

EXCITED ABOUT THE LORD'S RETURN

- A. Introduction: Jesus' first message to His followers was: I'll be back (Acts 1:9-11). Only the doctrine of salvation is mentioned more often in Scripture than Jesus' second coming. That's not surprising since Jesus is coming back to complete God's plan of salvation.
1. Neither this world nor the human race is as God intended them to be. Almighty God created human beings to become His sons and daughters and made the earth to be home for His family. Both the family and the family home have been damaged by sin. Gen 2:17; Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12; Rom 5:19
 - a. Jesus came to earth the first time to pay for sin through His death on the Cross and open the way for sinners to be transformed into sons and daughters of God through faith in Him. John 1:12-13
 - b. He will come again to cleanse the earth of all corruption and death and restore it to a fit forever home for God and His family. Isa 65:17; II Pet 3:10-13; etc.
 - c. According to the Bible the years leading up to the Lord's return will be increasingly challenging for a variety of reasons (Matt 24:21; II Tim 3:1). We are looking to God's Word to help us know how to deal with the difficult months and years ahead of us with peace and joy.
 2. In this part of our series we're considering what the second coming meant to the first generation of Christians. When we examine the New Testament we find that they understood that a time of great catastrophe will precede the Lord's return. But these first Christians—who fully expected to see the Lord's return were not afraid. They were excited. What did they know that we don't know?
- B. When Jesus came to earth two thousand years ago time His followers (first century Jews) were expecting Him to restore this planet to pre-sin, Eden-like conditions and establish the kingdom of God on earth. They got this idea from the writings of the Old Testament prophets—the portion of the Bible that had been written by their day. (many lessons for other days)
1. Jesus eventually informed His original apostles that He was not at that time going to restore the earth and set up His kingdom here. But, He assured them that He would return at a later time to do so.
 - a. Matt 24:1-3—Just a few days before Jesus went to the Cross He and some of His apostles had an interesting interchange when Jesus told them the Jerusalem Temple was going to be destroyed.
 1. Although Jesus just told them that the center of their religious, cultural, and political life (the Temple) was going to be destroyed, the apostles were not upset.
 2. Instead, they asked Jesus when this will happen and what sign would indicate His return and the end of this age—What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end—that is, the completion, the consummation—of the age (v3, Amp).
 - b. Notice that these men understood that an end is coming to the world the way it is and that some type of transformation will take place. They knew all of this from the Old Testament prophets.
 1. The apostles knew that although great tribulation will precede the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, God's people will survive and the end result will be wonderful.
 2. Peter's preached these words after Jesus returned to Heaven: (Jesus will remain in Heaven) until the time for the complete restoration of all that God spoke by the mouth of all His holy prophets for ages past—from the most ancient time in the memory of man (Acts 3:21, Amp).
 2. Keep in mind that these first believers expected Jesus to return soon—within the lifetime of many of them. No one at that time knew that Jesus' return was two thousand years away.
 - a. These first believers expected to see the coming calamity which they knew from the prophets would include a powerful world empire with a wicked ruler who wars against God's people and brings destructive warfare to the lands around Jerusalem. Dan 7:1-28; Dan 8:25-27; Dan 11:40-44
 - b. But they were not afraid because these predictions about world conditions when the Lord comes were followed by statements promising deliverance for the people of God and fulfillment of His

plan to establish His kingdom and the family home on earth.

1. Dan 7:21-22—As I watched, this horn (final ruler) was waging war against the holy people and was defeating them until the Ancient One came and judged over the kingdom (NLT).
 2. Dan 12:1—Then there will be a time of anguish greater than any since nations came into existence. But at that time every one of your people whose name is written in the book (people in covenant with God, Ex 32:32) will be rescued (NLT).
 3. Dan 7:18—But in the end, the people of the Most High will be given the kingdom and they will rule forever and ever (NLT).
- c. When the apostle John was given the information that he recorded in the Book of Revelation, it wasn't frightening to the first readers. It was a book of comfort and hope because it was familiar.
1. Rev 13—When John wrote about a beast with ten horns who rises up with great authority and power, blasphemes God, and wages war with His people (v1, 5-8), the first Christians recognized this to be what Daniel had prophesied over 500 years earlier.
 2. Although the Book of Revelation has more details about specific events and people, it ends as Daniel's visions ended—with God's enemies destroyed and His people triumphing.
 3. Rev 21:1-7—Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people...He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain...all who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children (NLT).

- C. Let's get more insight into what these first Christians knew about the Lord's return and the period of tribulation leading up to it from the apostle Paul. He became a believer when the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to him just a few years after the resurrection. Acts 9:1-6
1. Jesus personally taught Paul the message that he preached (Gal 1:11-12). Paul wrote fourteen New Testament documents. Only two of them make no reference to Jesus' return (Galatians and Philemon, which is a short personal letter). Consider Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.
 - a. Acts 17:1-10—About AD 51 Paul went to Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia in northern Greece. He preached Christ to them and established a community of believers. He was only there a short time (possibly as little as three weeks) when persecution broke out.
 1. Paul and his ministry partner Silas were forced to leave the city and moved on to the cities of Berea, Athens, and Corinth.
 2. Paul sent Timothy, another co-worker, back to encourage them in their faith. Then Paul wrote them a letter (I Thessalonians) to encourage them and give them more instruction.
 - b. As Paul greets the Thessalonians in the opening lines of his letter, we get insight into the message that Paul preached in the short time he was with them.
 1. I Thess 1:9-10—(Others in the region have heard about your faith and talk about how) you turned away from idols to serve the true and living God. And they speak of how you are looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven—Jesus, whom God raised from the dead. He is the one who has rescued us from the terrors of the coming judgment (NLT).
 2. Notice that living with the expectation of the Lord's return is part of the gospel that Paul proclaimed. Notice also that part of Paul's message was that trouble is coming, but that Jesus has delivered us from the wrath (judgment for sin) that is coming.
 2. Consider another comment Paul made about the Lord's return when he gave them some information about what happens when Christians die. It is possible that some of their friends and loved ones had died—either due to natural causes or persecution. I Thess 4:13-18
 - a. Paul told them that in the face of death, we have hope. Your loved ones are not dead even though their bodies are asleep (temporarily dead and in the grave). They are with the Lord now in Heaven,

and when He returns, He will bring them with Him.

1. v16—He will descend from Heaven and their dead bodies shall rise from the grave and be reunited with the original owner. Their bodies will be made incorruptible and immortal.
 2. Paul was given a lot of information about the nature of our resurrected bodies, along with the revelation that a generation of believers won't see physical death. Phil 3:20-21; I Cor 15:51-52.
 3. v15-17—I can tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not rise to meet him ahead of those who are in their graves (NLT). But we will all be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. And we will be with Him always
- b. I Thess 4:17—This catching away is referred to by many as the rapture of the church. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. When it was eventually translated into Latin the Latin word *raptus* was used for the Greek word translated catching away (*harpazo*).
- c. Its hard for us to hear this as the first readers did. We immediately think of the rapture, who is going in it, and when it is in relation to the tribulation. As 21st Century Christians we hear this in terms of every prophecy seminar we've ever attended.
1. But none of those arguments had arisen at the time Paul wrote. Those discussions evolved centuries after the first Christians. These first readers heard Paul's words in terms of the Bible (the Old Testament prophets and what Jesus taught them). John 14:1-3
 2. These people were experiencing persecution which would get worse before it got better. The region was under the control of an empire that ruled the known world (Rome) and had a leader whom many worshiped as a god. For all they knew, they were going to experience that calamity described in the prophets (Revelation hadn't been written yet.). But they knew God would help them and they would be victorious—even if they died.
 - A. Resurrection of the dead and transformation of the body is the clearest demonstration of the complete defeat of man's age old enemy, death, just as the prophets predicted: Then at last the scriptures will come true: Death is swallowed up in victory. Isa 25:8; Hosea 13:14
 - B. Paul told the Thessalonians: Encourage each other with this information. I Thess 4:18
3. A few months later, Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to clear up some misunderstandings about the Lord's return. Some of them had been influenced by a false teaching that said the day of the Lord had already begun. Paul urged them not be moved by revelations, visions, etc. II Thess 2:1-2
- a. The day of the Lord was the Old Testament term for what we call the second coming (Joel 2:11; Zeph 1:15; etc.) It meant three things to them: The Lord will come to deal with His enemies, deliver His people, and establish His kingdom on earth where He will then live with His people in a world renewed and restored to pristine conditions.
 - b. Paul urged the Thessalonians not to be moved by that contradicts what we've told you—even if they have a vision, a revelation, or a letter supposedly from us.
 1. Two things must happen before the Lord comes. v3—For that day will not come until there is a great rebellion against God and the man of lawlessness is revealed—the one who brings destruction (NLT).
 2. This is not brand new information. Daniel wrote about this man (Dan 7:25). Jesus made reference to him and lawlessness (Matt 24:11; 15). Paul told them about these conditions (v5).
 - A. Paul reminded them that there is presently a restraint on this wicked man being revealed because it's not time yet. v6-7
 - B. v9-10—This evil man will do the work of Satan with counterfeit power and signs and miracles. He will use every kind of wicked deception to fool those who are on their way to destruction because they refuse to believe the truth that would save them (NLT).
 1. Today, people want to argue about the timing of the rapture, the mark of the beast, the identity of Antichrist and miss the point: God triumphs! His plan will be completed.

2. II Thess 2:8—The man of lawlessness will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of his mouth and destroy with the splendor of his coming (NLT).
 - A. This would have been familiar imagery to men and women familiar with the writings of the prophets. The prophet Isaiah wrote: (The Savior) will smite the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked (Isa 11:4, NLT).
 - B. John used the same imagery of Jesus in the Book of Revelation stating that He will defeat His enemies with His Word or the breath of His mouth: A sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth (Rev 1:16; NLT). From his mouth came a sharp sword, and with it he struck down the nations (Rev 19:15, NLT).
- D. Conclusion: We are witnessing massive changes in the world around us—changes that are setting the stage for the conditions that will be in place at the time of the Lord’s return.
1. Globalism is advancing. Lawlessness is raging. Wholesale abandonment of Judeo-Christians ethics and morality along with a growing hostility toward those who worship Almighty God and His Son Jesus is increasing. Genuinely fearsome things are happening. It will get worse.
 2. However, there is a good end ahead and God will take care of His people until He comes. The first Christians understood this. They had the writings of the prophets and the words of Jesus and His apostles to direct them—not only encouraging words but instruction on specific actions to take.
 - a. The prophet Joel wrote: The day of the Lord will soon arrive...the earth and heavens will begin to shake But to his people...the Lord will be a welcoming refuge and a strong fortress (3:14-16, NLT).
 - b. Jesus made this statement in His answer to Peter, John, Andrew, and James about what sign will indicate His return is at hand: The time will come when you will see what Daniel the prophet spoke: the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing in the holy place—reader, pay attention! Then those in Judea must flee to the hills (Matt 24:15-16, NLT).
 1. In the not too distant future there will be people who actually witness the man of lawlessness Paul referred to declare himself to be God. Two thousand years Jesus gave those people this warning to help them: Get out Judea (the region around Jerusalem) immediately.
 2. A full explanation of Jesus’ words requires an entire lesson. The point for us now is that the first Christians knew from statements like this that God will help His people survive the difficult years preceding His return.
 - c. We said last week that by the time that John wrote the Book of Revelation severe persecution by the Roman government had begun and Christians were being martyred. Where’s the hope in that?
 1. Both Paul and John in their writings made it clear that believers who have died are alive in Heaven waiting with the Old Testament saints to return to the earth with the Lord. There will be reunion with friends and loved ones. I Thess 4:14; Rev 5:10; Rev 6:9-11
 2. They had the example from the beginning of how God helps and sustains those who are killed for their faith in Christ. The death of Stephen the first martyr is an example of God’s sustaining grace in the face of horrific circumstances. Acts 7:54-60
 3. Because we don’t consider what the Bible meant to the first readers and hearers, we don’t get the context and we miss the blessing, hope, and encouragement that comes from it.
 - a. Paul urged the Thessalonians: II Thess 2:15—Stand firm and keep a strong grip on everything we taught you both in person and by letter (NLT).
 - b. If ever there was a time to immerse yourself in God’s Word (instead of the 24 hour news shows and the internet), it is now. Much more next week!