

OVERHEARD AT STARBUCKS

What About the Second Coming of Christ?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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The Second Coming of Christ. Where's the most logical place to begin with such a complex subject? You guessed it. With Yogi Berra. Here are two Yogi-isms: It gets late early. (This is true. Life goes quickly and the Bible says that history is moving toward God's intended end). And here's the second: It's difficult to make predictions, especially about the future. It is difficult. But that hasn't kept people from trying! All kinds of predictions about the end of the world!

Let's be clear. God is the only one in the cosmos who knows when the world will end. Nowhere in Paul's writings (or any of the Bible) is the time revealed. In Mark 13:32, we read that neither the angels nor even the Son of Man knows...only God. We seem to err on one extreme or the other. Either that's all the church talks about and believes it has insider information on the end times, or out of embarrassment, the church neglects this teaching altogether. We run into problems when we try to get specific about details. One preacher thought he had this all figured out and began his sermon: "Today I am going to explain the unexplainable, define the undefine-able, ponder the imponderable and unscrew the inscrutable!

And speaking of wandering off into speculation, let me remind us that the text of the Scofield Bible is inspired, but the notes at the bottom of the pages are not! That the "Left Behind" book series is fiction and only one interpretation of end times. That there are many theories of sequence and when things will happen. But they are just that--theories. I was once told by a pastor friend that because I didn't agree with his understanding of the Second Coming, he didn't see how I could even be a Christian! Ray Summers once wrote that we can find unity around this much: the Lord will return and raise the dead and gather the living; there will be a final judgment; and Christ will establish his eternal rule. Summers went on to say, once we try to get too specific, confusion reigns! [*The Life Beyond*, p. 96].

The confusion and fear in Paul's day was different than in ours. The first century believers honestly expected Christ to return very soon, before any of them died. And when followers of Jesus began to pass away, the church began to panic. So Paul wrote these words of our text not for idle speculation or argumentation or curiosity. It was pastoral care! Read v. 13. We grieve but we grieve with hope. Why? Verse 14. Our hope is built around the resurrection of Christ. There really is no separating the resurrection and the return of the Lord. They are two parts of the same truth: he is Lord and reigns. Here is an ancient confession of the church that we need to revive: CHRIST HAS DIED! CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN! If we are "in Christ" whether on earth or with the Lord, we are still "in Christ."

Now vv. 15-16 take us to the heart of it all. And we have to remember that the Bible uses symbolic language--images and pictures--to help us with this truth. In Paul's day, a dignitary, a king or even the Emperor, might visit his subjects in a certain city. That appearing was called a *parousia* (appearing or coming), which is one of Paul's favorite words for the coming of the Lord Jesus (used in v. 15). And because the king who was coming was an important figure, the people would go out to meet him and escort him into the city limits. Trumpets would blow fanfare and there would be a military shout to muster the troops at hand to come to attention (v. 16). Paul says believers will be caught up in the air (v. 17), a symbolic way of saying Jesus is Lord of all beneath him. Romans may rule over small patches of real estate, but Jesus is Lord of all.

And so v. 18 says we are to do what with this truth? Scare one another? Argue? No. Comfort and encourage each other. Where is the safest place in the universe? In Christ! In God's loving hands! In the Holy Spirit's hug of grace!

So let me suggest three responses we are to have regarding the return of the Lord. 1) Self-examination. In the little book, Children's Letters To God, one little girl wrote, "Dear God, could you tell me about a week before you come back? I need time to pack." Don't we all! Vance Havner once said, "I'm not on the Time and Place Committee; I'm on the local arrangements committee!" The best preparation is to live prepared, to live for the Lord.

2) Responsible action. I have no patience with a theology of end times that says we may despoil the earth's environment because it will all be blown up anyway. Such escapism is not biblical. Someone once asked Martin Luther what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. He replied, "Plant a tree." Somehow, the Second Coming doesn't make us withdraw from the world. It makes us more engaged. One German pastor shared that during WWII, as the Allied bombs were falling, his German Christian congregation tried to train themselves in "letting go" of things. In the process, they made a strange discovery. He thought it would lead to an unhealthy escapism. Instead, they would look at their life, their family, their books, their possessions and think, "I have these now. I might not have them later. We might all go up in flames. But I have them now." He began to understand why the early Christians did not despise the world but loved it [*Notes From A Wayfarer*, by Helmut Thielicke, p. 162].

3) Longing. Paul references this in 2 Timothy 4:8..."for all those who long for his appearing." Evil does not have the last word. God is out to get back what is God's. And we are longing for that Day. As Billy Graham once said, "I'm not concerned about what the world is coming to but with who's coming to the world." Remember? CHRIST HAS DIED! CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN!