

# “Nearer Now than When We First Believed”

Romans 13:8-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 <sup>1</sup>

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, our journey through the Bible also brings us to Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians. When we observe the Lord’s Supper, we frequently turn our thoughts toward the first such meal, when Jesus infused the ancient Passover ritual with the meaning of what He would do for us the next day on the cross.

While we do well to remember the price at which our salvation was purchased, the New Testament is not so concerned with Jesus’ death as it is with His resurrection and with our own resurrections after Him, which Jesus’ victory over death made both possible and sure, if we belong to Him. The Thessalonian letters focus on this future Hope, and it is in that direction that our thoughts turn today.

When we consider the future in biblical terms, 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 implied and somewhat smug expectation 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 and seriously suspect as ill-informed, weak in faith, and maybe even heretics.

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

*<sup>13</sup> “And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.*

*<sup>15</sup> We tell you this directly from the Lord:<sup>2</sup> We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. <sup>17</sup> Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> So encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).*

As many still do today, the Christians in Thessalonica believed Jesus would return during their lifetimes, and it seems that Paul expected that as well. The problem was that some of the believers had now died before that return, and their families and friends “were afraid that this meant that they would miss out on his return and not be a part of the new age kingdom which Christ would usher in.”<sup>3</sup>

The Thessalonians weren’t worried that their friends would fail to be resurrected, but they were worried about whether their friends would have any share in the great events associated

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on October 3, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> These words do not appear in the New Testament. They appear to be an *αἰγροφον* (ahg-rah-FAHN), a saying of Jesus not preserved in written canonical sources and yet to be discovered in some other written form. See Linda Bridges, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

with the Parousia. Paul's main response to their concern was to say that believers who die will be at no disadvantage whatsoever when the Parousia comes.<sup>4</sup>

The word "parousia" (pah-roo-SEE-ah) 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.<sup>5</sup> As time passed, "Parousia" became for Christians a technical term that refers specifically to Jesus' return.

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

At the same time, these particular verses stand at the epicenter of a great deal of contemporary Christian attention, namely the idea of a "rapture" that removes Christians from the earth prior to the coming of "the great tribulation" (Revelation 7:14). 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. While we're all interested in knowing such things, these matters are peripheral to our faith, and different understandings of these verses are no 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:

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.<sup>6</sup>

That's the spirit in which I make these comments.

The whole idea of "the rapture" is quite a recent one, based on the Latin translation of the word ἀρπαγησόμεθα (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 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 expounded Darby's thought, which is technically known as dispensational premillennialism. This viewpoint became very popular in its diligent efforts to create a system that explained all the details of the end times, and this view has caught fire in our own generation through the *Left Behind* series of novels that claim to be based on Scripture.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), p. 307.

Our time together this morning does not allow for an extensive examination of either dispensational premillennialism or of the Rapture. Happily, our own Dr. Bill Tuck has a new book out this year on the subject, entitled *The Left Behind Fantasy: The Theology behind the "Left Behind" Tales*.

As usual, Bill has done his work carefully, and if you're interested in these matters, I encourage you to read his book. Bill's central conclusion is that the idea of "the rapture" is a fabricated, non-biblical concept that for those who adhere to it, tends to replace Jesus' resurrection as the organizing principle of their faith, a situation he regards as very dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Quoting Dr. Richard Vinson of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Bill points out that "Had Jesus believed in the Rapture, he would not have said, '*False messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. Watch out! I have warned you about this ahead of time!*'" (Mark 13:22-23). Instead, he would have said something like 'False messiahs and false prophets will appear, but you won't have to worry about it, because you'll be in heaven.'<sup>8</sup>

Bill's book suggests directions for more adequate understanding of the New Testament, viewpoints with which I myself am much more comfortable. The good news is that the Bible does tell us some things about Christ's return pretty clearly, and Jesus told us the most important things Himself. For example, Jesus told us that His return will have the stunning suddenness of a thief in the night and will strike like lightning in a terrible storm, or like the terrible judgment that fell from the sky on Sodom (Matthew 24:43, 27; Luke 17:29-30).

Jesus told His disciples that "No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch" (Mark 13:32-33). And Jesus' most important statement on the subject can be found in Luke 12:40, where He told us, "You must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected."

As you and I sit here this morning, here are four things we know for sure and certain: (1) Jesus is coming again; (2) there will be no warning of His arrival; (3) we have work to do as we wait; and (4) God's Spirit gives us the power to do this work.

A little girl had heard about Jesus' return in Sunday School, and she asked her mother about it when they got home.

"Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?"

"Yes, dear."

"Could he come this week?"

"Yes, dear."

"Could he come today?"

"Yes, dear."

"Could he come in the next hour?"

"Yes, dear."

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<sup>7</sup> Tuck, pp. 116-117.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Richard Vinson of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, in private correspondence with Bill Tuck on November 14, 2004, cited in Tuck, p. 83.

“Could he come in a few minutes?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Mommy, would you comb my hair?”<sup>9</sup>

The little girl’s concern about being ready to welcome Jesus leads to two final questions: Have you accepted Jesus’ invitation to salvation? Are you sure? And second, will Jesus find your life’s priorities well-ordered and pleasing to Him when He comes? Are you about the Master’s business?

As Paul wrote in our first text, *“This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for **our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed**. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living”* (Romans 14:11-12).

“Jesus is coming to earth again; what if it were today?  
 Coming in power and love to reign; what if it were today?  
 Coming to claim his chosen Bride; all the redeemed and purified,  
 Over this whole earth, scattered wide, what if it were today?” (#195)

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<sup>9</sup> Don Hussong, *Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 3.