proper stage upon which to make the biblical case that when we begin to delve deeper into “we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord” that we must understand when and what this coming of the Lord is, because it will greatly determine the true meaning of the text.

But as we’ll see next time it will also give us a true sense of comfort and joy as we consider the plan Jesus Christ has for establishing His throne on the new earth in the new Jerusalem on the eternal throne of David.

It will all make sense and help us to distinguish between that which is fanciful theology and theology built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles as we consider the whole counsel of God’s

word on this subject of the last days and our place and purpose for these last days.

Next week we will consider the resurrection that Paul speaks of in the closing verses of chapter 4, but we will also see when this resurrection actually takes place and what other events are associated with this event. And we will see that there will be a rapture of the church but it will happen simultaneously with the general resurrection of all.

And as we close this section next week it will really help us to understand why we will be able to embrace Paul's words to the church.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.