

PAUL ... who believed in the return of his Lord
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(I THESSALONIANS 1-5)

It has been suggested that Paul wrote the second Epistle to the Thessalonians in order to correct mistakes made in his first Epistle. Some theologians suggest that Paul was deceived into thinking that the return of Christ was imminent ; that eventually he recognized the absurdity of this belief, and endeavored to correct the false impression made by his earlier writings. It is very difficult to accept this suggestion, for Paul repeats in his second epistle the statements already made. Although he does not again deal at length with the doctrines of the return of Christ, we are justified in assuming that since the Thessalonians were already acquainted with the Pauline message, there was no need to repeat what they already knew. Paul's first letter to the saints at Thessalonica included five short chapters, and it is significant that each one closed with a reference to the great Hope.

Conversion and His Coming

" . . . ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God ; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come " (I :9, 10). Perhaps this was the most fitting way in which the apostle could begin his letter. The new message revealed the folly of idolatry, and outlined the matchless wonder of the grace of God in Christ. Paul said, "And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." The promise of the coming of Christ was a most important part of the Gospel message. This was the positive affirmation made by every New Testament preacher, and every convert intelligently expected Christ's return. Modern preaching seems to fall short of the ancient standard.

Continuance and His Coming

" . . . for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us ... but ye brethren ... endeavored the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. . . . For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (2: 14-19). Paul did not hesitate to express his deep appreciation of the faithful continuance of his converts. Persecution had not daunted them, for with steadfastness of purpose they were determined to remain loyal. The fact that Christ would return provided that extra incentive to be true in spite of persecution. The great Hope provided constant strength.

Consecration and His Coming

" And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you. To the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (3: 12, 13). Paul agreed with John who said, "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (I John

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3: 3). The teaching concerning the return of Christ was the
heart of the New Testament message, and demanded the
purity of the people who proclaimed it. The continuous
expectation of Christ's return deepened personal desires for
holiness.

Comfort and His Coming

" But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, con-
cerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as
others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died
and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will
God bring with him.... For the Lord himself shall descend
from heaven ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then
we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together
with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and
so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one
another with these words " (4: 13-18). The return of Christ
would mean glad reunion with loved ones who had already
fallen asleep. This message produced unending comfort in
the hearts of the saints. Finally, Paul ended his letter with
another reference to the great expectation, " And the very
God of peace sanctify you wholly ... unto the coming of our
Lord Jesus Christ" (5: 23). The return of the Saviour was
the thrilling hope of the Church-it still is, for all who are
not ashamed to meet Him.

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