

Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians

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Eschatology or "the doctrine of last things", in the limited aspect of teaching regarding the Parousia or Second Coming of our Lord, occurs in 1 Thessalonians both in isolated verses viz., 1:10; 2:19; 3:13, 5:23 and in two connected passages, viz., 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. A consideration of these suggests the following teaching concerning the Lord's Return.

First of all it implies vindication in respect of the glorified Christian. The Thessalonians await the return of God's son from heaven, who delivers them from the wrath to come (1:10). They will be Paul's joy and crown at the Parousia (2:19). Paul prays that the Lord will present them in impeccable holiness before God on that occasion (3:13), and his concluding request of God for them in his letter is that they may in their entirety, spirit, soul and body, be preserved well and without reproach at that day (5:23).

All of this suggests that the Parousia will be for the believer an occasion of vindication. Not only will he escape the wrath of God on that day, but he will be presented in holiness before his Creator at Christ's Return. What a great encouragement to those involved in Christian work to have this public recognition and divine seal upon their labour! The constant praying and patient caring for those brought with great difficulty to faith in Christ will be so signally rewarded as the prospect of their glorified state rejoices their teacher's heart on that day. The faithful sowing and meticulous training will be so graciously owned of God in their experience at that time. What glorious prospect is here for each believer as he anticipates his place within a Church presented before Christ and the Father in spotless splendour!

Then, too, it implies comfort in respect of the dead Christian. This is the prime thrust of Paul's teaching on the Second Coming in the passage 1 Thess. 4:13-18. He writes specifically to comfort those who sorrow over Christian loved ones who have died before the Parousia. The strength of this comfort, which he enjoins as mutual exhortation (v.18), rests principally on two grounds.

The death and resurrection of Christ (v.14) is one of these. The form in which Paul presents this truth underlines its historicity. It is on the grounds of the historical facts of Christ's death and resurrection that comfort and assurance are offered to Christians concerning their Christian loved ones who have died in the Lord. These kernal historic facts of the gospel are the basis of the believer's solace regarding his believing friends at time of bereavement. What greater foundation of comfort, what stronger encouragement of hope can he have than these?

The Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv.15-17) is the second ground to which Paul directs the Thessalonians in comforting themselves

concerning departed Christian friends. Again, the form in which this truth is presented emphasizes its authority. It is given to them from Paul "by [literally] in word of Lord." Much discussion has ranged over the particular origin of this word of the Lord, the substance of which is in vv. 15-17. Whatever the precise nature of the origin of the revelation, it is its authority which is stressed. This information which Paul offers the Thessalonians for their comfort, comes with all the imperium of a sovereign word from the sovereign Lord to their hearts.

Not only the form of the word but the details of it further substantiate its authority. The descent at the Parousia will be of the Lord in person. The cry of command, the archangel's call and the trumpet of God all stress the majestic arrival of a king. The rising of the dead "first" and the emphatic "together with them" almost "simultaneously with them"¹ describing the movement of surviving Christians together with their resurrected brothers to meet the Lord, removes any anxiety from the minds of the Thessalonians that their departed friends will be at any disadvantage at the Parousia.

This authoritative word of the Lord indicating Christ's personal intervention at the Parousia, and the simultaneous nature of the rising of Christians to meet their Lord, are the facets of Paul's teaching on the Second Coming which he urges upon believers at Thessalonica as firm grounds upon which to comfort each other. Let us continue to derive comfort and assurance from the hope and certainty of these future events and let us console those in bereavement on their express authority.

Again, it implies encouragement in respect of living Christians. Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to continue encouraging and up-building one another as they had been doing (5:11) arises from two main considerations of his teaching regarding our Lord's return in that chapter. The unexpected nature of the Parousia (5:13) is one. Paul stresses this aspect of the Second Coming to them as though it was teaching with which they were well acquainted and which he had perhaps given to them on his founding mission. The link of this unexpected nature of the Coming with our Lord's teaching seems clear from Mt. 24:40-44 and especially from v.43.² The inevitability of this occurrence and the impossibility of escape from it are stressed in the vivid imagery of child-birth (5:3). The very uncertainty of the actual time of this coming should lead them to a constant and watchful wakefulness (5:6).

The Christian's relationship to the Parousia (5:4-10) is the second. It is this aspect, on which Paul appears to dwell at even greater length in this section: their relationship to the Day of the Lord is such that it should not take them by surprise (5:4). Paul puts their relationship to that day in two different ways. God's character is imparted to them (5:5-8). They are both sons of the light and sons of the day. That is, as this Semitic form of expression would seem to indicate, they are characterized both by the enlightenment of gospel truth and by the joy, vindication and glory in prospect for them at Christ's return.³ The darkness of sin and of ignorance no longer predominates in their nature. Therefore, not only must they be

watchful but they must put on garments appropriate to their character and must cultivate fruits which will give evidence of their new nature, namely, faith, love and hope (5:8).

Besides, God's purpose will be fulfilled in them (5:9-10). Their future is as secure as their present is dynamic by virtue of this relationship. They are destined not for wrath but for life. It is a life resulting from Christ's death for them, and a life which is assured to them regardless of their dying before or surviving to the Parousia.

Thus, moved by the uncertainty of the actual moment of Christ's return, but also stimulated by their direct relationship with that event, both in terms of their spiritual enlightenment and of the fulfillment of the divine purpose in them through it, believers are to continue the process of mutual encouragement and mutual strengthening.

They are not to absorb themselves in abstruse calculations as to the moment of our Lord's return. Rather, accepting that they are not meant to know what is not properly their business, they are to live their lives as to be ready for His return at any moment. They are to recognize their relationship to that day in terms of their own spiritual enlightenment, and to see to it, by their watchfulness and sobriety, that they are manifesting the fruit of love, hope and faith in their lives. These are suitable characteristics for those who are sons of the day. They are to look, not in wistful speculation but in glad hope and anticipation to that day as the occasion of God's completed purpose in them, a destiny of eternal life through Christ. It is thus that Zion must lengthen her cords and strengthen her stakes in prospect of her King's return.

The force of these biblical principles should not be lost on us. We must translate them into strategies for living in the modern world. When eschatology becomes abstruse and academic it loses its dynamic. The world in which these principles were given, was the Judaeo-Christian of the first century. There is, however, a timeless quality about them for man is still a fallen, if redeemed, creaturely and contingent being. The hope of final vindication should continue to inspire Christians in the present modern world as they confirm personal faith, attend to its growth to maturity and see evidence of it both in their own transformed lives and in transformed relationships within their homes and in society. This is what Paul urges the Thessalonians to continue: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (5:1). It was the dynamic of their faith which was spreading throughout Greece. That faith was specified as their turning from idolatry, their living service of God and their anticipation of God's Son from heaven. Modern Christians must be characterized by a continual turning from the empty vanity of the old way and by a constant service of God whom they have found through His Son to be real and effectual in daily experience. The strategy is based on the fact that they are already new creatures, "sons of the light". They should be enjoying, expanding and making fresh discoveries about this new nature relevant to their living whether in home, office, workshop, factory-floor

or school-room. This will transform relationships in all of these settings. The interruption of this life-cycle by death is as much a part of the twentieth century as of the first. The practical comfort and hope offered by this teaching must literally be used by Christians to help one another in grief. If we serve anticipating a final vindication, we must come to view death as one step nearer that vindication on our on-going march from grace to glory. Not only life but death is transformed by the gospel.

Is this, however, enough? Stated baldly the conservative stance has been to develop the renewed nature in personal surroundings through Bible instruction, prayer and fellowship with other Christians. By this means and the proclamation of Christ's Lordship they have sought to extend the parameters of the kingdom in the world. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden have prepared a new approach, a new "kingdom theology", which they explain in their jointly written *Current Trends in Theology*.⁴ Writing from a Third World background they recognize the conservative position, itemize another which they describe as redefining the mission of the church in humanisation, through development projects, trades union activity, political education and social change, and propose a third where they see the mission of the church in terms of the Kingdom of God. The expression of this kingdom must not only be in proclaiming Jesus as Lord but in seeking to transform the structures of society appropriate to establishing this kingdom as much as possible here and now.

Many of their suggestions are helpful. There is a real sense in which New Testament eschatology proposes not only a future kingdom but one which has broken in on our present age. It is true that Christian as compared with pre-Christian apocalyptic is characterized by optimism rather than pessimism and in this we have not taken Christ's victory and its implications for our life-style sufficiently seriously. It is basic to presume that we must express our sonship of light in daily living and relationships and be concerned about structures which impede this progress. The biblical emphasis, however, seems to stress constantly as a priority the personal development of faith within the context of our relationships in both church and society and to do so as a quietly transforming leaven or preserving salt rather than as an outright frontal attack. There may be those systems which are so amoral and "anti-kingdom" in their structure that we must oppose them. That is acceptable. Nevertheless, such a preoccupation can too easily lead to a dependence on this process rather than on the transforming personal agency of a maturing faith associated with the normative proclamation of Christ's Lordship.

The eschatology of 1 Thessalonians reminds us of the victory of Christ by highlighting a final vindication, practical comfort and encouragement in present service for the Christian. As a strategy it is largely directed towards motivation, for it stresses that we are sons of the light. As to practical expression, it emphasizes a continuance in and maturing of personal faith rooted in repentance and regeneration and the relevance of this Lordship of Christ in renewed human relationships: "Make your

ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody". (1 Thess 4.II). It is a task well worthy of the attention of us all.

NOTES

1. L. Morris, *1 & 2 Epistle of Paul to Thessalonians*, (Grand Rapids, 1968), p. 145 n. 63.
2. G. H. Waterman, "The Sources of Paul's Teaching on the Second Coming of Christ in 1 and 2 Thessalonians", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 18, (1975), pp. 105-113.
3. The actual phrase "sons of the light" is found in Lk. 16:8 but the contrast between light and darkness as characteristic of Christian experience is also found in Paul at Eph. 5:6f and at Rom.13:11f, where the context is that of the Parousia. The concept is found frequently in Qumran literature as is evident from the scroll entitled "The War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness."
4. V. Samuel and C. Sugden, *Current Trends in Theology, A Third World Guide*, (Bangalore, 1981).