

52. Jesus in 1 Thessalonians

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In contrast to the Book of Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews, 1 Thessalonians is a rather unimposing Book that we can recommend to a new Christian to read. However, we shouldn't think that this Book does not contain any important doctrine at all. As a matter of fact that it deals with the basic truth that they need to know as new born Christians as well as the most descriptive sequences of the Rapture, the Return of Jesus Christ in this precious Book.

Paul's teachings about holy living and a life shaped by eternity are just as relevant for us today as they were for the believers in Thessalonica more than 1,900 years ago.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul was father and mother to hundreds, even thousands of God's children scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. These two letters to the Thessalonians are full of parental affection and advice. With the tenderness of a mother's touch, he affirmed and encouraged them in their growth. And with the strength of a father's voice, he answered their theological questions and corrected their moral misbehaviors.

On his 2nd missionary journey, the apostle went to Thessalonica. The city was situated at the crossroads of two major trade routes, it was the largest city in Macedonia and the capital of its province. The diverse center of commerce represented a golden opportunity for Christianity, a potential hub out of which the Gospel could travel to all points of the Roman empire.

The apostle began his ministry there in the synagogue. For 3 Sabbaths, he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and several Jews believed, as well as many Greeks who had turned to Judaism to find God.

Of course, Satan would not let Paul preach the Gospel without a fight. He used some Jews from the synagogue to form a mob and incited the city against him. Paul was forced out of town, leaving the new believers in a vulnerable position. They were baby Christians.

From Thessalonica, Paul went to Berea and eventually to Athens in 50 A.D. In Athens, he dispatched Timothy to strengthen and encourage the believers of the Thessalonian church and to see how they were doing in the Lord. In the meanwhile, Paul moved to Corinth, where he anxiously waited for Timothy's return. Much to Paul's relief, the news was good. The faith of the new born Christians of the Thessalonian church was solid; they were loving one another, and their affection for their spiritual father Paul was strong.

B. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The apostle noticed that a few matters still required his attention:

1) He needed to respond to some personal accusations.

Evidently, outsiders were trying to dishearten the believers of the Thessalonian church by questioning Paul's motives and criticizing him for failing to return.

2) He needed to affirm the new believers in their growth and encourage them to “excel still more.”

Particularly in the realms of sexual purity, respect for authority, and church unity.

3) He needed to clarify what he had taught them about the coming of Christ.

Some wanted to know what happened to the believers who died before His return. They wondered if those people missed out going to heaven.

C. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

Among the many subjects Paul stated, the rapture of Christ stands out as his major theme. Structurally, it is the framework upon which Paul wrote his letter, each chapter ends with a reference to this glorious event. And spiritually, it is the focal point of life that gives us hope and moral direction:

Chapter 1: The rapture rescues us from God’s judgment.

Chapter 2: The rapture gives us the time for glory, reward, and joy – especially over those we brought to Christ.

Chapter 3: The rapture is the motivation for holy living.

Chapter 4: The rapture is the hope and comfort for those in grief.

Chapter 5: The rapture is the goal of sanctification.

D. THE STRUCTURE

We can divide the Book into 2 broad sections. In chapters 1 through 3 Paul looked back. He traced the history of his visit to Thessalonica and encouraged the believers in how much they have grown. In chapter 4 and 5 he looked forward. He exhorted his spiritual children to grow even more in certain areas and addressed some of their questions.

E. THE RAPTURE

This Book clearly illustrates the rapture like no other Books in the Bible. I believe that we need to go over it more carefully.

The rapture is more than the ultimate flying experience. It is an expression of God’s love and faithfulness to His people. At the same time, it is a signal of His justice and judgement to the unbelieving people during the Great Tribulation time and the time after that.

If anyone tries to ignore the rapture of the church of Jesus Christ, that person is ignoring one of the most important doctrines in Christianity. As important as the rapture is, thoughts of meeting the Lord Jesus face-to-face, rarely find their way into the top priority in people’s mind and into their daily experience unfortunately.

In the NT, the subject of the Lord’s return is very up-front. It’s even in the final thought of Scripture.

Revelation 22:20 He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Jesus could come at any time, and He doesn’t want us to forget It.

F. THE RAPTURE EXTREMES

At the same time, if we’re not careful, we can take this awareness to extremes, getting bogged down on miry side paths in our faith. Because we need to keep a good balance between reality and expectancy. Let’s spend a moment examining the pitfalls to watch out for:

1) Fanatic intensity

Obsessed with end-times teachings and novels, some people interpret every world event as a fulfillment of prophecy. A few even attempt to set the date of Christ's return and, in euphoric anticipation, quit their jobs and disregard their responsibilities. But the date always comes and goes, and they are left disillusioned.

2) Theological ignorance

For some Christians, talk of God's prophetic timetable usually draws glassy stares and wide yawns. Unfortunately, this disinterest has a domino effect in their Christian life. Since they have little vision for the next world, they often lack passion for lost souls and for their own personal purity. Death and the future terrify them, because they have not anchored themselves in the truth of Christ's glorious return.

3) Theological misinformation

Some people not only don't understand the truth, they believe what is untrue. This makes matters worse.

G. DO NOT BE IGNORANT

1 Thessalonians 4:13 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.

When the apostle Paul wrote this letter to them, the Thessalonian church congregation was troubled by the Fanatic Intensity extremism. Ecstatic about Christ's imminent return, some people had quit their jobs and become freeloaders and busybodies.

Some of them were afraid that their Christian loved ones who had died before Christ's coming would be forgotten or somehow miss His return, because they didn't understand the Apostle Paul's teaching regarding the rapture. So Paul built for them and for us a firm theological footing concerning death and the coming of Christ.

There are four interesting facts Paul asked Christians to not be ignorant:

- Don't be ignorant about God's plan for Israel – Romans 11:25
- Don't be ignorant about spiritual gifts – 1 Corinthians 12 and 14
- Don't be ignorant about the suffering and trials in the Christian life – 2 Corinthians 1:8
- Don't be ignorant about the rapture and the second coming of Jesus – 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Remarkably, these are areas where ignorance is still common in the Christian world.

'Asleep' can be an interchangeable word for death, minus the finality. It is a hopeful word, because sleeping assumes a future "awakening" – a resurrection.

Early century Christians called 'death' 'sleep', but they emphasized the idea of rest. They began to call their burial places "cemeteries," which derives from, "dormitories" or "sleeping places." Yet the Bible never describes the death of the unbeliever as sleep, because there is no rest, peace, comfort, or hope in their death.

H. THE RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST FOR HIS CHURCH

1 Thessalonians 4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

There are three kinds of death in Scripture:

1) Spiritual death

Paul says that to be carnally minded is death, which is separation from God. This is what happened to the man in the Garden of Eden when God said that man would die in the day he ate of the fruit. Man became separated from God. Adam did die the day he ate the fruit – a spiritual death.

2) Physical death, which is the separation of the spirit from the body.

That is what we ordinarily call death. Adam didn't actually die physically until 930 years after he sinned against the Lord in the Garden of Eden.

3) Eternal death

It is the eternal separation of the unbelievers from God. This is the second death described in Revelation 20:14.

I. LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

1 Thessalonians 4:15 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 by no means precede those who are asleep.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that those who are asleep – Christians who have died before Jesus returns – will by no means be at a disadvantage. God will allow those who were born-again, but passed away to share in the glory of the coming of the Lord.

J. MUSIC TO OUR EARS

1 Thessalonians 4:16 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.

The rapture will not be silent or secret, even though the vast majority of people may not understand the sound or its meaning. Because they don't have the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

When Paul heard the heavenly voice on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, his companions heard the sound of a voice, but they did not hear articulate words. They heard a sound, but did not understand its meaning. It may well be that the shout/voice/trumpet sound that accompanies the rapture will have the same effect. The entire world will hear this heavenly sound, but will have no idea what its meaning is.

In the OT, trumpets sounded the alarm for war, and threw the enemy into a panic, in the same sense of the seven trumpets described in Numbers 10 and Revelation 8-9. Here, the trumpet of God gathers together God's people.

But please notice the difference. The seven trumpets of Numbers 10 were blown by people, the seven trumpets from Revelation 8-9 by angels. But for the rapture, God Himself will blow the trumpet. He has been waiting for this moment for a long, long time to take His people to heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:52 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.

It is not the time of blinking eye, which is very fast. The rapture will happen before the non-believers realize what happened.

Many wonder how are the dead in Christ raised first. The same God who created the universe into its existence by His command will take care of all the details.

K. I'LL FLY AWAY

1 Thessalonians 4:17-18 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. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

"Caught up" in Greek word is "harpazo." We get the English word 'rapture' from Latin Bible, Vulgate, "rapturo."

The rapture theology has been a controversial subject among Christians and non-Christians alike:

- The pre-tribulation rapture position believes that believers are caught up before this final seven-year Tribulation starts.
- The mid-tribulation rapture position believes that believers are caught up in the midst of this Tribulation period.
- The pre-wrath rapture position believes that believers are caught up at some time in the second half of this Tribulation period.
- The post-tribulation rapture position believes that believers are caught up at the end of the Tribulation.

Pre-tribulation or a.k.a. "Pre-trib" is the correct way to understand God's plan for the rapture.

We will not only meet our Lord Jesus Christ at the Rapture, but will also be reunited with our believing friends and loved ones who have died. "Together with them" is a great statement of encouragement. Death is the great separator, but Jesus Christ is the great Reconciler.

L. APPLICATION

What every church should be is what every Christian should be:

Elect – Born again

Exemplary – Imitating Jesus and other godly people's lives

Enthusiastic – Sharing the Gospel with others

Expectant – Looking for Jesus Christ to return daily