

The coming of the Lord

Part 3

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Duration	00:42:40
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/fw030/the-coming-of-the-lord

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[00:00:01] I want to continue on this wonderful theme that has engaged us for the last two evenings, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was a wonderful day in the history of Thessalonica when Paul and his companions went there and preached the Gospel.

The power of God unto salvation, Paul says elsewhere, this is to the Romans, and that was experienced in a very, very real way amongst those Thessalonians.

They were idolaters.

They were accustomed to every form of licentiousness. It was the order of the day.

And then, through the Gospel, their eyes were turned towards God, the living God, turned away from idols, turned to the Lord Jesus Christ, and they got converted.

[00:01:03] They were saved.

They received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul had taught them about a coming kingdom, and the Lord Jesus Christ would be the universal king, and all power would be put under him.

I think it's obvious from reading Acts chapter 17 that this was so.

And so Paul, in this epistle, writes to them. They were very, very young believers as far as age was concerned, possibly just a few months.

But because they had trusted the Lord Jesus Christ, they were faced with persecution, very real persecution.

And Paul, away from them, was very, very much concerned about these young believers. And so he wrote to them to encourage them. And I find it quite remarkable that this letter and the letter that follows were written with [00:02:04] a very, very short time to believers that had been saved for a very short time. And we might have said, oh, well, that's not the kind of ministry to give to new converts. We want something simple. My, there's nothing simple about the first epistle to the Thessalonians. There are plenty of wonderful truths in it, deep truths, truths that are soul-establishing. And that was

the object of the apostle to encourage these young believers. And so the coming of the Lord was something that he presented in a very real and thorough way. And you know, as you read through the epistle, he mentions this again and again. And what was more encouraging for them than to be told the Lord is coming? And that, of course, to ne'er their faint endeavor, to use the words of the hymn, to encourage them to keep going and not to give up because the Lord was coming and it would [00:03:05] be a great day for them to be taken out of the scene. Now, what was true to Thessalonians has been true down through the generations of the church's history right up until the pleasant moment. And whatever difficulties involved in the Christian testimony, the coming of the Lord is something that's held out brightly for the believer for their encouragement to continue the Lord is coming.

Paul commends them for all the things that they were doing, young believers and energetic in spreading the good news that there was salvation available in Christ. And at the end of the chapter that we've read together, he gives a great deal of truth in a very, very short compass indeed.

They turned to God from idols, and that was a great step forward in their history.

[00:04:04] Idolatry was rampant in the ancient world. We often say this, that from the cradle to the grave, idolatry marked those people.

And in between, idolatry for every conceivable feature of life, for business, for marriage, for war, everything was governed by idolatry.

The intellectuals, they sneered at it, of course, they saw through it all, but the common people were very, very much governed by idolatry.

And while the emperors and those who were under them gave credence to it, it was part of life, but idolatry was very much the part of ancient life.

And along with that, the most evil forms of living, awful living, licentious of every conceivable kind.

Now these people, they got converted, they turned to God from idols.

[00:05:07] What a tremendous moment that was. And Paul says here, to serve the living and the true God, turned away from all the gods of men and all their ideas to serve a God who could do things.

And the Bible tells us about gods that cannot see and cannot hear, cannot speak, cannot smell, cannot do anything. And God says to them, I've borne you in eagles' wings, I've carried you. He says, you have to carry your gods about with you. And he says, I've carried you, carried you through the wilderness, provided for you and sustained you. What a difference between the idols of men and God, the living God.

And what a moment it was in their history when they turned to him. We've often pointed out that in Hebrews chapter 9, when they're serving the living God, you'll [00:06:05] notice that the word true is dropped there because the Jew had been accustomed to know the living God.

It wasn't stops and idols that they followed. They did follow the living God, but unfortunately they had slipped down and the living God had become, well, named to them, not a reality.

But thank God they were cleansed from evil works, dead works to serve the living God. I read somewhere that someone asked, what are dead works? And the reply was the works of dead persons. And that's a very, very simple answer, very precise. And so we find that these Thessalonians, they turn to the living and true God, the God who was alive, who was powerful, and who could do what he wanted to do. [00:07:02] And it says to serve him.

Oh, how wonderful that was. Instead of being devotees of these idols, they turned to the living God and sought to serve him and to wait for his son from heaven.

Even Jesus, our deliverer, and Paul puts it, as far as I should say, Mr. Darby puts it in his translation in the future tense, our deliverer from the coming wrath.

Good scripture to hold on to when people speak about church going through the tribulation. Our deliverer from the coming wrath. If you want to know what the day of wrath is, read the 13th chapter of Isaiah and see what God says about the day of wrath that will sweep across the earth. And God says, we've been delivered from that through our Lord Jesus Christ, or will be delivered from it.

And we'll see that in a moment when we come to chapter four. [00:08:01] But just one word more about this awful scourge, idolatry.

When the Romans conquered a nation, they weren't concerned about the nation's gods.

It was quite an easy thing for them to incorporate another God into their circle of gods. That didn't matter. As long as they acknowledged the supremacy of Rome, then there was no problem about the nation hanging on to its gods.

Difficulty came when the Christians said, there is only one God.

And when they refused to worship the other gods.

And when they said, all your gods are false gods and we will not worship them. We will worship our God, the God who has revealed himself through Christ. And when they spoke about an exclusive God and all the other gods were idols, then the persecution [00:09:04] came. And of course, you know, the terrible persecutions that took place when Christians laid down their lives rather than deny the truth.

And if they weren't slain, their property was taken from them, often tortured, often dealt hardly with, but they would not bow.

Simple thing just to offer some incense to the emperor who was largely deified. No, not for one moment.

Mine, it has to be said that not all were faithful.

There were those who succumbed to the threat of torture and to the threat of loss of life. But in the main, there were many who gave their lives and who gave their property and who gave every prospect of advancement in this world because they wanted to be true to the living God.

So when you read in the Bible about the Christian's turning from idols to serve the living [00:10:03] God, don't think it was easy.

Perhaps it's not easy for us to turn away from the idols of materialism today. A simpler thing, no persecution, no thought of losing our lives, but so bound up with materialism that we find it extremely difficult to give it up. And I believe only the impelling power of Christ and affection for him will help us to get rid of those idols.

And there are idols. Paul speaks about covetousness, which is idolatry. He speaks about self-will, or rather Samuel did, self-will, which is idolatry. And these are the things that we have to face in our modern affluent age, self-will, covetousness. And we need the help and power of the Holy Spirit as we wait for God's son from heaven. [00:11:06] And we are waiting for him. Thank God we are waiting for him. We've been taught so long by so many that the Lord Jesus Christ is coming. We can never possibly omit this from the truths that we know.

It's built into our souls. We hear it again and again. We sing about it. We read about it. We hear about it, that the Lord is coming. But whether it's a vital, living truth governing our lives, that may be another matter. And so these Thessalonians, how earnestly they proved that they had imbibed the truth and were governed by the truth, and while they had turned away from that which was wrong, they served the living and the true God, and they waited for the son from heaven. And we say, our deliverer from the coming wrath.

Later on in the epistle, Paul says that God has not appointed us to wrath, but to salvation.

[00:12:09] Marvelous statement.

No possibility of the church of God going through the tribulation. And I often say, if we really knew what the tribulation will be, we would be looking in the Bible for verses to prove that we're not going through the tribulation. It would be such a horrific time for those who are upon earth, when the judgments of God sweep across the earth on a land that has given up God, has given up Christ in such an awful way, throw back in God's face every blessing that he has given to them. Terrible thing. And that's what we're experiencing day by day, as we see around us. Thank God for us, those of us who desire to lead simple lives and please the Lord and [00:13:02] in our little measure, whatever it might be, whether it's Sunday school work or tract distribution or preaching the gospel or ministering the truth or visiting the sick, anything connected with the Lord's interests, we're waiting for his son from heaven. We're serving the living and the true God. Keep at it.

Don't give it up. Do what you can until the Lord comes.

It's well worthwhile.

And so we turn over to chapter four.

I think you will agree with me that the whole chapter is seldom read. But usually when we read this chapter, we begin at verse 13.

I feel very much impressed to read the whole chapter. I'll tell you why.

Because in the first part of it, the matter of holiness is stressed, sanctification set [00:14:07] apart to God, holiness of life, walking in a way that pleases God.

And then the next part deals with love, love amongst the saints, brotherly love, love.

We'll see the difference in a few moments. I believe, dear brethren, if those two features were with us, what an excellent condition for the saints to be in when the Lord comes.

Living in holiness of life, love circulating amongst the saints, my, what a wonderful condition to be in for the Lord to come for his people. And so we ought to look at this, and I believe it's extremely important that Paul brings in the truth of the Lord's coming in a setting like this. [00:15:01] So he says, we've exhorted you by the Lord Jesus or in the Lord Jesus that as you received of us how you ought to walk and please God, so you would abound more and more.

Paul seems to give them credit that they were walking and pleasing God, but desired that they would abound still more and more, not be content with having reached a certain status, if you like, of walking and pleasing God, but to abound in it. Seems gives one the impression of tremendous energy, power in doing this.

And so what a marvelous thing if the saints are walking and pleasing God.

We cannot do better than go back to the time of Enoch because he is a type of the church being caught out of this world to be with Christ. [00:16:02] You remember that Enoch walked in a very, very evil day indeed.

What a tremendous evil was in the world at that time.

Men were doing just as they pleased. They had moved away from God.

God had repented that he had made man. But in the midst of all this corruption, there was one man that pleased God. He walked with God.

And Hebrews tells us he had the testimony that he pleased God.

And it was a joy for God to look down on that one man. He walked with God 300 years.

What a tremendous life that was.

And it's a little picture of the church in the midst of corruption, walking in a way that pleases God.

You know that when we come to the next type, Noah, Noah is a type of the remnant passing [00:17:03] through the time of judgment and trial and tribulation. And Noah and the few in the ark is that picture.

And they are born above all the storms and all the trials, and then they are re-peopling the earth.

Again, a type of the remnant that will take place in the future in connection with the nation of Israel.

But one feels that Enoch is a beautiful type here in this chapter that we've read or connected with this

chapter to show how we can walk and please God.

Whenever we get walk mentioned in the Bible, it's our manner of life. And here is to walk and please God.

You remember what Paul says, that if he pleased men, he wouldn't be the Lord's servant. What a marvelous thing to please God.

What can be greater in that sense in the realm of service than pleasing God? [00:18:06] Not being men pleasers, so easy to please men.

And a great deal of that goes on today in the Christian circle, unfortunately. People having itching ears and appointing speakers that please them don't want to hear the truth.

We're thankful for every brother and sister who is not a man pleaser and can speak the truth when every opportunity occurs. And of course, we're greatly indebted for many in the past who are far from being men pleasers.

They sought to please God and they've left us a heritage of truth and instruction that we might be helped in walking and pleasing God.

I like to think of the Apostle Paul in this respect. He said he had a conscience, an exercise conscience to avoid offending God and man.

[00:19:04] There's a real man who pleased God.

He was exercised.

That meant that he had a conscience that was energetic, that was active. It was not sleeping. It was not dulled. It wasn't seared.

It was a conscience that was tender and all his life, wherever he went, whatever he did, this was the great fact of his life. He pleased God and he sought to be upright before men.

Pleasing God and doing right before men.

That's the kind of life that pleases God. Do I please God?

Do you please God?

Each one has to answer that and that's what we have to do as we wait for the Lord coming. I think you will agree with me. What an honor is conferred upon us when we think that we can live our lives in this world [00:20:01] and please the great and holy and eternal living God.

And he's given us his word to show us how to please him. And many, many scriptures tell us how we can walk well pleasing to God, doing the things that please him, saying the things that please him. Yes, and thinking the things that please him. Our whole lives organized in this way, regimented, if you like, by the word of God and the power of the spirit to please God.

My, what a testimony Enoch had.

He had this testimony that he pleased God.

Well, Paul goes on and he says, this is the will of God, even your sanctification.

But here is a most wonderful truth that we are set apart.

If we do not live in consistency with being set apart, it does not invalidate or put away [00:21:09] the fact that we are sanctified. It doesn't destroy the truth that we are sanctified. We are sanctified and that's established once and for all, once and for all. But here, it's a question of being in consistency with being set aside or set apart rather. It's practical sanctification, living in consistency with the position that God has given to us. And of course, the underlying feature of that is holiness. We've already spoken about the licentiousness that marked idolatry. And this is what Paul's getting at. You people who have believed in God, believed in Christ, you must not allow yourselves to live in the same way as you lived before.

You remember that passage in 1 Corinthians chapter six, when he said, such were some [00:22:05] of you.

That's the wonder of salvation. And he gives a long list of evil living, but he says, that's how you used to be. But now you're washed, you're cleansed, you're sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the spirit of our God.

Wonderful transformation. And Paul is warning them here, we must not fall into this awful morass of evil that marks those who do not know God and who have no hope and don't know Christ in this world. And it would be a sad thing if the only difference that the world sees in us is that we go to a meeting place and the world goes to its places of amusement. It would be a sad, sad thing if that's the only difference. There's ought to be a difference in our conversation, there ought to be a difference in all our [00:23:01] ways, whether employees, employers, or in the home or at the school, wherever we are, a standard of Christian behavior that's pleasing to God and indicates that yes, we are like those who wait for the Lord.

And so Paul is stressing here, holiness of life.

Then he says, God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.

In the book of Leviticus, we find that God addresses his people, Israel, and he gives them a very high standard. He says, be ye holy for I am holy.

And on four different contexts, we find the stress that they are to be holy. The priests were to be holy. The ordinary people were to be holy. [00:24:01] God was holy and so his people were to be holy. And now God is saying to the Thessalonians, you're called unto holiness.

And one cannot do better than give Mr. Darby's definition of holiness. And he says, an abhorrence of evil, an abhorrence of evil.

And I believe if we were more sensitive as to how things are evil in the sight of God, it would go a

long way in helping us to keep clear of it and to please him. God has called us to holiness and the Christians ought to respond.

Now he says, he therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his Holy Spirit.

I could imagine these Thessalonian believers saying, Paul, you're giving us a very high [00:25:01] standard.

You're telling us what to do.

We feel very, very weak. How can we accomplish this? Paul says, God has given to you his Holy Spirit.

There is the power.

And we feel very, very helpless at times. I know I do. I don't know how you feel, but the power of evil is so great. Flesh is so persistent and sin and Satan are all around us.

How easy it is to feel weak in the face of it. And then thank God. We remember we're indwelt by the Holy Spirit and he's the power to enable us to do these things to enable us to please God.

We're not left to our own resources. In our weakness, we cast ourselves upon the power of the Holy Spirit and cry out to God to help us through that. And thank God it works.

And so there is power for the Christian to go through this evil world and be triumphant [00:26:06] in it.

And yes, we do fail. Thank God for restoring grace and he enables us to go on and to avoid the things that caused us to fail.

And so here, Paul says, we've got the Holy Spirit. Oh, we can remember this. We ought to remember it day by day that in this context, when we're waiting for the Lord, keep clear of evil, rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit and keep looking up the Lord's coming.

And now he goes on to speak about love, but it's touching brotherly love. You need not that I write unto you for you yourselves are taught of God to love one another.

I think I'm right in saying that when he mentions brotherly love, he uses a word that means that are attractive features in the person that draw my love to that person. [00:27:05] I'm attracted by the fine features that are there. But when he uses this other word, it means the settled disposition in loving. And suppose we see awkward features in anyone. We're still obligated to love. It's the word that's most often used in relation to the love of God. Not that the love and the first verse is not used in connection with divine persons. It is, but the second word love is a more powerful one. They settled disposition of love.

Brotherly love, of course, doesn't go any higher than love between each other. That's what it means. Brotherly love, the love that we show towards each other mentioned in a few places twice. I think in Peter's first epistle and once in his second epistle, you remember he says that add to brotherly love,

love, I'd almost think, well, brotherly love is quite sufficient. [00:28:06] Well, we're not always attractive.

Sometimes we might be awkward, we might do things or say things that cause people not to think highly of us, but they're still obligated to love me even though I'm awkward because To brotherly love, they have to add love. My, what a powerful condition to be in just when the Lord comes.

Christians loving each other, brotherly love and activity in our companies. And if there are any failures, there's great and marvelous love that rises above difficulties and trials and opposition, love operating amongst the believers, you might almost say what an ideal condition for the Lord to come to take his people out of the scene.

[00:29:05] Brotherly love, love.

And you say, oh, yes, but I know somebody who doesn't love me. That's not the point. That's never the point in divine things. The point is I'm to love.

Because nobody loves me, I'm obligated to love.

And you're obligated to love. And oh, how sad it is when sometimes you're concerned about no one loving us, no one being kind to us, no one paying any attention to us. That's a very sad thing if it exists, but it should never stop us from loving. The obligation is always upon me to love.

And in that measure, something is being secured if I do that.

Brotherly love, love.

And so Paul goes on, and indeed you do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia. But we beseech you, brethren, that you increase more and more. [00:30:04] He gives them great credit that they were doing this, but he says, keep at it and add a little more. And that's a good word in the Christian life. Keep at it.

Don't give it up. Don't be set aside by any disappointment or failure in yourself or in others. Keep at it.

Abound still more and more.

Study to be quiet.

Do your own business. You can almost hear Paul saying, mind your own business. Don't be a nosy parker, always getting into other people's businesses. Mind your own business, and we've all got plenty in our hands when we do that. And that means, I think, keeping close links with the Lord and making sure that we're walking with the Lord and doing the things that please him. And to work with your own hands, don't be lazy, as we commanded you, that we may walk [00:31:02] honestly toward them that are without, and that you may have lack of nothing. We see a correct form of life.

Dishonesty is a very, very dishonourous thing in the sight of God, and ought not to mark any Christian lie telling, dishonesty, unrighteousness are features that certainly do not please God and certainly do not adorn the doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, Paul is talking about simple matters that everybody can understand, but these are the features that should mark us as we wait for the Lord from heaven. Now, it would appear that when Paul spoke about the coming kingdom, there were those who were encouraged by this, and they were looking forward to it with anticipation.

[00:32:04] But after he had left them, some of them had died. I don't know if they were killed in the persecution, but some of them had gone to be with the Lord. And they were very, very much concerned. How will they have part in the kingdom? If they have died and the king is coming to set up his kingdom, what part will they have? Oh, says Paul, I'll make that clear to you. And so he says, I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that you sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. That's a very wonderful thing that the Christian who falls asleep does so in the hope of being with Christ. And as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15, the hope of the resurrection of the body and to be with Christ forever in a glorified condition. And he says, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep [00:33:05] in Jesus, will God bring with him.

Now we have to notice this. We believe that Jesus died and rose again.

Paul's not talking here about salvation. He's not believing in Jesus that he died and rose again for salvation. Paul says the fact that Jesus died and rose again is the guarantee that those who die and are put in the grave, they will rise again. And so he is emphasizing that as he goes on to prove, he says, they will be brought with God, with the Lord Jesus. God will bring them when the Lord Jesus comes to set up his kingdom. Paul's not talking about the rapture here in this first few verses. [00:34:02] He's talking about the coming kingdom when the Lord Jesus Christ will come with his saints and God will see to it that all those who have died in Christ will come with God.

How is that possible, they say? Why they've died, they're in the grave. How is it possible?

Well Paul says, I've had a special revelation from the Lord, something I received directly from the Lord, something that had never been made known before. And he says, I'll tell you about it. He says, for this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede those that are fallen asleep.

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. [00:35:02] Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Now you know that we use the term rapture, and it's connected with the expression caught up. That's where we get it, it's a Latin word I understand, which means caught up, and this is why we term it the rapture.

Caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

Now says Paul, this is how these persons who have died and been placed in the grave will come out with the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes in glory. Because when he comes for his saints to take them home to be with Christ, they'll all go with him, and then they'll come out with him. They've got to be caught up first, caught up to be with him, the church left upon earth, and they'll be caught up to be with him, and then they'll come out with him when he comes [00:36:03] out publicly in display.

I hope that's plain enough, in fact I'm sure you've heard it so often that it is plain. A lot has been said about these three things, the shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God, and I'm just going to give the simple explanation that always appeals to me.

I obtained it as many know here from Mr. Darby, when he says it's a reference to the Roman camp, and the shout is to tell them to break up the camp, they're getting ready to move.

Break up the camp, and then the archangel's voice is, get all your equipment packed ready, and then the trump of God, march.

[00:37:01] They're moving from one location to another, and Paul uses this figure to show that the saints are ready to go, ready to march. Well, it'll be a wonderful moment when that takes place. You think of all the believers all over the world, different languages, different environments, but they'll all understand that shout.

There'll be no difficulty.

Every nation, they'll understand the shout, or should I say every believer belonging to different nations will understand the shout.

You remember what the Lord Jesus says, the voice of the son of God, and he's able to make himself known, and he will, and when that shout takes place, there will be a mighty movement indeed.

It will be private.

There might be consternation in this world, as I suppose there will be when millions of [00:38:04] people leave this scene.

All sorts of difficulties and problems, but oh dear friends, we don't want to speculate, but there certainly will be consternation when so many people have gone. How sad for many children of Christian parents who have sat in a room like this and have listened to ministry concerning the coming of the Lord, and they've missed the opportunity to get ready, and suddenly the news comes, their parents are gone, their friends are gone, all those believers, and the dread news comes into their soul that what they were told about so often has happened, the Lord has come. Oh, how awful to think that they're left for judgment.

Paul is talking about the fact itself as it applies to believers, and those believers [00:39:01] whose bodies were placed in the grave shall be raised, and they'll go first. The dead in Christ shall rise first, and then that mighty living throng shall ascend to be with Christ.

Those on earth will be changed, although that's not mentioned here, it just says the living will be caught up.

If it's possible to give a sequence in something that happens in the twinkling of an eye, we would say that 1 Corinthians 15 emphasizes the change, and then 1 Thessalonians 4 emphasizes the believers being caught up into the air, and then John 14 tells us we're taken into the Father's house.

Now, we believe that's how it will operate, but of course it all happens in the twinkling of an eye.

It's not a progression that takes a long spell of time, no, the twinkling of an eye. Oh, how marvelous this is.

[00:40:03] Dear friends, I believe we're just on the verge of it. Thank God for us all here that we're waiting, we're ready. Whatever failure attaches to us, we're not talking about partial rapture, that some who are faithful will go, and the others will need to be faithful through the tribulation in order to get their place in the kingdom, we don't believe that. Every person will be caught up to meet Christ in the air who believes in his work, who believes in him, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Those are the blessings that we need to be caught up, not any faithfulness on our part. That will apply to the kingdom when rewards are given, and so that's an encouragement to be faithful. So, how wonderful that Paul was given this distinct revelation that has no place whatsoever in Old Testament scriptures, indeed, not even referred to, I believe, obliquely in the Gospels [00:41:03] except perhaps in John 14, and the reference in John 5, the voice of the Son of God in raising the dead, but apart from that, we believe that this is something that was distinctly given to Paul, the truth of the rapture of the saints.

And those of you who have many books of the Brethren on your bookshelves, look through them, just go down through the articles and see how often the hope of the church is mentioned. A distinctive ministry that was given to them, and not only was it given to them, but these dear early Brethren who have left with such an example, they practiced what they preached. The truth was operative in their lives, and they really were waiting for the coming of the Lord.

Oh, may our hearts be revived to be more like our Lord while we wait for him. [00:42:02] I read these few statements at the beginning of chapter five, times and seasons, and times and seasons don't belong to the church. Times and seasons belong to earth. I think I'm right in saying that three, possibly four times in scripture, we get times and seasons mentioned in Ecclesiastes chapter three, a time and purpose for every season.

Then in Daniel chapter two, in that wonderful ascription of praise that Daniel gave to God when God revealed to him the dream.