

1 Thessalonians 4: the Return of Christ

One of the major themes in this Epistle, is that of the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each chapter refers to this momentous future event, as follows:

“... to **wait for his Son from heaven**, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thes. 1:10).

“... for what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ **at his coming?**” (1 Thes. 2:19).

“... to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, **at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ** with all his saints” (1 Thes. 3:13)

“... for **the Lord himself shall descend from heaven** with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thes. 4:16)

“... For yourselves know perfectly that **the day of the Lord so cometh** as a thief in the night” (1 Thes. 5:2).

For the purposes of today’s exhortation, we shall focus on today’s chapter: 1 Thessalonians 4, and some of the Old Testament principles being alluded to here.

As cited, above, the Lord Jesus Christ is to “himself descend from heaven”, and at that time the “first” thing that takes place is the rising of the dead. The verse that follows then proceeds to describe how that “we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air ...” (1 Thes. 1:17). The language here, takes us back to the beginning of Israel’s formation as a nation, as recorded in Exodus chapter 19.

In this passage, we read the following:

“... And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to **meet with God**; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because **Yahweh descended** upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the sound of **a trumpet** sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by **a voice**. And **Yahweh came down** upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount and Yahweh called Moses up to the top of the mount, and Moses went up ...” (Exo. 19:17-20).

Notice how that the emboldened words match the description given in 1 Thessalonians 4: Just as the Lord descended upon mount Sinai, so the Lord Jesus Christ is to descend from heaven. There is a point of comparison here: just as Moses went up the mount to lead the people in meeting their God, so the Lord has ascended to his Father’s presence

– to return again. And we must be like the people ought to have been: patiently waiting for the Master to return: “unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Heb. 9:28). Like Moses was to come again, so with the Master. And just like the people had turned aside to idolatry in Moses’ absence, even so Christendom has gone astray from the true Gospel message, to the worshipping of a fictitious Trinitarian deity.

Our position, however, does differ in certain respects:

“ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness and tempest ... and so terrible was the sight that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake. But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of Angels” (Heb. 12:see verses 18-22).

We don’t have the terrifying sight of a burning mountain and all the experiences which made even Moses to “fear and quake”. Rather, we come to be part of a new system of things, even heavenly Jerusalem, “and to Jesus the mediator of the New Testament” (vs. 24).

There is another way in which the experiences of Israel at the beginning of their existence as a nation, foreshadow our situation in the Lord Jesus Christ:

In Exodus 33, Moses prayed to God: “I beseech thee, show my thy Glory”. And the response was:

“he said, I will make all **my goodness** pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of Yahweh before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” (Exo. 33:18-19)

But interestingly what actually happened, was that God’s goodness passed before Moses in the proclamation of words:

“And Yahweh descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Yahweh. And Yahweh passed by before him, and proclaimed, **Yahweh, Yahweh God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin**, and that by will no means clear the guilty visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and fourth generation” (Exo. 34:5-7).

Notice that here, the goodness and glory of God was demonstrated, not in what was literally seen by the eyes, but in the words that declared His Attributes. And that word demonstrated the “gracious” and “mercy” of God.

Even so, we read of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas Moses said “shew my thy glory,” in Christ “we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jno. 1:14). And this verse in John 1 also described how that glory is revealed:

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us ...”. Jesus was the embodiment of all those attributes described in the words proclaimed to Moses – he was all of those words “made flesh”. And “the word was God” in that it contained the various virtues of Yahweh – it describes who He is.

Returning to 1 Thessalonians 4, we read that when the Lord descends from heaven, “the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive shall be caught up together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thes. 4:16-17). This gathering together of believers is referred to elsewhere. Hence we read in the Psalm:

“He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. **Gather my saints together unto me:** those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. And the heavens shall declare his righteousness ...” (Psa. 50:4-6).

Although the judgments of God are referred to in the Psalm, in 1 Thessalonians 4, this aspect is not specifically mentioned: it is a condensed view on what will take place regarding the faithful who watch for the coming of Messiah. But notice that here, those saints (i.e. the approved) who are gathered together, are defined as those who have “made a covenant with me by sacrifice”. The question arises, what sacrifice? Romans 12 has the answer:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:1-2).

Ordinarily, a sacrifice is dead. With few exceptions, the sacrifice involved the slaying of an animal, so that “almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). But in our case, the sacrifice is alive. The true believers die with Christ in the waters of Baptism (Rom. 6), and rise again to a new existence, devoted to the doing of the will of God. Like Paul, they can say “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20, also vs 24).

Notice also here, there is only one sacrifice, but many members who constitute that offering. As Paul continues: “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another” (Rom. 12:4-5). The unity of true believers is spoken of many times in the New Testament, their hearts “being knit together in love” (Col. 2:2), as members of the united body of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4 continues: “then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air and so shall be ever by with the Lord” (vs. 17). This verse is misunderstood and misapplied by those who believe in the “rapture,” and the gathering of Christians to be with Jesus in heaven. The Bible knows no

such doctrine, and defines the hope of believers as inheriting the earth (Mat. 5:5) when Christ comes again to fulfil the promises made to the Father's of old, Abraham Isaac and Israel. But leaving aside what the verse is not saying, we need to consider what it is actually teaching!

In Revelation chapter 4, we read of the invitation extended to John:

“... After this I looked, and behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew you things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the spirit: and behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat upon the throne” (Rev. 4:1-2).

Here, John is taken through the door into the heavens. The actual throne itself is upon earth, as it was promised by the Angel of the Lord: “he shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Lu. 1:32-33). But it is in the political heavens – the place of rulership. The prophets often use the heavens to symbolise a position of power and authority (cp. Gen. 1:16, Isa. 1:2, Isa. 34:4, 2 Pet. 3:13 etc), and if we were writing to Christendom at large, we would demonstrate that principle in more detail. But for those who are disabused from such a notion, we are content to notice the point in passing, that John was given a door of entrance into the ruling plane of the Age to Come, and being a representative man, his situation thus describes how the believers will also “come up hither” to be with their Lord, seated in his throne. This is the promise: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the ecclesiastis” (Rev. 3:21-22).

When we referred to Psalm 50 above, we saw that it is the “saints” who will be so gathered together to be with their Lord. This precedes the situation described by Zechariah: “And Yahweh my God shall come, and all the saints with thee” (Zech. 14:5). Clearly, the saints have been brought together, to be manifest in the earth with Yahweh – the Son who has from his Father, inherited a better Name than that of the angels (Heb. 1:4).

And this is alluded to again by Paul in the chapter before, speaking of the love of saints in the purpose of God: “to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness, before God, even our Father, at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (1 Thes. 3:13).

The promises of God will only be given to “... them also that love his appearing” (1 Tim. 4:8). We may know that Christ is going to come again in an intellectual capacity – but how will we respond when he does come again? Will it be an unwelcome interruption of our lives, or will it be the fulfilment of all our hopes and desires? Do we yearn with all our hearts for Messiah to come again? If not, we need to reconsider our standing – but if so, we can “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thes. 4:18), and prepare for that great day to come.

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