

Article of the Month – October 2013

Missions & Eschatology (9) – Thessalonians

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Eschatology keeps people divided into different groups. There is the division between Protestants and Evangelicals about whether or not there will be a Millennium of Peace under Christ's rule before the appearing of the New Heaven and the New Earth. Among Evangelicals there is difference of opinion about whether the Rapture of the Church will take place before, in the middle or at the end of the Great Tribulation. There is also confusion about how Christ's Return relates to other aspects of

eschatology.

Such differences should not cause polemics; mutual respect should be maintained. Theological fights can detract the attention from our focus, namely to motivate the Church to take the Gospel to the unreached groups in the shortest possible time.

It is likely, that there will grow more unity in understanding the details of the final scenario as time passes. Confusion about the end times is not new. The Thessalonians and later the Corinthians,¹ who had been taught orally by Paul, had no clarity about the Return of the Lord, the resurrection, and with events that will precede them. So, why wouldn't *we* have difficulty understanding those issues correctly?

Paul heard from Timothy that not all previous teaching, especially about the second coming of Christ, had been well understood. His letters correct some of these errors; one of them had to do with believers who died² before Jesus came back and others thought that the Day of the Lord had already taken place.³ Paul explains *what* will take place *when* Jesus returns⁴ and what events will take place *before* that Day.⁵

Apparently not all questions had been answered: in his 2nd letter he goes into some detail about other aspects of eschatology. Both have a strong eschatological character, although the difference is 'one of emphasis, not of principle'.⁶ During his first stay in the city, Paul must have emphasized eschatology in his sermons because he referred to certain aspects as known.⁷ Eschatology is an important component of mission theology.⁸

¹ See how many questions Paul answers in 1 Cor. 15

² Paul uses the term 'fall asleep' (1 T. 4:13-15) for them who die in Christ, because they are not actually dead: in Christ they are alive. 'Dead' for Paul means 'died outside Christ, lost forever'

³ 2 T. 2:2

⁴ 1 T. 4:13-17

⁵ 2 T. 2:3-12

⁶ Morris, 1976:22

⁷ 2 T. 2:5,6

⁸ Remember that Paul, the *missionary*, taught eschatology to the church at an early stage

There are a number of passages in both letters that are mainly eschatological in nature.⁹ The *first* letter deals with things that take place *when* Jesus returns; the *second* with the events *preceding* His coming. Below, we see this scenario:

The *law* holds back the *lawless*, until the system of law and order crumbles so far under influence of the secret power of lawlessness,¹⁰ that it can no longer stand against him.¹¹ Jesus said: ‘in the Last Days *lawlessness* will increase’.¹² When the time is ripe Antichrist reveals himself.¹³ God also uses angels to hold back demonic forces.¹⁴

When Antichrist, also called ‘man of lawlessness’ or ‘son of perdition’¹⁵ appears, his coming will be with Satan-inspired counterfeit miracles.¹⁶ He will deceive those who do not know God nor obey the Gospel.¹⁷ He becomes a catalyst of doom, speeding up the process through which the measure of iniquity of unbelievers becomes full.¹⁸ This culminates into a great rebellion; Antichrist opposes anything that is worshipped, including God.¹⁹

Jesus’ Return and our rapture is *preceded*,²⁰ not *followed*, by the manifestation of Antichrist and his opposition against God, until Jesus deals with him at His coming.²¹ Paul speaks consistently about *the* coming, not about *two comings*.²² When He comes, those who refuse the truth²³ will be sentenced, whilst believers will be vindicated.²⁴

The question, whether saints will go through the Great Tribulation can be answered with yes and no. Yes, because they will still be present on earth²⁵ and no, because many – but not all²⁶ – will be protected when judgments befall unbelievers.²⁷ The woman, image of the Church, is given protection and shelter during the dragon’s fury.²⁸

⁹ 1 T. 3:13b; 4:13-17; 5:1-4,23; and 2 T. 1:6-10; 2:1-12.

¹⁰ 2 T. 2:6,7

¹¹ Morris, 1976:129

¹² ‘Lawlessness’ is a better translation of the Greek *ἀνομία* (*anomia*) than ‘wickedness’ (N.I.V.) is, Matt. 24:12

¹³ 2 T. 2:7,8a

¹⁴ Van den Berg, 1975:42,43, referring to Dan. 10:13,20,21 and Eph. 6:11,12; for the future, see Rev. 7:1

¹⁵ Morris, 1976:127, argues convincingly that all three terms describe the same person

¹⁶ Compare 1 T. 2:9 (counterfeit) with 2 Cor. 12:12a (genuine)

¹⁷ 2 T. 1:8,9

¹⁸ Compare e.g. with the judgment on the Amorites (Gen. 15:16) and similar verses describing the same principle, e.g. Dan. 11:36; Matt. 23:32 and 1 T. 2:16

¹⁹ 2 T. 2:3,4

²⁰ Simpson Jr., in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *Dictionary of St. Paul & His Letters*, 1993:938

²¹ 2 T. 2:1,3,4,7b,8b

²² *One* allegedly in secret, where only believers will be taken away, and *another* in public, to judge Antichrist, 7 years later

²³ 2 T. 2:10b-12; 1:6,8,9

²⁴ 1:7a,10

²⁵ Israel was still in Egypt when it was hit by Plagues. God said ‘I will deal differently with ... Goshen where My people live’ (Ex. 8:22). This ‘dealing differently’ happened 5 times (also Ex. 9:4,26; 10:21-23 and 11:7). Similarly, Noah and his family lived through the Flood, but were protected by the Ark. Daniel was protected *in* the lion’s den, not taken out of it; his friends were thrown *into* the furnace and protected, not taken out of it

²⁶ Dan. 11:33,34; Matt. 24:9; Rev. 6:9; 7:14; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7,10; 14:12

²⁷ Rev. 3:10 ‘I will keep you from the hour of trial’ has been interpreted incorrectly as ‘being taken out before’, but the Greek verb *τηρεω* (*tereoo*) only means ‘to guard’, ‘keep a (close) eye on’, ‘taking care that [not]’, ‘being on guard’, ‘conserve in a certain condition’

²⁸ Rev. 12:13-17

The Lord will come down from heaven: a loud command, the voice of the archangel and a trumpet call will be heard.²⁹ That appearing will be sudden, like a flash of lightning.³⁰

Paul deemed it unnecessary to say *when* this will take place, because it has not been revealed.³¹ That day will come unexpectedly like a thief in the night for *unbelievers*. It will not come as a surprise for *believers*;³² at that time they are prepared by taking note of the signs of the times and recognizing them from the Word.

After His appearance in the sky, the dead in Christ rise first³³ and Christians who are alive will be changed, immediately after that (first) resurrection.³⁴ Then the resurrected dead and the changed living will be caught up to meet Christ in the air³⁵ – which is only a meeting place – from where *all will come back to earth*.³⁶ The verse ‘So we will be with the Lord forever’³⁷ has often been interpreted as if Christ will take His whole Church, resurrected and changed saints, with Him to heaven.

But Christ comes *back to earth*; not just halfway to go back to heaven again. In that case we could not speak about a *return*! In New Testament times it was the habit that when Caesar (*Κυριος*, Greek ‘*Kurios*’, ‘*Lord*’) visited a city, his arrival was announced by trumpet-blowing heralds; hence the Archangel and the trumpet call. The population would go out to meet him, and celebrate his entry into that city.³⁸ Caesar did not take the population to his palace. Likewise, Christ will establish His Millennial Kingdom on earth and rule it with His saints.³⁹ Then they will be with Him forever: on earth, not in heaven.

So, what does all this eschatology have to do with world missions? Your eschatology designs your missiology. We know that the Great Commission will only be finished *when the end comes*,⁴⁰ so we get to work until the Lord returns.⁴¹ If however, you expect a rapture that can take place ‘any time now’ you may relax your efforts, because it does not matter whether you finish or not. In the first instance missions will increase, in the second they may stagnate.

²⁹ 1 T. 4:16a; 1 Cor. 15:52a; Matt. 24:30,31a; Zech. 9:14b; Rev. 11:15a

³⁰ Matt. 24:27; Zech. 9:14a

³¹ 1 T. 1:5; Acts 1:7; Matt. 24:36

³² 1 T. 5:2-4

³³ 1 T. 4:16b,15b; 1 Cor. 15:52b; this is the First Resurrection, Rev. 20:5,6

³⁴ 1 Cor. 15:52b; 1 T. 4:17a

³⁵ Although the term is extra-biblical, this gathering up is usually referred to as the Rapture, 1 T. 4:17a

³⁶ 1 T. 3:13b,14b

³⁷ 4:17b

³⁸ Morris, 1976:88,89; Van den Berg, 1975:84,85

³⁹ Rev. 11:15b; 19:1 – 20:6

⁴⁰ Matt. 24:14

⁴¹ Hebr. 10:23-25

