

“In that Great Getting Up Morning”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ¹

Charlie Brown: “It’s a beautiful little tree isn’t it?”

Linus: “Yes, it is.”

Charlie: “It’s a shame that we won’t be around to see it when it’s fully grown.”

Linus: “Why? Where are we going?”

“**Where are we going?**” That is the question isn’t it? When will history’s final curtain fall, and what will happen then?

In that great gettin’ up mornin’
Fare ye well, fare ye well [farewell]
In that great gettin’ up mornin’
Fare ye well, fare ye well
In that great gettin’ up mornin’
Fare ye well, fare ye well
In that great gettin’ up mornin’
Fare ye well, fare ye well

Let me tell you bout the comin of judgment -
God’s goin up to speak to Gabriel.
“Pick up your golden trumpet;
Blow your trumpet, Gabriel!”
“Lord, how loud shall I blow it?”
“Blow it so the people will know it.
Wake my people that are sleeping!”

When you see the forked lightning,
When you hear the rumbling thunder,
When you see the moon a-bleeding,
When you see the stars are falling,
When you see the world on fire;
There’s a better day a-comin!

Good news (good news) chariot’s comin!
So glad (so glad) chariot’s comin,
And I don’t wanna be left out!
When my Lord speaks to His Father
Oh, preacher, fold your Bible,
For the last soul’s converted!
Yes, the last soul’s converted,
And I don’t wanna be left out!

When you see dem sinners risin,
See ‘em marching home for heaven,
They be comin’ from ev’ry nation,
On their way to the great carnation,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 15, 2015.

Dressed in robes so white as snow,
Singin, “Oh, I been redeemed!”

I look forward to that Day, don't you? I feel sure that at least once a week I hear someone state the strong conviction that the end of the world is near, usually with the somewhat smug implication that God's judgment will then fall on the wicked, of whom the speaker is most certainly not one! It has become quite fashionable in some circles to express this opinion, and those who fail to subscribe to this view are immediately suspect as ill-informed, weak in faith, and maybe even heretics.

Well, while the end of all things may, in fact, be near, followers of Jesus in every age have had the conviction that they themselves were the terminal generation, and the New Testament encourages that attitude. That's part of what was going on in our text in 1 Thessalonians:

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

As many of us still do today, the Christians in Thessalonica believed that Jesus would return during their lifetimes, and Paul seems to have expected that as well. The problem was that some of the believers had now died before that Return occurred, and their families and friends were afraid that this meant that their loved ones would miss out on Christ's Return and not be a part of the New Kingdom He would then usher in.²

As we consider our text this morning, the most important thing to keep in mind is the central point Paul was making to the Thessalonians, namely, that **those Christians who die prior to Christ's return will be at no disadvantage when Jesus does return.**³ That's the main truth here, and it's the core of the good news Paul was conveying. And it is Good News!

At the same time, these particular verses stand at the epicenter of a great deal of contemporary Christian conversation, conversation having to do with the idea of a “rapture” that removes Christians from the earth prior to the coming of what is known as “the great tribulation” (Revelation 7:14). This morning, I'm going to briefly tell you how I understand these verses, and my approach will likely be different from how some of you think about them . . . and that's okay.

² William Powell Tuck, *The Left Behind Fantasy: The Theology behind the “Left Behind” Tales* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2010), p. 70. See Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *The Left Behind Series* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995-2007).

³ Leon Morris, “The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 141-142. The technical theological word for Jesus' return is “parousia” (pah-roo-SEE-ah), which is a transliteration of the Greek word παρουσία, and literally means “coming” or “presence.” In New Testament times, the word was used of the official visit of an important ruler, such as a Presidential visit might be today.

The word occurs twenty-four times in the New Testament, seventeen of which refer to Jesus' promised return: παρουσία in the NT (x24): Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Corinthians 15:23, 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, 10:10; Philippians 1:26, 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8-9; James 5:7-8; 2 Peter 1:16, 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28.

While we're all interested in knowing such things, these matters are not central to our faith, and different understandings of these verses are not grounds for contention among those who follow Jesus.

After all, it seems to me that if it were really important for us to have all the details related to the end times, God would surely have given them to us in a clearer fashion. W. T. Conner, a prominent Baptist theologian of several generations ago, wrote that "There has been, and is yet, great diversity of opinion in regard to the return of Christ to the earth. . . . One should not be too dogmatic where it is evidently so easy to miss the way; and when one has pronounced convictions, he should have due respect for good and honest brethren who hold opposite opinions."⁴ That's the spirit in which I make these comments.

Now while my own conclusion is that we don't know nearly so much about God's plan for the End Times as some would have us believe, that does not leave us in the position of knowing nothing at all. Our task this morning is to identify some of the things we can know. . . .

Some years ago I received a thirty-four page document from a lawyer in Oklahoma who said that he had received a new revelation about the Rapture. I initially threw it away, but after thinking about it, I got the paper out of the trash and read it—twice—and then I threw it away.

The whole idea of "the rapture," you see, is really rather recent. It's based on the Latin translation of the word ἀρραγησομεθα (ahr-pahg-ay-SOHM-ethah) in 1Thessalonians 4:17, a word that means "caught up, seized, or snatched away." The idea of "the rapture" seems to have its root not quite two hundred years ago in a vision experienced by fifteen year-old Margaret McDonald during a healing service in Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1830.

An Anglican priest named John Nelson Darby learned of and developed McDonald's idea and then brought it to the United States, where a Congregational pastor named Cyrus Scofield was persuaded by Darby's teaching. Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909, through the notes of which he expanded on Darby's thought, teaching a worldview that is technically known as *dispensational premillennialism*. This viewpoint became—and remains—very popular through its diligent efforts to create a system that explains every single detail of the End Times, and this view has been popularized in our own time through the *Left Behind* series of novels and movies that develop these same ideas.

As it is popularly understood, this "catching up" of believers will precede the time of the "Great Tribulation" (Revelation 7:14); but I submit to you this morning that while the schema of dispensational premillennialism with its "rapture" does have a certain attraction, in my view, the Bible—and especially the teaching of Jesus—simply does not support it.

Although my own conclusion is that the concept of "the rapture" is based on a misunderstanding of the text and is therefore neither true nor biblical, the good news is that the Bible does tell us some things pretty clearly about Christ's return, and Jesus told us the most important things Himself.⁵

As I understand the New Testament, there will be no secret coming of Jesus to take believers out of the world prior to a time of tribulation. To the contrary, it seems to me that Jesus was very clear that Christians would in fact experience tribulation rather than being

⁴ W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), p. 307.

⁵ For those who believe in "the Rapture," this concept tends to take pride of place in their faith, replacing the New Testament's focus on Jesus' Resurrection, which is a very dangerous thing.

exempted from it, and He warned about the importance of faithfulness during that time of trouble.⁶

In fact, if it really is true that Jesus might return at any moment—and He was pretty clear on that point—then we are in the time of tribulation already (Matthew 24:44). This is it. And, while the world situation these days is certainly bad enough, the Bible tells us that it's going to get worse before it gets better.

What 1 Thessalonians 4 is describing is Christ's Return at the End of Time, not some "secret coming" prior to the "Great Tribulation." And the "meeting the Lord in the air" described there is really very much like the delegation of dignitaries who would meet the President's plane at the airport if he were visiting Dallas, for example.

Those dignitaries wouldn't get on the plane and leave town with the President; they would meet the President at the airport so they could escort him into their city with great honor. Similarly, what is being described in our text is the "welcoming party" of the redeemed who are caught up to meet the Lord as He descends from Heaven in glory, and who then return with Him as He comes to establish the New Creation on the New Earth (Revelation 19:11-20:10).

Jesus' most substantial teachings about His Return are found in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, and His very last teaching on the subject occurs in Acts 1, just before His Ascension back to Heaven. There are several things that we can "know for sure" out of these passages:

1. **Jesus will return to this planet in bodily form** (Matthew 24:27; Acts 1:11).
2. **Jesus will return without warning, at a time when He is not expected** (Matthew 24:36, 44, 25:13; Acts 1:7). We can put our charts away.
3. **Prior to Jesus' return, though not revealing its specific timing, there will be enormous signs in the heavens:** "*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken*" (Matthew 24:29). Whatever specific events may be predicted here, it seems clear that they will be obvious and cataclysmic. We might say that "all *heaven* will break loose!"⁷
4. **Jesus will return in glory and majesty** (Matthew 24:30).
5. **His Return will not be secret at all. There will be absolutely no doubt about the fact that He has returned.** Believers and unbelievers alike will see Him "*coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory*" (Matthew 24:27, 30; Revelation 1:7).
6. **When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise first** (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
7. **After the believers who have died have been raised, believers still on the earth will be caught up to meet Him as He descends** (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
8. **When Jesus returns, there will be a judgment. Justice will be done in the Cosmos** (Matthew 24:45-51, 25:31-48; Revelation 20:11-15).
9. **After the Judgment, the New Heaven and the New Earth will be inaugurated** (Revelation 21:1-22:5).
10. **Until that Day comes, we have work to do, and God will give us the wisdom and power we need to do that work** (Acts 1:7-8).

⁶ Matthew 24; Mark 13.

⁷ Signs in the heavens are commonly associated in the Old Testament with the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31, 3:15; cf. Revelation 6:12-14, 8:12) and so here as well (Witherington, p. 451).

Because the Return of Christ cannot be dated, the New Testament urges us to stay constantly prepared for it. Jesus Himself said that the stunning suddenness of His coming will be like that of a thief in the night, like lightning in a storm, like the terrible judgment that fell on Sodom, like the flood of Noah's day.

There's nothing wrong with eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field or grinding at the mill. What is fatal is such preoccupation with these normal and necessary matters that we neglect to watch for the coming of the Lord and to be ready for it.⁸

When we look at the world around us, you and I may sometimes wonder why Jesus hasn't already come back to drop the final curtain on His fractured, fragmented, and fermenting creation, but Peter told us why: "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but **everyone** to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9).

At the same time, Peter also told us that "*the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*" (2 Peter 3:10-12a).

Peter's warning is that living without watchfulness invites disaster. A thief doesn't send a letter saying when he is going to burgle a house; the thief's principal weapon is surprise, and therefore homeowners who have valuables in their houses must maintain a constant guard. But to get this picture right, it's important to remember that our watching for the coming of Christ is not an anticipation filled with fear and dread, but is rather an eager anticipation of the arrival of indescribable glory and joy.⁹

My friends, the New Testament is quite clear that Jesus' Return could happen at any moment. And as of *this* moment, the Door is still open . . . but it will someday be closed. Like the door on Noah's ark, there will come a time when it is too late. And, while Jesus' first coming was for salvation, not for judgment (John 3:17, 12:47), His Return will be for judgment, not for salvation (Revelation 20:11 ff.).

At the end of history (HisStory), the only thing that will matter is a relationship of love and obedience to God through Jesus Christ. For some, the time of His coming will be a time of terror, not because of some calloused and arbitrary decision on *God's* part, but because of the trajectory of all the decisions of *their* lives.¹⁰ For others, Jesus' Return will mark the completion of their salvation. Having accepted Jesus as Savior and followed Him as Lord, they will sing and celebrate when He appears!

So what does all of this have to do with us today? In the first place, the End of all things *is near*, as it has always been. It is imminent – at the very door. Any moment could be our last, and some things can't be left to the last moment. It is too late to prepare for an examination when the test paper is in front of you. It is too late to patch the roof when the rain begins.

Jesus has told us that His Return will be sudden and unexpected, but it need not find us unprepared. It could be *today*. What if it *were* today? Are *you* ready?

⁸ Frank Stagg, "Matthew," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton Allen, volume 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), p. 222.

⁹ Barclay, p. 317.

¹⁰ God really does honor our freedom to reject Him. We are free to sin. But we are not free to sin and not die.

Finally, to follow up on Peter's admonition to "live holy and godly lives and look forward to the day of God," here are the words to another black spiritual that wrap it all up pretty well:

"There's a King and a Captain high,
And He's coming by and by,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

You can hear His legions charging in the regions of the sky,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

There's a Man they thrust aside,
Who was tortured till He died,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

He was hated and rejected,
He was scorned and crucified,
And He'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.

When He comes! When He comes!
He'll be crowned by saints and angels when He comes.

They'll be shouting out Hosanna! to the Man that men denied,
And I'll kneel among my cotton when He comes."¹¹



¹¹ Cited in William Barclay, "The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2," *The Daily Study Bible Series*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 318. Probably comes from French Earl Oliver, *Oliver's Songs of Deliverance* (Kansas City, 1908).