

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
“The Second Coming”
December 27, 2015
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Though technically the Advent season is over, I have prolonged it by one week, choosing to preach this morning on the “coming” or “advent” of the Lord, in this case his second advent. And, since the Second Coming focuses our attention on our future life and on the passage of time, it seemed appropriate to consider this subject at the dawn of a new year.

Text Comment

v.13 “Those who are asleep.” We still use euphemisms in speaking of death; virtually every culture does. We say nowadays that someone “passed away” or “departed from this life” and so on.

You may have noticed that the signs that direct traffic to Mt. Tahoma National Cemetery read: “Where heroes rest.” Like “rest,” sleep as a metaphor for death is richly suggestive: of rest after work, of death as only a temporary state (since sleep is something from which one awakes), and of the resurrection of the body, since it is the body that is sleeping. The word “cemetery” itself comes from a Greek word meaning “sleeping place.” All of this betrays the instinctive recognition of human beings, made as they are in the image of the eternal God, that human life is not confined to this world.

v.15 Notice the typical biblical custom of referring to the dead with personal pronouns. “*Those* (that is, those persons) who have fallen asleep.” We find this throughout this passage and often elsewhere. When they took the Lord down from the cross, they took *him* down, not simply his dead body. Dead bodies are not what *used to be* people. They are and continue to be human beings. Like the metaphor of death as sleep, it is a direct affirmation of the personhood of the dead human body. This biblical manner of speaking furnishes a powerful argument *for* burial or entombment and *against* the practice of cremation.

We do not have a record of this “word from the Lord.” Paul is probably making reference to a statement of Jesus unrecorded in the four Gospels (as he does in Acts 20:35, where he quotes Jesus as having said “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”).

The long-debated question posed by Paul words “we who are alive” is whether the apostle thought, at this time in his life, that Jesus would return before his own death. He certainly may have entertained that belief early on, his personal opinions were not infallible. He told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 that he would not see them again, but apparently he did. But his words here don’t require the conclusion that Paul expected the Lord’s return in his own lifetime, only that those Christians who were alive when the Lord returned would be re-united with those who had already died. A few verses later, in 5:2-3, he will say, as the New Testament often says, the time of the Lord’s return is unknown. In 1 Cor. 6:14 he seems to class himself with those who will be raised from the dead.

- v.16 You find these same features in the descriptions of the Second Coming given by Jesus in the Gospels and by John in Revelation.

It is worth our pausing for a moment to consider the phrase “dead in Christ.” What we are taught here is that our union with Christ is closer and more profound than any other unity we may have or experience in life. We are closer to Christ than we are to life itself, since we can die and still be united to Christ. Many martyrs lost their heads, but they didn’t lose Christ! This union is a fact irrespective of our sense of it at any time.

[Letham, *Union with Christ*, 123]

- v.17 The Greek word translated “caught up” was translated in the Latin Bible with *rapio*, from which comes the word “rapture” in connection with the Second Coming. But the following phrase used by Paul, here translated “to meet” (literally “for a meeting with the Lord”), appears to be a technical term for the official welcome of an arriving dignitary by a deputation that comes out of the city to greet him and escort him in. It is used in exactly this sense in Acts 28 of the delegation of Christians that came out of Rome to welcome the Apostle Paul and to escort him into the capital. So the picture here is of the dead in Christ rising first, then being joined by the believers living in the world at that moment, all of them joining the Lord in the air, and forming, together with the angels, the Lord’s host as he makes his way onward down to earth. The idea is most certainly *not*, as too many Christians have been led to believe over the past nearly two centuries, that the Lord comes so far, is joined by the resurrected saints, and then returns to heaven for another seven years! If there is any reason to continue to employ the term “rapture,” it must be made clear that it is simply one aspect of that complex event that is the Second Coming of the Lord.

In context, Paul is clarifying a basic article of the Christian faith that he had taught the Thessalonian believers. If you remember, he had been run out of town suddenly and, no doubt, had not finished his instruction of these new converts. They had questions that had been forwarded to him and one of them concerned the Second Coming. They didn’t doubt that Christ was coming again. That expectation was fundamental to the Christian faith and was a basic ingredient of the good news. Jesus had taught repeatedly and emphatically that he was leaving the world only to return to it at some future date. The apostles all made the Second Coming a fundamental element of their instruction. And these new Christians believed it. They simply wanted to know *how* those who had already died would participate in the Second Coming. They apparently didn’t doubt that their now departed loved ones would rise from the dead – for Paul says nothing about that – but they were concerned that the dead in Christ would not witness the great event of the Second Coming itself; that they wouldn’t share in the Savior’s triumphal return. It is this concern that Paul here lays to rest. All the dead in Christ would participate in the Second Coming. In fact, the dead in Christ would be as much participants as the believers who are living in the world at the time the Savior appears.

But I am less interested in the details of the event that Paul describes here than in the fact of it. What we have in this text is one among several more elaborate descriptions of the Second Coming found in the New Testament. The Lord’s Second Advent is mentioned repeatedly, but

there are only several descriptions of the event. But these descriptions impress us all the more because they force upon us the realization that this will be an actual event in human history. A day will dawn that will change forever the destiny of human beings because on that day Christ himself will appear in the heavens. No day in human history will have been anything like this day: the dead rising, the host of heaven visible to men, the Judge and the Savior appearing, the clouds of confusion and distraction immediately clearing, every human being knowing in an instant, for weal or woe, who this is and why he has come. The Second Coming is the proof positive that every human being *is bound for another world!*

Everywhere in the Bible *the meaning of the present is determined by the future!* There are many ways into the nature and the meaning and the significance of the Christian faith and its message to the world, but one of them surely is that of our expectation that Jesus Christ will bring an end to human history by his personal and physical return to earth and that his return will separate the human race into two populations: the saved and the lost. The principle itself is hardly controversial; the logic is irresistible. The future, obviously enough, can completely alter the story of a human life and the story of the whole world. *The question is: what is that future?* It was this inexorable logic that prompted Henry Liddon, the evangelical Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral in the 19th century, to say, "If Christ is not coming back, we might as well lock the west door of this cathedral and throw the key into the river." A great many Christian thinkers have said a similar thing: that without the Second Coming the entire edifice of Christian truth must fall. But, then, without whatever future is promised in any religion or philosophy of life actually coming to pass, that worldview is also worthless.

What if Scrooge never learned his lesson and died like Marley, a sour, unloved old man, Tiny Tim never got the medical help he needed, and the Bob Cratchit family lived out their days in mourning for a beloved son who died so young? No one would read or watch *A Christmas Carol*, that's for sure. Dickens wouldn't have written it in the first place. Who would want to read such a story? What if Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy never got over their initial distaste for one another and went on in life the same people they had always been, Elizabeth living out her days as an unmarried woman, putting up with her shrew of a mother and dolt of a father, and Darcy marrying a suitable woman for whom he had no real affection and who could not influence his character for the better? Such a story would not be worth reading, which is why Jane Austen didn't write such a story. No; *the end is the meaning of the beginning and the meaning of the middle.* The writer knows how the story will end before he or she puts pen to paper or begins to type.

But, then, you see, such must be the stories of a great many human beings, according to the Bible. The beginning is spoiled by the end. Jesus made a great point of this in his parables. Who pities Lazarus the beggar now that he is in heaven, and who admires or envies the rich man whose few years of worldly comfort and ease have now been exchanged for a bed in hell? Think of the foolish virgins who imagined themselves just like the others, until the bridegroom arrived and they were shut out of the wedding banquet. Everything, everything up to that point meant nothing. Their lives were a charade. They found that they were on the wrong side of history only at the very moment history came to its end.

Without a happy ending, the story of any life loses all of its interest and all of its charm, whether that story was one of struggle and suffering or comfort and worldly success. Such to a great degree is the life of this world according to the Word of God, lived as it has been with no thought of the world to come, no recognition that it profits a person *nothing*, even if he or she gain the whole world, only then at last to lose his or her own soul. But, on the other hand, what does it matter if one has endured hardship, suffered want, made great sacrifices out of loyalty to Jesus Christ, if on that day he finds himself with a perfect heart and body, one among the great host of the Lord, descending in triumph to the earth in the train of the King of Kings?

Nothing so concentrates the issue of life as the prospect of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Most people, religious or otherwise, must hope against hope that nothing like this will never happen. The Christian lives his or her life as he does *precisely because he or she is sure it will!*

In Robert Bellah's often cited book, *Habits of the Heart*, published in the 1980s, the University of California, Berkeley sociologist and several collaborators concluded that Americans "tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice." For this reason "freedom" is ranked in our culture as the highest cultural value. Indeed it has practically become the definition of good in the American mind. As the authors put it:

"Freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. What it is that one might do with that freedom is much more difficult for Americans to define." [Cited in Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 34]

There are many problems with that view of life and, indeed, of that view of freedom, and we are encountering all of them in our culture and politics today; but surely it ought to be obvious to any believer that, while Americans in great numbers may indulge the illusion that we are free to make their own choices and that it would be unfair for anyone, God included, to judge them for those choices, the Second Coming puts a full stop to all such thinking. A day will come when the notion that human beings are free to create their own moral universe will be suddenly and categorically exposed as ultimate folly. If Jesus Christ is coming again to vindicate those who have trusted in him and to judge those who have not, then, in the nature of the case, what good will it have done that vast multitudes of human beings spent their lives in pursuit of a mirage. When he appears, it will be beyond contradiction or protest that what the Lord Christ thinks *is all that matters or has ever mattered!*

Do you see the point? This commonplace of American opinion, that we are free to make our own choices and no one has a right to tell us what to think or do *absolutely depends on a certain view of the future*. It absolutely requires that there be no such day as Paul describes here, no day of reckoning, and no appearance of the Judge of all the earth at the head of his great host. Indeed, it requires a view of the future that, in fact, almost no one actually holds: viz. that human life, brief as it is, simply ends, full stop, the person exists no longer, only ashes scattered on the wind or a body rotting in the ground to testify to an existence that once was. If the future is actually to be different *than that*, well, then one had better think again about his or her life.

It has been, of course, one of the most powerful arguments of Christian apologists in the modern era that views of life based on an utterly impersonal future, based on the eradication or extinction of human existence, based on the objective meaninglessness of life, cannot satisfy the human soul and invariably prove impossible to live with. We carry within ourselves – all human beings do – the evidence that without a fixed moral ending to the drama of human life the search to find real meaning in life is hopeless. So men go on thinking that morality matters even if morality absolutely requires that objective standard and final reckoning they have denied. So people go on investing great significance in human life, even if they have no reason to think that human beings, when all is said and done, are anything more than highly evolved carbon-based life forms, soon to disintegrate into nothing.

Of course few people think this through; far from it. Most people who think like ordinary Americans think nowadays, do so on the strength of an unspoken and ill-considered assumption that the future holds no reason for them to reconsider their lives. Few of them bother to consider the fact that, if that is true, their lives *now* are without any real meaning or purpose or point. *But why do they assume this? Why would they believe, as they must, that the future is empty of purpose because it lacks a conclusion, a fulfillment, or a judgment?* It is because they are not taking the most serious of all questions seriously; a very common problem with human beings.

Ask a Christian how he knows that human life is rendered morally meaningful and utterly serious precisely by the prospect of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, *and he or she knows exactly what to say*. He says, she says as Paul says here in v. 14, we know Jesus is coming again because he has *already risen from the dead*, he has already demonstrated his power over death. We know that the Second Coming is *the definitive, the defining* event of human history, because Jesus said that it would be, as Paul says here in v. 15. On many occasions the Lord took pains to assure his disciples that while he was leaving the world, he would certainly return to bring final salvation to those who are waiting for him. And, above all, he told them that *after he had already died and risen from the dead*. The resurrection changed everything, as it must. The Second Coming was no one's doctrine until the resurrection of Christ! The fact that a dead man, *this* dead man, rose again to new and everlasting *human* life, body and soul, must change everything. It is the event – Christ's resurrection – that reveals the future. All the more must it be the case when the man who rose from the dead is the one who told us that he is coming again and that we will rise again because he has.

His first coming and its triumphant conclusion in the Lord's resurrection and ascension to heaven are the proof that there will be a Second Coming! His virgin birth, his miracles, the teaching of the Lord, his giving himself up to sacrificial death for our sins, his resurrection from the dead, his bodily ascension to heaven, and his repeated promise to return – the promise of a man whose word we have learned to trust implicitly – all prove to us, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that sometime in the future a day will dawn on which the world will behold the King of Kings coming upon the clouds, multitudes of people welcoming him joyously, multitudes of others cowering in fear. The Word of God said he would come the first time, *and he came*. The Word of God says that he will come again *and he will!*

This is the Christian's *hope*, as Paul puts it in v. 13. "Hope" is a word that in our common usage often means "wish" or "desire." We say, "I hope it won't rain tomorrow." In Tacoma,

Washington, as we know, that is often a forlorn hope. But in Christian usage, “hope” does not mean a mere wish or desire. It is not a way of expressing what we would *like* to see come to pass, though we don’t *know* whether or not it will. In biblical usage “hope” is another word for faith, for confidence based on evidence that the future will come to pass as God has promised it will. Hope is objective as well as subjective in biblical usage; that is, it refers to a future that has been made certain by the work and Word of God!

It is in this sense that Paul says in Ephesians 2 that the unbelieving world lives *without hope* and without God in the world. They are without hope because they are without God. They don’t know who he is, what he has done for them in Christ, what he has promised to do for those who trust in him, and they do not know the truth of what he has told us of the future. This is why the gospel has always had such power in the world, has had it from the very beginning. Today as in the first century there were religions and philosophies that promised some vague form of a continuing existence after death – though it was only that, a mere promise – there was no evidence, no demonstration that it could deliver on such a promise. There was no ringing certainty such as the Christians brought with them, witnesses as they were to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and his ascension to heaven, and having in their hearts the promise of his return.

Listen to this letter, written in the second century by a woman to her friend who had lost a loved one. It is so typical of the sentiments of people – both in those days and in our own – when face to face with death.

“Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermuthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another.”

Irene, an Egyptian woman, feels for married friends, Philo and Taonnophris, who have lost a son to death. She shares their pain, because she too had lost a son, her Didymus. She wants to console, but she has no consolation to give. Perhaps that is why the letter is so short. “Against such things one can do nothing.” She finishes with a sentence that she has herself just rendered meaningless: “Comfort one another.” [Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 176-177]

The great 19th century British scholar J.D. Lightfoot drew eloquent attention to the contrasting approaches to death of the Christians and the pagans in those long ago days. Here he is speaking of the difference between the Christian graves in the catacombs, the underground burial chambers used by Christians in Roman times, and the graves of the pagans above them, lining the great Appian Highway.

“The contrast between the gloomy despair of the heathen and the triumphant hope of the Christian mourner is nowhere more forcibly brought out than by their monumental inscriptions. The contrast of the tombs, for instance, in the Appian Way, above and below ground, has often been [noted]. On the one hand, there is the dreary wail of despair, the effect of which is only heightened by the pomp of outward splendor from which it issues. On the other, the exulting psalm of hope, shining the more brightly in all

ill-written, ill-spelled records amidst the darkness of subterranean caverns.” [Cited in Stott, 95]

In antiquity generally there was neither joy nor triumph nor celebration in the face of death, but a general hopelessness. Theocritus, the Greek poet, wrote, “Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.”

How different the Christians with their characterization of the dead as sleeping, and about to awake, with their hope of the Lord’s return in triumph, with their confident expectation of eventual vindication. Their savior had come out of the grave and told them that they would as well. He left this world as his disciples watched after often telling them that he would return to the earth as he left it. They *knew* he was coming again, and that changed everything *now* in the present.

Paul is picturing the day for them and for us. We are expected to dwell on the scene, to see it unfold in our mind’s eye, absolutely real as it will be on that day when the voice of the archangels sounds and the sound of the trumpet of God is heard first in the distance and then drawing ever nearer.

“The dead are rising! ... Magnificent mausoleums are bursting in which lie inurned the ashes of sceptered monarchs; moss-covered sepulchers are cleaving, beneath which molder the remains of priests and high-priests, nobles and princes, legislators and warriors, philosophers, orators, and poets; while the grass-grown mounds under which the slave and the peasant repose in death are not disobedient to the heavenly call.

From dim cathedral aisles from every crowded churchyard, from forest burying grounds, from profoundest ocean depths, the long-forgotten dead are starting into new, immortal being amidst the thrilling realities of the Judgment Day. The solitary traveler rises from the lonely grave which he found in a land far distant from home; while from the narrow beds in which they slept side by side in the populous cemetery whole families rise together...the mother once more clasps in her arms the babe that slumbered with her in the same grave, and mingled its dust with hers.” [John Girardeau in D. Kelly, *Preachers with Power*, 162]

If that day is coming, *and it is*, what now? Well, says Paul, *encourage one another with these words*. Think of what it will be to have your sorrows wiped away and to discover in a moment how happy a human being can be. Ponder what it must mean to be always with the Lord. Consider how you will want to have lived your life when that day dawns and live it that way now. Or, as the Apostle John put it:

“Beloved we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” [1 John 3:2-3]