

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians

(SB_1Thess_Lsn5_Chap4)

PAUL PLEADS FOR PURITY (4:1-8)

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. 8 Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

“Walking” to Please God

Note Paul’s “request and exhortation” – that these believers continue to excel in their “walk” according to the instruction that they had received (v. 1) – according to the “commandments” Paul had given them by the authority of Jesus Christ (v. 2). Paul connects all of this to their “sanctification” (v. 3).

The particular issue in terms of having the potential to derail the Thessalonian believers was “sexual immorality” (v. 3). Obviously, this issue is not unique to this generation of Gentile believers and it has been an issue since the spiritual fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Sex was immediately distorted as a result of the fall. Only in the life of the spiritual believer is there a hope for a dynamic, meaningful and full sexual relationship between a husband and wife. To the extent the mature, Christian spiritual life is not present in a married relationship, then to that extent there will not be a vibrant and meaningful sexual relationship. When sex is distorted or when sex is practiced outside of God’s parameters, then it is like a raging wildfire that destroys everything in its path – including the lives of the sexual partners. God meant sex to be a source of intense pleasure and a means of expressing one’s deepest love and intimacy toward another. Like a fine wine, when it is abused and not handled by an emotionally mature adult, it can be the source of great misery.

As we have noted on previous occasions, the Gentiles of Macedonia and Greece and the Roman Empire participated in religions that mixed idolatrous worship and sex in a manner that was only rivaled by ancient Baal worship – the perpetual nemesis of Israel throughout her ancient history. In this context, sex was often associated with idolatry which was particularly offensive to the Jew.

When the believer engaged in sexual immorality in Paul’s day, it mirrored the behavior of the unbeliever Gentile and was closely associated in people’s minds with the practices and beliefs surrounding the various pagan temples. If the believer practiced sexual immorality, he or she would effectively (albeit perhaps unknowingly) indicate that the worship of Jesus Christ was no different than the practices surrounding pagan deities. The believer in Jesus Christ would not illustrate the “set-apart” life (i.e. experiential sanctification) that was his in reality (i.e. positional sanctification).

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to be ambassadors for Him in this world. Ambassadors represent the interests of the leadership of their home country. We are to represent our heavenly leadership – Jesus Christ. When we engage in sexual practices that are contrary to God’s parameters, we are defrauding everyone – the sexual partner, ourselves, and others – with our life testimony that is a contradiction.

Outside of marriage, sex is distorted and distorts in more ways than can be mentioned. Inside of marriage, sex that is not practiced with an attitude of mutual submission and with a desire to meet the physical and emotional needs of one’s spouse simply becomes a meaningless ritual in time – at best. At worst, it becomes a control mechanism [e.g. a revenge mechanism (by withholding sex), a reward mechanism, a domination mechanism] and a source of resentment. One’s believing spouse is “defrauded” of the blessings God intended a vibrant sexual relationship to provide inside of marriage. For the man especially, when the sexual dynamic within marriage is missing or withheld, it can easily become a source of resentment, frustration and bitterness toward the spouse.

The tendency of fallen daughters of Eve to usurp the husband’s dominion in the home and to manipulate things to her will is as old as the fall of Adam and Eve. The tendency for sons of Adam to be embittered toward their wives as a result of the fallen daughter of Eve’s tendency to manipulate is also as old as the fall of Adam and Eve. Paul succinctly deals with these two tendencies in Colossians 3:18-19.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them.

Imagine a marriage in which the husband and wife demonstrate love and respect for each other in the way they talk about each other and in the way they physically interact in front of their children, family and friends. Imagine a marriage in which the wife understands and lovingly submits to the husband’s physical and emotional needs. Imagine a marriage in which the husband does likewise and demonstrates his love for his wife in a self-sacrificial manner. Imagine a marriage in which both spouses share the same vision for their marriage, i.e. that it be a demonstration of Christ and His loving care and concern for His Own.

Now imagine the polar opposite of these things in a marriage where two people claim to be believers. Are you attracted to that type of marriage? Are you attracted to the faith these people claim to have?

Paul reminds us that to reject, ignore or fail to enact these principles in one’s life is not a rejection of a man’s teaching (i.e. Paul himself), but it is a rejection of God. Accordingly, believers who reject, ignore or fail to enact these principles in their lives are effectively living like an agnostic or atheist. They are not living a life of sanctification.

PAUL PLEADS FOR A PEACEABLE AND ORDERLY LIFE (4:9-12)

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; 12 so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

After dealing with a negative situation, Paul provides encouragement. He notes that the Thessalonian believers were indeed practicing “love” for one another – even though he provides no specific examples.

If the believer is constantly living life in a frantic rush and turmoil and never has any “down-time,” it is a given that a vibrant Christian spiritual life cannot exist. Where a vibrant Christian spiritual life does not exist, then all other aspects of the believer’s life will suffer – e.g. emotional, social, marriage, family, etc. This is simply a rule of life since the fall of Adam and Eve.

Conversely, if the believer has a practiced pattern of decision-making in which the proper priorities govern and shape his or her decisions and expenditure of energy, then that believer’s life will be characterized by the things that Paul mentions in these verses – “a quiet life,” minding one’s own business (i.e. not a gossip, maligner, accuser, back-stabber, etc.), and one who supports himself and his family.

How revolting to cross paths in life with those who name the name of Christ, yet who do not take responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their family members! How pleasurable or attractive is it to have a mooch for a pastor, Christian leader or representative! Not only are fellow believers repulsed, but the unbelieving community is as well.

As we will see, Paul raises some of these issues because evidently some of the Thessalonian believers had stopped working to support themselves and because there had been a distortion or confusion that resulted from Paul’s teaching regarding the return of the Lord. These verses serve to transition us to Paul’s next topic – clarification of prior teaching regarding Christ’s coming.

THE COMFORT OF CHRIST’S COMING (4:13-18)

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 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, shall 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 shall rise first. 17 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.

In this passage, Paul is addressing the Thessalonians’ question regarding whether fellow believers who have died will miss the resurrection. Will the living have an advantage over the dead? Will the dead not participate in the Rapture and be left for some future resurrection? Will the dead in Christ be short-changed in any way? (Later in Paul’s ministry, he will address a similar concern voiced by the Corinthians – will the dead eventually be raised at all?)

Exegesis:

Paul begins his answer to the question in verses 13 and 14 as he discusses the fate of those “who are asleep.” In verse 15, Paul begins to relate the question to the *parousia* (translated “coming” in the NASV). Let’s examine this word.

- 1) This word does not always refer to the Rapture, rather it refers to the whole complex of events leading to the 2nd Advent.
- 2) Thus, it means more than “coming,” yet it includes that idea.
- 3) It emphasizes the thought of presence (since it is derived from *pareimi* which means to be present).
- 4) A good translation of this word is “arrival.”

- 5) So, in order to acknowledge the validity of one point frequently made by those who believe this passage is a reference to the 2nd Advent, this word [*parousia* – “coming”] can be used in reference to aspects of both the Rapture and the 2nd Advent.
- 6) The event of the Rapture or the 2nd Advent depends upon the context.
- 7) The important point of verse 15 is that the living will have no advantage over the dead in the *parousia*. The living will not precede the dead into the Lord’s presence.

In verse 16, Paul provides further details regarding the specific *parousia* that is at issue. It is from the further details that Paul provides in verses 16 and 17 that we can know whether he is describing the Rapture or the 2nd Advent. Let’s look at the following points:

- 1) In verse 16, Paul uses the emphatic personal pronoun (Himself) to emphasize that the Lord will come for His Own, personally. This is an extremely important point.
- 2) Verses 16 and 17 must be contrasted with Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50.
- 3) Note that in Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50, Jesus indicates that angels attend His coming and perform the task of separating the “wicked from among the righteous and will cast them into the furnace of fire” where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In verses 16 & 17, we observe several things concerning the *parousia* which do point to a contrast to other passages that describe the Lord’s coming.

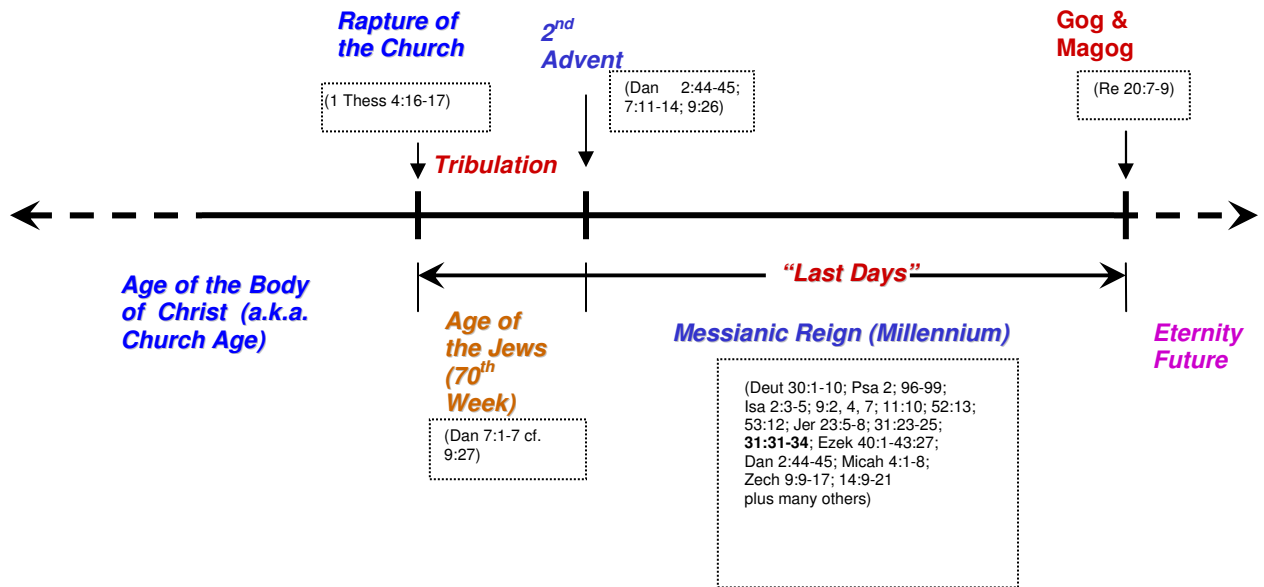
- 1) First, Christ “descends from heaven.”
- 2) Second, the meeting between the believer and the Lord occurs “in the air.”
- 3) Third, this coming is announced by a great signal from heaven called a “shout” – a command.
- 4) The Greek word is *keleusma* and was used of the cry of a ship’s master to his rowers and of a military officer to his soldiers.
- 5) Fourth, the “dead in Christ shall rise first.” The prepositional phrase “in Christ” is a technical phrase referring to Church Age – Body of Christ believers.
- 6) Fifth, the living (believers) are said to be “caught up.”
- 7) The phrase “caught up” is the passive voice of the verb *harpadzo*.
- 8) *Harpadzo* means to snatch away, seize, or carry off by force.
- 9) In the passive voice, the picture is presented of a sudden forcible seizure by divine agency.
- 10) *Harpadzo* was translated into the Latin Vulgate using a form of the Latin verb *rapio* from which we get the term Rapture.
- 11) Sixth, the living and the dead in Christ will meet the Lord together at this *parousia* described by Paul and the meeting will be in the air.
- 12) Seventh, when so analyzed, Paul’s description in these verses are a dramatic contrast to Jesus’ teaching concerning another aspect of the *parousia* – i.e. the 2nd Advent in which believers are left on earth and unbelievers are taken in judgment.

Summary

This passage by itself does not establish the Rapture as a pre-Tribulation event. However, from this passage, we see that there is a definite distinction between Paul’s description in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and Jesus’ description in Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50. Paul emphasizes the coming of the Lord Himself; whereas, Jesus taught that angels would attend His Coming and have certain responsibilities. Paul emphasizes that believers of the Church Age Body of Christ will meet the Lord in the air and there is no mention of the earth as that place of meeting. See the Appendix to these notes for a pictorial of this distinction.

APPENDIX A

A Dispensational Perspective of the Lord's Coming



APPENDIX B

The following diagram provides a pictorial aide to understanding Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks found in Daniel 9:20-27. Please note that I include a reference to a popular analysis by Sir Robert Anderson (1841-1918) who was born in Dublin, Ireland and of Scottish descent. He became a lawyer and police official in Scotland Yard and was closely associated with some of the early leaders of what I term the Second Reformation, the systematic formulation of dispensationalism – significant leaders of which included James M. Gray, C. I. Scofield, A. C. Dixon, John Nelson Darby and E. W. Bullinger. Anderson's detailed analysis of the prophecy of Daniel 9 resulted in a conclusion that A.D. 32 (specifically the Passover associated with Jesus' crucifixion) was the terminus of the first 483 years of the 490 years prophesied.¹ In his book *The Coming Prince*, Anderson reconciles the difference between 476 years (445 B.C. – A.D. 32) and 483 years (490 years – 7 years) as follows:

476 X 365 days = 173,740 days
 Add (14 March to 6th April, both inclusive) 24 days
 Add for leap years 116 days
 Equals a total of 173,880 days

69 prophetic weeks X 360 days or (69 X 7 X 360) = 173,880 days

¹ One online source that provides helpful insight into Sir Robert Anderson's work can be found at www.endtimepilgrim.org/70wks2.htm

The important thing to note is that regardless of whether one accepts Anderson's analysis, 483 years of Daniel's 490 prophesied years have been fulfilled, thus leaving seven years – the seven years of the Tribulation period. This fact is further support for a pre-Tribulation Rapture position.

