The Second Coming: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The claim that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead features in the Apostles’ Creed, an ancient summary of what Christians believe. In all four gospel accounts, Jesus predicts his return, and this promise frequently recurs in the New Testament letters and in Revelation. It is a key component of the Christian faith. When we celebrate Communion, we are often reminded that whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death ‘until he comes.’ How do you feel about the second coming? How much does it matter to you? Is it something you look forward to, dread, or simply forget about most of the time? Why is that the case? To what extent does your view of the second coming affect how you live on a weekly basis?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Paul provides us with a description of what will happen when Jesus returns. He grounds this description in ‘a word from the Lord’ (4:15), and there is some debate as to whether Paul is referring to a prophetic word given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or whether this is a fresh application of Jesus’ own teaching on the subject. What Paul depicts here strikes some people as bizarre – in his commentary, Howard Marshall warns against dismissing his statements ‘as antiquated mumbo-jumbo which must be jettisoned by modern Christians’ (128). He cautions against taking Paul’s language too literally, suggesting that the apostle employs metaphors and symbols to describe an act of God which is real, but which cannot be adequately expressed in human language.

The closest parallel to the imagery of 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is found in the contemporaneous Jewish text *The Apocalypse of Moses* 22.1, where God comes to judge Adam and Eve after they have eaten the forbidden fruit: the archangel Michael sounds his trumpet and calls his fellow angels, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Come with me into Paradise and hear the sentence which I pronounce on Adam.”’ It rather looks as though Paul takes up this imagery, which is associated with divine judgment, and applies it to Christ coming to judge the world. Does it help to try and understand Paul’s language in metaphorical rather than directly referential terms here? If so why, or if not, why not?

I personally find 1 Thessalonians 4:17 particularly difficult to grasp: the Lord descends from heaven and those believers who are living on the earth are caught up to meet him as he is on his way down and everyone is left (quite literally) suspended in mid-air. What happens then? Does Jesus take us back to heaven to be with him, or does he carry on coming down to earth once he has picked us up on the way?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul refers to the ‘coming’ (παρουσία) of the Lord (cf. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23), and in 4:16 he talks about ‘meeting’ (ἀπάντησις) the Lord in the air. This combination of terms evokes a scenario where the inhabitants of a city go out to greet a king as he approaches and to welcome him into the city. For example, Josephus uses these terms to recount how, when Alexander the Great was approaching Jerusalem at the head of his army, the high priest was told in a dream that he should open the gates, and that he and the other priests should dress in white to go out of the city to ‘meet’ the king; acting on this dream, the high priest made preparations for the ‘coming’ of the king, who in due course was welcomed into the city (*Antiquities* 11.325-336). Understanding Paul’s language this way suggests that those who are alive on earth will welcome Jesus as he returns to the world as king and judge, and Paul indicates that he will bring with him all those who have fallen asleep in Christ. How do you feel about the idea that Jesus comes down to earth, rather than taking us up to heaven to be with him?

The hope he expresses here is that those who are still alive and those who have died in Christ will be together with the Lord forever. Paul hopes that this message will be a source of comfort (4:18) to those who are grieving over their friends and family who have died in Christ (4:13-14). To what extent do you find comfort or assurance in his words?

People wonder why the Thessalonian believers needed to be told all of this: after all, we presume that Paul had told them of Jesus’ resurrection, and part of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection is that death itself is defeated and we will live and reign with him for ever. And yet it may well be that for some the harsh reality of losing someone close to them had caused them to question and even to doubt the hope that Paul had shared with them.

For us too there are lots of unanswered questions. If the second coming of Jesus heralds a new heaven and a new earth, what will that look like? Paul says that ‘the dead in Christ will rise first’ (4:16): does that mean that all those Christians who have died over the 2000 year period since the resurrection of Jesus are sleeping until they are awakened by the sound of the last trumpet? If so, does that mean they are unconscious, unaware of the passing of time, and unaware of what is happening to us? Or are their souls conscious as they are kept safe in the presence of Jesus? And if resurrection means we get a new body, what will that look like and how old will we be?

There is so much that we do not know or understand. It is important that we don’t allow what we don’t know to rob us of the assurance of what we can know. We can have confidence that Jesus is alive, and trust in his promise that, ‘Because I live, you will live as well’ (John 14:19). So whatever happens, however much we do or do not understand, if we simply put our trust in him, that will be enough.

We give you thanks, our God and Father, for all those who have died in the faith of Christ; for the memory of their words and deeds and all they accomplished in their time; for the joyful hope of reunion with them in the world to come; and for our communion with them now in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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