

## 1 Thessalonians: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ

by Steve Ray

He was chased out of the city and barely escaped under the cover of night. Local friends are good to have at times like this—they can find the city gates in the dark. Traveling by the light of the moon Paul and his companions arrived with the morning dew in Berea only twenty miles to the west. But his enemies in Thessalonica quickly discovered Paul had escaped to Berea and was again teaching—they came after him again. This time Paul was rushed off to the coast and escaped by the Aegean Sea, sailing to Athens. All he wanted to do was share the Good News, but not everyone wanted to hear it—in fact some wanted to kill the messenger. His companions Silas and Timothy stayed behind but soon joined Paul in Athens 200 miles to the south (Acts 18:5).

The Jews in Thessalonica had been furious to hear that a Galilean man named Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God had come to earth to save the Jews and Gentiles by being assassinated on a cross. What blasphemy! And to make it worse, the one preaching this message to the Jews was a Jew himself! And to make it even *worse* this Jewish preacher was telling the Gentiles, of all people, that the Jewish God was welcoming them into a new covenant. And to make it even worse than *that*, he was telling the Jews they could be reconciled to God *without circumcision and without following all 613 commands in the Law of Moses!* No wonder they were furious.

Paul had arrived in Thessalonica (in modern day Greece) around AD 50 and went directly to the Jewish synagogue since there was a sizeable Jewish population living in the city (Acts 17:1). But the Jews were very defensive of their unique identity and didn't want some itinerant preacher coming along and stealing their people away, or trying to include unclean Gentiles into the community. They argued with Paul as he proved from the Jewish scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. They rejected Paul's new revelation that God had revealed to him (1 Thes 2:13; Gal 1:16).

After denouncing him and scowling at his teaching of Jesus, they became jealous because some of the people believed Paul, both Jews and Greeks, especially some of the well-to-do Greek women (Acts 17:4). They treated Paul with contempt and violence—they threw him ignominiously out of town. Why? “For three weeks he [Paul] reasoned with them from the scriptures” in the synagogue as was his custom. They did not revile Paul the first week, or the second, rather, they listened and discussed, but ultimately they rejected what he had to say. They had listened, compared his “new teaching” to the Old Testament scriptures, and then decided that Paul was wrong.

The Berean Jews, who received Paul after his escape from Thessalonica, “were more noble [or, *open minded*] than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). A perusal of grammars and commentaries make it clear they were “noble-minded” not for studying Scripture, but for treating Paul better—more civilly than the Thessalonians, with an open mind and generous courtesy.

They did not insist on the “Bible only” mentality that many Protestants attribute to them. They were willing to accept Paul’s words as the words of God—to accept his “new” tradition as inspired and infallible (as did the few in Thessalonica who accepted Paul’s teaching, e.g., 1 Thes 2:13). The Thessalonian Jews demonstrated no nobility of mind. In a way, they seem to be the equivalent of modern day “Bible only” Christians in that they would not accept Paul’s teaching and tradition as the word of God—holding stiffly to the “Bible alone” [Old Testament] and their own interpretation.

The Bereans, on the other hand, were not adherents of a Protestant-style *sola Scriptura* for they were willing to accept Paul’s new oral teaching as the word of God (Scripture and tradition). The Bereans, who were more open and noble minded, received Paul and his tradition, searching the Old Testament Scriptures to confirm the truth of Paul’s teaching. Paul did not *just* teach the Old Testament. He clearly presents himself as the teacher of new revelation (see Eph 3:1–5). The Thessalonians were the “Bible only” representatives; the Bereans were much more Catholic.

These new believers weathered the storm of opposition and became the church of Thessalonica, a church Paul applauded with high praise in his two letters to them. Since persecution and Satan had kept Paul from returning to the fledgling church (1 Thes 2:18) he was sent his fellow worker Timothy. Timothy returned with a glowing report of their faith, hope and love (1 Thes 1:3). After receiving Timothy’s report, Paul sat down with him and Silvanus and wrote a letter of encouragement to these “brethren beloved by God”. Most people don’t realize that this very first preserved letter of Paul had two co-authors! (1 Thes 1:1)

But several things had disrupted the minds of these new Christians in the short months since Paul had fled their city. Paul’s teaching had been contradicted and as is often the case today, people had seriously misinterpreted his tradition. Paul had taught them about Christ’s return. He had told them about eternal life. But in the meantime, some had died and the new Christians were scared—what happens to those who die before the Lord returns?

Paul responded to the unsettled brethren and encouraged them. One of the reasons Paul’s letter is such a precious document is that it gives the most encouraging and insightful explanation of the future of the faithful whether they are alive or dead when Christ returns. It was the first letter we have from the pen of St. Paul—*First Thessalonians*, written around AD 51.

Imagine your own baby dying in your arms and then placed in the ground, or a wife or husband. Imagine the gut wrenching loss. They are dead, buried and gone. *But then, Paul’s letter arrives!* He informs you that the Christian has a marvelous hope, based on good and sufficient reasons. He tells them “The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, 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” (1 Thes 4:16–17). What extraordinary news! What a marvelous hope!

Lately, and I mean that literally, many have chosen to believe a theological novelty called the “Rapture”, which teaches that Christ will come to take his people prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. It is a secret, “interim” visit preceding and distinct from his 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. The word “rapture” does not appear in the New Testament, nor has such a thing been taught in the history of the Church; yet, many today have found it fashionable to teach this newly invented doctrine. It first saw the light of day in Scotland in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It was birthed by a pair of women who had ecstatic visions in the Brethren movement. It was then made popular in the United States through the annotations in the Scofield Reference Bible. Even today the teaching is mainly confined to the United States and countries strongly influenced by American theology. Most people that hold to this theology think it has been orthodox teaching from the first centuries—they are wrong.

Paul never intended to preach a secret coming of Christ to snatch Christians away prior to and distinct from the Second Coming. Nowhere are we taught that Jesus will actually make an interim secret return to earth, secretly to sweep only the believers away before the final tribulation on earth. As the Church has always taught and as the *Catechism* teaches today, the Second Coming will happen at the “last day”, at the “end of time” after the Church goes through a time of trial (CCC 675, 1001). The Nicene Creed states, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” This is the Second Coming and says nothing about a “third” coming of Christ. Paul was correcting false teaching then, just as the Church must do today. (For more on this topic, read *The Rapture Trap*, by Paul Thigpen.)

Opponents had also unsettled the Thessalonians by accusing Paul of being a profiteer. It seems they accused him of gathering a group together and take their money. Paul scoffs at such an accusation and reminds them that he did not come with using a “cloak for greed”, but reminds them that he worked “day and night” to avoid being a financial burden to anyone (1 Thes 2:5–13). He was a tentmaker and worked with his own hands to his own way (cp. Acts 18:3). He also uses the interesting descriptions of his being a “nurse taking care of her children” and a “father with his children” to remind them of his gentle care and impassioned exhortations to holiness and obedience to God.

The first three chapters center on the personal and historical; last two chapters emphasize the practical and instructional. They learned their lessons eagerly and well. This first letter from Paul was written from Corinth where he stayed for eighteen months. When Timothy returned from delivering the letter it was not long before Paul sat with Timothy and Silvanus again and sent a second letter of encouragement to these examples to all believers living—the Thessalonians.