

Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet

2 Thess. | *The Return of the King*

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CONTEXT

This is Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica, and if you spend time reading through both letters, you'll notice that there are **remarkable similarities** between the two:

- He praises them for their faithfulness to God in the midst of all kinds of hardship
 - 1 Thess. 1:2–8
 - **2 Thess. 1:3–5**
- He reminds them of the sovereignty of God: that nothing in their life is accidental or incidental; that God chose them for salvation, and that God appointed them for this suffering.
 - 1 Thess. 1:4; 3:3
 - **2 Thess. 2:13**
- He talks about what it means to live as a Christian in this sinful world as we wait for the return of King Jesus.
 - 1 Thess. 4:1–12; 5:12–22
 - **2 Thess. 3:5–15**
- And he seeks to comfort them with the realities of Jesus' return.
 - 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 5:1–11
 - **2 Thess. 1:10; 2:1–12, 17; 3:13**

The Return of King Jesus is a **central theme** in both letters.

1. In his first letter, he was comforting them with the **hope for their loved ones who had died (4:13)**. They had this notion that Jesus was only coming back for those who were alive. And so, Paul wrote to assure them that death does not take away the hope of a believer.¹
2. Here in his second letter, he is seeking to comfort them with the reality that they haven't somehow missed the return of Christ (**2:1–3**).
 - False teachers had come into the church, and they were spreading the message that Jesus had already returned and that everybody there in Thessalonica had missed the boat. They'd been left behind.
 - Paul assures them that they haven't missed Jesus' return. And then Paul writes one of the most debated paragraphs about the end times in the NT (**Read 2:3–12**).
 - What is “*the falling away*” (**2:3**)?
 - Who is “*the man of sin*” (**2:3**)?
 - What/who is “*restraining*” (**2:6**), and what does it mean that this restrainer will be “*taken out of the way*” (**2:7**)?
 - Who is “*the lawless one*” (**2:8–9**)?

¹ We believe there's hope beyond the grave. We believe the cross was meant to save. We that death has been defeated, 'cause Jesus is alive. We believe that death is just a door. We'll cross the waves to Aslan's shore. And then we'll hear the Lion roar. Jesus is alive.

There is absolutely no consensus among biblical scholars when it comes to this passage. I haven't asked Pastor Stan what he thinks Paul is saying in this passage, but I have a hunch that he probably interprets it a little bit differently than I do. 😊

Clarification: just because Christians disagree on the exact meaning of a particular passage doesn't give us an excuse to not study it. It is important that Christians study passages like this. It's important that we read it, think about it, pray about it, talk about it, and that we seek (with God's help) to understand it...because it's God's Word, and everything God says is important. Every word of God is for our edification (**2 Tim. 3:16**).²

However, as important as this passage is, it's not the main thing that we see from our vantagepoint at 30,000 feet. I think **the main thing** Paul wanted the church in Thessalonica to see is that when Jesus returns – the entire world is going to know it...and He will make all things right.

And then the lawless one will be revealed,
whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth
and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

~ 2 Thess. 2:8

Jesus will destroy evil with “*the brightness of His coming*.”

Jesus is “the light of the world”, and when the Light comes, it will vanquish the darkness.

And nobody is going to miss it. When Jesus returns, nobody is going to miss Him.

Many people missed the Messiah's first appearing: as a baby born in a remote village, as an infant wrapped in dead man's clothes and laid in a feeding trough, as the adoptive son of a Jewish carpenter, as a rabbi with a motley crew of disciples, as a condemned man hanging on a cross outside of Jerusalem...

But nobody is going to miss His second coming.

- “*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God...*” (**1 Thess. 4:16**)
- “*Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him...*” (**Rev. 1:7**)
- “*He will destroy his enemy with the brightness of His coming*” (**2 Thess. 2:8**).

So, Paul reassures this church that they have not missed the Return of the King.

1. Nobody will miss Jesus' return (**first**) because it will be gloriously public.
2. And (**secondly**) because it will be the day when everybody's life changes drastically...forever.

...It is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you,
And to give you who are troubled rest with us
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,
in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God,
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

² It's also important to study this passage because it informs our eschatological expectations. For example: is Paul (through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **2 Pet. 1:21**) prophesying of events that would transpire in the very near future for the Christians in Thessalonica (e.g., the coming of Nero and the destruction of the Temple), or is he prophesying of events that would transpire thousands of years later (e.g., the coming of a figure known as *the antichrist* and the removal of the global church)?

These shall be **punished** with **everlasting destruction** from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be **glorified** in His saints and to be **admired** among all **those who believe**, because our testimony among you was believed.

~ 2 Thess. 1:6–10

When Jesus comes back, nobody will be “left behind.”

- Those who do not know God & who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ will be punished with **everlasting destruction** = so, they aren’t left behind.
- And those who believe in Jesus will have **everlasting rest** in the presence of God = so, they aren’t left behind.

When King Jesus returns, the entire world will know it, and the entire world will feel it.

- The wicked will be judged, and His children will be vindicated.
- Those who rejected the gospel will be punished, and those who received the gospel will be rewarded.
- Those who rejected the knowledge of God will be thrown into everlasting torment forever, and those who loved God will be welcomed into the presence of Jesus where there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (**Psalm 16:11**).

There are many people who **shrug their shoulders** at God today – as if they don’t really care one way or another about who God is or about what He says, but nobody will be shrugging their shoulders on that day.

...at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

~ Phil. 2:10–11

Nobody will be neutral – or disinterested – or unaware when King Jesus returns to earth. Because on that day, the life of every human being who has ever lived will be changed forever.³

This reality should affect us in at least 3 ways:

1. It should cause us to **examine ourselves** – to make sure that we are ready for that day.
2. It should give us a **sense of urgency** when it comes to sharing the gospel with those who don’t know God and who do not obey the gospel of Jesus.
3. It should fill us with **comfort & hope** as we wait for Jesus’ return.

In a sense, that’s **the theme** of both of Paul’s letters to the church in Thessalonica: ***the anchor of our hope in the promise of Jesus’ return.***

And this is **such an important theme for the church today** (*especially the American church*) because, if you listen to what professing Christians spend the majority of their time thinking about (*on social media, at the coffee shop, in our blogs and podcasts, in the music we listen to...*) it’s not this.

- **We think about** sports. Politics. Economy. Weather. Family. Work. Health. Problems.
- But how often do you find yourself thinking about Heaven?
- How often do you find yourself talking to other people about Heaven?

³ 1 Cor. 15:51–52.

Yes, I believe that Jesus is coming back. Yes, I believe that He is taking us home to be with Him forever. But, if I'm honest, I just don't spend much time thinking about it. And it's not just me...

One of the previous music leaders at Bethlehem Baptist, **Matthew Westerholm**, studied the difference between songs that were sung in American churches from the 1700's through the 1900's compared to the songs that have been sung in American churches in the 2000's. He noted that the biggest difference is the topic of heaven. The hope of heaven used to dominate our singing, and now it has almost completely disappeared.⁴

...**which is crazy** when we consider the fact that **over 350 verses in the NT are talking about "the hope of heaven."**⁵

If I had to guess, I think that one of the main reasons we don't spend more time meditating on Jesus' Return is because we have a really shallow view of Heaven.⁶

- We have this image of clouds, little angels with wings and harps, white robes, and endless singing. And we're like, "*Yeah, that just doesn't sound...exciting.*"
- But that's not at all how the Bible describes eternity in the presence of our Creator.
 - Think about this: God made you & me just the way He wanted to (**Psalm 139**).
 - Which means ... God made me to take great pleasure playing basketball and drinking coffee and floating down the river on my paddleboard and sleeping under the stars and taking walks with my family and playing games with my friends and worshipping with my church and sharing His Word. These things bring me pleasure.
 - Now, the Bible says that in the presence of my Creator (which is where I will be when Jesus returns and takes me home), there will be pleasures forevermore.
 - In other words, my ability to experience pleasure doesn't disappear in heaven. No, it increases...forever!
 - One Christian singer (**Todd Agnew**) talks about our greatest joys on earth being just a taste of what it will be like when we are finally home in the presence of Jesus.⁷

If that's true (*and the Bible tells us that it is*), then it ought to fill our hearts with comfort and hope and excitement and longing because we ought to be thinking and talking about it all the time.

Last month, **Desiring God** published an article about Heaven, and this is how the author concluded:

⁴ In his book on Heaven, **Randy Alcorn** says that when Christians go through this life without keeping our eyes fixed on the promise of heaven, we've lost our North Star (Randy Alcorn, Heaven, 9).

⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-often-do-you-think-about-heaven>

⁶ If you have ever said, "I'm excited for Jesus to return, but I really hope He waits until I get married... until I get to experience the joy of having children... until after I get back from vacation..." then you (like me) have a shallow view of Heaven.

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_vNPhrMuRo

Brothers and sisters, regularly draw your attention to this heaven. Pray heaven. Preach heaven. Sing heaven. Counsel heaven. Make heaven so much a part of your local church's culture that on the brightest day or the darkest night you can say together with confidence, "Jesus is coming, and he will make this right. Once and for all." Drink it in: He's coming, as sure as that sky that you look upon now. And when he comes, justice and everlasting joy will come with him.

~ *Nathan Knight*

That's how Paul talks.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father,
who has loved us and given us **everlasting consolation** and **good hope** by grace,
comfort your hearts and **establish** you in every good word and work.

~ *2 Thess. 2:16-17*

What establishes our good words and our good works?

What makes it so that we talk like Christians and act like Christians?

What comforts our hearts in the midst of hardships?

Answer: the everlasting consolation and the good hope that God has given us?

And what is this everlasting consolation and hope?

Answer: The promise that Jesus is coming back and that He will make all things right.

God means for this hope to captivate our hearts as we wait for Jesus' return.

So, now we continue to wait... and waiting is hard.

- I know some people who seem to have an extraordinary gift of patience, but even for them I know that waiting can be really hard.
 - And God has put us into a world where we all wait...all the time.
 - For school to start.
 - For school to end.
 - Fall. Spring. Summer (not many of us wait for winter).
 - Stop lights
 - Age
 - Marriage
 - Meal
 - Payday
 - Bathroom
 - Elevator
 - Coffee
 - Potty Training
 - Wait for the Vikings to win the Super Bowl

And, as Christians, the most anticipated event that we are waiting for is the return of our King.

Both of these letters were written to encourage the local church in Thessalonica as they waited for the return of Christ. They didn't know when Jesus was coming back, and so Paul exhorts them to live every moment as if Jesus could come back today.

- “Watch and be sober” (1 Thess. 5:6)
- “Stand fast and hold on to the [truths] that you've been taught” (2 Thess. 2:15)

And if this was true then, how much more true is it for us today – when we are 2,000 years closer to Christ's return. He could wait another 2,000 years. He could wait another 200,000 years. Or He could come back today.

But that's not really the point. The point is: if Jesus were to return today, would He find us watching for Him...or would He find us sleeping?

Would He find us standing fast in the truths that we've been taught...or would He find us compromising our faith with the world around us?

Paul doesn't write this letter to help the Thessalonians map out a timeline of Christ's return. Many people over the years have tried to do this, and it's foolishness. Not even the Son of Man knew...

Paul wrote to help us stand fast in our waiting.

Comforting themselves in the second coming.

But there's a fear that Jesus has already come.

Paul writes a second letter to assure them that:

1. Their suffering is not in vain (1:5)
2. Their Savior is still coming
3. The Saints and the Sinners will be separated (1:6ff)

In our Waiting

The point is not distance, delay, indifference, and delinquency. The point is nearness, at the gates, spiritual vigilance, and doing our job. “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” ([Matthew 24:44](#)). What keeps him out is not distance, but sovereign purposes of patience, mercy, and judgment ([2 Peter 3:9](#)).

~ John Piper

The End of the Unbelievers: *eternal suffering & separation*

The picture here is one of an *irresistible* army—the Lord of the universe returning from a long journey to settle accounts with the tenants of his earth. There will be no escape and no recourse, no place to hide, and above all no possibility to withstand.

~ John Piper

“Love wins.” Rob Bell argues that there is no hell...that a loving God would not send anyone to hell. But that’s not true.

- God’s love sent His only son to pay the price for our redemption & salvation so that we would not have to go to hell.
- He has filled this world with evidence of His glory.
- He has made Himself known in the world that He has made – so that everybody who goes to hell chooses to go there by rejecting the God who made them and the Savior who gave everything to save them.

But there is a hell... and Paul (through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) describes it here.

In sum, for unbelievers the second coming of Christ will mean *confrontation* with an irresistible and inescapable army from heaven, *condemnation* to eternal destruction, and finally *exclusion* from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might.

~ John Piper

Wheat will be separate from the tares.

The End for the Believers: *rest & amazement*

- Heb. 9:26
- Phil. 2:8
- John 19:30
- Rom 5:19

The word for “rest” here means more literally “release” or “relief” from whatever is making life hard to live.

- Matt 11:28
- 2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5; 8:13

He says in verse 10 that Christ is coming “to be glorified in his saints and to be *marveled at* by all who have believed.” One of the most exhilarating experiences in life is to see a

wonder or a marvel so great and so glorious that we are utterly amazed, speechless before beauty. That's how it will be when we see Jesus coming in his glory.

~ John Piper

2 Tim. 4:8

CONCLUSION

The meek and lowly Lamb of God will come as the roaring Lion of Judah and rend his foes. And the Jesus who wept over the unbelief of Jerusalem and gave his life for sinners will come a second time and lay waste everyone who has spurned eternal life in him. And their destruction will be eternal.

~ John Piper

- He calls them to “stand fast” in their faith; to “hold fast” to the truth
 - *1 Thess. 3:8; 5:6, 21*
 - **2 Thess. 2:15**