

Fifth Summary on the New Testament 1st and 2nd Thessalonians

1st and 2nd Thessalonians has St. Paul presenting "eschatology" which is the fancy theological word for the study of the end times or the study of the last days. What is perhaps the single most clear teaching on the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is recorded in 1st Thessalonians 4. We need to keep in mind the contextual circumstances of this text. Paul does not give an exhaustive presentation on the Last Day, but presents an ASPECT of it by addressing the CONCERN that the Christian Thessalonians have. The Thessalonians were worried about, "What happens to Christians who die before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ?" St. Paul was great in addressing this question. In 1st Thessalonians 4 he teaches at verse 14 that God will bring with Him those who have "fallen asleep" (Paul's reference to physical death). This means that Christ brings with Him the spirits of those Christians who had died. Then at the end of verse 16, the Scriptures say that "the dead in Christ will rise first." That is St. Paul is describing a rejoining, a reunification of deceased believer's living spirits and their raised bodies from the grave. Think back to Luke 23 where Christ is being crucified. One of the robbers defended Jesus and then asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus entered into heaven. To which Christ said to the robber: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (23:43) The Bible teaches that when the believer dies, their spirit immediately goes to be with God. Being in the presence of God means that they are in an "intermediate state" that is no longer bound to time and space (time and space being something Einstein demonstrated as inextricable; still there is activity and movement in heaven and these concepts reveal at least a type of dimension in heaven, a heavenly time and space consisting of an eternal quality). Being in the presence of God (or being in heaven) means that we are in a state of perfect peace and joy, but also full awareness, full individual identity, and our very spirits -- the people we really are inside -- in perfect communion with the One True God of Love. Then, Christ brings us with Him during His second coming, our bodies are raised and according to 1st Corinthians 15 they are also glorified and the rejoining/reunification of spirit and body is said to have taken place. // The ramifications are immense: 1) everything you do, and everything you are, has eternal results; 2) life is not "just" this life on this side of heaven; 3) your physical body is absolutely precious to God; and 4) our lives are not measured merely by years (50, 70 or 80), but by eternity! But St. Paul was also dealing with a PROBLEM in Thessalonica and not just the CONCERN mentioned above. The PROBLEM was that while the early Christians believed that Jesus' Second Coming was imminent (that which would occur at any moment), some were not reacting well to this expectation. That is, some were "checking out" of regular living. Instead of being faithful to the responsibilities of their God-given vocations, they were forsaking their callings and living in an irresponsible manner. Picture the person who expects Jesus to return in 2012 and quits their job, sells everything, moves to a mountainous area, fills silos with food and water and develops an armory for the final battle between good and evil. I know that this is an extreme picture, but it makes us aware of the mentality that may indeed lead someone to "check out" of their God-given vocations. Instead, St. Paul admonishes them, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." (1 Thess. 4:7) Here, you get the picture of someone who says, "I'll sell everything and just have a big party!" // Now having said all of that, it is important to understand that we should have a sense of the imminent nature of Christ's Second Coming! Luther said that the Christian ought to live as if Christ died yesterday, rose today and is coming tomorrow.

However, this does not mean that we "check out," but that we make the most of each day to love and serve our neighbors according to our God-given gifts and stations in life. It is absolutely true that Christ could come today and even if He doesn't come today, then the other truth still holds: "we are only a heart-beat from heaven!" That is, we are to be ready; we are to be watchful and prepared every day; but we are not prepared through radical physical preparations, but through faith in Christ (which is to truly love God) and through loving and serving our neighbor. In teaching about the second coming of Christ, however, St. Paul writes this at 1st Thessalonians 4:17: "Then we who are alive, who are left, will 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." Where the ESV translation says, "caught up," we have the basis for another English translation, namely, "rapture." The idea is that at the Second Coming of Christ, believers will be caught up, snatched up or raptured to Christ. // It is essential to know that there are two distinct understandings of what this word MEANS within the Christian Church. One view (which is held by the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church and the Lutheran Church and others) is that "rapture" simply describes what will happen to Christians on the Last Day of all time. That is, the rapture is one event on the Last Day that will be joined to other events like the universal resurrection of all the dead; and the universal judgment of all people. It might be said that the "rapture" is the special handling of believers to the right hand of Christ in preparation for the great judgment that will follow (Matthew 25). This is the ancient and traditional understanding of "rapture." // The other understanding is held by many modern-day American Evangelicals (though not all), many Baptists, and many in the non-denominational movement in the U.S. It is the teaching that was represented in the best selling book in the 1970's in the U.S. entitled "The Late Great Planet Earth" (which sold about 30 million copies); and the "Left Behind" series of novels (released between 1995-2007) that sold over 70 million copies. This teaching of the "rapture" is significantly different. This version of the "rapture" presents the Second Coming of Jesus Christ as occurring in two stages. The first stage is the rapture or "the blessed hope" and the second stage is the "glorious appearing." The first stage of the Second Coming will be -- from the perspective of unbelievers -- an "invisible" coming of Christ. When this occurs, all Christians will be raptured from earth to heaven. All Christians will be removed from planet earth and only unbelievers will be left behind. Then, not long after, there will commence a seven-year "tribulation" that will esp. be marked by the evil Antichrist who will persecute anyone who comes to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This tribulation will be marked by terrible suffering and the literalistic fulfillment of the 21 judgments described in the book of Revelation. After the seven-year tribulation, the second stage of the Second Coming will take place. This time Jesus will come to bind the devil and Christ will establish a 1000-year (millennial) Kingdom of God on earth. // Needless to say, the two views are quite distinct to say the least. My PhD thesis was dedicated to understanding the history of this view, the biblical basis (exegesis) for this view, the method of interpretation for this view (hermeneutics), the reason for the popularity in the U.S. for this view, the effect on U.S. politics of this view; and the effect on Christian living (sanctification) of this view. One of my main tasks was to examine the many claims that this view which was made popular by John Nelson Darby in the early 19th century, was actually the view of the early church. I examined the claims and found that in fact, there is no early origin for this version of the rapture. The main question, however, is whether the view is biblical. // As this is a survey course, my overview (on this subject)

will end here. It is important, however, that you are made aware of the two perspectives within Christianity on this view (there are of course many other implications). But know that Christians essentially represent one of the two positions. I would not be surprised that our class represents a combination of the two views. What is important, however, is that we avoid like the plague the following ideas: 1) that God gives us the teaching on the End Times in the New Testament in order to frighten us or to try to "make" people come to faith; 2) that anyone can actually know when the end will come. First of all, the idea that mounting anxiety and fear in order to "convince" someone to believe in Jesus is atrocious and horrendous! This view treats "Christianity" as an "insurance" policy. People come to believe "just in case," or "to save their tails," or to simply "avoid" punishment. Such motivation knows nothing of the reasons for faith in the Savior. Consider how Jesus calls people to Himself: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) We come to faith ultimately drawn to our God of love and mercy; to our God of grace; the God who forgives and the God who gives eternal life. We come not because we are running from hell, but because we are running to love. That is, the way in which we present the teaching of the End Times and God's purpose for it is vital. Someone will ask of course, "Then what's the point of making us aware of these things?" The descriptors of hell and judgment are given especially to BELIEVERS [they also serve unbelievers and indeed should rouse fear, but this in and of itself will not engender faith]. For Christians who have salvation, however, will be made mindful that they must still battle against their own sinful nature (their "flesh" as it is called, that is the spiritual part of us that resists God and resists faith). These teachings are put there to remind us of what continually stands against us; the devil's goal to take us from God. These teachings remind us from that which we are saved from. They keep us humble, they keep us diligent and keep us guarding the salvation we have received. We remain steadfast, immovable and alert; we remain watchful, because our salvation connected to the wonderful promises contained in it is worthy of our constant care/our daily battle against sin, the world and the evil one. The teaching about the "other side" is helpful for us to make us watchful and to do what St. Paul describes in a book we are coming to: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12b-13) In Christ, Dr. Espinosa