

# 1 Thessalonians

## I. Introduction

- A. **1 Thessalonians 1:8-10** . . . For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. [9] For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, [10] **and** to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.
- B. Pray

## II. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 – the return of Jesus Christ

- A. **1 Thessalonians 1:10** is Paul's first mention of the return of Christ in this letter – a return prophesied by the two angels who appeared to the disciples right after Jesus ascended into heaven.
1. We read about this in **Acts 1:9-11**, “And after [Jesus] had said these things, He was lifted up while [the disciples] were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. [10] And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. [11] They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”
  2. As I said, **1 Thessalonians 1:10** is Paul's first mention of the return of Christ. Interestingly, Paul refers to Christ's return at or near the end of each chapter in this letter.
    - a. For example, in **1 Thessalonians 1:10** (*last*), Paul writes, “and to **wait for His Son from heaven**, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”
    - b. **1 Thessalonians 2:19-20** (*just before last*), “For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus **at His coming**? [20] For you are our glory and joy.”
    - c. **1 Thessalonians 3:11-13** (*last*), “Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; [12] and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one

another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; [13] so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at **the coming of our Lord Jesus** with all His saints.”

- d. **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** (*directly precede last*), “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. [14] For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. [15] For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the **coming of the Lord**, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. [16] 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. [17] Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. [18] Therefore comfort one another with these words.”
  - e. **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24** (*fifth from last*), “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**.”
3. It seems that Paul is endeavoring to drive home the importance of confidently counting on and looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ – a return that will raise to life those Christians who have died while waiting for His return and those Christians who are alive when He comes.
    - a. Which raises the question, “Why is it important for Christians to confidently count on and look forward to the return of Christ?”
    - b. Before looking at some possible answers, I want to present a short overview along with a few different views of the end times held by Christians down through the ages.
- B. The Bible’s teaching on the end times and the return of Christ is called “**eschatology**,” which means “the study of last things.” In other words, eschatology is the study of the timing and the events involved in and revolving around God bringing to completion His work of redeeming sinners and making them a people for His own possession with whom He will dwell forever in the new heavens and new earth.

1. In the Bible, the end times are referred to as “the last” or “latter days” (**Isaiah 2:2**, **Daniel 10:14**, **Micah 4:1**), the “day of the Lord” (**Joel 1:15**; **Amos 5:18**; **1 Thessalonians 5:2**), the “age to come” (**Matthew 12:32**; **Ephesians 1:21**; **Hebrews 6:5**), the “last days” (**2 Timothy 3:1**; **2 Peter 3:3**), the “last hour” (**1 John 2:18**) and the “last time” (**Jude 18**).
2. The commonly understood events of the end times include the rapture of believers (**1 Thessalonians 4:17**), a time of great tribulation (**Matthew 24:21**), the return of Christ, the millennial reign of Christ – which is commonly understood to be for a thousand years (**1 Corinthians 15:20-26**), the judgment of unbelievers and believers – both the living and the dead (**2 Corinthians 5:10**), and the creation of a new heavens and a new earth (**Revelation 20:11-21:5**).
3. However, there has been and continues to be differing opinions among Christians as to how to interpret and understand specific parts of the end times, especially the rapture of believers, the great tribulation, and the millennial reign of Christ.
  - a. For example, most Bible scholars understand Daniel’s prophecy about the seventy weeks to include a seventieth week that is made up of seven years.
    - (1) These seven years are commonly divided in half – with the first 3½ years being years of God’s judgement and hard times, but nothing near as bad as the second 3½ years which are commonly referred to as the great tribulation.
    - (2) Tied to these seven years is the idea of the rapture of believers which is believed to take place during these seven years – yet even here there are differences on the timing.
    - (3) Some believe Christians are raptured (*that is, caught up to meet Christ in the air and taken back to heaven with Him*) at the beginning of the seven years.
    - (4) Some believe the rapture takes place in the middle, just before the great tribulation begins.
      - (a) Obviously, these first two groups believe Christians will not have to suffer through the final 3½ years of God’s most severe judgment of the great tribulation.
      - (b) And in these first two scenarios, it is believed Christ does not come all the way to the earth, but rather takes up those believers who are alive and those who have died to meet Him in the air and take them to heaven.

- (5) However, there is a third view which holds there is no rapture, no taking Christians out of this world, but rather leaving them here during the seven years, including the last 3½ years of the great tribulation – after which Christ returns and sets up His kingdom over all the earth. In this last scenario, Christ returns once to fulfill His final duties before handing over all things to God.
      - b. As you can see from what I just presented, some Bible scholars understand the scriptures to teach a rapture and some don't. Some believe Christians will not go through the 3½ years of the great tribulation, and some believe they will. And as for the millennial reign of Christ, there are several differing views on that as well – all taken from the same Word of God.
- C. My purpose for talking about this is not to confuse you, or to make you think God's word can't be trusted, or to debate which view is correct.
  1. My purpose is to reinforce that what matters most about the end times and the return of Christ is our mindset and attitude toward the return of Christ, not knowing exactly how it will happen.
  2. For example, it seems to me that when we examine Paul's references to Christ's return in **1 Thessalonians**, it is our mindset and attitude toward His return that matters most. And that is the focus I will be taking today.
- D. With this in mind, let's return to **1 Thessalonians 1:10**, "and to wait for God's Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead."
  1. There are two major ways of looking at or thinking about the return of Christ. Both are good and acceptable, for both serve a good and acceptable purpose – depending on your situation and your spiritual maturity. So again let me say, one is not better than the other, just different for different situations and Christians at different places in their spiritual growth.
  2. The **first way** of looking at the return of Christ with a Christian mindset and attitude is based on being in an ongoing situation where the only reasonable hope of anything better is the return of Christ.
    - a. In other words, when life is exceedingly bad or painful and there is no apparent hope for any improvement or relief, then a healthy mindset is to look for, pray for, and take comfort from the promised and therefore expected return of Christ.

- b. The Thessalonian believers were in just such a situation. And there are Christians today who are suffering under unremitting persecution that may include imprisonment, torture, or a cruel, painful death – for any or all of their family members. This kind of treatment of Christians is happening today at the hands of the Boko Haram and their supporters in parts of Nigeria.
- c. Paul, himself, had been on both sides of this kind of persecution, for he persecuted Jewish converts and he endured persecution himself. In fact, he came to Thessalonica after having been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi for casting a demon out of a slave girl and preaching the gospel.
- d. It is from this kind of personal experience that Paul knows the reality of connecting one's view of the return of Christ to going through trials, tribulation, pain, and persecution. Surely Stephen's stoning taught him this from the persecutors' side and being persecuted himself taught him this from the suffering side – which is why he presents this connection as a means of comfort, confident hope that evil will be dealt with and good will come, and as the assurance that God has not abandoned you in spite of what it looks and feels like.
- e. In my opinion, Paul's most complete statement on this topic is found in **Romans 8:18-39**, where he presents a Christian mindset and attitude that connects suffering with looking forward to the return of Christ and having a certainty that such circumstances do not mean you have been abandoned by God.
  - (1) For example, Paul begins this section with these words in **Romans 8:18**, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."
  - (2) And he concludes this section with these words in **Romans 8:38-39**, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- f. However, given our humanity, it is easy to lose hope or become so distraught and discouraged in the face of trials, tribulation, or persecution that we forsake God, or even turn on God because it feels like God has forsaken us. Our mindset and attitude is not one of looking forward, but wanting relief.

- (1) Yet we are no longer mere humans. We are new creations in Christ Jesus, and as such we have a realistic expectation that in spite of our circumstances, and in spite of how long we've had to endure them, and in spite of it looking like our suffering will never end in this life, Jesus Christ will return one day and make all things right and all things new.
    - (2) And it is this realistic expectation of the return of Christ that gives us comfort in our suffering, confidence in the justice of God, an assurance that God has not abandoned us, and the motivation to persevere.
  - g. In other words, the Christian mindset and attitude toward the return of Christ provides a source of comfort in the midst of hard times, the assurance that God is with us, and the encouragement to press on – knowing that the worst of life here on earth will change one day, and the change will be for the better and forever.
3. There is a **second way** of looking at the return of Christ, and this way is based on your love for God, intimacy with God, and longing to be with God in a setting where nothing can come between you and God.
- a. Unlike the first way, this mindset and attitude is not driven or affected by our circumstances – be they good or bad.
  - b. And I am using both descriptive words – good and bad – in reference to our circumstances because it is easy as Christians in an age and place of prosperity to like our circumstances so much that we lack any genuine longing for the return of Christ.
  - c. In fact, Christians in an age and place of prosperity can grow so comfortable and content with life as it is that Christ's return becomes more of an imposition than the fulfillment of a longing.
  - d. However, even in an age and place of prosperity, there are those who have grown to love God, to enjoy sweet fellowship with God, and to have a soul-satisfying intimacy with God so as to long for the return of Christ – because it is His return that opens the door to being with God without the hindrances of sin, the burdens of the old nature, the temptations of the devil, or anything else that acts as a barrier to a relationship of mutual love and trust with Him.
  - e. I believe it is in this sense that Paul said, “to die is gain” (**Philippians 1:21**). It is true, he was conflicted as to seeing Christ face-to-face or remaining and continuing the ministry

God have him. Both had their appeal, yet he speaks of staying as “**necessary**” for the ministry’s sake, while going to be with Christ he labels as “**much better.**”

4. What is your mindset and attitude toward the return of Christ? Do you long for it? Do you look forward to it? Is it something you want to happen – sooner rather than latter?
  - a. Is the promise of Christ’s return a comfort in hard times? Is it a reminder that justice will prevail? Is it an assurance that God is with you even when it seems He has abandoned you? Do you find motivation to persevere through your trials, tribulation, or possible persecution in the promise of His return?
  - b. Or maybe you are looking forward to Christ’s return because you long to be with God so you can fellowship with Him unhindered by anything in yourself or in this world.
5. Either way, whether you long for His return because life is so horrible and there appears to be no chance of it getting better, or you long for His return because you long to be with Him in intimate fellowship and companionship, your mindset and attitude are in agreement with the teaching of scripture, and that is good.

### III. Conclusion

- A. It is possible you haven’t given much thought to your mindset and attitude toward the return of Christ. If that is the case, I urge you to begin thinking about this matter. And as you might guess, we will be returning to this topic four more times as we work our way through **1 Thessalonians**.
- B. If you want to read more from the NT concerning the return of Christ, I recommend the following scriptures: Luke 17:22-36; Romans 8:18-39; Philippians 3:17-21; 2 Peter 3:10-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6.