

161 Comfort one another

The Christians in Thessalonica were doing well, in a tough place and in tough times, so Paul's first letter to them, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is filled with thankfulness and encouragement for them.

But in the midst of all the good that was going on, two of their worries had come to Paul's attention, both concerning the promised "coming of the Lord". First, they were concerned about those of their number who had died, or were yet to die, before Jesus' coming - would these Christian saints somehow "lose out"? And second, just when would this coming occur? So, they, and hence also we today, are given the facts about these concerns - enough facts, but no more than we need to be going on with.

In the well-known passage of I Thessalonians 4.13-18, (and I Corinthians 15.51-52), the Holy Spirit tells us of what is to be the next "coming of the Lord". This will be for the members of His Church only, the "bride of Christ", and has become known as the "rapture", from the Latin word "rapio", "I seize", as this occasion is about the seizing-away of the true Church from the "wrath to come" (eg., Romans 5.9 / Ephesians 2.1-10 / I Thessalonians 1.10, 5.9). (We need to remember that this "rapture-coming" is an entirely different occasion from the Lord's later, victorious return in triumph and glory at the end of the 7-year "Great Tribulation").

The Holy Spirit refers to the Christians who have died in the faith of Christ as those "who sleep in Jesus" (4.14), that is, spiritually, and also as "the dead in Christ" (4.16), that is, physically. These two descriptions refer to the same people. It means that right now they are as spiritually alive as they have ever been, but for the time being they remain apart from their former physical bodies.

All this will change when the Lord returns for His Church! He will bring with Him those who spiritually "sleep in Him", who will then be re-united with their now new, changed physical bodies, being "raised incorruptible" (I Corinthians 15.52): quite a sight! The rapture will then be completed with the still-alive-on-earth Christians being "caught up together" with our just-raised predecessors "in the clouds", to meet with the Lord in the air (4.17); "so shall we ever be with the Lord" (v.17). No wonder that through Paul the Holy Spirit commands us to comfort one another with these words! (4.18).

Then the second concern of the Thessalonian Christians is addressed, regarding the timing of "the day of the Lord" (5.1-11), a phrase that refers to a period of

time rather than to a single day. We are told that this period will arrive "as a thief in the night" (v 2), thus starting most likely with the rapture, and then involving sudden destruction and no escape for those left behind (v 3). It continues with God's judgement on the Christ-rejecting Jews and Gentiles. We are given further details of this period of great trouble and judgement in Matthew 24 and Gospel parallels, II Thessalonians, II Timothy, II Peter, and Revelation.

In view of these future events the Holy Spirit reminds us that Christ's people are not in darkness; we are children of light, and of the day (5.4-5) - so we can see! We can SEE that what is happening all around us - the chaos, the wickedness, the foreboding - are God's clear words of warning, mercy and promise coming to fulfilment before our very eyes.

"Therefore"! (5.6) - no sleeping; much watching with "sobriety", plus the deliberate use of the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the "hope of salvation" (v.8). We are not appointed to God's righteous wrath that is coming on those who reject His Son, but to salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, so that we can live together with Him (vv 9-10). As we see and understand, we are told once again - "comfort yourselves together, and edify one another" (v. 11).

All this means that in Christ, praise God, all is well, and all shall be well. For those outside, in such need and such danger, there is still time. By God's mercy, the path into eternal safety remains so simple - "Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2.21 / Romans 10.13).

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