

Letters from Paul – Session Four

Dear Thessalonians: The End is Only the Beginning

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Paul wrote to several churches for several reasons. Some of his letters dealt with theology, some dealt with doctrine, and others interpersonal relationships. His first letter to the church in Thessalonica was unique when it dealt with the end of time and their questions about what happens to the people when they die. The whole “end of time” thing continues to puzzle us so imagine what it was like for the very young church that believed Jesus’ return was imminent.

So, here’s a question: When you think of the end of time and the return of Jesus do you think of Paul’s writing or the book of Revelation? Or (and you can be honest here, we are not in a classroom) do you think of the *Left Behind* series? Most of us *Pass Go*, collect our \$200 and go straight to Revelation, despite the reality that few of us can make heads or tails of John’s letter to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor. John’s Revelation is long and confusing and seems to be written in some sort of code. I’ll be honest, I struggle with it, but it is what it is, and we have little choice in trying to figure it out. *Struggle* is the operative word if we are honest.

We struggle with Revelation in many ways, possibly the biggest reason being the future nature of John’s writing. If it was written to the seven churches of his day can it be a universal and timeless book? And, if it is a future, yet-to-happen book, can it be written mainly to the seven churches in the late first century? Ah, this is the sticky wicket of studying Revelation. What to do with it?

Eschatology is the official name for the study of the end of time. *Eschatos* means “last,” so the term is officially “the study of the last things,” or as we say, “the study of the end times.” And, Revelation has a minimum of three basic possible views of the end of time. We will break down each of the three but before we do let me deal with the larger question: What in the world does Revelation have to do with Paul? John wrote Revelation long after Paul was martyred; in fact, John outlived Paul and all the original disciples. In a snapshot, both Paul and John wrote about the end times and the return of Jesus, but in very different ways. For

the purposes of orthodoxy, we must be familiar with all the possible end of time views and we must form our theology around one of the possible options. So, we will tackle the complexities of John first, then shift to Paul's more simplistic approach. Who is right? Who wrote the *bible* on eschatology and the end of life as we know it? It must be John, right? He wrote such a long and, well, long book. But Paul is Paul, right? He wrote most of the New Testament and he had that Damascus Road encounter and hey, he went to prison for Jesus several times. So, Paul, right?

Honestly, no one knows for sure. Paul wrote differently than John, but John was writing to a different church and world in the late 90's of the first century. I'm sure his readers understood him, but I can't say I do. So again, we do not know about the particulars of the Second Coming of Jesus and the end of time as we know it. And it's fun to get to choose our own view. Consider the remainder of this lesson a virtual buffet of theological possibilities about the end times. We will begin with the three main views formed from John's Revelation.

Premillennialism: This is the most prevalent view of the end times. The *Left Behind* series made this view even more popular and now it's so mainstream it's basically the default view of most believers. That said, the creators of this view had to navigate all around Revelation to put it together, especially the multiple variations of Premillennialism.

This view has Jesus returning in a visible way to begin a 1000 year reign on earth. Satan will be subdued and bound for the millennial reign of Christ on earth. This removes evil from the world, however near the end Satan will find a way out and will lead a rebellion against Christ. He will fail and Jesus defeats him leading to a new Heaven and a new Earth, essentially a new, purified created order. This will be much like the Paradise depicted in the Garden with a perfect union with God.

This view has variations based on a tribulation period of 7 years that will (a) include all believers for the entire time; (b) no believers will face the tribulation; or, (c) believers will be present for one half of it, 3.5 years. This view requires several choices to be made.

Postmillennial: This is the extreme opposite stance and sees Christ returning after the millennium. Even though Christ won't visibly return to set the stage, the world will gradually become better, more spiritual and holier. This will trigger Christ's

return and initiate the final judgment and end of time. After the return judgment takes place and this present age will conclude and the eternal age will commence.

Amillennial: “A” means no, so this is a no-millennial view. This view believes the 1000 years is totally symbolic and figurative and is not a yet-to-come event. In this view the millennium is now, the church age, and is the entire period between Jesus’ ascension and his return. In essence, this is the “when it’s over it’s over” view.

Amillennial is also the view least based on Revelation. This view is more compatible with 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and following, which has Jesus coming down with a shout (or a cry/command) and the dead in Christ will rise and go up to meet him, followed by those believers who are still alive. Again, no millennial era or battles or tribulation period; it’s over when he returns, and the final judgment and Eternal age follows.

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Revelation was written to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, which means it could be that the entire confusing book is a *time in a capsule* writing to those churches, or as many theologians believe, all the churches in the late 90’s of the first century. If this is the case it would be difficult to give it 2000 years and counting based on a yet-to-come set of events that must occur before Jesus returns. Again, however, we simply don’t know. But we do have Paul and his letter to the church at Thessalonica. Paul gives us more to “not know,” if you know what I mean...which I’m not sure I do!

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so 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 died. 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, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be*

*with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18 NRSV).*

The early church had a firm belief that Jesus would return during their lifetime, as did Paul, but this wasn't the issue Paul initially addressed with the Thessalonian church. Their main concern was what happened to the souls of believers who died in-between Jesus' ascension and return. The Greco-Roman mentality concerning death was a mixed bag of pagan religious teachings and philosophical ideas. Some philosophers taught that everyone lives on in some capacity while the majority taught that this life was it and nothing exists after death.

Jesus taught that believers would enjoy eternal life with him, but he also said that he would return soon, or at least this is what most everyone believed him to have said. With the average person holding out no hope for life after death and Jesus not yet returned, the church was in a state of confused angst. It had gotten to the point when a church member died, they questioned if they would experience eternal life. This sounds so misguided, but they questioned what happened in between Jesus' going and coming back. This had reached such a point that their mourning had become much like the pagans who truly held no hope beyond this life. As Leighton Ford writes: "They faced a struggle to bring their faith and emotions together."

Paul tells them to remember they, unlike the unredeemed, have hope for eternal life. Those who die in Christ are with Christ so any mourning should be accompanied by hope and joy. He then shifts to deal with the reality that Jesus will indeed return, and he depicts how it will happen.

This is the plainest description scripture holds of Jesus' return. It's not written in code and it doesn't sequence itself over seven years or a millennium. It's a *bang*, *bang* it happens and now it's over. And it's dramatic.

*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord together (vv. 16-17).*

**Takeaway:**

We all need to choose a theology of the end of time. Why? Despite the reality that no one knows how it will happen, whether it's the Pre-Post-A-millennial way, or Paul's succinct description, it will happen. Jesus will return. To have a fully formed theology of Jesus requires a thought-out belief in how it all will end. To be an apologist requires an end times theological belief. And goodness knows, we have choices.

So, Revelation and its options (minimum of three) or Paul's view found in Thessalonians...we need to choose. We can't go wrong. Jesus is coming back and at least Paul's version stresses a "better be ready" mindset. The whole *thief in the night* thing is excellent food for thought and practice.

Amen and Amen

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