



## CHRIST'S COMING IN GLORY

by  
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One night, during his second missionary journey, Paul had a vision. A Greek called out to him, "Come over here to Macedonia and help us!" (Acts 16:9) It was a key moment in the spread of the gospel from Asia into Europe.

Paul boldly proclaimed to the Thessalonians that God had raised Jesus from the dead and they believed his message, taking it to be God's Word. They "turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Their sincerity in becoming believers was genuine: Paul made deep friendships with them. But suddenly persecution broke out and after only a few weeks, he had to leave them. Paul worried how they would do without his presence and teaching; Timothy reported they came through with flying colors.

Meantime, Paul sent them a letter, the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Scholars believe it was the first New Testament document put into writing, about 51 AD. Paul heard the Thessalonians were grieving over the deaths of some of their friends.

Christians have faith in God and in Christ's resurrection. Still, separation from a loved one—or seeing a loved one suffer or losing someone to death—all these things remain painful experiences for us. The question, then, is how our faith, hope and love can help us to approach these realities. This was the struggle of the Thessalonians when Paul wrote them.

An important theme of First Thessalonians is the "parousia" of Jesus (cf. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:4, 9, 23). This Greek word literally means "presence" and refers to the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time (or the end of the world). Paul clearly spoke of this event as the completion of the dramatic events begun by Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and glorification at God's right hand.

Paul may have implied the Parousia would take place very soon. In fact, he probably spoke in such a way that his Thessalonian converts expected to take part in this glorious happening themselves. And—possibly—some may have thought that those who died before this "glorious coming" were judged unworthy of sharing in this central moment in salvation history.

Paul teaches the Thessalonians more fully about how Christians are to view the mystery of death. He says that believers are to mourn for the loss of their sisters and brothers, but not like other people "who have no hope" (4:13). For Christians, death is like going to sleep at night. It is something from which one naturally awakes (or "rises up") in the morning: this is why Paul uses "the day" to describe the time of Christ's "arrival" (5:4).

The Thessalonians who died, Paul says, have "gone to sleep" believing both in Jesus and in the mystery of his death and resurrection (4:14). So a Christian's death is not a divine judgment against them. In reality, Christians who have died and those who are still alive at the Parousia are united in a common faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. So any Christians who happen to be alive at the coming of Christ will not have an advantage over those who have died.

Paul made use of several sets of images to explain the reality of the Parousia. He drew on the Greek world's experience of a visit from the emperor to a Hellenistic city (something like "royal visits" we have in Canada every so often) to show how all the Christians will go out to meet Christ as he "arrives" to inaugurate his kingly rule for good.

The other images Paul used come from the Old Testament concept of "holy war" in which God

comes to Israel's assistance to defeat the enemies of the chosen people. In this view, the last enemy still to be fully defeated is "Death" (although Death's defeat has already been assured through Christ's victory in his resurrection).

So, the "word of command", the "archangel's voice" and "God's trumpet" (4:16) are images taken from the "holy war" tradition. In the last battle of the "holy war" against Death, it is Christ who will come as God's agent to rescue both dead and living believers from Death's grasp.

The last image Paul left his readers with was one in which all believers exist with Christ and one another "in the air" or "on the clouds". These descriptions simply point to the place where people naturally located God's dwelling-place, namely "in the heavens". "Thenceforth," Paul concludes, "we shall be with the Lord unceasingly" (4:17).

With Christ's coming, the pain of separation from loved ones will be overcome forever. This conviction is meant to be a source of consolation for all Christians (4:18). In Paul's view, then, heaven means reunion with loved ones as well as union with God. Elsewhere in the Bible other images of heaven are given, but Paul imagined that the reunion he hoped to have with the Thessalonians would be a rehearsal for the eternal life all would share in after death.

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*Second Thessalonians: The Complex Nature of the End-Time*