

The Second Coming

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Today, Christians gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the first day of the week—what we know as Easter Sunday—a group of women came to Jesus’ tomb bearing spices with which they intended to embalm Jesus’ dead body. They arrived at the tomb fully expecting to find a corpse. Instead, they found the tomb was empty! The mammoth stone that had blocked its entrance had been rolled away! They saw the angel of the Lord sitting on the stone. The angel announced to the women, “You seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is *risen* from the dead.” Here is the Christian gospel in a nutshell: Christ is risen from the dead! All the founders of the worlds major religions are dead—all, except for Christ!

In the inscrutable providence of God our text for preaching this morning has an explicit reference to the resurrection: “If we believe that Jesus died and *rose again* . . .” (v. 14). Belief in the resurrection is the core belief of the Christian church. A dead savior cannot save! If Jesus’ body lies in a cold tomb outside the old city of Jerusalem at this moment, then the Christian religion is a fraud; it has no power to save. If you deny the bodily resurrection of Christ, then you cannot be saved. There is no hope for you; there is only death and eternal doom.

In Romans 10:9 Paul gives one of the clearest statements of the gospel. He writes, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Belief in the gospel requires belief in the resurrection. Do you believe that Jesus died for you and rose from the dead on the third day? Then confess it with his church: “I believe in Jesus Christ. . . . He was crucified, dead, and buried . . . the third day he rose again!” Church of Jesus Christ, you worship a living Savior!

Last week we used this same text. Our theme was “those who sleep in Jesus.” We considered the biblical truth that for the Christian, death is a falling asleep. At the end of time our Savior will awaken us to life everlasting. Believers who have died and gone to heaven will not be forgotten when Christ returns. “Those who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” That is the Christian hope.

Today we turn our attention to the second part of the text, which deals with Christ’s second coming. I have three points, and we will get to them in a moment. But first we need to establish the context, and that is that the apostle Paul’s topic in these verses is Christ’s second coming: “For the Lord Himself will *descend* from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.” The basic meaning of the word translated “descend” is *come down, go down*. Years ago, as I was teaching one of my grandsons modern Greek, I would pick him up and climb the stairs, and say to him the Greek word meaning “I go up.” Then I

would start back down the stairs and say to him the Greek word meaning “I go down.” The word I would use is the common Greek word meaning *I go down*. It is a word learned by Greek children from their earliest days, and it is the word used by the apostle Paul here. Our translation has “descend,” and that is an accurate translation. But “descend” is not one of the first words we teach to young children. We don’t take them in our arms and start down the stairs and say, “I descend.” Rather, we say, “I go down.” That is the word Paul uses here. What he says is literally, “The Lord himself *will come down* from heaven with a shout.” The event that Paul describes is the fulfillment of our Lord’s promise to his disciples in John 14. Shortly before he went to the cross, he told them, “I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, *I will come again* and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3).

The Second Coming is one of the core beliefs of the church. In the familiar words of the Apostles Creed the church professes that Christ “ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there *he shall come* to judge the living and the dead.” Jesus promised, “I will come again,” and the church believes that. He came to the earth the first time to purchase our salvation. After he died and rose again, he went up to heaven to prepare a place for us. That is where he is now, and as his plan unfolds, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. The Lord will come down from heaven with a shout—a shout that will be heard by everyone, living or dead. All creation will hear that shout and will know that the second coming is taking place, exactly as planned from eternity. Every human being will assemble for the final judgment. For those who don’t know Christ it will be terrifying, but for us who know him and love his appearing it will be our first glimpse of him who loved us with an everlasting love. The man of sorrows and acquainted with grief will return with great glory. With this background let us look at the particulars of our text. I have three points: (1) the church is raptured, (2) the saints rise to meet the Lord in the air, (3) the saints return with their victorious King. First,

1. The church is raptured.

Here in our text is the astounding truth that “we who are alive and remain shall be *caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Let that sink in for a moment. At some point in the future—no man knows the day or the hour—Christ’s true disciples will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord Jesus at his second coming. This will be a true miracle; it will not be accomplished by man’s scheming but by God’s Almighty power. Jesus will come back for his people, as he promised when he told his disciples, “if I go and prepare a place for you, *I will come again* and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3).

The word for “caught up” literally means *snatched away*. The English word *rapture* is derived from the word used in Jerome’s fourth century Latin translation: *rapere*, meaning *to seize and carry off*. The Rapture is literally Christ’s snatching the church away from this earth when he comes again. By Christ’s supernatural power, his people will be caught up out of this world and brought into his personal presence, never to be separated from him again! This is the Rapture, and biblically, it is not a distinct event, but part of Christ’s Second Coming.

There is a lot of interest in the rapture, and for some, it is big business. Think of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s, or the *Left Behind* books. An online encyclopedia says of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, “this book became a bestseller. Coming on the heels of the Six-Day War, the book fueled the popularity of dispensationalism and its support of ethnic Jews as the ‘chosen people of God.’”¹ But God doesn’t have *two* chosen peoples; he has *one*, identified in Scripture as those “chosen . . . in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Make no mistake! God’s elect are chosen *in Christ*—that is, Christians!

There is an interesting account in the April issue of *New Horizons* of how nineteenth century America shaped dispensationalism’s rise, and then how dispensationalism shaped the twentieth century church.² Dispensationalism arose in the nineteenth century with John Nelson Darby, a leader among the Plymouth Brethren in England, then spread to the USA. The nineteenth century also gave us a number of new religions and cults (Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses) along with anti-Christian secular-materialistic philosophies (Charles Darwin and Karl Marx). All of these arose in the 19th century. They were not the historic faith of the church.

What is dispensationalism? It is a theology that divides up biblical history. While it has undergone a lot of changes over time, there are two bedrock principles: (1) an iron-clad distinction between Israel and the church, and (2) an insistence on “literally interpreting” all categories of biblical literature, including Old Testament prophecies.³

Dispensationalism breaks up the biblical story about a single people of God, elect in Christ before the foundation of the world, beginning with Adam in the garden of Eden, and continuing until the last person to be saved before the Second Coming, all saved by the finished work of Christ, identified as Abraham’s true spiritual seed, and part of his body the church, personally known by the Lord. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:19, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord *knoweth* them that are his.” The fact that the Savior

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hal_Lindsey accessed 3-30-24

² Review of *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* by Daniel G. Hummel, reviewed by OPC pastor Daniel R. Svendsen (*New Horizons* 4-24, pp. 12–13)

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/dispensational-theology/> accessed 3-30-24

personally *knows* all those whom the Father gave to him in eternity past, who were in his thoughts as he went to the cross to purchase their salvation, is identified as “the foundation of God.” It is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith. And what is this foundation? It is this: “The Lord knoweth *them that are his*.” The Lord doesn’t have two distinct peoples: a heavenly people and an earthly people, one identified by faith in Jesus Christ, and the other identified by physical descent from the patriarch Abraham. No! Christ has *one* people, whom he has known from eternity past—before any of us were ever born, or had done any good or evil—who are part of the election of grace. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, separated from the mass of humanity whom God judicially abandoned in their sins, his elect are *his*, given to him by the Father, and for whom he has accomplished their redemption. Christ does not have two peoples—one whose eternal destiny is an earthly Canaan where every Jew will dwell safely, every man under his vine and fig tree, enjoying the delights of a renewed earth; and another whose eternal destiny is to be with him in heaven, when the church gathers around the throne of God, in the very presence of the Lamb who was slain, worshipping the Father, Son and Holy Spirit forevermore. The worldling dreams of earthly security, of material prosperity and plenty of food and drink and a nice place to live. These are the things that we work for. But ultimately life has meaning only as we glorify God and draw near to him and enjoy the light of his countenance. As Scripture assures us, God himself is “our portion forever”⁴—that portion which can never be taken away from us. To live eternally upon earth on one’s own plot of land in the Middle East, sitting under one’s own fruitful vine and fig tree, while missing out on being in the personal presence of the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, who has loved us with an everlasting love and accomplished our salvation—truly this would be missing out on the greatest blessing of all. No! God has *one* people, not two; this is the foundation of the biblical religion.

In the Heidelberg Catechism the question is asked, “What do you believe concerning ‘the holy catholic church’?” The answer: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.”⁵ Yes, there is a single people of God, destined for eternal union and communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living life to the fullest, forevermore. To miss out on this is to be cheated out of the greatest blessing man could ever experience.

But under dispensationalism God has *two* peoples: the church, his spiritual people; and Israel, his earthly people. This dualism shaped Darby’s thought, and its

⁴ Ps. 73:26

⁵ <https://threeforms.org/heidelberg-catechism/#question-54> accessed 3-30-24

influence continues to this day, leading millions of evangelical Christians to “stand with Israel,” despite its government’s heavy-handed efforts to suppress Christian evangelism and Christian churches.

Reformed Christians do not reject the Rapture. We wholeheartedly embrace the truth taught by Paul that “we who are alive and remain shall be *caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” What we do reject is the idea that the rapture is a separate event. Rather, it is part of the Second Coming.

According to dispensationalism’s convoluted scheme, Christ raptures his church and takes the saints back to heaven to escape the judgment of the Great Tribulation, then brings them back with him at his second coming seven years later. In dispensationalism there are essentially *two* second comings—the first to the upper atmosphere at the rapture; then a second, seven years later, when his feet finally touch down upon the Mount of Olives.

With regard to the second coming Christ taught that no one knows the day or the hour—“not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only.”⁶ But under classic dispensationalism, *the whole world* will know the day and hour: it will follow the rapture by exactly seven years to the day!

Let me be clear: there will be a rapture, when all those who trust in Christ will be “caught up” from this earth. It will not be a separate event, but will take place at the second coming. My second point is this:

2. The saints rise to meet the Lord in the air.

Our text teaches that “we who are alive and remain shall be *caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The purpose of the rapture—of our being “caught up” or “snatched away”—is “to meet the Lord in the air.” The word translated “air” occurs seven times. It is used in such expressions as “threw dust into the air,” “beat the air,” “speak into the air,” “the prince of the power of the air.” In English, *air* is the atmosphere, the mixture of invisible gases (mainly nitrogen and oxygen) that surrounds the earth. In our text, “air” is secondary; the main focus is on meeting the Lord. This will be of infinitely greater importance than by chance running into a celebrity on the streets of Hollywood. People who have a chance encounter with a celebrity usually like to talk about it. It is something that sets them apart from other people. It is an unusual occurrence. But at the second coming the saints rise to meet the Lord of heaven—of infinitely greater importance than a Hollywood celebrity!

Anyone who goes to church intuitively knows that the most important character in the Bible is Jesus Christ. We have studied his life, read about him, thought about him, prayed to him, sung to him, wondered what he looks like. We have taught our children about him. He is God, and the second commandment forbids making

⁶ Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32

images and representations of God. But we love him, and the reason for this is because he first loved us. He loved us with an everlasting love and drew us to him by the mighty power of his blessed Spirit. But at the second coming, faith will be sight; we will actually get to look into the face of our Savior, to see him face to face. We have thought of him often with great longing, but at the second coming our hopes will be realized, and we will see him face to face.

What a marvelous, unforgettable experience that will be! As the hymnwriter expressed it, “Face to face with Christ, my Savior, face to face—what will it be when with rapture I behold him, Jesus Christ who died for me? Only faintly now I see him with the darkened veil between, but a blessed day is coming when his glory shall be seen. Face to face I shall behold him, far beyond the starry sky; face to face in all his glory, I shall see him by and by.”⁷

The glory of heaven will not be the ivory palaces or the streets of gold. The glory of heaven will be Christ! We need to remember this in a world that has thousands and millions of distractions, all vying for our attention. The thing that really ought to get our attention is the Savior, the one who loved us and died for us. What is the most important thing to you? Your honest answer to that question will reveal whether you are an idolater or a Christian. Christ is our God. *God* by its very definition is *a person or thing of supreme value*. If something holds supreme value, then it is the most important thing in all our life. Do we need to reprioritize our values, to bring them into accord with our confession? Each of us should spend much time thinking about this. Can we honestly say, “To me, to live is *Christ*”?

Thirdly,

3. The saints return with their victorious King.

Our text continues: “And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

Remember that the rapture is an aspect of Christ’s second coming. As I speak, the church’s heavenly bridegroom has been away in heaven for nearly two thousand years, preparing a dwelling place for his people. Jesus told his disciples, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, *that where I am, there you may be also*” (John 14:2–3). As we pointed out before, this text tracks perfectly with Paul’s teaching in our present text: “And thus *we shall always be with the Lord.*” The point is that when Christ returns, believers will be ushered into his personal presence, never to depart from him again. Up until this point he has been present with his church *spiritually* only. At the second coming he will come down *bodily*. He will come down to this earth, returning to the place where he had lived during his incarnation. The first time he came in weakness, born as a little baby to humble

⁷ https://hymnary.org/text/face_to_face_with_christ_my_savior accessed 3-30-24

parents, raised in obscurity and poverty. When he returns, he will come in glory, having defeated death, hell, and all his foes. He will come to claim the kingdom given to him before the foundation of the world. “Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain, and he lives forever with his saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!” He returns, having triumphed over his enemies. He will reign forever, and his saints will reign with him.

The heavenly bridegroom will return for his church, and we will never be separated from him again. We will meet him in the air and escort him to this earth in the same manner as the people of an ancient city-state went out to greet their victorious king returning from victory in battle. Jesus will not come back to this earth alone, but escorted by his adoring saints. Those who rise to meet him will be those who looked to the cross and believed in the Savior, to the salvation of their souls.

At the second coming, the church is raptured, the saints rise to meet the Lord in the air, and the saints return with their victorious King. Jesus rose, Jesus returns, and Jesus reigns! Amen!