

So what Does St. Paul say about the Second Coming? (1/2)

(1 Thessalonians 4.16-17)

This morning I want to answer the question “So what does St. Paul say about the Second Coming” by looking at one of the most misunderstood passages in his letters, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Based on this passage, and popularized in a book and movie series called “Left Behind”, is the idea that at Jesus’ Second Coming believers will be snatched up to heaven. Empty cars will be left behind crashing on freeways. Kids will come home from school only to find that their parents have been taken to be with Jesus while they have been “left behind.” This pseudo-theological version of *Home Alone* has reportedly frightened many people into some kind of (distorted) faith.

This dramatic end-time scenario is based (wrongly, as we shall see) on Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, where he writes: " For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

What on earth (or in heaven) does Paul mean?

Well before we look at these verses in more detail we need to look at a theme found throughout the New Testament envisioning God remaking heaven and earth entirely, affirming the goodness of the old Creation but overcoming its mortality and corruptibility.

Romans 8:18-23 most clearly articulates this.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Paul writes that all of creation is in labour waiting for the day when those who truly belong to Jesus will be revealed. The word “revealed” is derived from the Greek word apocalypse. The Apocalypse is a term that has become synonymous with the “Second Coming.” When we understand that the word apocalypse means “to reveal” it helps to make sense of this passage from Romans. When those who belong to God are revealed to be God’s children then all of creation will be renewed. One translation of verses 19-21 puts it vividly like this. “The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. ²⁰Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in ²¹until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.”

The questions that follows from this is, when will the children of God be revealed? The answer is found in Colossians 3:4 “When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” The Message, the alternate version I quoted a minute ago, translates this verse: “When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you’ll show up, too--the real you, the glorious you.”

You will notice that in both of these passages there is nothing to suggest that the creation will be destroyed and those who belong to Jesus snatched away from the horror those left behind will go through. No, it is clear Paul understood that at the Second Coming of Jesus there will be a continuity with the creation we already share but it will be transformed and incorruptible.

With this in mind let’s now turn to 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul’s description of Jesus’ reappearance in this passage is a brightly coloured version of what he says in two other passages, 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 and Philippians 3:20–21: In 1 Corinthians he writes:

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

In Philippians we read “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our

humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.”

At Jesus' "coming" or "appearing," those who are still alive will be "changed" or "transformed" so that their mortal bodies will become incorruptible, deathless. This is all that Paul intends to say in Thessalonians, but here he borrows imagery from biblical sources to enhance his message.

Little did he know how his rich metaphors would be misunderstood two millennia later.

First at verse 16 Paul echoes the story of Moses coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. The trumpet sounds, a loud voice is heard, and after a long wait Moses comes to see what's been going on in his absence. In alluding to the Exodus story Paul has in mind the material in Exodus 19-32. In chapter 19:16 we read “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” We then read about God descending upon Mount Sinai and Moses going up the mountain to receive the Law. Then in chapter 32 Moses comes down from the Mountain with the Ten Commandments. In this story Paul sees an example of the Jesus story. Like Moses going up on the Mountain, Jesus ascends to heaven to then one day come back to earth. With this in mind listen again to verse 16 “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

Here Paul is saying that just as there was a trumpet blast as God prepared to give the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, so too there will be a trumpet blast when Jesus comes back at the end of the age. Upon his return those who have already died will appear with him on the earth in glory.

It’s worth pointing out that there is in the Gospels a description of an event that foreshadows this general resurrection. We read in Matthew 27:52 that at the point Jesus died “The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.”

In verse 17 Paul draws the imagery from Daniel 7:13 to describe what those who are still alive at Jesus Second Coming can expect.

¹³As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a son of man
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.

¹⁴To him was given dominion

and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.

In Daniel Seven we have been reading about earthly kingdoms that set themselves against God's kingdom. Jesus understood himself to the Son of Man referred to in this verse. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel written to a Jewish audience, where Daniel seven would have been well known, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man thirty times. You will notice that in this passage Jesus is depicted coming on the clouds of heaven establishing his reign in such a way that all peoples, nations and languages will serve him. And as it says his dominion will be everlasting, never to be destroyed.

When Paul writes in verse 17 "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together" he has in mind the clouds from Daniel chapter 7. Implied in this is the New Testament theme that those of God's Children who are alive at the time of the Second Coming will be raised up to sit with God in glory and reign with Christ as he fully establishes his kingdom.

Third, Paul conjures up images of an emperor visiting a colony or province. The citizens go out to meet him in open country and then escort him into the city. Paul's image of the people "meeting the Lord in the air" should be read with the assumption that the people will immediately turn around and lead the Lord back to the newly remade world.

So in summary then what does St. Paul say about the Second Coming?

1. At the Coming of Jesus all of creation will be transformed in such a way that every aspect of the created order will share in the Glory of God.
2. When Jesus comes, those who have died will be revealed with him in this remade and restored universe.
3. Those who are still alive will be caught up to meet Jesus not to be taken away but rather to escort him our Lord and King to this New Earth where he will reign forever and ever.

Paul's mixed metaphors of trumpets blowing and the living being snatched into heaven to meet the Lord are not to be understood as literal truth, as the *Left Behind* series suggests, but as a vivid and biblically allusive description of the great transformation of the present world of which he speaks elsewhere.

Paul's misunderstood metaphors present a challenge for us: How can we reuse biblical imagery, including Paul's, so as to clarify the truth, not distort it? It is to an answering of that question we will turn to next week as we consider an application of Paul's teaching on what the Second Coming.