

The Second Coming in Thessalonians #3

Probably the most consistent theme of the two books of Thessalonians is the second coming of Christ. So far we have looked at 1 Thess. 1:10, 2:19, 3:12-13, and 4:13.

Jesus' Return is Preceded by the Resurrection and the Rapture of Saints

1 Thess. 4:13-18 – “¹³ But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. ¹⁵ For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: ¹⁷ Then we are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

Verse 14:

As Christ was raised from the dead, so also those of his who die before he comes back will come with him.

Remember last time we dealt with this more fully, from 1 Thess. 3:13 (“... at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.”), so we will not repeat it here, except to simply state that when Jesus returns, he will be bringing the dead-and-resurrected saints with him. The point of 4:14 is that we believe this because Christ himself rose from death. He rose not just for himself, but as the firstfruits from the dead, and so we believe in our resurrection (or rapture) also.

The Bible clearly shows that after death a believer is with Christ. Lk. 23:43 (to the thief on the cross) and 16:19-31 (Lazarus and the rich man)

- Death is not a cessation of existence, or of consciousness, not “soul sleep” as some call it.
- At death, the elect are in God’s presence in “Paradise”, described in Lk. 16 as “Abraham’s bosom” and the unregenerate will be in conscious torment in Hades (the place of the wicked dead, prior to final judgment).

Verse 15:

Whenever Christ does return, there will obviously be some believers who are alive. They will not “go ahead” of those who have died. There will be a resurrection of the righteous dead, followed almost simultaneously by the “change” of the living saints, and so all the elect, resurrected or changed, will be taken up to meet the Lord in the air.

What do I mean by “changed”? That is the word used in 1 Cor. 15:51-52 to describe the change from our mortal, fleshly bodies to our immortal and eternal, spiritual bodies. This happens to all God’s elect, but the only difference is that living saints are changed directly, while the dead are also resurrected.

The commonly used word “rapture” is not in the Bible, but is a valid word describing this change from physical to spiritual bodies, immediately followed by the catching up of the glorified saints into the air to be with Jesus.

Verses 16-17:

When Christ returns, it will be with a great shout by “the archangel”, and a trumpet call (1 Cor. 15:52). Here again, I would like to distinguish between Christ coming “in the air” to catch up the saints, and his later return in fearful judgment with the armies of heaven. At that point he will not just be in the air, but his feet will stand on the mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4). That return is also described in Rev. 19 in awesome detail. At that time it will be with his angels in battle.

The first resurrection and rapture will be signalled by the shout of the archangel, but it is not a battle shout. It is more probably something to the effect of “Saints arise! Your LORD has come for you!”.

At that point there is a great resurrection of saints that have been long dead. They come out of their graves with their new, glorified bodies. Living saints are also changed immediately, “in the twinkling of an eye”. This is described in 1 Cor. 15, the chapter where Paul is defending the whole concept of the resurrection of believers against those who were denying it.

1 Cor. 15:51-52 – “Behold, I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

From that point on, we will “ever be with the Lord”. That is, we will no longer be separated from him as we are in this life. We will see him face to face.

Verse 18: “Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

These words are not to terrify us, but should be a source of great comfort to us. If there is fear in a person’s heart at the thought of Christ returning, it is probably because they have unconfessed sins, or at least they do not have a real confidence that those sins are really gone and covered by the blood. If this describes you, then you need to realize that a life free of condemnation is possible. Confess those sins to God and believe that they are really forgiven.

Here is a table that should clarify the differences between the “Rapture” and the Second Coming.

	First Resurrection and Rapture	Second Coming of Christ
When	Imminent – could happen at any time	Not imminent - comes at end of seven years of the Tribulation
Where	Christ comes “in the air”, as the Great Shepherd gathering his sheep.	Christ stands on mount of Olives in Jerusalem, as the mighty Warrior, the Lion of Judah, King of kings and Lord of lords.
Purpose	The purpose of this is peaceful - for the saints to be united with Christ and to receive their glorified, spiritual bodies.	The purpose of the Second Coming is not peaceful, but it is the day of the LORD’s wrath and fury for the destruction of the Antichrist and all the armies that have come against Israel, the deliverance of Israel, and the revelation of Christ to them. “... and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced ...” (Zech. 12:10).
Who is Affected	Overcoming saints are resurrected and/or “changed” and go to be with Christ. Nothing happens to the unsaved, or apparently, to lukewarm believers (“foolish virgins”, Mt. 25). They are simply left here to go through the great Tribulation.	Saints return with Christ and his mighty angels. The unsaved the targets of God’s vengeance, and many are killed.
Subsequent events	For the saints, the marriage supper of the Lamb. For the world, earthly governments continue but are consolidated into a one-world government with the rise of the Antichrist. There are 7 years of “the Great Tribulation” and God’s fearsome, worldwide judgments. Satan is cast down to the earth and is free to vent his wrath on the world, and on remaining Christians.	The Antichrist and false prophet are cast into Hell (Gehenna). Satan is cast into the bottomless pit for 1000 years. The world is physically restored from the Tribulation judgments. All earthly governments are replaced by Christ reigning as the righteous King for 1000 years from his throne in Jerusalem.

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