

The Thessalonian Letters and the Return of Jesus

Barry O'Dell

Totaling just eight chapters and only 136 verses, Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica are extremely important in our understanding of the promised return of Jesus. This congregation was established by Paul during his second missionary tour as recorded in Acts 17. Many were persuaded by the preaching of the gospel and, according to Luke, a "great multitude" joined Paul and Silas. However, as was often the case on his journeys, there were those who stirred up trouble (Acts 17:5-9). Paul reminded them of the conflict that had occurred during his trip (1 The. 2:3). His second letter to them acknowledged that they were being persecuted while he was writing (2 The. 1:4-9). He also reminded them that they were not alone in their sufferings. The churches in Judea were suffering and Jesus and the prophets also had to endure persecution (1 The. 2:14-16). Persecution is a reality for those who would faithfully follow Jesus (2 Tim. 3:12). What could be more comforting to know than, even though they were suffering, Christ would return and vindicate them? What do these two letters teach us about the return of Jesus?

First, it is good to know that each chapter of the first letter mentions the reality of His return. "*And to wait for His Son from heaven, Whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come*" (1 The. 1:10). "*For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming*" (1 The. 2:19). "*To the end He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints*" (1 The. 3:13). Then, from 4:13 all the way through 5:11 is a lengthy and detailed description of what will happen at the "*coming of the Lord.*" Finally, near the end of the letter, Paul wrote, "*And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus*" (1 The. 5:23). So, here are eight things we learn from **First Thessalonians**...

***"...the return of Christ is
a source of comfort for
the faithful."***

1. Jesus is coming "*from heaven*" - 1:10; 4:16.
2. When He comes, He's coming "*with His saints*" - 3:13; 4:14.
3. Jesus, because of His resurrection and the guarantee of His return, has "*delivered us from the wrath to come*" - 1:10; 5:9.
4. The presence of fellow saints is a source of hope and "*joy and rejoicing*" when Jesus returns - 2:19; 4:13-14.
5. The faithful child of God can be preserved, blameless, saved, sanctified, and holy when Christ returns - 3:13; 5:9, 23.
6. The return of Jesus will be a noisy, yet orderly event - 4:16-17.
7. We will "*meet the Lord in the air*" and thus (an adverb) "*ever be with Him*" (4:17).
8. The message of the return of Christ is a source of comfort for the faithful - 4:18.

Now, **Second Thessalonians**. The letter begins by acknowledging the "*perseverance and faith*" that they exhibited during "*persecutions and tribulations*" (1:4). Paul reassured them that God was going to "*recompense tribulation*" to those who had been troubling the faithful (1:6). The NKJ says God would "*repay*" with tribulation (affliction) when Jesus will be "*revealed from heaven*" (1:7). Notice also that verse six says "*it is a righteous thing*" for God to do so! God does not make mistakes. He will avenge His faithful - and that is not wrong! The opening of the fifth seal reveals that those who had been slain for the word of God were wondering about God's vengeance (Rev. 6:9-11). They were not rebuked for wondering. In fact, they were reassured that God's vengeance would come in the future. Here are some things we learn about Jesus' return in chapter one...

1. Tribulation was coming for the persecutors - v. 6.
2. The faithful were encouraged because rest was coming for them - v. 7.
3. Punishment and eternal destruction is the end of those who trouble God's children - v. 8-9.
4. When Jesus comes, He will be glorified and admired - v. 10.

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While many conservative Christians have celebrated the overturning of Roe v. Wade, we must understand that the battle to preserve the lives of unborn children still rages on in our society. In essence, we are in a battle for the hearts of those who have been calloused by the god of this world. It is sad to reason that we must persuade parents to love and desire their unborn children.

Every person is responsible for the potential reproductive activities they engage in willfully - men and women. This means that one must be willing to accept the consequences of their decisions to engage in sexual activities. From potentially contracting a sexually transmitted disease, to becoming pregnant each person assumes the “risks” for engaging in sex with their partners.

Some time back, pop star Stevie Nicks, was advocating for prochoice groups by revealing her decision to abort her unborn child when her group, Fleetwood Mac, was at its zenith. She said in an interview, “Fleetwood Mac is three years in, and it’s big, and we’re going into our third album,” Nicks recounted. “It would have destroyed Fleetwood Mac,” she said of her baby. “I would have, like, tried my best to get through, you know, being in the studio every single day expecting a child,” Nicks continued. “It would have been a nightmare scenario for me to live through.” One wonders about the “nightmare scenario” that Nicks’ unborn child endured at the hands of an abortionist.

While the focus was on Nicks’ career, questions abound regarding the potential life that she ended in the name of profession and success. Would this unborn child have become as powerful an artist as her talented mother or even greater? This child might have had an extremely high IQ that provided the cure for various diseases. While this is all speculative, the world will never know the kinds of talent and love that this and countless other unborn children could have brought into the world.

An article that discussed Nicks’ decision said, that “Nicks admitted to murdering her baby in exchange for career success: She took the life of her own child for the specific reason of pursuing stardom in the music world. In other words, she committed child sacrifice. In the same way that past civilizations sacrificed their children to enable abundant harvests, victory over their enemies, or improved rainfalls, Americans sacrifice our children to enable success in our careers, more financial freedom, or fewer inconvenient responsibilities. But unlike other civilizations, we do not murder our children in the name of any specific false god or demonic entity. Instead, we serve ourselves as our own gods — murdering our babies as an act of devotion in the cult of our own autonomy.”

“I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.”

As intimated at the beginning of this treatise, changing and making laws will not stop women from aborting their unborn children. There needs to be a real internal change that orients one toward God and His view of human life—in utero and otherwise. It is very clear that God’s word recognizes the pre-birth nature of life before a baby is ever born.

Jeremiah was very plain about the nature of his calling to serve as a prophet of God. Jeremiah 1:4-5 says, *“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.’”* There was a sense in which Jeremiah was called to be a prophet of God before he was ever born!

Scripture makes it clear that God knew us as human beings with souls before we ever took our first breath as children. The psalmist underscores this in particularly beautiful language. Psalm 139:13-17 says, *“For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!”* Why would any person even consider destroying a beautiful child created in the image of God? It is sad and tragic to consider.

When Mary and Elizabeth encountered one another, they both had a child that was conceived through miraculous measures. Elizabeth conceived a child past her child bearing days (Luke 1:36), and Mary was carrying the Messiah who was conceived without an earthly father. Notice how scripture describes the child that Elizabeth was carrying within her womb. Luke 1:41-44 says, *“And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she*

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A Battle for the Heart

spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.'"

John the Baptist, the child of Elizabeth, was not described as a "fetus" or a "mass of tissue" or "not alive until the time of his birth." John was described as a "babe." Until society reaches the same conclusion about every unborn child, human life will continue to be viewed as expendable and burdensome in some considerations.

We must understand that this is a battle for the hearts and minds of those in our society. No amount of laws will stop a person who is determined to abort an unborn child as evidenced by a recent political campaign in our area. The only true answer for the problems that plague our world is true conversion to Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19).

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Second Thessalonians 2 is further reassurance for the faithful. It seems, based on the first three verses, that there was someone attempting to deceive the church in regard to the "*day of the Lord*." Paul wrote, "*Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of the Lord is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition*" (2 The. 2:1-3). False teachers' spoken words and letters were apparently circulating and some in the church were thinking that the return of Christ was imminent. Then, from verses 3 to 12, Paul disclosed that many events related to what we today call "Church History" would have to transpire before "*that day*" comes. Paul had already told the church that the "*day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night*" (1 The. 5:2). There are no markers of the return of Christ for judgment on the world (Mk. 13:32-37; 2 Pet. 3:10).

All of this information is pertinent to us today as well. There are many who would have us believe that the return of Christ will be known ahead of time. Those who say such things will misuse Matthew 24 and Jesus' prophecies regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70. Jesus will return. A judgment of "*all nations*" will occur (Matt. 25:31-46). The faithful are told to "*Watch and pray*" because we do not know **when** the Master is coming (Mk. 13:33). The Thessalonians were told to "*watch and be sober*" (1 The. 5:6). Are you ready?

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Baptized into Christ's death - raised to a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism - faith in God's working/operation (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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