

Clarifying the Pre-Tribulation Rapture from the Second Coming in Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians

Terms important for understanding.

Day of the Lord or Tribulation or That Day, or Day of Wrath

Thief in the night

Them / us

People of the Light or the Day

People of Darkness

wrath or fury

brothers or believers

The Church

The Rapture

The Second Coming

We need to be sharp readers when reading Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians. He jockeys between the Second Coming and the Pre-Tribulation rapture sometimes in the same paragraph and we need to understand the terms to see when this is happening. It helps to read a Bible in several translations as familiar words tend to be slid over. The translation I will use a lot in this essay is the Complete Jewish Bible.

Sometimes one just needs to leave the familiar text to have the meaning jump out. But most frequently meaning is lost because we are unfamiliar with Biblical terms. A problem arises when a reader sees all texts as referring to the church. The **Epistles** are expressly written to the church, the body of believers. The **Acts** details the beginning of the Gospel of Grace preached first to the Jew and later to the Gentile. The **Gospels** describe the life and ministry of Jesus and are addressed to the Jew to explain that a transition would occur from the dispensation of law to a new era. The Gospels also proclaim the arrival of the Messiah as promised to the Jews by the prophets.

The Jews looked with great expectation for a Kingdom over which the Messiah would rule. But since the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah that promised kingdom is held in abeyance until the "fullness of the Gentiles." The Church Era will come to an end with the removal of the body of believers marking the end of the Dispensation of Grace.

The **Church** consists of both Jewish and Gentile believers in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus who have received Christ as Savior. The Church is called the body of Christ. The "professing church" or church attenders who have not been changed by the power of the new birth is not included in this special group.

The Kingdom is God's promise to the Jews which has the Messiah, Jesus, as ruler over the earth. The return of Jesus to rule on the earth is known as **The Second Coming**. But a mysterious event occurs before the second coming which is promised only to the believer. This wonderful promise is called **the rapture** which takes God's people out of the earth to meet Jesus in the air before the time of the terrible punishment and tribulation caused by the judgments of God. These two events are very clearly distinguished by Paul to the Thessalonians.

First, Paul is writing to the believers in Thessaloniki who had recently gone through some time of persecution and who had lost brothers as martyrs. They had also received a letter from someone in utter misunderstanding of correct doctrine who said that the *Day of the Lord* had already come, probably to explain the particular hardship just endured.

So let us begin with an explanation of *The Day of the Lord*. This is the most prophesied event in the Bible which remains unfulfilled. Daniel refers to it as the 70th week, a seven year period when the Antichrist comes to power. Jesus speaks prophetically about this time as the Tribulation, the Great Tribulation (the last three years) and also of the events leading up to the tribulation (the birth pangs) in the 24th chapter of Matthew. Jesus cites the prophet Daniel and refers to the days of Noah and Lot.

And, the entire book of Revelation is a play by play of the tribulation, a seven year period that is culminated by Jesus's return to the Mount of Olives (See Zechariah 12). At ***His coming***, the covenant promise, the promise of an earthly kingdom called ***The Kingdom of God*** is fulfilled. This kingdom was promised to the Jews by the prophets but interrupted when Jesus was rejected. "He came unto His own but His own received Him not" (John 1.11 KJV).

Paul also teaches the restoration of ***Israel/ Jews*** to a prominent place in chapters 9-11 in Romans. It is important to understand that the ***Kingdom of God is not a specific promise to the church nor does it require the church's involvement*** as it is promised to the Jews and is fulfilled when all the remnant of Israel is saved (Romans 11.26) at the culmination of the tribulation. As Jesus said, "You will not see me again, until you say, "Baruch H'bah B'Shem Adonai, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23.39).

Jesus was speaking to the Jews in great sorrow, but he will not forget his eternal covenant with Israel that was made with Abraham and Moses. If anyone thinks that the Church has replaced Israel, they have failed to read Romans 11 and other critical prophecies as yet unfulfilled.

During the tribulation period this final remnant of Jewish believers in their Messiah will be saved and the Gospel proclaimed to all peoples predominantly by 144,000 Jewish virgin males, by angels, and by the Two Witnesses. And, so the great commission given by Jesus to His Jewish disciples will be fulfilled (Matthew 28.19-20).

We will now proceed to the first chapter of Thessalonians. "... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, And to wait for His son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who ***delivers us*** from the ***wrath to come***" (1.9-10 NKJB).

Notice how Paul addresses the Thessalonians. They are the church, the believers, often called called ***the brethren***. He refers to believers as ***us, we***. ***We*** are the exclusive fraternity. He tells them that even though they are going through tough times, because they turned to God from idols, that Jesus will ***appear*** "from heaven and rescue ***us*** from the impending fury of God's judgment" (1Th. 1.7 CJB).

Notice that ***us*** is a reference to believers. Who will be rescued? Believers. What will they be rescued from? God's judgment. This ***appearing*** is a clear reference to the rapture, a promise only to believers or God's church. God's judgment is the *Day of the Lord* when he pours out his ***wrath***. Christians, ***believers, brothers, us, we*** are rescued! "God hath not appointed us to wrath" (1 Th. 5.9 KJB).

Romans 5.9 says it this way: "Therefore, since we have now come to be considered righteous by means of his bloody sacrificial death, how much more will ***we*** be delivered through him from the anger of

God's *judgment*" (CJB). Other translations say "**wrath.**" It is important to know that *wrath* in this case is a future event also known as The Day of the Lord or the Day of the Lord's Judgment. Or sometimes just The judgment, or The Day. (See my essay on The Wrath of God for a complete explanation of this term.)

Titus refers to the rapture as "the blessed hope."

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, **awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ . . .**

(Titus 11 RSV)

Notice the word "our." Would it be a *blessed hope* to live through the judgments detailed in Revelation?

Paul repeats the promise: "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming" (1 Th. 2.19 NKJB)?

Paul goes on to say:

"But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep [dead], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall 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. Therefore *comfort* one another with these words" (1 Th.4. 13- 18 RSV).

The above paragraph is the very oft quoted reference to the *rapture*. Paul's words were to comfort. How comforting would such an event be if *we, us, the believers, the brethren*, were to first undergo the greatest horror the world has ever known?

1 Th. 5.1 begins with: "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you" (NAS). Paul is referring to the statement just cited, the times, dates, eras, regarding verses 13-18 (the rapture). Why? Because no events precede the rapture that can be counted down. This is the doctrine of *imminency* as the rapture can occur any time. Nothing has to precede or take place or be fulfilled prior to the rapture.

Now verse 2 of the text introduces a big contrast:

because *you yourselves* well know that the *Day of the Lord* will come like a thief in the night. When people are saying, 'everything is so peaceful and secure,' then destruction will suddenly come upon *them*, the way labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there is no way *they* will escape (1Th.5.2 CJB).

Notice the *they*, another set of people. *The Day of the Lord* and "*thief in the night*" refer to the words of Jesus in his Olivet discourse in the 24th chapter of Matthew where He answers the disciples' questions: "And, what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (3)?

When Jesus delivered this discourse, the church was still a mystery. He had not gone to the cross. He tells his disciples that the promise of the **Kingdom** (the original covenant promise to Israel) will take place at the **end of the age**. Not a single disciple yet knew of the church, the “*mystery hidden from the ages*” (Col. 1.26). But now, the Thessalonians, have the mystery unfolded to them. Paul contrasts his audience, **children of the light** with the **children of the night** for whom Christ will come like a thief bringing their ultimate judgment. (Jesus explains this more completely in the 13th and 25th chapters of Matthew). No sensible person can read these accounts and assume such events have already taken place.

“But you, brothers, are not in the dark, so that the Day should take you by surprise like a thief; for you are all people who belong to the light, who belong to the day. We don't belong to the night or to darkness Since we belong to the day, let us stay sober, putting on trust and love as a breastplate and the hope **of being delivered as a helmet**. For God has not intended that we should experience **his fury**, but that we should gain deliverance through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah Therefore, encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are doing” (1Th. 5.4-10 CJB).

The contrast is between **children of the light**, who will experience deliverance prior to that great tribulation, and **children of the night** who will not escape. This is a metaphorical contrast between those who live in light who know the essential truths and those who live in darkness, who have no understanding of the great promises to those who hope in Jesus.

In 2 Th. Paul expounds on the letter that told the brethren that the *Day of the Lord* had already occurred, still a prevalent deception today known as Preterism. He says, “ Don't let anyone deceive you” echoing the words of Jesus. Then Paul details a series of events that must precede the *Day of the Lord*. Such a count down always signals **Second Coming** not the **rapture**. Paul says that before the *Second Coming*, there will be a great falling away and the Antichrist will be revealed. Any careful reader should discern the difference between the rapture and the second coming and be able to see two events. Not one!!

Paul enlarges on that great falling away, also called *the rebellion*, more completely in the Epistle to 1 Timothy: “. . . . the Spirit expressly states that people will apostatize from the faith by paying attention to deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Timothy 4). Whereas he describes the rise of the Antichrist in the second chapter of 2nd Th. But the promise to the brethren is a sure thing:

. . . we have to keep thanking God for you always, brothers whom the Lord loves, because God chose you as **first fruits of deliverance** by giving you the holiness that has its origin in the Spirit and the faithfulness that has its origin in the truth. He called you to this through our Good News so that you could have the glory of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah. Therefore brothers, stand firm.” 2 Th. 2.13. CJB

What are the **first fruits** of deliverance? The rapture. Who is it for? The brethren. The distinction is made very plain in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

The great Bible expositor, Sir. Robert Anderson, describes the confusion over the rapture and the second coming, or worse over concluding that the two events are one and the same. He writes:

Common sense vetoes the suggestion that His coming as Avenger and Judge is the event described as “that blessed hope’ That the coming of the Lord as Savior is now confounded with the “day of the Lord, the day of wrath” is the error which the second epistle to the Thessalonians was designed to correct. But now it is the creed of Christendom Are we to believe that the Gentile converts were taught to live in expectation of the Coming, although, . . before that hope could be realised the people of God were doomed to pass through a time of horror unparalleled in all the ages?
(Forgotten Truths. Sir Robert Anderson Library, 1914. 70-71).

Partly the error comes from not reading the Bible in its plainest sense. As Anderson says, we must read the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit and with all the common sense we can muster.

By Mary E Parnell, April 2017

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