**Part Three: The eschatology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians**

In Romans 9-11, Paul has discussed the saving plan of God in history, culminating in a great harvest of the Jewish people in the period immediately prior to the Lord’s return. But it is in the two letters to the Thessalonians that Paul is most specific about the events of the end, and where he most closely echoes the teachings of Jesus on the same subject. These passages are the primary source for the dispensationalist doctrine of the “rapture.” These are the critical passages for understanding what Paul taught about the events surrounding the return of Christ.

Paul is concerned in both these letters to clear up confusion as to the nature and order of events preceding the Lord’s return. He describes the future “coming” of the Lord and our “meeting” him as he descends in the clouds. He discusses the future “apostasy” and the coming of the “lawless one.” He speaks of a mysterious figure called the “restrainer.” What is the apostasy? Is the lawless one a person, and is he what is elsewhere called the antichrist? Who or what is the restrainer? And above all, what does Paul mean when he speaks of our being “caught up in the clouds” to meet the Lord? These are the questions we seek to answer.

***1. The parousia: the return of the Lord***

***“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?”* (1 Thess. 2:19).**

The word “coming” is the Greek word *parousia*. Paul uses this word a number of times to refer to Jesus’ second coming (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8). The same word is used to refer to the Lord’s coming by the disciples (Mt. 24:3); by Jesus himself (Mt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39); by James (Jas. 5:5, 8); by Peter (2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12); and by John (1 Jn. 2:28). It is the key New Testament word for the second coming of Christ.

So this is a significant word in terms of understanding the Lord’s return. Providentially, we have some very specific information about what it means and why the New Testament uses this word and not some other. *Parousia* was a technical word which referred to the coming of kings or high-ranking officials to a city or locality for an official visit. A delegation of prominent citizens would go outside the city and meet the ruler to escort him back into the city, where he was duly honoured and his rule was proclaimed. He then sat down on his throne and passed judgment, acquitting the innocent and convicting the guilty. This was a very common custom in the Greek and Roman world, and the Thessalonians would have known exactly what Paul meant by it. It may well have been why Paul was accused at Thessalonica of saying that there is another king, Jesus (Ac. 17:7).

So when Paul uses the word *parousia* here, he is describing an event in which Christ returns to rule over his renewed earthly kingdom, *not an event in which he takes believers out of this world* while leaving it in the hands of the devil. The picture is of believers going outside the city to meet the Lord as he approaches it, and then to take him back to the city, where his rulership will be proclaimed over the renewed earth and heavens, and where he passes judgment on the saved and the lost. It is the *immediate precursor* to the great white throne judgment, and not separated from it by a thousand-year gap.

***2. Caught up in the clouds: return not rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18)***

***Verses 15-17: “For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, 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, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”***

The Gospel has only just come to them, but in all probability some members of the congregation have already died. In light of this, the Thessalonian Christians have become alarmed at a false teaching that those who die before the Lord’s return will somehow miss out on the events of the great day when Christ returns. In order to correct this, Paul gives assurance in these verses that those who have died in the Lord will be raised from the dead in time for them and those still alive to go to meet the Lord together at his coming. No one will be left out. Verse 15 is now the third time in the letter (after 2:19 and 3:13) Paul has used the word *parousia*. This time he adds more colour and definition to his description of the event. In verses 15-17 we have the most explicit description of the Lord’s return anywhere in Paul’s writings.

*First, the Lord descends from heaven.*  He does so with a commanding shout, the voice of an archangel and the sound of a trumpet. The shout (*keleusma*) was an authoritative cry given at a moment of great importance. The archangel is almost certainly Michael (Jude verse 9), the only archangel mentioned in the New Testament. Michael appears in Dan. 10:13 and 12:1 as the “patron saint” or divine protector of God’s people, and he is also mentioned in Rev. 12:7 in that same capacity. Revelation is full of references to angels in association with the end of the age, as are other many other parts of the New Testament (Mt. 13:39; Mk. 8:38; 1 Cor. 6:3, 2 Thess. 1:7, etc.). The sounding of the trumpet, which in the Old Testament acted as a signal something important was about to happen, is often connected in the New Testament with the Lord’s return (Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52 and various places in Revelation).

*Second, deceased believers are resurrected.* The problem is not that they might not rise at all. The Thessalonian Christians would surely have been taught by Paul concerning the resurrection of the dead and eternal life as part of his basic gospel message. The fear they apparently had was that believers who had died since Paul had brought the gospel to them might miss out on this glorious event. That is why Paul does not insist on the fact that deceased believers will rise, but rather on the fact they will *rise first.*

*Third, the resurrected saints and living believers are caught up in the air to meet the Lord as he returns.* The critical question here is the meaning of the phrase “caught up.” The Greek verb is *harpazo*, and its Latin translation is *rapio*, from which we get the word “rapture.” Does this text really speak of a taking of the saints out of this world and leaving the lost behind as dispensationalist teaching claims? The first problem is this: how could the Thessalonians possibly have known anything about a secret rapture, in which Christ returns surreptitiously to remove the church, when Paul had only taught them the Lord was going to return, and is *only just now teaching them for the very first time* about the details of the Lord’s return? In fact, how could the Thessalonians know about a doctrine completely unknown in the history of the church until the year 1830?

Paul used the verb *harpazo* for a very specific reason. The word referred to a person’s being “snatched away” in death. Fate or Fortune, understood as gods, are frequently pictured in both Greek and Latin literature as snatching loved ones away to Hades or the underworld. Death, so to speak, has “raptured” them. Paul turns the word around. Believers are snatched up not by death, but by life. He is not using the word to refer to a secret return of Christ in which believers are removed from the world. He is simply contrasting the pagan belief in fate snatching people to Hades with the Christian belief that Christ snatches them up into eternal life.

So believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the clouds. This image is associated with the ascension of Christ (Ac. 1: 9) and his return (Mt. 24:30; Mk. 13:36; Rev. 1:7). It is rooted in Daniel’s vision of the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven (Dn. 7:13). The clouds are not so much an indicator of location as they are a sign of the presence of God. But Christ who ascended is now descending just as the angels promised the watching disciples (Ac. 1:11). As he left this world, how he is returning to reclaim it. He has no intention of leaving again.

The next phase is extremely significant. The purpose of the believers being caught up is to meet the Lord — literally, “for a meeting with the Lord.” The word “meeting” is *apantesis*. And we find this word is very similar in meaning to *parousia*. A *parousia* was the term for the “coming” of a king or high official to a city, whereupon the citizens went out to meet him and escort him back into the city. An *apantesis* was the term for a formal reception given for the same kind of dignitary at his *parousia*. The civic leaders would go outside the city to meet the important personage, shower him with shouts of praise and then escort him back into the city. The parousia is the coming of the king, and the apantesis is the reception given when he arrives. The key to both is that the king was escorted by the citizens *back into the city* where his kingship was affirmed and honoured.  This completely opposite to the idea of a rapture, in which believers *go outside the city in order to be taken out of the world entirely*, whereas the world is handed over to a devastating tribulation in which Satan runs rampant.

The Thessalonians would have understood instantly what both words, *parousia* and *apantesis*, meant. The latter word was so common it was used as a loan word in Latin, where Cicero writes of the *apantesis* Caesar was receiving from the Roman towns as he returned from his military triumphs abroad. Even more remarkably, the word was known by the Rabbis and used as a loan word in Hebrew, where the great people of the city were said to move out of the city for an *apantesis* with the king, then escorting him back in.

Now let’s look at the two other places in the New Testament where the word appears. In both these cases, the meaning of *apantesis* *is spelled out literally in the text.* When the Christians in Rome learned that Paul was approaching the city, they sent a delegation quite a way out of the city for an *apantesis* in his honour. *They then escorted him all the way into Rome* (Ac. 28:15-16). In the parable of the ten virgins, the young women “go out” for an *apantesis* with the approaching bridegroom. After the *apantesis*, the wise virgins then *accompanied him back into the wedding feast* (Mt. 25:6-10).

*These verses prove beyond doubt that Paul was not teaching a rapture.* He was painting a picture of Christians going out to meet Jesus as he descended in the clouds in order to escort him back into the new eternal city and proclaim his rule over it. *This passage also teaches that there is no thousand year gap between the descending of the Lord in the clouds and the inauguration of the new Jerusalem.*  Jesus was speaking of his final return, not of an earthly millennial rule, for in the same passage quoted above he tells the disciples what will happen immediately after the *apantesis:* “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another… and these (the wicked) will go away into eternal punishment, but he righteous into eternal life” (Mt. 25:31-32, 46). There is only one return of Christ, and it is followed immediately by the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15).