

SERMON NOTES

I Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11; II Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2:1-12 “The Rapture and Second Coming”

Intro:

- *Have you ever wondered: **Is this** (what we are now experiencing) **all there is to our salvation?***
- *And if it is – then maybe the Gospel is not quite all it was cracked up to be?*

The Gospel is the Good News of what Jesus Christ has already accomplished for our salvation through his death and resurrection – already we have the forgiveness of sins / already we have the gift of eternal life // already we have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit

*--but if that were all there was to the Gospel, it would be incomplete
--because there is still way too much unfinished business in the world*

- *Death still awaits us all // Satan still roams the earth seeking whom he may devour // Indwelling sin still causes believers to behave contrary to their godly desires // War and poverty and famine and injustice and oppression and violence and immorality and disease and suffering still dominate the world’s landscape
--Why does a loving and all-powerful God allow evil to continue to flourish and cause so much suffering?*
- *Erika – trying to correct a girl who was fighting with other kids on the playground
--Grandma was called in to help correct the girl
--Grandma: “What’s the problem? She’s just doing what I teach her. I tell her: ‘Finish what you start. And if someone else starts something, you finish it.’”
--Maybe Erika could nominate her for the next Nobel Peace Prize*
- *2000 years ago Jesus started something – he picked a fight with Satan – and in fact, he secured Satan’s defeat through his sacrificial death, shed blood and resurrection from the grave
--but Satan still roams the earth seeking whom he may devour – defeated but not yet destroyed – still a powerful enemy -- and a sore loser at that
--but the Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ will finish what he started – Death will be destroyed // Satan will be destroyed // Evil will be no more*
- *Without the return of Jesus Christ to earth to finish what he started 2000 years ago – the Gospel would not be the Gospel*
- *From Max Lucado’s “When Christ Comes”*

- *You are in your car driving home. Thoughts wander to the game you want to see or meal you want to eat, when suddenly a sound unlike any you've ever heard fills the air. The sound is high above you. A trumpet? A choir? A choir of trumpets?*
- You don't know, but you want to know. So you pull over, get out of your car, and look up. As you do, you see you aren't the only curious one. The roadside has become a parking lot. Car doors are open, and people are staring at the sky. Shoppers are racing out of the grocery store. The Little League baseball game across the street has come to a halt. Players and parents are searching the clouds.
- *And what they see, and what you see, has never before been seen.*
- As if the sky were a curtain, the drapes of the atmosphere part. A brilliant light spills onto the earth. There are no shadows. None. From whence came the light begins to tumble a river of color – spiking crystals of every hue ever seen and a million more never seen.
- *Riding on the flow is an endless fleet of angels. They pass through the curtains one myriad at a time, until they occupy every square inch of the sky. North. South. East. West. Thousands of silvery wings rise and fall in unison, and over the sound of the trumpets, you can hear the cherubim and seraphim chanting, 'Holy, Holy, Holy.'*
- The final flank of angels is followed by 24 silver-bearded elders and a multitude of souls who join the angels in worship. Presently the movement stops and the trumpets are silent, leaving only the triumphant triplet: *'Holy, holy, holy.'* Between each word is a pause. With each word, a profound reverence. You hear your voice join in the chorus. You don't know why you say the words, but you know you must.
- *Suddenly, the heavens are quiet. All is quiet. The angels turn, you turn, the entire world turns – and there he is. Jesus. Through waves of light you see the silhouetted figure of Christ the King. He is atop a great stallion, and the stallion is atop a billowing cloud. He opens his mouth, and you are surrounded by his declaration: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.'*
- The angels bow their heads. The elders remove their crowns. And before you is a figure so consuming that you know, instantly you know: Nothing else matters. Forget stock markets and school reports. Sales meetings and football games. Nothing is newsworthy. All that mattered, matters no more, *for Christ has come.*
- **When I was a college student, I thought for sure that I would live to see that Day**
- **Even now, I think it is possible – but at age 57, it is also possible that I will not**
- **The other day I was feeling a little sad to think that I might miss the Greatest of all Days – the Day of the Coming of the Lord**

- ***But then I joyfully realized – No I won't! – even if I die first – I will be part of the Day of the Coming of the Lord – that's what 1 Thessalonians 4 is all about***

I. THE DEAD IN CHRIST WILL RISE FIRST TO MEET THE LORD (4:13-18)

- A basic element of Paul's missionary preaching in Thessalonica was the *Parousia* – the Coming of the Lord – a teaching that goes back to Jesus
- *The Parousia would take place from heaven, would be accompanied by clouds, angels, trumpet blasts, and manifestation of power and glory*

Matthew 24:30-31 (NIV) ³⁰**“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.**

1 Thessalonians 4:15 - 17 (NIV) ¹⁵According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷After 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.

1 Corinthians 15:51 - 52 (NIV) ⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵²in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

- ***And the Parousia would be associated with Judgment***

Matthew 16:27 (NIV) ²⁷**For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.**

Matthew 25:31 - 32 (NIV) ³¹**“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.**

2 Thessalonians 1:7 - 10 (NIV) This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

- *It appears that the Thessalonians understood Paul to say that all who believed in Jesus would see the Parousia – the coming of the Lord*
- **But now some believers had died – what would that mean for them?**
- *Would they miss out on the Parousia – or would they be at some disadvantage compared to those who were alive at Christ’s coming?*
- **It was to address these concerns that Paul wrote these famous verses in I Thessalonians 4:13-18**

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 ¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For 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 will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort one another with these words.

- *The death and resurrection of Jesus have transformed death from a permanent, hopeless end of existence to a temporary sleep*
- **It is no more difficult for the risen Jesus to raise the dead than it is for us to awake the sleeping**
- *Our word “cemetery” – meaning “a place of sleep” comes from the Greek word used here for sleep in vs. 13-15*
- **Christians grieve the loss of loved ones – but not as those without hope – for we look forward to the coming reunion in the sky spoken of in verse 17**
- **Because Jesus endured the full horror of death and separation from God as our Sin-Bearer and then conquered the grave in His resurrection– therefore He has transformed death for us into a mere sleep**

- *Then Paul reassures the Thessalonians that those who have already died in Christ – those who have fallen asleep in Jesus – will not miss the Coming of the Lord nor be disadvantaged in any way*
- **In fact, the dead in Christ will rise first to meet the Lord in the air together with those who are alive at the Parousia**
- *Those who are alive at the Coming of the Lord are said to be “caught up” together with the resurrected dead to a meeting with the Lord in the clouds*
- **Our English word “Rapture” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word meaning “caught up” or “snatched away”**
- *Now, the key question of much debate in I Thessalonians 4 is “caught up to where?”*
- Many of you will say: *“Why, caught up to heaven, of course”*
- But what does the text say?

1 Thessalonians 4:17 (NIV) ¹⁷After 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.

- *“Caught up together to a meeting with the Lord in the air”*
- The Greek word for “meeting” was used as a technical term for the formal reception of a visiting dignitary in which a delegation of citizens or city officials would go out to meet a guest on his way to the city and escort him back into town with appropriate pomp and circumstance

Matthew 25:6 (NIV) ⁶**“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’**

Acts 28:15 (NIV) ¹⁵The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

- *In each case the word describes a welcoming party going out to meet someone and then escorting him back to the destination*
- **In the context of I Thess. 4, the meaning would be that the resurrected dead and the raptured living together will meet the descending Lord in the air and accompany him in glory and honor the rest of the way to earth**
- This was how the early church fathers – Greek-speaking – understood this passage:

- For example, John Chrysostom – Bishop of Constantinople (4th cent.): *“If He (Christ) is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. “We shall be caught up in the clouds.” Do you see how great is the honor? And as He descends, we go forth to meet him, and, what is more blessed than all, so shall we be with him.”*
- The early church interpreted I Thessalonians 4 to refer to the Second Coming of Christ – an event which included the Rapture
- *2nd & 3rd & 4th century commentaries do not mention a two-stage Return of Christ with the Rapture and Second Coming separated by a 7-year Tribulation*
- The interpretation that I Thessalonians 4 refers to the church being raptured to heaven prior to the Tribulation emerged in the 1800’s and became popular in the 1900’s among evangelical Christians
- *This view – called the Pre-Tribulation Rapture – has been popularized in recent years by books and movies depicting a secret rapture of Christians being taken up to heaven prior to the Great Tribulation*
- *The Bible is our authority, not books and movies*
- What does the Bible say?
- *The text itself does not say whether believers are caught up to heaven or whether they escort Christ to earth at His Parousia*
- Nor is there any reference to the timing of this event in relation to the Tribulation, which is not mentioned at all here
- **Therefore, it is impossible for anyone to say with certainty whether this event in I Thessalonians 4 is referring to the Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the church or to the Post-Tribulation Second Coming of Christ which includes a Rapture**
- *The text simply does not tell us whether believers are being raptured up to heaven or whether believers are meeting the Lord in the air in order to escort Him to earth at His Second Coming*
- This is precisely why devout Christians equally committed to the authority of the Scriptures disagree in their interpretations – *we simply are not given enough information to be dogmatic – and therefore we need to hold our opinions humbly with tolerance for differing viewpoints*
- *There are some inserts in the bulletin if you are interested in doing some further study on these issues*

- Instead of speculating about matters which are not revealed to us – we need to focus on those truths that are clearly taught here: *namely, that the risen Christ is coming again // that the dead in Christ will not miss out on the Coming of the Lord // that the dead in Christ will rise first and will be reunited with living believers to meet the Lord in the air // and most importantly – and so we will all be with the Lord forever*
- The dead and living will end up together // *all believers in Jesus – whether alive or dead at the time of Christ’s Coming – will be with the Lord forever*
- **That is the central point of this passage**
- Those are the truths that we can believe with certainty – those are the truths that matter the most – *those are the truths that bring comfort and encouragement to grieving loved ones at funerals*

II. THE LIVING IN CHRIST MUST BE ALERT (5:1-11)

- Next Paul deals with the issue of when the Lord will return
- *Of course, this has been a topic of intense interest throughout much of church history right up to the present day*
- The correct answer is: **We don’t know**
- Paul uses the term “The Day of the Lord” here in 5:2 to refer to the Parousia
- *The Day of the Lord was a common OT term referring to a Day of Judgment for the enemies of God and His People – and a Day of Deliverance for God’s People*
- **The Day of the Lord is the Day when the Lord Jesus returns to earth to execute God’s wrath and to destroy all evil powers**
- *This is the Day of the Second Coming described in Revelation 19 and many other Scriptures, including:*

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 ⁵But God will use this persecution to show his justice. For he will make you worthy of his Kingdom, for which you are suffering, ⁶and in his justice he will punish those who persecute you. ⁷And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty angels, ⁸in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don’t know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will be punished with everlasting destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power ¹⁰when he comes to receive glory and praise from his holy people. And you will be among those praising him on that day, for you believed what we testified about him.

- **Notice that Paul implies that persecuted Christians – such as the Thessalonian believers – being persecuted for their allegiance to Jesus – would be among those present on that Day when Jesus returns to earth to bring judgment on those who reject and disobey the Gospel and to be glorified among Christians who love Him and suffer for the Gospel**
- **Quoting Jesus’ own teaching, Paul says that the Day of the Lord’s Coming will come like a thief in the night – for those who are living in spiritual darkness**

1 Thessalonians 5:2-3 ²For you know quite well that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. ³When people are saying, “All is well; everything is peaceful and secure,” then disaster will fall upon them as suddenly as a woman’s birth pains begin when her child is about to be born. And there will be no escape.

- ***Yet the Day of the Lord should not take believers by surprise like a thief in the night – because believers are sons of the light and do not belong to the darkness like those who reject and disobey Christ***

1 Thessalonians 5:4-6 ⁴But you aren’t in the dark about these things, dear brothers and sisters, and you won’t be surprised when the day of the Lord comes like a thief. ⁵For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don’t belong to darkness and night. ⁶So be on your guard, not asleep like the others. Stay alert and be sober.

- *This call to alertness, watchfulness, and self-control is the same point that Jesus makes in much of His teaching on His Coming, for example:*

Luke 12:43-46 ⁴³**If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. ⁴⁴I assure you, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. ⁴⁵But if the servant thinks, ‘My master won’t be back for a while,’ and begins oppressing the other servants, partying, and getting drunk—⁴⁶well, the master will return unannounced and unexpected. He will tear the servant apart and banish him with the unfaithful.**

- ***The central points of Paul’s teaching on the Day of the Lord’s Coming in 1 Thessalonians 5 are these:***
 - (1) No human being knows when the Day of the Lord will come (5:2)**
 - (2) To unbelievers who are asleep, clueless and in the dark, the coming of Christ will be a sudden and unexpected and unwelcome surprise (5:3, 5)**

- (3) ***To believers who are walking in the Light, the coming of the Day of the Lord will not be a surprise (5:4)***
- (4) ***In contrast to believers who have a false sense of security and well-being, believers have genuine security in the salvation grounded in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus – though the Day of the Lord will be a Day of Judgment for unbelievers, it will be a Day of Salvation for believers (5:9-10)***
- (5) ***For believers – regardless of whether they are dead or alive at the time – the coming of the Lord will mean life together with Christ forever (5:10)***
- (6) ***In the meantime, believers should stay alert and self-controlled and disciplined as we build up one another in faith, love and hope (5:6, 8, 11)***

III. THE COMING OF THE ANTICHRIST WILL PRECEDE THE COMING OF CHRIST (II Thessalonians 2:1-12)

- ***Apparently, some time after receiving Paul's first letter, some Thessalonian believers became concerned that the Day of the Lord had already arrived or at least that the events associated with that Day had begun to unfold and would very soon be consummated***
- **Paul addresses that concern in this chapter:**

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 ¹²And now, what about the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to meet him? Please don't be upset and excited, dear brothers, by the rumor that this day of the Lord has already begun. If you hear of people having visions and special messages from God about this, or letters that are supposed to have come from me, don't believe them. ³Don't be carried away and deceived regardless of what they say. For that day will not come until two things happen: first, there will be a time of great rebellion against God, and then the man of rebellion will come—the son of hell.

- ***The word for coming again is Parousia – the same word used in I Thessalonians 4:15***
- **The reference here clearly is to the Second Coming of Christ following the Great Tribulation**
- ***And notice that Paul joins the Parousia with the Rapture – our being gathered together to meet Christ at His Coming***
- **The Parousia and the Rapture are also mentioned in I Thessalonians 4 – and the word for “gathered” here is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 24**

Matthew 24:30 - 31 (NIV) ³⁰**“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.**

³¹**And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.**

- ***Paul says that this event – the Parousia – the Day of the Lord – the Second Coming of Christ – will NOT happen until the Rebellion or Apostasy occurs and the Man of Lawlessness – the Antichrist – is revealed***
- ***The Antichrist will exalt himself as a rival Messiah who seeks to usurp the power and position of God Himself – seeking to be worshiped above all gods and even in place of the one true God Himself***

2 Thessalonians 2:4 (NIV) ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

- ***This man of lawlessness will be Satan incarnate – Satan in human flesh – in a similar manner to Jesus Christ being God incarnate***
- ***The Antichrist will embody the supernatural power of Satan and will perform counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders in order to deceive those living in darkness to believe his lies and give their allegiance to him***
- ***The man of lawlessness here is the same as the Beast in Revelation 13 who utters blasphemies and makes war against the believers and is worshiped by unbelievers***
- ***The Antichrist is revealed and exercises his power and authority once the restraining influence is taken out of the way***

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 ⁶And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way.

- ***Who or what is this restrainer that is holding back that evil day of the coming to power of the Antichrist?***
- ***We don’t know***
- ***Paul says the Thessalonians knew – but Paul doesn’t tell us***

- Suggestions have included the Roman Empire as personified in the Emperor – or some other similar world power today // or the principle of law and order // or the Jewish state // or the Holy Spirit // or an angel
- Perhaps we would be wise to heed Augustine’s words: *“We don’t know what the Thessalonians knew. I frankly confess I do not know what Paul means.”*
- Similarly, it is foolish to speculate as to the identity of the Antichrist before he is revealed
- *Suggestions throughout history have included: Nero, Domitian, Mohammed, several Popes, Martin Luther, King George II, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, King Faisal, the United Nations, Kruschev, Gorbachev, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, Henry Kissinger, and former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan*
- No doubt some Obama-haters will suggest our current President
- *This kind of speculation is just as foolish as speculating about the date of Christ’s return*
- The most important truth in this chapter is stated in verse 8:

2 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV) ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

- *Though impressive and deceptive – the power of the Antichrist will be short-lived – and his power and glory will be shown to be nothing compared to the power and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed at His Coming*
- **In the end – Jesus wins!**
- *That’s the main thing – and in the midst of so much curiosity and futile speculation about things that have not been revealed to us – it behooves us to keep the main thing the main thing*
- ***In the end – Jesus wins – and we will live with him forever***

(Conclusion):

- There is much that we would like to know about the end times and the Rapture and the Tribulation and the Antichrist and the Second Coming that we have not been told
- *Some of what we have been told is unclear and subject to differing interpretations*
- But here are some take-aways based on what we do know to be true:

- (1) *Death and evil do not have the final word. Both have already been defeated by the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus – and both will be destroyed at the Second Coming***
- (2) *All believers will share in the Parousia, and the ultimate fate of all believers – whether they are dead or alive when Christ returns – is to be with the Lord forever.***
- (3) *Since it is certain that Christ is coming again – but unclear when the Rapture will take place in relation to the Tribulation and Second Coming – we should hold to our opinions with humility and be tolerant of believers with differing opinions.***
- (4) *Since it is certain that Christ is coming again, but unclear whether the Rapture will take place before, during or after the Tribulation, Believers ought to be prepared to face persecution as the Day of the Lord draws near. Many Christians all over the world already are facing the kind of persecution to be expected during the last days. This persecution will spread and intensify after the revealing of the Antichrist – who possibly could already be present in the world. The Parousia – the Second Coming – will definitely NOT occur until after the revealing of the Antichrist. Though a pre-tribulation Rapture of the church is possible – there is no certain, clear, definite teaching in the NT that Christians will be raptured before the Tribulation and escape the coming persecution. If the early church fathers are right – then the Rapture will occur as part of the Second Coming – after the Tribulation and the reign of the Antichrist. Since it is at least possible that Christians will suffer through the persecutions of the Antichrist during the Tribulation – we should be prepared to face persecution as the Day of the Lord draws near.***
- (5) *What we know and believe about the future should shape how we live in the present. Since death is not an end but a transition // and since the Day of the Lord will be a day of final judgment and separation from God for unbelievers – therefore we should be willing to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of saving people from hell– we should not fear to sacrifice all for Christ – for the believer, to live is Christ and to die is gain***
- (6) *Since it is certain that Christ is coming again – but uncertain when He is coming – therefore we should stay alert and live godly lives. Preparation is far more important and useful than speculation. The proper preparation for the coming Day of the Lord is involvement in evangelism, missions and service to others rather than speculation about dates and details which have not been revealed.***
- (7) *Since the world is divided into light and darkness – and since the darkness is ruled by Satan but Jesus is Lord over all – and since Jesus wins in the end – therefore we should flee the darkness and all of its activities – and live in the light as fully devoted followers of Jesus. Instead of sitting on the fence***

– or dabbling in the deeds of darkness – let us devote our lives wholeheartedly to the cause of Christ and His Gospel, and live godly lives befitting those who belong to the light.

Prayer

“Days of Elijah”