

Eschatology: New Testament Epistles

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17: *The rapture:*

1 Thess. 4:13-15 is talking about those who have fallen asleep. This was a standard metaphor for death among pagans as well as Jews and Christians. The term has no particular reference to the state of the soul or consciousness of the deceased. It also speaks about not grieving for those who are "asleep." Christ's resurrection affords Christians a deeply seated hope and assurance of never-ending fellowship with Him.

1 Thess. 4:13-15

Probably the most frequently quoted verses in the Bible when talking about the rapture are 1 Thess. 4:16-17. But before we get into the passage I want to make a few statements about the rapture. The rapture is the time when Christ calls us to "the heavens" to be with him. This is the final judgment. The dead will raise first, then those who are alive.

1 Thess. 4:16-17

What this passage clearly teaches is that at the time of the Lord's return all the believing dead will be raised, and all believers who are still alive will be transformed and glorified.

1 Cor. 15:51-52

Then these two groups, the dead in Christ and those who are alive, will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. What these words do not teach is that after this meeting in the air the Lord will reverse his direction and go back to heaven, taking the raised and transformed members of the church with him. Verse 17 of 1 Thess. 4 ends with, "and so we will always be with the Lord." But Paul does not say where we will always be with the Lord. Everlasting oneness with Christ in glory is the clear teaching of this passage.

Let's look at this in a little more detail. Remember as Nathan taught last week: The great tribulation that many believe will take place has already happened. It happened during "this generation," which we determined last week was those who were alive during the first century before the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

Jesus was not talking about a time of tribulation for the entire world in the future; he was talking about great tribulation for Judea, for the Jews in his own generation, as we read in Matt. 24:16.

Make no mistake about it; there is going to be a rapture, but notice again it is not going to be a quiet one. Remember as we read in 1 Thess. 4:16-17: there is going to be the shout of the archangel of God and the trumpet of God, and we are going to be caught up before Christ. There is nothing secret about it. It is going to be the noisiest day of earth's history. The entire world will be brought to the attention of the trumpet of God, and the saints will be gathered before him first.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11: *The day of the Lord:*

This passage is dealing with the day of the Lord. There are a couple of differing views as to what Paul is talking about here. 1) Some believe this passage is directly linked to 1 Thess. 4 dealing with the rapture and the second coming of Christ. 2) Others believe this passage is linked to 2 Thess. 2 dealing with the destruction of the temple in AD 70. This, in part, is why I am addressing it in-between these passages. I believe this passage is dealing with the temple's destruction AD 70.

1 Thess. 5:1-2

The second verse in particular is the reason people link this passage with 1 Thess. 4 and the rapture/second coming. The challenge I have with doing this starts in verse 1. While, I am fully aware that the chapter and verse designations were not in the original text, Paul is making an abrupt stop in verse 1 that I think is noteworthy. Paul is making an abrupt change in direction in his letter to the Thessalonians when he says, "**now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.**" I do not think that we can overlook this. Paul is warning the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. This is referring to the judgment of God/the destruction of the temple coming suddenly.

Paul then goes on to describe what they can expect.

1 Thess. 5:3

Paul says there will be peace and then suddenly destruction. At the second coming of Christ there is not a sudden destruction that takes place. There is the rapture but there is not destruction. In my Sunday school lesson in 5 weeks, I will be covering what heaven and hell will be like. Although, I have not fully prepared that Sunday school lesson, as of yet, I am sure, that the earth will not be destroyed at Christ's second coming.

Paul then goes on to tell them that the day will not surprise them. The Thessalonians were going to be alive when this day happened.

1 Thess. 5:4

Then Paul reminds them of who they are versus who the lost are on that day.

1 Thess. 5:5-11

All of the language in this passage is addressing the Thessalonians in their day. This is not to say that we can't apply it to ourselves and how we are to live our lives. But it is to say that Paul was dealing with the Thessalonians' concern about the day of the Lord or God's judgment coming, and what they could expect.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12:

The man of lawlessness:

Since the "apostasy" arose from the midst of Judaism, it is probable that the man of lawlessness is also a Jewish figure of the first century. A number of indicators in the text of 2 Thess. 2:1-12 give us reason to believe that a particular man is in view.

2 Thess. 2:1-12

First, Paul's language is pulled directly from Jesus' prophetic announcements, biblical vocabulary, and theological themes of the Old Testament. All of these suggest a covenantal interpretation. Jesus dealt with the "mystery of lawlessness" during his ministry:

-**"Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8)**

-**"You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:9)**

-**"Invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that" (Mark 7:13)**

-**"Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death" (Matt. 26:59)**

While the Jews claimed to be keepers of the law, these texts and many more like them show that their deeds were contrary to the law, the very essence of lawlessness, which is sin.

1 John 3:4

Second, the Thessalonians were Jews and "God-fearing Greeks." They would have understood and applied the covenantal language to their era since "the mystery of lawlessness was already at work."

2 Thess. 2:7

The Thessalonians would have been looking for a contemporary figure. In fact, they knew who it was since Paul writes: **"And you know what restrains him now"** (2 Thess. 2:6).

Third, persecution came by the way of the Jews, stirred up by the priests. When Paul was struck by the high priest Ananias, Paul called him a "whitewashed wall," accusing him of lawlessness.

Acts 23:3

The Bible records the blasphemous expression of lawlessness uttered by the priest in rejecting Jesus and turning Him over to the pagan State of Rome to be crucified.

John 19:15

'The mystery of iniquity was already working,' when the apostle wrote 2 Thess. 2, which cannot possibly be understood to mean anything else but the Jewish nation; and so it is explained again and again.

Fourth, lawlessness must be understood in covenantal terms. Any deviation from New Covenant precepts is apostasy. An Old Covenant example will demonstrate this point. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, **"offered strange fire to the Lord, which he had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1)**. Their lawless deed was that they offered a type of fire that was contrary to the law. This means that the priests were

"men of lawlessness." Their judgment was by fire that **"came out of the presence of the Lord" (Lev. 10:2)**. Jerusalem was destroyed by "fire."

Similarly, the high priest who served in the temple prior to its destruction in AD 70 offered "strange" sacrifices that violated the provisions of the New Covenant that is now defined by Jesus' blood and no longer by the blood of animals.

Hebrews 10:4

The sin of the high priest was akin to that of Nadab and Abihu. He was the man of lawlessness by the provisions of the New Covenant. Their fire was "strange" and their sacrifices detestable because Jesus was God's sacrificial lamb whom they scorned and later slaughtered by turning him over to the Romans to be crucified.

Fifth, prior to Jesus' description of events leading up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, found in Matthew 24, he denounced the lawless religious leaders who "seated themselves in the chair of Moses."

Matt. 23:2-3

Remember, Paul did the same in Acts 23:3.

The man of lawlessness was the principle religious leader of Israel-the high priest who officiated over Jewish law and did not concern himself with using the law in a God-honoring way. All of the lawless deeds of those priests who sent Jesus to his death and persecuted His Bride, the church, had reached their climax by the time the temple was destroyed in AD 70.

In addition, the defilement of the temple was a result of their lawless acts. The zealots had taken possession of the temple at an early stage in the siege. The zealots had dismantled the biblically prescribed methods of choosing priests.

The Restrainer:

The Thessalonians were certainly aware of "the what" and "the who" of this restraint. Based on the fact, according to Acts 22-28, that the first century Roman government restrained the Jews from persecuting the Christians, I believe that "the what" was the Roman civil government. They had been operating in this fashion for decades. The Jews, for example, were "not allowed to put anyone to death."

John 18:31

We also see in Acts 4:1-22 Peter and John are arrested and charged with teaching the people about Christ and healing a crippled man, and 5:17-42 the Apostles were arrested for performing signs and wonders. They were imprisoned over night and released by the Lord to preach in the temple until daybreak. The Roman restraint meant that the high priest could not longer use his judicial authority to call for the imprisonment, persecution and death of Christians. On each of these occasions the men were released and told not to preach or teach about Jesus.

The Romans foiled a plot to assassinate Paul by restraining the Jews and providing safe passage for Paul to be moved to Caesarea. Claudius Lysias sent the following letter to "governor Felix:"

Acts 23:27

At this point in time Rome insisted that the Jews make all charges against the Christians in Roman courts.

Now let's look at "who" the restrainer is. The challenge here is that we are never told specifically who. An educated guess would be that King Agrippa would fit the requirements since he was the one who stopped the Jews from further bloodletting after the death of James, the brother of Jesus. It was Agrippa who "had the prerogative of appointing the Jewish high priests. He did his best to prevent the outbreak of the Jewish war against Rome in AD 66." When his attempt to stop the revolt failed, he became a staunch supporter of the Romans throughout the war.

1 John 2:18-19, 22: *Antichrist:*

When the Bible speaks of antichrist it is most often referring to an antichrist not the antichrist. An antichrist is someone who denies or opposes Christ. This understanding is very important to our study of the end times because most people spend their time looking to the media, world news and history to identify "the antichrist." The problem is that these should not be our sources for biblical interpretation. Confusion also arises because of two misconceptions: 1) any time the Bible references antichrist most

people lump the verses all together and create one figure out of them; and 2) most people mistake the time period in which these different figures are to appear.

First, let's find a biblical definition of antichrist. The word "antichrist" only appears in John's epistles. Let's see what John has to say.

1 John 2:18-19

Per John's antichrist:

- many had already come
- they went out from them and were not of them

1 John 2:22

John's antichrist is:

- Anyone "who denies that Jesus is the Christ"
- Anyone "who denies the Father and the Son"

1 John 4:1-3

John's antichrist was:

- "Every spirit that does not confess Jesus"
- a spirit of antichrist
- already in the world at that time

2 John 7

John's antichrist is:

- "Those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh."

John's antichrist doctrine is a theological concept related to an apostasy that was forming in his day. John did not have one particular individual in mind but rather many individuals who taught that Jesus Christ in not who the Bible says He is.

As the New Testament makes clear, apostasy was rampant almost from the church's inception. Paul had to counter a "different gospel" that was "contrary to what he had preached."

Gal. 1:6

He had to battle "false brethren."

Gal. 2:4-5

He warned the Ephesian church leadership that "men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them."

Acts 20:28-30

The list goes on and on about apostasy in the church. So, antichrist is simply any belief system that disputes the fundamental teachings of Christianity, beginning with the person of Christ. These antichrists are "religious" figures. The antichrist, contrary to much present-day speculation, is not a political figure, no matter how anti- (against) Christ he might be. Antichrist is and was the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that a time of great apostasy would come, when **'many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many'** (Matt. 24:10-11).

In addition, you will not find the word antichrist in the book of Revelation. This is significant since the John who defines antichrist for us in his first two letters is the same John who penned the book of Revelation.

Second, according to the Bible, antichrist is not a single individual. Once again let's look at 1 John 2:18:

1 John 2:18

Lastly, John makes it clear that this is the last hour for those who first read his letters, as we saw in 1 John 2:18. John is not describing a period of time thousands of years in the future where 'the antichrist' will come. It already was the last hour for his contemporaries. Keep in mind that Jesus had told his disciples years before, John among them, that their generation would see the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem.

John, writing close to the time when this prophecy was to be fulfilled, described its fulfillment in the rise of "many antichrists," that is many who preach and teach a false religious system, the denial that Jesus had come in the flesh. Remember, they had heard that "the spirit of the antichrist" was coming. Antichrist had arrived.