

The Lord's Return?

“But concerning the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that aught be written unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. When they are saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in no wise escape” (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

In three verses the apostle continues his discussion of what he had written about to them in the concluding verses of chapter 4: the resurrection of the believers who had died before the Lord's coming. Thessalonian Christians had been fully informed that Christ would return again. Their confusion lay primarily in that somehow they had missed the point that when He did come there would be a resurrection of the righteous dead. Remember, the coming of Christ in chapter 4 is the same time as the “day of the Lord” of chapter 5.

The “day of the Lord” is a phrase found many times, both in the Old and New Testament. It does not always refer to the same event each time it appears. Notice that the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Joel, and Zechariah all mention the “day of the Lord,” yet a study of each of them will show that different times in Jewish history were in their mind and some of them were not related to others. Briefly stated, the phrase “day of the Lord” referred to a judgment God brought on His people: frequently brought on them by foreign armies.

In the New Testament, “the day of the Lord” is also used in this way. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was God's “day of the Lord;” God's visitation of destruction upon His people who had had so many blessings and opportunities, and yet who rejected God's Son (whom the Father sent as the Redeemer of His nation and all men), and clamored for His death (John 18:38-40). Daniel had prophesied of this “day of the Lord” in Daniel 9:27. Jesus Himself spoke frequently of this sad day for His nation in Matt. 24:2-34; Lk. 17:7-27; Mk. 13:2-26.

Because in some passages relating to this destruction of Jerusalem the record says “then shall they see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mk. 13:25f; et al.), and that phrase is also tied in with the second coming of Christ, some make the two refer to one event, yet future: the destruction of Jerusalem at some future time. Still, Isaiah wrote of past events and said that “the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud” (Isa. 19:1), so the expression the Lord “coming in the clouds” can, does, and has referred to events other than Christ's second coming at the end of this age.

The point we make is this: yes, Jesus was said to come in the clouds when Jerusalem was destroyed, as well as that He will come with the clouds when the world is destroyed at His second coming (1 Thess. 4:16f). Both comings of the day of the Lord was (or will be) a day of judgment and destruction: Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and the world (A.D. ?). But one is past (destruction of Jerusalem) and one is future (destruction of our world).

Jesus dealt extensively with the destruction of Jerusalem, yet He did speak also of His coming, at the end of our age (Jn. 14:11, Mt. 24:37ff.). The apostles spoke primarily of Christ's second coming because most of the churches and brethren would be little affected by the destruction of Jerusalem, while all of them would be affected by the future return of Christ. Yet, that is not to say that likely some reference is made to the destruction of Jerusalem (cp. Heb. 13:14).

The first and second letters to the Thessalonians spoke repeatedly of Christ's second coming. Each of the five chapters of his first letter mention his second coming, and the first two of the three chapters of his second letter to Thessalonica refer to that future event.

Likely ten years after Paul's Thessalonian letters, Peter penned his second letter addressed to "them that have obtained a like precious faith with us in the righteousness of God" (2 Pet. 1:1). By that time mockers were asking, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Pet. 3:3f). Peter assured them Christ would come; warning that the "heavens would pass away with a great noise and the elements would melt with fervent heat, and the earth and the works therein would be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). He then asked, "Seeing that these things are all thus to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness?" (2 Pet. 3:11). We still, confidently, look for the Lord's return 1,900 years after Peter's letter: the same things will occur when He does come, just as Peter predicted nearly 2,000 years ago. And the same need to live holy and godly is an ever present one. Let us not sleep, but watch and be sober!

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