

Maranatha, Come Soon Lord Jesus

Maranatha is actually an Aramaic phrase that occurs only once in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 16:22 which is commonly translated “O Lord Come” or “Come Soon Lord”. It was popularly used by Christians by the end of the first century as a greeting, and tradition tells us Paul used it this way. The word Maranatha can be found in an early Christian book of orders called the Didache which was used by many churches, and also an early Christian document called “The Teaching of the Apostles”. The Greek equivalent is used several places in the New Testament, as the Bible ends in Revelation 22:20 by saying “Come, Lord Jesus.” This all tells us that the idea of Jesus returning soon was common to all Christians and used as a word of comfort to any believers under going affliction.

The two letters of Paul written to the Thessalonians contain key passages regarding the return of Jesus, and what this great event means for Christians. First and second Thessalonians are thought of as Paul’s letters of eschatology. Eschatology is the study of the events in the end times. The Thessalonians wanted to know when Christ will come back, who will be resurrected, where they will go, and would those Christians already dead miss out on this great event. It seems clear that Paul taught that he expected, but did not guarantee, that Jesus might come back in their lifetime. Therefore what would happen to those who physically died in the meantime? Each chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the second coming, and a section of chapter 4 is the key passage in the Bible concerning the resurrection of the Church commonly called the Rapture. The word rapture is not found in the Bible, but comes from the Latin word translating the phrase in 1 Thes.4:17 “caught up”. Christians have always been curious about these events, and Paul did a masterful job of answering just enough, but not too much about the future. He reassures and gives great hope without giving too many answers. Christ is definitely coming again (4:15), but we don’t know when (5:2). We will go up to be with the Lord (4:17), but we don’t know exactly where. Paul gives hope and comfort without satisfying their curiosity. A theologian named Terry Muck said it well, “In order to have meaning in life, we must have confidence that a brighter future lies ahead. Yet it is also apparent that we are severely limited in what we can know about the future. It is the interaction between these two truths—our desire for future meaning and the limitations of what we can know—that hope resides. If we disregard our desire for future meaning, despair results. If we disregard our limitations, we begin to make predictions about the future and make mistakes in doing so.” Who among us would not make adjustments if they knew the exact timing, and thus violate free will or selfishly profit from their predictions. It is better to just know the reality of the second coming and not know the

time.

Thessalonica

This was the most important city of Macedonia in the first century. It was a thriving seaport on the Aegean Sea. It had a population of about 250,000, including a significant and influential Jewish population. It was also on the main Roman highway called the Egnatian Way that linked Rome with Byzantium (Constantinople or Istanbul). The city was founded by Cassander in 315 BC. He was one of Alexander the Great's main generals who divided up his empire when he died. Cassander named the city after his wife who was also Alexander's sister. In 42 BC the city wisely backed Antony and Octavian in Rome's civil war. After Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius it was made a free city, meaning free of taxes, free of Roman soldiers, and free to self rule. Today it is still a thriving city called Thessaloniki with a population of 400,000. During World War II, the Nazis executed 60,000 Jews in Thessaloniki.

Paul Planted a Church in Thessalonica

In Acts 16, Paul was on his second missionary journey in which he traveled across Asia Minor arriving at the west coast city of Troas accompanied by Silas, Timothy, and Luke. They wanted to go northeast, but the Holy Spirit had other plans. Paul received a vision of a man in Macedonia asking for help. Their first stop was in Philippi where they received many converts until their preaching provoked a riot. Paul and Silas were beaten, thrown into prison, and fastened into stocks. Paul used this occasion to share the gospel with the jailer who was saved along with his entire family. The next day the city magistrates tried to release Paul but he would not go saying, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Roman citizens." When the magistrates heard this they begged them to leave the city. Paul and his men walked about 100 miles along the Egnatian Way to the next major city, Thessalonica. They got jobs there to support themselves and every Sabbath for three weeks they entered the local Synagogue where they preached a two fold message: The Old Test. foretold of a suffering, dying Messiah who was resurrected, and Jesus was the fulfillment of this. Their audience in the Synagogue that believed in Jesus was made up of a few Jews, a multitude of God-fearing Greeks (proselytes), and a number of leading women. The majority of Jews were jealous, and resented Paul so they hired some thugs, and formed a mob to attack them. They could not find Paul's group so they arrested a disciple named Jason. They made him post a pledge against further trouble. Paul probably wanted to avoid further trouble for Jason so Paul and Silas slipped out that night and headed for Berea 50 miles away.

The Jews in Berea were "noble minded" and received the Word of God examining the Scriptures daily, and many of them believed. When the Jews in Thessalonica heard this they

came there and caused trouble for Paul. Paul left for Athens, but left Silas and Timothy in Berea. They later joined Paul in Athens(1 Thes.3:1-2), but concerned for the church in Thessalonica, he sent Timothy back to check on them. After Athens, Paul went down to Corinth where he stayed for 18 months. Timothy eventually joined Paul in Corinth with good news of the church in Thessalonica. Paul then wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica in order to: encourage them in the midst of their persecution, counteract slander about Paul and his message of the gospel of Jesus, and to instruct about righteous living and a correct understanding about the end times and resurrection.

The Parousia

Parousia is the Greek word used for “coming” or “appearing” therefore most of the New Testament references to the return of Christ use the Greek word parousia. This is the word used in 1 Thes.4:15 translated “the coming of the Lord”. It is also the word Jesus used in Matt.24:27 translated “the coming of the Son of Man” to refer to His return.

In 1 Thes.4:13-18, Paul used a common phrase to introduce a new topic concerning the parousia, “But brothers we don’t want you to be uninformed”. Paul was no doubt responding to an urgent question that was bothering the new Christians in Thessalonica. The idea of the bodily resurrection was a fundamental part of the gospel that Paul preached to every audience, yet this was a brand new concept to Greeks. Greek philosophers had always depreciated the value of the body, and death was widely associated with a lack of hope. Physical death was viewed as a permanent condition to Greeks. Paul had been teaching the new Christians that Jesus would return for them, and they would spend eternity with the Lord. Remember that Paul had only been with them for a short time before he had to flee from persecution, so they had questions about the coming of Christ. Some of the new Christians had already died. They were worried that these loved ones would miss out on this great event. In this passage Paul would assure them that those alive would have no advantage over those who “have fallen asleep”, both groups, the dead and the living will end up together with the Lord forever.

Paul offered these new believers a wonderful and different understanding of death, the future, and their own resurrection being linked to the resurrection of Jesus. His purpose was to give them hope, peace, and comfort for their loved ones and themselves. Their new hope would forever distinguish them from all the rest who had no hope, and therefore would continue to fear death. In 1 Thes.4:14, Paul ties the resurrection of Jesus to the certainty that Jesus will bring the souls of believers who have died back with Him to be reunited with their new resurrection bodies. There is a “since—then” relationship between His resurrection and

ours.

In verse 15, Paul answers the question about whether there is any difference between the resurrection of the dead believers and believers still alive at the 2nd coming. The Lord will descend from Heaven and the bodies of the dead in Christ will rise first, and then a moment later believers still living will be “caught up” with them to meet the Lord in the air. As Jesus promised in John 14:3, His disciples would then be with Him in glory forever. Paul’s purpose was more than just answering questions or satisfying curiosity. He wanted them to be comforted and encouraged by this knowledge, but also be alert, ready, and to build up one another (1 Thes. 5:6, 11).

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 is a parallel passage that echoes the Christian belief about death and the resurrection. For us it is a transition to a much better mode of existence lived in the glorious presence of Christ, and without suffering, sin and death. Therefore we live in hope looking forward to that day. We live today getting prepared, making sure we are ready, serving God now so that when Jesus returns and we rise to meet Him, He will say, “Well done good and faithful servant”.

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