





Chapter 4

The Trumpet Shall Sound

... we believe that Jesus ... through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thess. 4:14)



A venerable opinion exists, stemming largely from the philosophical traditions of Aristotle and Plato, that knowledge is a virtue. Our mind matters. We are meant to explore and discover new boundaries of knowledge. We are meant to know and understand certain things.

The Second Coming and the constellation of events that accompany it, including the resurrection of those who have “fallen asleep,” are truths that Christians are meant to know. “... [W]e do not want you to be uninformed ...”

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Paul told the Thessalonian Christians (1 Thess. 4:13), about certain truths, some of which had been circulating for a while, and some Paul said came to him "... by a word from the Lord ...” (1 Thess. 4:15).

One such truth concerns the faithful dead, currently with Jesus: are they going to miss the greatest spectacle on earth—the Second Coming?

To be honest, this may not sound like a particularly important issue. And the reason lies with the degree to which the Second Coming figures in our thinking. For the early Christians, talk about the Second Coming had a greater sense of anticipation than it seems to have for many Christians today. For all they knew, the interval between the ascension and the Second Coming might only be a generation or two. In which case, they might still be alive when it happened. And if they were to be alive, some interesting questions arise: will the departed in heaven, currently dis-embodied, receive a resurrection body? Will those who are alive at Jesus’ Second Coming be reunited with their departed friends and relatives? And, do we have any real estimate as to *when* the Second Coming might occur?

NEAR, FAR, AT ANY MOMENT?

Interestingly, as Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians, he includes himself among those who may be alive when Jesus returns: "... we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord ...” (1 Thess. 4:15). In later epistles (Philippians, for example), Paul demonstrates

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an expectation that he may die before Jesus returns (Phil. 1:20).

Did Paul change his mind? Some have made much of this possibility, suggesting that Paul's theology, on this issue and many other matters, evolved and changed. There is an "early Paul" and a "late Paul" and the New Testament can't be trusted. The trajectory of insinuation is designed to undermine certainty and confidence. It has been the stuff of debate for over a century. It is a narrative of skepticism about Scripture's trustworthiness.

Whether Paul initially believed that Jesus would return within his lifetime or not seems innocent enough. He was not privy to the date of the Lord's return and it is perfectly understandable that he believed in the possibility that Jesus might return within his lifetime. Revising his view of the possibility of death is very different from the allegations that Paul revised his entire thinking about the Second Coming and matters relating to it.

Early Christians do appear to have believed that the "End" was near-at-hand. For example, when Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple (an event that took place during the sacking of Jerusalem in A.D. 70), the disciples seemed to think that such an event would indeed usher in the "... end of the age" (Matt. 24:3).

SOON OR RIGHT NOW?

Believing that Jesus is going to return "soon" and believing that it can happen "at any moment" are two very different

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ideas. Does the New Testament teach that Jesus can return in the next five seconds?

The question is important. If, for example, the New Testament teaches that an event (or a series of events) must occur *before* Jesus returns, then clearly, Jesus *cannot* be said to return *at any moment*. What events might these be? Some examples would be the preaching of the gospel in all the world (Matt. 24:14), and the appearance of the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:3–10). We need not explore what either of these mean just now. That such markers exist at all indicates that Jesus’ return cannot be in the next five seconds. If these passages predict an event that has not yet occurred (and this is an important caveat) *and* that the event must occur *before* Jesus’ return, then the “any moment” view of Jesus’ Second Coming is misguided.

The “any moment” view of the Second Coming was bolstered by the belief that the Second Coming involves a two-fold “coming” of Christ at the end of age. The first aspect of this coming may occur at any moment, without warning; the second aspect after a more predictable trajectory.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, for example, Paul speaks of believers being “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air. In the Latin Vulgate translation, the verb is rendered “*rapiemur*”, or in English, “raptured.” According to this view, Jesus is thought to come *for* the saints “at any moment.” Resurrected saints and saints who are still alive will be “raptured” to the clouds to meet Jesus and thereafter be taken to the seven-year marriage feast of

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the Lamb.¹ During this period, all kinds of events occur including a period of tribulation, culminating in the Great Tribulation. Armies of the beast and the false prophet will gather to do battle against the people of God. Once this feast is over, Jesus will then return *with* the saints and this time descend all the way down to the earth and take His throne in Jerusalem.

Note the following:

- Jesus comes in two stages: *for* the saints and *with* the saints.²
- Stage one will include a rapture and only in the second stage of His coming will Jesus descend to the earth.
- The rapture stage is “at any moment” whereas the second stage will be seven years later.

If Jesus is not expected to return “at any moment,” should we also dismiss the idea that Jesus will return “soon”? No. This would be unsafe and presumptive. All the events that must occur before Jesus returns could occur in a relatively short period, certainly within a generation. The wisest policy therefore is to live with the *possibility* (that’s different from saying *probability*) that Jesus might return before we die. *If* that were to occur, we would not ourselves experience the intermediate state. Our bodies would

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- 1 The seven-year marriage supper of the Lamb is a view derived from a synthesis of the seventieth week of Daniel 9 and Revelation 19:7-9.
 - 2 Note that the coming of Jesus “with” the saints occurs in 1 Thess. 3:13 and 4:14.

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therefore experience a transformation that befits our new residence—a transformed earth.

SECRET COMING?

The belief that Jesus can return “at any moment”, and that we might not know it (unbelievers, for example, would experience the phenomenon that people have “disappeared”), is sometimes referred to as the “*secret rapture*”. According to this view the Second Coming (at least its initial phase) is a secret event. But the New Testament describes the Second Coming as a *noisy* event! Far from being a *secret*, the Second Coming involves the sound of a trumpet.

Trumpets are noisy. In a one-hundred-piece orchestra, with all the instruments playing loudly, the trumpets will always overpower the rest. Conductors, especially of less disciplined orchestras, can often be seen gesturing the brass to lay up a little. I once attended a rehearsal of a major symphony orchestra when the conductor said some rather unpleasant things to the brass section because they were playing too loudly. In their embarrassment, they asked me to leave.

Trumpets sounded at Sinai saying in effect, “the LORD is here” (Exod. 19:13, 16, 19; 20:18).

Trumpets foretold Pentecost, saying in effect, “the LORD is here” (Joel 2:1, 15).

Trumpets accompany the Second Coming, saying in effect, “the LORD is here” (1 Thess. 4:16).

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There is nothing secret about the Second Coming! When it happens, everyone will know it.

And at the Second Coming, a magnificent transformation will take place. The order of things will change. And there will be no advantage at all in being alive when Jesus comes. The first thing Jesus will do is raise the dead. Bodies will rise from the grave ... “the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16).

Paul describes it using two quite different ideas. The dead will come *with* Jesus, and the dead will rise to *meet* Jesus:

... at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.
(1 Thess. 3:13)

... God will bring with [Jesus] those who have fallen asleep.
(1 Thess. 4:14)

... we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.
(1 Thess. 4:17)

How can those who come “*with* Jesus” rise and “*meet*” Him “in the air”? The answer is simple. When the saints die, they leave half of themselves behind! What is in view here is the reunion of the soul and resurrected body.

What a marvelous thing it would be not to experience death—the separation of body and soul! It is an unnatural thing. Had Adam and Eve not sinned, there would have been no experience of human death. But Paul’s point is

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to say that even if we die, this will be of no disadvantage when it comes to the Second Coming. We will rise and meet the Lord in the air and be reunited with the other half of ourselves, our souls. And we, who have always been alive in a soulish way, will be alive *in our bodies* again. The morning of resurrection has arrived.

Right now, these bodies of ours grow frail and decay. They wear out. Bits and pieces no longer work. Some parts have been replaced. And for some, every day in this body is a struggle. Disease has made life in this body a daily torture. In our present status, we “... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). Soon, we will “sleep”, our bodies will be laid to rest to await the resurrection morning.

But all that is going to change.

Death is going to be transformed. Jesus told Jairus that his daughter who had died was sleeping. People laughed. But He raised her from the dead and stopped their laughing (Mark 5:41–42). He will do the same on resurrection morning.

Grief is going to be transformed—in our future existence, there will be no more tears.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

Hope will be transformed. Thessalonian Christians were grieving the loss of loved ones. And Paul’s aim was to

help them see beyond the temporary loss, and a vision of a beautiful future of transformation and reunion. Do not grieve as though there is no hope, Paul says to them, because there is hope, marvelous and certain hope involving resurrection and fullness of life (1 Thess. 4:13).

“The dead have no hope.” That was the world Paul lived in. It is the world we also live in. Great Britain’s most eminent scientist, Stephen Hawking, pronounced in an exclusive interview in *The Guardian* newspaper that belief in a heaven or an afterlife is “a fairy story.”³ But for Paul, who had witnessed Jesus’ own resurrection, nothing could be more certain for a believer than the belief that when we die, our souls are with Jesus in a conscious state and, when Jesus returns, our souls will be clothed with the physicality of a resurrected body.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Jesus is returning personally. As we have seen, there is no advantage to being alive when this happens; the dead will be advantaged and have a place of priority in the proceedings—a front row seat, as it were. “For the Lord *himself*⁴ will descend from heaven ...” (1 Thess. 4:16).

Luke tells us something very similar: “... This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven>. Accessed 06/03/17.

4 The word “himself” is not in the Greek text, but it is the intent of the verse.

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The entire event has drama written all over it. We have already noted the drama associated with trumpet blasts announcing that the Lord is coming. Trumpets get your attention. In addition, there are two more features that we should notice:

- The cry of command (1 Thess. 4:16). Who will give it? The Father? He alone knows when this event is to take place (cf. Matt. 24:36).
- The accompaniment of an archangel (1 Thess. 4:16). Only one archangel is mentioned in the Bible—Michael (Jude 9).⁵ In the opening verse of Daniel 10, Michael is described as a great heavenly power who stands in defense of Messiah and his people (Dan. 10:13, 21). In Revelation, he leads the cosmic forces of heaven in war against the dragon (Satan) and his armies (Rev. 12:7).

Trumpets, a cry of command, an archangel and *Jesus* in His resplendent glory! All this takes place “up there” in the clouds, in the air. Symbolism abounds here, of course. Clouds remind us of the presence of God—the “cloudy pillar” at the time of the Exodus; the clouds at Jesus’ transfiguration (Exod. 19:16; Matt. 17:5). The “air” is Satan’s current domain in Scripture. He is “... the prince and power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). But he is going to be knocked off his pretentious perch. Jesus will reign supreme over the totality of creation.

5 Gabriel is sometimes said to be an archangel, but he is identified in Scripture as an “angel” (Luke 1:19, 26; cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:21).

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And what follows the Second Coming is forever: Christians will be with the Lord “always” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Little wonder, then, that Paul says, “... encourage one another ...” as he concludes his study of the Second Coming (1 Thess. 4:18).

Christians look ahead and have a million reasons to be encouraged.