

Spirit, Soul, and Body Kept At Parousia

“May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). With this text I began this long series relating to the “parousia,” the “coming / presence of the Lord” in Freedom’s Ring, No. 30. Now we look into Paul’s first letter from which this quotation is taken. It was written before Luke wrote Acts. It may add some insight as to why Bible history ended so abruptly.

Paul’s evangelism in Thessalonica was cut short because of opposition. After time in Beroea and Athens, he came to Corinth where news came to him by Timothy about the welfare of that new community of believers. It was then that Paul wrote his epistle of commendation and encouragement to them.

One can hardly read Paul’s letter without being impressed with the emphasis that he had placed in his short stay there on the coming of the Lord. He wrote, “. . . 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, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1:9-10). Paul had forewarned them of the coming wrath at the “parousia” which had been foretold by Malachi, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter. Jesus would deliver them from it at his coming. They were awaiting expectantly for his return from heaven.

How were those disciples to wait? In the grave or in hades for centuries? That would have offered no comfort to them. They were expecting the soon coming of Jesus in their lifetime -- while still in their fleshly bodies. It is true that there was some lack of understanding by some of them about the event. Paul did not say they erred in thinking Jesus was to return nor in expecting it in their day, for Paul himself had taught them that. In the meantime, some of them had already died. It is implied that there was anxiety that those who had died would miss that glorious experience.

Paul told them they were imitators of the churches in Judea who suffered persecution from the Jews, “But God’s wrath has come upon them at last!” (2:16). Because of their fidelity, the disciples would be vindicated even though the avenger was at the door at that time, so that Paul could say, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” (2:19). It was in this immediate setting that Paul could pronounce his benediction, “May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice that their bodies were to be “kept” in soundness rather than “restored” or “raised” to it.

The apostle was eager that they stand without blame in the scrutiny of Jesus “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints / holy ones” (3:13). The term “holy” used here may refer to persons or angels. Evidently, this refers to his coming with his holy angels as Jesus taught, “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in

his kingdom” (Matt. 16:27f; see Matt. 25:1; Mark 8:38; 2 Thes. 1:7). This approaching event was to be for judgment and destruction of their disobedient nation and for vindication and deliverance of the faithful whose citizenship was in the spiritual kingdom..

Jesus assured the high priest, Caiaphas, “But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64). Did Caiaphas live to see Jesus’ second coming? Yes, or Jesus deceived him. He lived to “see” it in the literal unfolding of prophesied events even though Jesus did not return in physical body. We showed sufficient evidence in FR 84 that Jesus did not return literally on the clouds, but his Presence (parousia) was perceived through the happenings. That thought must be carried into the next much-discussed reference (1 Thes. 4:13-17).

It is evident in this reference that the disciples thought all of them would live to the time of Jesus’ return. Some had died. It was feared that those would miss the expected blessing. Paul told them not to grieve for their dead as for those who have no hope. He assured, “..through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Jesus, as high priest, entered into heaven opening the way for man by his offering. At his return, that would become effective as the dead would be given immortality and be received into the eternal state of the redeemed. What of those still living? “Then WE who are alive” -- Paul includes himself in this group expecting it in his lifetime. “Then” may mean “at that time” or “next in order.” It is not necessary to infer that all that transpired was instantaneous. Since it is evident that those living then were not all literally caught up bodily at the “parousia,” we must look for other than the popularly expounded literal meaning. It is not incumbent upon us to explain every detail of fulfillment in order to accept that what was foretold did happen. The preponderance of evidence indicates that the coming of the Lord was to be in their lifetime.

Those still living at the advent died at different times. So will we. We hear the symbolic trumpet call individually. When we die, we are given an incorruptible, immortal nature and are received (caught up, “raptured”) to be together with those who have gone before. Previous lessons have dealt with our transformation from the physical to the spiritual, from the mortal to the immortal at the point of physical death. Fresh insights may come to view if we can think outside of literal parameters. I doubt if any of you actually look forward to floating in the cold and turbulent clouds eternally up in the air as the literal wording of the text indicates. Whether or not we understand the details of Paul’s

message is of no vital importance. The crowning point is: “And so we shall always be with the Lord.”

When the events connected with the “parousia” began to transpire, the city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Roman Army under the general, Cestius Gallus. A sustained thrust would have overcome the city, according to Josephus, but for some reason he withdrew the army temporarily. The disciples, remembering the warnings and instructions of Jesus, fled the city. Jesus had instructed, “So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, etc. . .” (Matt. 24:15-22; compare Luke 21:20-24). Thus they would escape the great tribulation that Jesus said was about to come upon the city.

As inspired history ended abruptly about this time, we depend upon Josephus to inform us of this fulfillment. Such a mass deliverance from the great tribulation the doomed city was soon to undergo might well be described in imagery as God snatching them up out of calamity and destruction into safety under his protection. These two possibilities of interpretation are not proposed as dogmatic explanations of “the rapture,” but they are offered to suggest that other than the traditional idea of being “snatched up” literally might be considered. Such a logical explanation would deflate the colossal balloons of fantasy being inflated with such excited imagination in this generation. Such a kill-joy explanation is not likely to prevail at this time -- even though it is in harmony with Jesus’ own words on the Mount of Olives.

In the first part of Chapter 5, Paul cautions that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” He then assured, “But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief.” If the “day of the Lord” was to be hundreds or thousands of years in the future, Paul’s words would have been meaningless, if not outright deception. It was “the Day drawing near!” (Heb. 10:25). They were to be ready for it. Paul’s confidence allowed him to end his epistle with this benediction which we repeat: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:23).

(Cecil Hook, August 2001) []