

# Living . . .In Light of His Coming

## Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

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Back in the early '40's, when I was about eight or nine years old, I was a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Bristol, Pennsylvania. The church was pastored by a young seminarian named Lehman Strauss, who later went on to become a widely known author, especially with regard to Biblical prophecy. Thus as a young boy I sat under the ministry of this man as he preached on the second coming of Christ, becoming familiar at an early age with such terms as rapture, tribulation, antichrist, millennium, etc. Around that time there was a popular book circulating. "In the Twinkling of an Eye," which my mother read to me. This book told the story of a family who had missed the rapture and had to live through the horrors of the tribulation. Between the preaching of Pastor Strauss and my mother's readings from this and other books, I grew up expecting Jesus to return at any moment.

In the years that followed I have felt, in turn, anxiety and fear, hope and excitement, whenever I contemplate the events of the end times. When I gave way to my favorite sin, I feared that Christ would return at any moment. I worried that he would return before I married. Then, after I married, I wondered if it was right to have children since Jesus could return any time. I questioned making any preparations for the future, thinking I should sell everything I had and give to the poor. Through the 45 intervening years I have always lived with the expectation that Christ could return at any moment. Needless to say, I have suffered many disappointments.

Regardless of how we feel about Christ's second coming, however, the Scriptures are very clear: God has a plan. The first part of his plan is concerned with redemption. He is presently calling out a people from every age and nation for his glory. But the second part of the plan of God, which is called "the day of the Lord," concerns God's judgment. The Scriptures, Old and New Testament alike, speak of this day. Obadiah has written, "For the day of the Lord draws near on all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you." The prophets Jeremiah, Daniel, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Ezekiel, and Malachi all have spoken of the "day of the Lord." Jesus spoke of that day. Matthew records his words: "The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (24:31). The apostles made reference to that day. Paul wrote: "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 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 shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51, 52). Peter said: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief . . . (2 Peter 3:10). John wrote: "And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 John 2:28).

We are living in the age of the Spirit, an age which will last until Christ returns again for his own. Until that moment arrives how should we be living in light of his coming? Let us look for answers to this question as we begin a series in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.

In 51 and 52 A.D., Paul, Silas and Timothy were ministering in what we now call the second missionary journey (recorded in chapters 16 through 18 of the book of Acts). Their journey began in the city of Philippi, in Macedonia, located in northern Greece, the heart of what was once the kingdom of Alexander the Great. There the missionary team ended up in prison for their good works among the people, but escaped captivity when an earthquake struck. Leaving Philippi, Paul and his friends traveled southeast about 140 miles to Thessalonica, a port city located on an ancient highway in an area extending from Rome through the port to points east, called the "lap of the Roman Empire." Thessalonica was a trading city, of which it was said, "As long as nature did not change (a reference to earthquake activity in that area), Thessalonica would remain wealthy and prosperous."

Let us read the opening verses of Acts 17, which will set the scene for our study in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians:

**Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.**

**But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.**

At this point, as Paul and Silas headed for Berea, Timothy may have still been in Philippi. Then, leaving Silas, Paul headed south again for Athens, and finally to Corinth, where he was joined by Timothy and Silas, and all three of them remained there for 18 months. While they were in Corinth, Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians. In his first letter he set out the motives which lay behind his ministry; he shed light on the second coming of Christ; and he encouraged their spiritual walk. In his second, written a few months later, he expressed his delight at their spiritual growth; sought to clear up their misunderstanding of the "day of the Lord"; and admonished those who refused to work because they thought Christ's return was imminent.

The key verses behind this second letter to the Thessalonians are perhaps verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2:

**Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.**

God the Father promised long ago through the prophets that he would send his Son the Messiah to this earth to become the "Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world." His Son would suffer and die, be buried and then rise from the dead. Jesus Christ is now sitting in power and glory at the right hand of God, awaiting word of the time of his second coming to earth to judge the world. All the promises concerning his first coming were fulfilled to the letter, and we may be assured that the word of the prophets and the apostles as to his second coming will also be fulfilled to the letter.

As I was studying this epistle, I asked myself what value this book has for me in my life. There are four areas where I find it is of particular help to me. I trust you will also find it helpful in your walk of faith. First, in this book we will gain a deeper love and trust in our glorious heavenly Father. History is his story. In spite of the apparent chaos we see on all sides, everything that happens is within his sovereign control. Despite what Paul describes as the "mystery of lawlessness" which is now at work, God is working out his plan of redemption. Secondly, in this book we will gain a deeper love for and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. We are reminded that he came to earth to provide the way of salvation, that he will come again for his own, and that he will judge the wicked. Thirdly, we will gain a deeper awareness and insight into world events. We are reminded by the prophets, by the Lord and the apostles of what must occur on the world scene before the final and great day of the Lord will come. Fourthly, we will be encouraged on how we should be living in light of Christ's second coming. We should be growing in our faith, love, and courage, living Christlike lives, filled with faith in our blessed hope; we should be knowledgeable in the Scriptures, and faithful in our work.

In my study of this letter I have been humbled and convicted in my spirit that I had fallen away from believing that Jesus is coming again. But I have also been encouraged and instructed. I hope you too will be similarly touched as we study together this book of second Thessalonians.

The first two verses form Paul's introduction.

**Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

What a team Paul, Silas and Timothy! Paul, the converted Jew, called by God on the Damascus road some twenty years earlier to become, as our Lord said, "A chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16). Then there was Silas, a Hellenistic Jew, a prominent member of the Council of Jerusalem. Silas had the gift of prophecy, and was asked by the Council to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch in order to encourage the growing church there. After Paul and Barnabas had a falling-out over Mark, Barnabas' nephew, Paul asked Silas to accompany him on his second missionary journey. Then there was Timothy, whom Paul would later call his "beloved son" His father was a Greek, and his mother and grandmother were God-fearing Jews. They, together with Timothy, may have become Christians during Paul's first visit to Lystra (Acts 14:6, II Timothy 1:2, 5). Spiritually blessed with the gifts of encouragement and teaching, Timothy was asked by the apostle to join the teams for the upcoming missionary journey.

So while he is ministering in pagan Corinth, a city of merchants, priests, rabbis, slaves, prostitutes, seamen and noblemen and women, Paul begins his second letter to the Thessalonians. He tells them that they are the recipients of God's call. Acts 17:4 identifies who these people are: "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women." They were called by the Father out of the kingdom of darkness and placed into the Kingdom of his Son. The apostle speaks of them in I Thessalonians 1:9: ". . . you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." Spiritually speaking, these Christians were not really "in" the city of Thessalonica, they were actually "in" God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These "called-out ones" were eternally in God the Father as revealed in his Son. He had called them, saved them and gifted them with his Holy Spirit.

Further, they were the recipients of God's grace. Paul reminds them that his own salvation, together with theirs, was a direct result of that grace. Grace is God's divine favor expressed toward men and women who were living in rebellion against him and who were formerly under his wrath. Scripture says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Yet although we were "dead in our trespasses and sins," held captive by the "prince of the power of the air, filled with lust of every kind," God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . . through faith . . . and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Also, the Thessalonians were the recipients of God's peace. They had come by faith to Jesus Christ, and part of God's favor to them was his peace. As Paul would write later in Romans, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now the apostle turns his attention from the gifts God had bestowed upon the Thessalonians to share with them his thankfulness to God for their new lifestyle in Christ. How should Christians be living in light of Christ's coming?

1. Our faith in God should be increasing 1:3, 4

**We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows even greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God**

**for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.**

Paul was feeling the pain of a father who had been torn away from his spiritual children, leaving him no opportunity to return and encourage them in their walk of faith. The Thessalonians were being persecuted by the Jews, and as young believers they were being tempted to slip back into Judaism or even paganism. Perhaps the apostle was thinking of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed: "And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away" (Matt. 13:20, 21).

Earlier, Timothy had to return to Thessalonica and encourage their faith. In Paul's first letter to them we have several examples of his concern for them. Here are three illustrations of his concern: I Thess 3:2: "We sent Timothy' our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith"; 3:5: "For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain"; 3:10: "We night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith." Paul's prayers for the faith of the Thessalonians had been answered, as we see here in verse 3 of his second letter, where he says, ". . . your faith is greatly enlarged . . ." Like a healthy plant, their faith had grown and prospered.

Faith in this context means a confidence in the reality of a personal God who is revealed in his Son Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians had received the gift of faith from God (Eph. 2:8). Faith, according to Hebrews, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was simply their reliance upon a God who revealed himself and whom they knew to be trustworthy. Such reliance enabled them to treat the future as present, the invisible as visible.

Faith does not end at the moment of salvation, but continues to grow as one begins to trust God for the joys and temptations of daily living. Jesus demonstrated his faith by trusting in his Father for every word, action and direction of his life. His will, he said, was to do the will of his Father in heaven. He was, as Hebrews says, "the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith." As a result of the terrible trials Paul had suffered, he promised in his letter to the Corinthians to "no longer trust in himself but in God who raises the dead."

Faith not only saves us, but gives us confidence in God for all that life throws our way. "Without faith," Hebrews says, "it is impossible to please God." So the believer not only trusts God for his salvation, and leans upon God's power to cope with present realities, his heart is also filled with confidence that Jesus is coming again. According to Paul, that is the kind of faith the Thessalonians were exhibiting: "your faith is greatly enlarged," he said of them.

As you know, Thelma Dodd, one of our church organists, entered the presence of the Lord a few weeks ago. For many years I have watched Thelma accompany us here on Sunday mornings. When I visited her in the hospital I found her in a coma. I talked with her daughter Pam, who told me of her mother's preparations for her death. She said that a couple of weeks earlier they went to a garage sale together, but when she asked Thelma whether she had found anything she would like to buy, she replied, "Yes, I have, but I'm not going to buy it because I will soon be going home to be with the Lord and I don't need anything." Following her death, Pam found her mother's house perfectly in order. Her desk had been cleaned, all her bills paid, and her will was lying there, ready to be opened by her children. Thelma's faith had grown to such an extent that she fully believed the apostle Paul's words, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." That is the kind of faith the apostle is thankful for in the Thessalonians.

Paul's heart was filled with thankfulness to God also because their love for one another had grown ever greater. What a model they are for us as we await our Lord's second coming.

2. Our love toward one another should be growing 1:3b

**. . . and the love of each one of you toward one another**

**grows ever greater.**

Paul talks about their love in his first letter: ". . . and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you; so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (I Thess. 3:12, 13). Also chapter 4, verses 9, 10: "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for any one to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more."

Here Paul is talking of "agape" love, self-sacrificial love, love that always recognizes another's worth, and holds him in high esteem. This is the kind of love that is filled with good will in thought and deed. "agape;" love, whether directed toward fellow-believers or non-believers, is not motivated by emotion. It does not always run with our natural inclinations, nor is it always directed toward those who are easy to love. Rather, it is to be expressed by the power of God within us towards all men for their good.

This is the kind of love Jesus was talking about when he said, in reply to the lawyer (Matt. 22): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this hath no man, that one lays down his life for his friends." Paul taught the Romans: "Owe nothing to anyone except love." Peter taught the Christians in Turkey: "Fervently love one another from the heart, for love covers a multitude of sins." The apostle John wrote: "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" "Agape" love - this is the kind of love Paul is speaking of.

This is my sixteenth year at Peninsula Bible Church, and I must tell you that through the years I have been very impressed by your love and generosity for each other and for strangers. Many times at our staff and elders' meetings we have spoken of you and our hearts have welled up with love, with tender affection for you. We have watched you feed the poor, take in the homeless, care for the unwed mothers, love our missionaries, take in and care for refugees for Poland and Vietnam, and minister to prisoners both in this country and overseas; you have reached out to the widows and the divorced; your love for the handicapped is well known; you have loved the spiritually bankrupt, the blind, the downtrodden. Together with Paul, we hope when Jesus comes again he may find all of us growing in this kind of love towards one another, for his honor and our joy.

How should we be living in light of his coming? Our faith toward God should be increasing; our love toward one another should be growing; and

3. Our courage toward our enemies should be persisting 1:4

**Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.**

Paul and his fellow-workers were proud of the Thessalonians' determination to bear up courageously, as well as maintain their trust in their God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of their persecutions and afflictions.

The Jews were jealous of Paul's message, for many Jews and God-fearing Gentile men and women were placing their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. When Paul, Silas and Timothy left Thessalonica, the other Christians had to remain on and face the pressure of the Jewish establishment who charged them with political crimes (because they held Jesus to be King), and with blasphemy (because they called Jesus the Messiah). Paul had earlier written to the Thessalonian Gentiles who had come to faith: ". . . for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord

Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved . . . " (1 Thess. 2).

The religious, civil and social pressure was unrelenting: Jews against new Jewish Christians, Gentile idol worshipers against new converts to a "new" God, husbands and wives against their Christian mates. How Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount would have applied to them: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (5:10-12). The Thessalonians were courageously enduring in the face of their enemies. They were, in Paul's words, ". . . affliction in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Cor. 4:8-10). Theirs was not a fatalistic, passive endurance, but an endurance found in hearts that were filled with the blessed hope of the coming of Christ in power, glory and justice.

We recently received a letter from Don and Marie Burgess, our missionaries in Arizona, telling the story of a local native Christian brother who was persisting under persecution. Ramon, a teacher, has been helping Don translate a summary of the Old Testament into his own language. He has been under attack from his own people because of his testimony. A fellow teacher, a confessed communist, has publicly accused Ramon of saying that Jesus is the only way, and also that he spends too much time with the children. Ramon had to defend himself in court, and then find work in another school. Last year a jealous neighbor accused him of stealing cattle some 22 years ago! Ramon was put in jail, but the lawyer who prosecuted him was transferred to another town and replaced by a Christian lawyer who had the judge release him. Now Ramon carries a letter from the judge declaring his innocence of any such charge.

The Burgess letter continues, "When Ramon was telling us about this, his face almost glowed with peace. He said he had no feelings of animosity toward the other party. His concern was that people in the community see Christ at work in him. He had stopped working on the Old Testament summary but he told us he has decided it was the devil who stopped him from completing the work and now he has started again. In September, Ramon will retire from teaching. He hopes to spend time going to various ranches, telling people about the Lord. So don't stop praying!" There is a man who knows that Jesus Christ is coming again.

God's plan of redemption is still in operation throughout the world. You and I are part of that plan as we strive by the power of the Holy Spirit within us to live Christlike lives in a crooked and perverse generation. At this moment, Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God, waiting for word from his Father to return again to earth and carry out the second part of God's plan, his coming for his own and his judgment on sinful mankind, as well as set up his Kingdom on earth. How should be we living until that day? Our faith toward God should be increasing; our love toward one another should be growing; and our courage toward our enemies should be persisting.

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