

# The End of the Age in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

by Anthony Buzzard

There is a great need for Christians to share Paul's simple program for the end of the age. This is beautifully laid out by the apostle in many of his epistles, but more distinctly than anywhere else in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Popular readings of the Bible often reflect a failure to examine the context of any given verse. It is essential in reading the Bible (or any piece of written information!) to follow the logical progression of the writer. The chapter breaks in our Bible have sometimes allowed us to wreak havoc on what Paul wrote. We simply must not disturb the movement of Paul's thought by interrupting the flow of his thinking with arbitrary gaps, or reading one verse without its context.

Let us see how important this is in the Thessalonian letters.

## The Coming of Jesus

Paul has his eye on the second coming as he writes. It is a major concern of his to keep his flock properly instructed about that great event of the future. "For what is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?" (1 Thess. 2:19). Yes, the lord is coming. So Paul prays that "he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess. 3:13).

## 1 Thessalonians 4

A question had arisen in the Thessalonians' minds. How were the Christians who had already died to meet Christ at his coming? The answer is given by Paul as a "word of the lord" (4:15) — i.e., based on sayings of Jesus to which Paul had access, some of which were later written down in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 (the Olivet discourse). The plan is quite simple:

"We who are alive and remain until the coming of the lord shall not take precedence over those who have fallen asleep. For the lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the

trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the lord...Now as to times and epochs, brethren..." Paul continues (the chapter break must be ignored), "You yourselves know full well that the *day of the lord* [which he has just finished describing] will come like a thief in the night."

That is to say, when the *world* is saying "'peace and safety,' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child" (5:3). In other words, disaster will overcome the godless unexpectedly like a thief, and they will not escape. But that "day of the Lord," which Paul had just described as the time when the saints would be caught up to meet Jesus, will not overtake the church as a thief. It will, however, have a catastrophic effect on the world.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul continued his theme, adding new material deliberately. This was to counteract the deceptive influence of a "spirit" or "letter pretending to come from us," maintaining that this great event, the coming of the Lord, was immediately at hand (2 Thess. 2:2, KJV, ASV).

## The Scheme for the End

Paul had one burning desire. It was to reinforce, against false teaching, what he had already taught the Thessalonians in his first letter. So in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 he begins by telling the church that they must expect to suffer tribulation until the moment of relief arrives. What was that moment? Until *when* must they expect to be persecuted? Verse 7 tells us: God will give you relief from tribulation "when the lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God" (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

This is precisely what Paul had said in his first letter, though now he adds further details. Christians must be ready to be caught up to meet

the lord. They will then be safe, while the lord's appearance will overwhelm the heedless world.

### **Tribulation Until Christ's Coming in Power**

Not only must the church expect tribulation right up to the moment when Jesus is revealed from heaven in flaming fire (2 Thess. 1:7), but they must also realize that certain events must happen before Christ comes back (2 Thess. 2:1-3). In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul opens by restating his subject. He wants to instruct his readers further about the "coming of the lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him" (v. 1).

His readers will remember from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that they are to assemble to meet Jesus. This event, the day of the Lord — he had already called it the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 — cannot happen before the apostasy and the revelation of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3). The restrainer — it is a singular male being (v. 7) as well as a neuter force (v. 6) — will hold back the Antichrist until the latter is finally allowed to appear. Later, Jesus will arrive. This arrival is his coming, and his coming means our gathering together to meet him (2:1). That great event will save the Christians as 2 Thessalonians 1:7 had said, and it will mean the end of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:8) as well as punishment upon the godless world (1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:8).

### **Summary**

Paul was evidently most unhappy about misconceptions in regard to the second coming. He wanted to assure the Thessalonians that dead Christians would not be left out of the great second coming event. They would meet Christ in the air with the Christians who survived until the great day. The day would take the wicked world completely by surprise. It would be as unprepared as a homeowner who does not expect a thief to break into his house.

Later a wrong idea began to circulate in the church — that the promised day of the Lord was to come without any further delay. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians 2 specifically to correct this idea. He says that "the coming of our Lord Jesus and our gathering together" to him (v. 1) cannot occur before two things happen: The falling away (apostasy) and the appearance of the Antichrist. Following the reign of Antichrist Jesus will appear in glory and destroy the

Antichrist. This is the simple program described by 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. The church's task is to guard the information faithfully and teach it to others.

A coherent picture of the end emerges, provided the text is allowed to coerce us. Interference with the message sometimes occurs when our own presuppositions block our understanding and deafen us to Paul's words. We must be careful that we do not drown Paul's instructions with our own noisy ideas!