

HEADS UP!

Understanding the Future So We Are Not Taken By Surprise

Today is the Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost—the season of witness and mission to take the gospel to every person in the world. In just 8 weeks, it will be the Season of Advent. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are to live toward and for the coming of Christ.

As we follow the apostles—both literally as the successors of their mission and in our study of Scripture—our journey has taken us to Corinth, the latest destination on the Apostle Paul’s European outreach.

From Athens, his previous stop, Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonica because of his anxious concern for the spiritual well-being of the new church they had established there, but had been forced to abruptly leave because of opposition and social unrest. When Timothy returned with his report, Paul wrote his first letter to encourage, clarify and instruct. Specifically, he wrote to clarify about the *parousia*, the coming of Christ for his church (1.11; 4.4.13-18; 5.9-11).

About six months later, after his first letter had been delivered, Paul wrote his second letter—again for the same purposes, only this time it was to clarify a different “coming”—the “day of the Lord” and the *apocalupsis* and the *apostasia*.

These things will be the focus of our study today, a study that is known as *eschatology*, the study of future things. The coming of Christ was central to Paul’s ministry while he was in Thessalonica and it continues to be at the heart of his letters. The New Testament contains more than 300 direct references to Christ’s return and occupies more space than any other emphasis.

This is the most important sermon I will preach this year and the most important truth that you will hear. You cannot afford to forget or fail to act on the words that you hear today. Your destiny and the destiny of your children is at stake. Nothing in your life is more important than understanding and acting on these truths with intense focus.

May we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

In Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, God never acts without giving His people, to use a colloquial expression, a “heads up”. In these letters of Paul to the Thessalonians, God has given us a “heads up” so that we know what is coming and how to live, enabling us to be part of those who are eternally blessed and not those who will experience unimaginable destruction.

THE APOSTLES CREED

In confession at baptism and at other times of consecration, we declare our faith in the revelation of Scripture as it is summarized in The Apostles Creed—

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;*

*And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting.*

Amen.

What do we declare that we believe about future things? We believe that Jesus will come again, we believe that he will judge the living and the dead, we believe in bodily resurrection of the dead, and we believe in life everlasting. This is what the Apostle Paul taught the new converts when he was in Thessalonica, and it is what they truly believed. In his first letter to them, he wrote—

[Others throughout Macedonia and Achaia] tell how 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—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

1 THESSALONIANS 1.9-10

THE DAY OF THE LORD

In both of his letters, the Apostle Paul used a specific term in writing about this time of coming wrath: “the day of the Lord.” This is a term not only used by the apostles but one that prolifically appears in the Old Testament as the prophets relayed the messages spoken by God to His people.

▶ ISAIAH—

See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. (13.9-11)

▶ EZEKIEL—

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, prophesy and say: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “Wail and say, “Alas for that day!” For the day is near, the day of the LORD is near—a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations. (30.1-3)

▶ OBADIAH—

“The day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.” (15)

▶ ZEPHANIAH—

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. “I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea— and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.” “When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth,” declares the LORD, “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests— those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molek, those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.” Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. . . . That day will be a day of wrath— a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness . . . In the fire of his jealousy the whole earth will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth. (1.2-7, 15, 18)

In his first letter, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the return of Jesus to rescue them from the coming wrath. Because of misinformation they had received from others and the trouble and persecution that they were now experiencing, they were confused and alarmed about the timing of these events. This matter of “the day of the Lord” is the primary focus of Paul’s second letter. He wrote—

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He 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. Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?

In his two letters, the Apostle Paul uses the words “come” and “coming” fifteen times in reference to the Lord’s return and the events of the end. There are critical truths we need to understand as we look at the future:

- ▶ Humanity is not in charge of their future. Human history is on an inexorable timeline that has been determined by the Sovereign and Eternal God.
- ▶ Human history will culminate in a season of unimaginable spiritual darkness and in a climatic altercation between the followers of the champion of darkness and the Lord Jesus Christ (see Revelation 16.14; 19.11-21).
- ▶ During that time of unimaginable darkness, God will be judging humanity for their rejection of the truth and their determination to live in opposition to His revealed truth. For example, Revelation 16 describes the seven bowls of God’s wrath being poured out on God-defiant humanity—

And I heard the altar respond: “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are Your judgments.” The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify Him.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

REVELATION 16.7-11

- ▶ The “Day of the Lord” is that period of judgment; it will be experienced by everyone on the earth (Luke 21.35). This is Paul’s reference in his first letter when he wrote to the Thessalonians of “the coming wrath” (1.10). Jesus told his disciples (and us) to be “always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen” (Luke 21.36).

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS COMING

In their confusion, the Thessalonians thought that the day of the Lord had already come; the Apostle Paul wrote to give them insight into what was already occurring and what was coming. He described four dynamics at work in the agenda of darkness—

(1) The Lie (2.11)

- ▶ The Lie has been opposing the Truth since the beginning. It began in the heart of Lucifer and manifested itself in determined rebellion to usurp the place of God (Isaiah, 14.12-14; Ezekiel 28.15-17).
- ▶ The Lie resurfaced in the Garden of Eden as the serpent questioned those made in the image of God and enticed them to reject the revelation of God for an alternate, self-focused “truth” (Genesis 3.4-6).
- ▶ The Lie is the belief that I am the highest relevancy, the determiner of truth and of my destiny; all begins and ends with me.
- ▶ The Lie opposes The Truth and imposes deception (2.10-11).
- ▶ The Lie is operative in every generation; it is seen in those who “delight in wickedness” (2.12) and who reject any sense of accountability to God.

(2) The Secret Power of Lawlessness (2.7)

- ▶ The Secret Power of Lawlessness is at work rejecting Truth and Revelation. The Apostle Paul described this dynamic of darkness in his letter to the church at Rome—

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

- ▶ The Secret Power of Lawlessness can be seen when societies reject the God-given sense of right and wrong that He embedded in the human conscience. It is seen when politicians and courts reject God's moral law that has been universally accepted for generations and redefine truth and morality to be "what is right in their own eyes."

(3) The Rebellion (2.3)

- ▶ The word for "rebellion" is *apostasia*. It is the rejection of the Revealed Truth that was once believed and professed and an acceptance and a delight in what was once understood to be against God's will. Jesus described this "falling away from the faith" in his warnings about the last days—

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

MATTHEW 24.10-13

- ▶ Apostasy rejects the authority of God's Word in one's life, and having rejected God's truth, finds "delight in things that transgress God's moral law and give offense to God's holy person"—things that invariably involve the idolatry of self and sexual expression.
- ▶ The pervasiveness of *apostasia* can be seen in the many denominations, the progressive Christian movement, and the numerous high profile Christians who have rejected the Scripture as God's authoritative, infallible truth, instead embracing the positions of a changing culture whose values reflect the affirmation of self and self-will over God and His revealed truth.

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 TIMOTHY 4.3-4

*“They perish because they refused to love the truth
and so be saved.” (2.10)*

- (1) The truth that all are sinners, unrighteous; my ways are at odds with God (Isaiah 53.6; Romans 3.23)
- (2) The truth that we must become a new creation in Christ, i.e. born again (John 3.3, 5; Titus 3.5)
- (3) The truth that my sin and God’s love and desire to reconcile me necessitated the death of Christ on the cross (Romans 5.8; Colossians 1.19-20; 1 John 4.10)
- (4) The truth that I must turn from my self and my sin and to Christ for forgiveness and new life (1 Thessalonians 1.9; 2 Timothy 2.19)
- (5) The truth that I must abandon self to live the Christ-life by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit– that always means “No!” to self and its desires and “Yes!” to God’s Word and ways (Titus 2.12; Galatians 2.20; 5.24-25)

(4) The Lawless Man - 2.3

- ▶ At an appointed time, God’s restraint on spiritual lawlessness will be removed and the one who is the epitome of lawlessness against God will be revealed (*apocalupsis*) (2.6-7).
- ▶ The Bible calls this one the Antichrist; in every way he will be the antithesis of Christ who came to fulfill God’s law and die as a law-breaker on our behalf, and who fully submitted in everything to the will of the Father.
- ▶ He will oppose everything that represents God or bears the image (imprint) of God (2.4).
- ▶ He will present himself as God and exalt himself over everything that represents God (2.4; Revelation 13.6).

- ▶ His revealing will be accompanied by “the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing” (2.9-10).
- ▶ He is doomed for destruction and will be overthrown and destroyed “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (1.7; 2.8; cf. Revelation 19.19-20).

He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed.

DANIEL 11.36

JESUS WHO RESCUES US FROM THE COMING WRATH

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

1 THESSALONIANS 5.9-10

In contrast to the day of the Lord and the time of wrath for those who reject the truth and delight in wickedness, the Apostle Paul pointed the Thessalonian believers to the “*parousia*” – the coming of Christ for all true believers (1 Thessalonians 4.16-17).

- ▶ At the appointed time, Christ will come for all who are living in expectation of His return, to rescue them from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1.11). This is our “blessed hope” (Titus 2.13).
- ▶ The day of the Lord will commence and God’s judgment will be administered—but we will be with Him!
- ▶ Until then, we must live intentionally as His set-apart people: standing firm, not relinquishing His truth, praying, and anticipating His return.

God chose you . . . to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. . . . that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

2 THESSALONIANS 2.14-15