I remember a conversation I had with some friends of mine at the outset of WWII. One of them asked, “Do you think it’s possible that Jesus might come tonight and deliver us from the mess we are in?” “No,” I replied, “The signs of the end have not yet been fulfilled. Antichrist must rule the world for a short time before Jesus comes back.” We all agreed that Jesus couldn’t return yet. Then one of them said, “This would be a perfect time, then, for Him to return because Jesus said that He would return ‘at an hour you do not expect’” (Mt. 24:44).

This got me thinking. Matthew 24:15-31 depicts a frightening time of tribulation plus awesome wonders in nature as preludes to Christ’s return. Yet Jesus said He would come when people would not be expecting Him. Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians helped me solve this problem and clarified many other second-coming issues as well. I pray that this booklet will bring to you a clearer understanding of the events of the endtimes that these wonderful letters provide.

_Herb Vander Lugt_, RBC Senior Research Editor

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A RENDEZVOUS WITH JESUS

Marshall Applewhite and 38 of his Heaven’s Gate followers committed suicide because they were convinced that by leaving their bodies they could rendezvous with a spaceship trailing the Hale-Bopp comet to begin life on a higher plane. “Experts” immediately offered their explanations of this bizarre incident. Several took advantage of the opportunity to strike a few low blows at Christians who believe in the literal return of Jesus. “After all,” they reasoned, “don’t Christians also anticipate being caught up for a rendezvous in the air?”

There is a similarity, but is it real or superficial? One way to find out is to study the letters written by the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians. Written in AD 50 or 51, when many who saw Jesus after His resurrection were still alive, these letters witness powerfully to the truth of the New Testament and reveal the attitude of first-century Christians toward Christ’s return. These letters also contain more specific teaching about the second coming than any other book in the New Testament. From these two letters we can learn all we need to know about this tremendous event:

• Why we should live in daily expectation of it.
• What will occur when He comes.
• How we should live as we wait for Him.

Since the Pauline authorship of these letters and their dates are so well-documented that they are virtually unquestioned (even by anti-supernaturalistic scholars), their teaching is undeniably authentic. They are also highly relevant at this time when so many people are thinking about the end of the world.
In AD 50, Paul entered the Greek city of Thessalonica and held services in a Jewish synagogue on 3 successive sabbaths before being driven out by hostile Jews. But during his brief ministry there he led to Christ some of the Jews, “a great multitude of the devout Greeks [Gentiles who had been attracted to the Jewish faith because of its highly moral monotheism], and not a few of the leading women” (Acts 17:4).

Paul was in Corinth a few months later where he received an encouraging report about the continuing spiritual vitality of these recent converts. However, he also learned that a few problems had developed. It appears that some people had understood him to say that the second coming of Christ would take place very soon. As a result, a number of them had quit working and were either living off their savings or depending on others for their necessities. So they needed encouragement, instruction, and correction.

For their encouragement, Paul commended them for their devotion to Christ, telling them that believers in other cities were impressed with the way they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven” (1 Th. 1:9-10). He then went on to instruct them carefully and to correct them lovingly about the manner in which they were to wait for Jesus.

Paul’s words of instruction and correction can be summarized under three headings: waiting expectantly, waiting knowledgeably, and waiting appropriately.
WAITING EXPECTANTLY
Jesus promised His disciples that He would return for His people. They never forgot His promise. Christians still look forward to this event with anticipation. The Thessalonian believers were right in their eager expectation of Christ’s return. Years later in another letter, Paul described those who live “godly” as “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Ti. 2:13). The apostle John also encouraged us to be continually mindful of this expectation:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

Among the Thessalonians this expectation was a passionate longing. For most believers, this hope takes a less intense form. We rejoice in the fact that Jesus is coming, but we don’t yearn for it with impatient fervor. Why not? Should we? These are two of the questions we will try to answer in this booklet.

A Passionate Longing (1 Th. 1:1–3:10). As noted earlier, the Thessalonian believers were eagerly expecting the Lord’s return. Few of us share their intensity of desire. However, we can perhaps understand why this was true of them by considering their situation. In the first place, most of them had just recently undergone a radical conversion. Second, they were being persecuted fiercely by their Jewish and pagan peers.

Their Radical Conversion. Christian conversion is always a highly significant event, but it is not always a
radical, about-face experience. Children from a Christian home who have been associated with the Bible, prayer, and the church since infancy make a momentous decision when they receive Jesus as their Savior, but they are not likely to experience a radical change in either outlook or behavior. On the contrary, people converted to Christ from militant atheism or passionate devotion to another religion step into a situation never anticipated. They find themselves with a brand-new outlook on life. They may have to make new friends because most of their relatives and former companions will either oppose or abandon them. And they will have to give up practices that have long been a part of their very existence.

This is what took place when people in Thessalonica turned to Jesus. The Jews and God-fearing Greeks, who according to Acts 17:4 were among the first converts, had undoubtedly been warned about a new religion which, by honoring Jesus Christ as God, denied the monotheism they held so dear. Yet, when they heard Paul and his companions and sensed the presence of the supernatural in their ministry, they could not help but believe their message, a message that came “not . . . in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance” (1 Th. 1:5). Their conversion was an emotional experience because it was accompanied by immediate opposition on the one hand and supernatural joy on the other. They “received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Th. 1:6).

The joy they experienced must have so outweighed their distress at being persecuted that they immediately shared the good news with all who would listen. It appears that many pagans turned to the
Lord. They must have far outnumbered the converts from Judaism because Paul referred to the Thessalonians as having “turned to God from idols” (1 Th. 1:9). This involved a tremendous change in lifestyle. The mystery religions offered exciting festivals, mystic cleansing rites, ecstatic tongues-speaking, and ambiguous oracles that purportedly came from the gods. These observances and practices were a major part of their lives. Turning to Jesus Christ from this kind of religious system, which was so intricately woven into the fabric of Greek society, was such a radical step that only those ready for full commitment to Jesus Christ would take it.

It is not surprising, then, that they were so zealous in their devotion to Jesus that Paul expressed his gratitude for their “work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope” (1 Th. 1:3). Their faith moved them to work for Jesus. Their love expressed itself in self-sacrificing toil. Their hope, which gave them patience in the face of severe opposition, also developed in them a passionate longing for Jesus.

**Their Difficult Circumstances.** A second factor that contributed to their intense longing for Christ’s return was their persecution. It came from both pagan Greeks (“your own countrymen”—1 Th. 2:14) and from unbelieving Jews (“who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets”—1 Th. 2:15-16). The exact nature of the opposition is not stated. It may have been persecution by the local government, though undoubtedly not under official sanction from Rome. Perhaps it consisted largely of harassment by former friends, discrimination in the marketplace, and even violence that went unnoticed by the magistrates. When we read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, we discover
that the opposition was so severe that some believers saw it as a sign they had entered the frightening end-time period of tribulation called the “day of the Lord” by the Old Testament prophets.

In addition to personal persecution, the believers in Thessalonica were bombarded by slanderous charges against Paul and his co-workers. These attacks on the evangelists were a real trial for these new believers. Since the favorable impression Paul and his companions made on them had been a factor in their conversion, their faith in Jesus was closely bound up with their confidence in the integrity of these men. Realizing this, the apostle took great pains to remind these new believers of what he and his co-workers were like when they were with them.

To refute any charge that he and his associates were religious impostors, Paul referred to the evidence of God’s presence and power that made their ministry so effective (1 Th. 1:5-7; 2:1).

To refute any charge that they were insincere, Paul pointed out that they were bold in the face of persecution and spoke honestly as before God, with no attempt to gain favor with them through flattery or to win them through trickery (1 Th. 2:2-5).

To refute any charge that he was power hungry, Paul recalled for them the fact that he worked to support himself and was as gentle among them as a mother is with her child (1 Th. 2:6-9).

To refute any charge that he was uncaring, Paul reminded them of the way he worked among them, making himself available to them night and day. He told them of his longing to see them, explained how his concern for them had led him to send Timothy to visit them, and recounted how he had rejoiced when
Timothy returned with good news about their spiritual progress (1 Th. 2:10–3:10).

These reminders undoubtedly reinvigorated these believers’ confidence in Paul and his companions. But the hurt they felt at the thought of the injustice done to these servants of God probably intensified their longing for the day when Jesus would return to vindicate and reward His suffering people. And there was nothing wrong with that!

A Comforting Hope (1 Th. 3:11-13). Christians who live in pleasant circumstances do not normally have a passionate longing for Christ’s return. We may yearn for it when overwhelmed by pain, sorrow, or disappointment, but once life is back to normal we are quite happy to remain on planet earth. The deeply sensitive among us may long for the return of Jesus when distressed by all the suffering caused by injustice, war, crime, and moral perversity, knowing that these evils will end only when Jesus rules over the earth as her King.

This desire for the Lord’s return may also surface when, distressed by our continuing struggle against indwelling sin, we echo the words of Paul, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24-25). Even then, this longing for the sinlessness of heaven is counterbalanced by a reluctance to leave loved ones and friends. Need we feel guilty about this ambivalence?

Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 is not a petition that we have a passionate, almost impatient desire for the immediate return of the Savior. His prayer is that we may grow in love and be strengthened inwardly so that we will be “blameless in holiness

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before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (v.13).

A lively 13-year-old Christian girl once asked me if it was wrong for her to be more captivated by thoughts of romance, marriage, and motherhood than the return of Jesus. I assured her that God was not displeased with her for being a normal young person. I said that He didn’t expect her to be so focused on Christ’s return—which could occur today but may not take place in the next hundred years—that she had to deny her normal and legitimate human desires. But I reminded her of her responsibility to be aware that He is coming back and to live in such a way that she will not be ashamed to meet Him. Before she left me to join her friends, I assured her that if the Lord returned before she has a chance for adult life, she will find heaven so wonderful that she will not feel in the least that she was cheated out of some happiness.

Waiting expectantly may or may not be a passionate longing that the Lord’s return take place immediately. But the prospect of it should always be a source of joy, and the day-by-day expectation of it should always be a purifying hope.

**Seeing God**

- In Paul’s early references to God as Father (1:1,3), we are reminded of His parental concern for His children.
- In Paul’s declaration to the Thessalonians that the way they turned to the Lord was proof of their having been chosen for salvation, we see His sovereignty.
- In God’s supernatural accompaniment of Paul and his associates, we see His active involvement in the salvation of those He has chosen.

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SEEING OURSELVES

- In the Lord’s empowering of the ministry of Paul and his helpers, we see that without His enablement we could never have been saved.
- In the devotion of the persecuted Thessalonian believers, we see why suffering is often good for us.
- In Paul’s life, we see an example of what we can be by God’s grace.

WAITING KNOWLEDGEABLY

The followers of William Miller were undoubtedly sincere in their devotion to Jesus when on a set day in 1844 they donned white robes and stood on a hill waiting for Jesus to take them up to heaven. But they definitely were lacking in their understanding of the Scriptures. This was also the case with the Thessalonian believers. Their zeal was praiseworthy. So was their longing to be with Jesus. But they retreated from their responsibilities because they had the idea that the second coming of Jesus was an any-moment certainty instead of an any-moment possibility. This revealed a serious misunderstanding of what Paul had taught them about Jesus’ return.

In addition, they lacked knowledge about two other important details associated with the second coming. First, they were afraid that the believers who had died were not going to share fully in the blessings that would be experienced by living believers. Second, many interpreted their trials as an indication that they had entered that terrible endtime period of divine judgment and wrath called “the day of the Lord” in the Old Testament.

To inform and correct them, the apostle proceeded to affirm three important features of the Lord’s re-
turn. First, at His coming for the church, the dead and the living will receive their glorified bodies. Together they will meet the Lord in the air (1 Th. 4:13-18). Second, the rapture will occur suddenly and unexpectedly without warning signs (1 Th. 5:1-11). Third, because believers are indwelt by the Spirit, they must be removed from the earth before the horrors of “the day of the Lord” can begin (2 Th. 2:1-12).

The Rapture: A Selective Resurrection And Transformation (1 Th. 4:13-18). To give the Thessalonian believers assurance about those who had died recently and to correct some misconceptions, Paul described three distinct events that will occur at Christ’s return: (1) believers who died as Christians will be resurrected; (2) living believers will be transformed; and (3) both groups will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air.

*I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Th. 4:13-17).*

The words are so clear they need little explanation, but let me make three observations. First, by using the
first personal plural pronoun in “we who are alive,” the apostle left open the possibility that the rapture might occur during his own lifetime. But he never said he would surely live until the rapture. In fact, he always acknowledged the possibility that he might die, and he did so with calm confidence, even with anticipation (Phil. 1:19-26; 2 Tim. 4:6-18). In this he was a model for believers in every subsequent generation. We are to live with the expectation that Jesus might come at any moment, but we must also acknowledge that He may not return until after we have died. And it doesn’t really matter. The resurrected and the transformed will share equally in the blessings of Christ’s return.

Second, Paul mentioned three sounds that will accompany our Lord’s descent: the shout (lit. “cry of command”), the voice of an archangel (perhaps a signal of the end of God’s program for the church and the resumption of His unique relationship with Israel), and the trumpet of God (probably like the trumpet sound the Israelites heard at Mt. Sinai as described in Exodus 19). Some Bible students insist that only believers will hear these sounds. Maybe so. But we can’t be sure. Coming simultaneously with our Lord’s descent, they will not give anyone time to prepare. If heard by the unsaved as well as believers, they certainly would add a startling element to this clearly supernatural event. This would make it more difficult for God’s enemies to come up with a plausible explanation of the disappearance of millions of people.

Third, while the dead in Christ will receive their new bodies before those who are still alive, the difference in time is like the blinking of an eye. A man who knew the end of his life was near had a twinkle in his eye when he said, “Brother, I have been expecting the Lord
to take me to heaven without dying, but it looks like He’ll take me through death. Maybe you’ll live until the day He comes, but if you do, you’ll have nothing on me. I’ll get my new body a split-second ahead of you because ‘the dead in Christ will rise first.’” He was right, but the time element—like the blink of an eye—does not speak of the advantage of those who died as much as it does of the oneness of all believers from Pentecost to the rapture. We will be caught up “together” to meet Jesus. What a rendezvous!

**The Rapture: An Unannounced Surprise (1 Th. 5:1-12).** Having assured the Thessalonian believers about the good future for Christians who die before the second coming, Paul addressed their mistaken idea that the Lord’s return could not be long delayed. They saw their trials and persecution as signs of its nearness. Some of them were so sure of its immediacy that they quit their jobs. Paul therefore took great pains to teach them that their tribulation was not necessarily a sign of the nearness of the rapture. He wanted them to know that the rapture will be sudden and unannounced; that it will, in fact, catch many people by surprise.

*Concerning the times [the date] and the seasons [the signs indicating its nearness], brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness (1 Th. 5:1-5).*
Like A Thief In The Night. Paul said that the Thessalonians should have known (apparently from what he had told them) that a “day of the Lord” (no article in the Greek) will come stealthily, “like a thief in the night.” When nonbelievers are quite comfortable, thinking things are under control, a “day of the Lord” will suddenly “overtake” them, and they “will not escape.” It is clear that Paul was referring to the rapture because this is what the Thessalonians were expecting. But for unbelievers, the rapture will be an unpleasant and unexpected event.

The fact that Paul referred to it as a “day of the Lord” requires a bit of explanation. This term, according to excellent scholars like Leon Morris, has a rather complex usage in the Old Testament. Sometimes (usually with the article the) it denotes the outpouring of God’s wrath in passages that bring together into one picture an impending judgment in the near future and the final endtime judgment that will prepare the way for the establishment of God’s kingdom.

For example, in Isaiah 13 “the day of the LORD” refers to Babylon’s imminent defeat by the Medes (vv.1-5,17-18), but it also depicts judgments that go far beyond that event (vv.6-16,19-22). The “day of the LORD” has a slightly different connotation in Ezekiel 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Malachi 4:5. These passages indicate that the “day of the LORD” is a time of divine intervention in judgment, but without a clear endtime scenario.

In Zechariah 14:1, it has still another connotation. The term “day of the LORD” covers a time period that extends from the war of Armageddon into the golden age, the millennium of Revelation 20. This complex
usage of the term in the Old Testament made it possible for Paul to be completely accurate in referring to the rapture as a “day of the Lord.” Ray Stedman made this astute observation:

Actually, the phrase “day of the Lord” refers to any period of time when God acts directly and unmistakably in human affairs. It may be in blessing, as in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, or it may be in judgment. Or it may be that the same event will be a judgment for some people and a blessing for others.

Because a “day of the Lord” comes stealthily as “a thief in the night” when the nonbelievers are saying, “Peace and safety,” it will catch them unprepared for what will follow—utter chaos. Land vehicles of all kinds will suddenly be without drivers. Many planes will be without pilots. Machines everywhere will be without operators. Key men and women in the worlds of government, industry, finance, education, and entertainment will not be in their positions. Valuable properties and billions of dollars will be ownerless and up for grabs. It’s also possible that children who have not reached the age of accountability will be among those who are raptured.

Do you remember the crime and violence that accompanied the last California earthquake? Just think about what will happen in the wake of this worldwide upheaval! Strong leadership with dictatorial power will be required to bring things under control. The stage will be set for the rise of the Antichrist and the unleashing of the frightful judgments portrayed in Revelation 5–19.

In emphasizing the unexpected nature of the rapture, Paul reiterated what Jesus had said earlier:

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As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. . . . Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed (Lk. 17:26-27,30).

Note the pattern: life as usual with warnings unheeded, an unanticipated removal of God’s people, and an unleashing of God’s judgment.

**A Welcome Surprise.** The element of unexpectedness will hold true for believers, but not necessarily the unpreparedness. It should be and can be a welcome surprise. Paul said:

*You, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness* (1 Th. 5:4-5).

As believers who live in the light, we know this event will occur so we can anticipate it. But since we do not know just when it will take place, we will find it a welcome surprise. To illustrate, imagine a husband and father leaving for an overseas assignment and saying to his family, “I don’t know how long I will be away, but I will be back as soon as possible.” His wife and children take him at his word and expect his return. But when he returns he decides it would be fun to walk into his house without a telephone call. It would be a welcome surprise! His return would have no resemblance to the stealthy visit of a thief in the night. But if one of the teens has rebelled against his mother’s authority and gotten himself into trouble, the sudden appearance of his father would be a mixed blessing. He would be glad Dad is back, but he would
have some dread of a private meeting with him. He knows he wouldn’t be beaten to within an inch of his life or be disowned, but a sense of shame and the anticipated hurt he expects to see on his father’s face would make him apprehensive. That’s how it will be when Jesus comes for His own. First John 2:28 warns about the possibility of being “ashamed before Him at His coming.”

Having made it clear that the rapture will not be preceded by signs and that it therefore will catch many unprepared, Paul issued an admonition and a promise to believers:

*Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him (1 Th. 5:6-10).*

The exhortation tells us how to live so that the Lord’s return will be a welcome surprise, untarnished by any regret or shame. The promise that God did not appoint us to wrath but to deliverance is often taken as a reference to our eternal destiny. This is a possible interpretation. But coming as it does after Paul’s contrast between what the rapture means for believers and what it means for non-Christians, it seems best to view it as a promise of deliverance from the divine wrath that is going to fall on those who are left behind. If this is what Paul had in mind, the rapture will be not only an unannounced surprise, it will also be a gra-
cious deliverance from the most frightful timespan of all history. Let’s test the validity of this concept.

**The Rapture: A Gracious Deliverance (2 Th. 2:1-12).** The question “Will the church go through the great tribulation?” has been vigorously debated by Christian scholars, and it cannot be settled by appeal to any one passage of Scripture. But all must agree that 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 speaks to this issue more directly than any other chapter in the Bible. In it Paul corrected a misconception that some Thessalonian believers had gathered from questionable sources—that they had entered the frightening endtime “day of the Lord” of Old Testament prophecy.

Paul assured them that they had not entered this fearful endtime judgment era. He did so by calling their attention to two closely related events that must occur before the coming of this “day of the Lord”:

*Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God (2 Th. 2:3-4).*

The setting of this double-barreled event—the falling away and the revealing of the man of sin—appears in the Old Testament book of Daniel, a remarkable document written in the sixth century BC. The prophet predicted that in the endtimes a powerful world leader he called “the prince who is to come” (9:26) will “confirm a covenant with many [Israel] for one week [a 7-year timespan]; but in the middle of the week he will bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who

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makes desolate” (v.27). The leaders of Israel will apparently trust this man and make an agreement with him, but he will break it and reveal his true nature as a treacherous and cruel enemy of their nation.

The Thessalonian believers needed to be reminded of truths Paul had taught them while he was with them. In the first place, the frightful endtime “day of the Lord” will be preceded by two closely related events: “the falling away” and the revealing of the “man of sin.” Second, someone who restrains must be taken out of the way before these events can take place.

**The Falling Away.** Paul wrote, “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first” (2 Th. 2:3). Unfortunately, the rendering “falling away” has led some to see the apostle as referring to apostasy in the church. But to do this is to ignore the context. This term is so closely tied to the revealing of “the man of sin” that these two events have a causal relationship. It is through this “falling away” that the man of sin is revealed. Besides, the Greek word *apostasia* denotes a departure with hostile overtones. The NIV translators correctly rendered the word “rebellion.” This meaning is borne out as we look at the endtime person Paul called the “man of sin” and the “son of perdition.”

**The Revealed Tyrant.** This evil person who is revealed in or through “the rebellion” is the coming world ruler to whom we were introduced in Daniel 9. He appears again in Daniel 11:36-45, where he is portrayed as initiating an all-out rebellion against God:

*Then the king shall do according to his own will: he shall exalt and magnify himself above every god, shall speak blasphemies against the God of*
This same man is called the “beast rising up out of the sea” in Revelation 13:1, where the rebellion against God led by him and his henchman is graphically described. He first appears as a hero and receives the voluntary worship of multitudes. Once accepted by mankind, he begins to blaspheme the true God and “make war with the saints.” His right-hand man, the “beast coming up out of the earth,” who is called the “false prophet” in Revelation 19:20, will perform supernatural feats, demand that all people worship the beast, and kill those who refuse.

All of this ties in perfectly with Paul’s depiction of him as one who “opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Th. 2:4). He is the Antichrist, the most cruel tyrant of all history. And the dreadful “day of the Lord,” which the Thessalonian believers thought they had entered, will not begin until he is in his place of power. Therefore, the Thessalonians could be sure they were not in the great tribulation.

**The Remarkable Restrainer.** After portraying the characteristics and actions of the coming Antichrist, Paul reminded his readers in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8 that when he was with them he had told them about a restraining influence and a personal restrainer that were holding back the powers of evil:

> Now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.
It is important to note that the phrase “what is restraining” is neuter in the Greek, while the expression “He who restrains” is masculine. Bible students have not been able to reach a consensus as to the identity of the restrainer. Some have said the restrainer is God, who does so through His providential control of all things. But will God and His providence be taken out of the way when Antichrist comes to power?

Others have said that the restrainer was the Roman Emperor and his government. But the Roman Empire came to an end without the Antichrist making his appearance. Some have even conjectured that the restrainer is Michael, the archangel mentioned in Daniel 12:1 as standing up for the Israelites in the endtimes.

All this uncertainty, however, seems quite unnecessary. To whom was Jesus speaking when He said, “You are the salt of the earth”? (Mt. 5:13). The answer is obvious—His people. Who are His people in this age? Those who make up His body, the church. Who empowers believers for this task? The Holy Spirit, who indwells every believer and equips all who yield to Him. The restrainer is therefore the Holy Spirit as He works through the born-again people who constitute the body of Christ.

This is not a new teaching as some imply. Biblical scholar Robert L. Thomas points out that according to the well-known exegete Henry Alford (1810-1871), this view has deep roots in church history. Notice that the text does not say that the Holy Spirit will be taken away—it says “out of the way.” His special ministry in the church, which began 50 days after Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2), will terminate at the rapture. He will continue to function on the earth, but in a manner similar to that of the Old Testament era. This will open the
way for Satan to launch his all-out effort to disrupt God’s program for Israel and mankind.

The devil and his henchmen undoubtedly will offer clever explanations for the disappearance of believers. This will delude many, including all who during the church age deliberately and hatefully rejected the gospel (2 Th. 2:8-12). But this satanic rebellion and deception cannot begin until the proper time (v.6) and will end suddenly in God’s own time—at the return of Christ in glory to destroy His enemies “with the breath of His mouth” (v.8).

The identity of the restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2 gives us a strong basis for believing that the church will be removed before the great tribulation begins.

**The Rapture: Harbinger Of A New Day (2 Th. 1:1-12).** The coming of Jesus for the church will usher in a terrible time for those left on earth. But the time of trouble will be brief and purposeful. Revelation 13:5 tells us that Antichrist will be in power for only 42 months. And during this brief period of tribulation an unnumbered multitude will turn to Jesus and the nation of Israel will be prepared to welcome Him as Messiah when He returns to rule the earth in righteousness (Zech.12:10-14; Mt. 23:38-39).

From the beginning of the church until now, believers have known that vindication will come ultimately. But during the great tribulation, believers will know that it will be soon. A young man who grew up in Uganda told a group of us how his father was executed because he refused to deny Christ. He and thousands like him all over the world have seen cruel anti-God leaders seemingly get away with barbaric atrocities. Even when forced out of office, most of these tyrants have been able to find sanctuary in an-
other country where they continue a lavish lifestyle. Sometimes persecuted people see in this world the outworking of the principle that people reap what they have sown. But for the most part it is only through the exercise of faith that they can live with the assurance that in the end God’s justice will prevail. And as they keep trusting the Lord, they become stronger in their faith and devotion.

This was the situation for believers in first-century Thessalonica. Paul could not give them a guarantee that they would soon be delivered from their oppressors. He could only praise the Lord for the way they were handling their affliction and remind them of what God would do.

*It is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe* (2 Th. 1:6-10).

**The Appearing.** At the appearing (Gk. *apokalypsei*) of Jesus Christ, the unbelieving enemies of God will be repaid and the believing members of His family will be rewarded. But we must wait in patience, not knowing when it will take place. Tribulation saints (those who turn to Jesus after the rapture) will know that our Lord’s glorious appearing is just around the corner.

Paul declared that when this day comes, the Lord
will be “revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire” (2 Th. 1:7-8). The presence of the powerful angels fits perfectly with the words of Jesus: *Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened . . . . Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, . . . and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels* (Mt. 24:29-31).

Paul here presents the glorious appearing of Jesus as the climax of a whole series of events that will begin with the rapture.

**The Retribution.** Paul said that when Jesus returns in blazing fire with His powerful angels, He will take “vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Th. 1:8). Let it be noted that the Greek word translated “vengeance” has absolutely no connotation of vindictiveness. It is a compound word that denotes “unwavering justice.” It is the dispensing of perfect justice on the wrong-doer—nothing more, nothing less. This righteous judgment will be dispensed to both those who do not know God because they have rejected His revelation of Himself in nature and conscience (as in Rom. 1:18-32) and to those who have rejected the gospel, which, according to Leon Morris, is “disobedience to a royal invitation.”

Their punishment, which is meted out in perfect justice, will be “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:9). To understand “eternal destruction,” it will help us to consider its opposite—“eternal life,” a present possession of every believer (Jn. 5:24). Eternal
life is more than unending existence—it is a spiritual quality of life derived from our relationship with God through Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3). Eternal destruction is existence away “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:9). It is continuance as a conscious being separated in varying degrees from everything that makes life significant and worthwhile.

To the extent that people have wanted freedom from God and resented His interfering with their lives, they will experience the abject emptiness, dreary loneliness, and soul-chilling terror of God-forsakenness. For a human being created in the image of God and designed to worship and serve Him, separation from His presence and the glory of His power is indeed everlasting destruction—it is utter ruin.

The Reward. The appearing of Jesus Christ will be a wonderful event for believers. Paul said that when He comes He will “be glorified in His saints and . . . be admired among all those who believe” (2 Th. 1:10). Note the expression, “to be glorified in His saints.” The Lord will be glorious; we will be glorious. Glory will radiate from Him to us, and back from us to Him. In the presence of the angels, this will bring honor and praise to Him.

For believers, another purpose of His appearance is “to be admired among all those who believe.” The idea is that of marveling at the wonder of it all—the wonder of His person, the wonder of our own glorification, the wonder of our new environment. The apostle’s assuring words to the Thessalonians that they would share in all of this because they believed the gospel are applicable to all those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ!
SEEING GOD

• In God’s withholding from us the date of the rapture, we see God’s love and wisdom. It would not be good for us, and its value as an incentive to godliness would be minimized.
• In His promise of rapture before wrath, we see His mercy to His undeserving people.
• In His program of tribulation for Israel and the unsaved Gentile world, we see His holy wrath coupled with His concern for the salvation of both groups.

SEEING OURSELVES

• In the weaknesses of the Thessalonian believers, we see our own weakness.
• In the Thessalonians’ eagerness for the Lord’s return, we see one of the reasons suffering has value.

WAITING APPROPRIATELY

In addition to waiting for the return of Jesus expectantly and knowledgeably, believers should do so appropriately by living exemplary lives. We should, as Ray Stedman put it, be “living Christianly.” One reason we don’t make a greater impact on the world is that too many people who profess faith in Jesus and attend church regularly lie without blinking an eye, cheat on their taxes, pull dishonest business deals, break their marriage vows, hold bitter grudges, spread malicious gossip, and despise the downtrodden in society while overlooking the evils of the rich and successful. Even those of us who are seen by our peers as truthful, honest, moral, and kind can at heart be self-serving and self-righteous. Paul was writing to us as well as to the believers in Thessalonica when he
interspersed practical Christian-life admonitions throughout these letters.

**Maintain Sexual Purity (1 Th. 4:1-8).** Pagan society in the first century was marked by sexual permissiveness. So believers needed to be reminded that God wants His people to be distinctive by their chastity. Christians are to keep their passions under control because their bodies belong to God. Adultery always defrauds someone other than the two participants in the act. The unmarried who commit fornication wrong their future partner by not being able to bring into their marriage the virginity one has a right to expect. God will punish sexual impurity because it violates the whole character of the Christian life and is outright disobedience to the One who has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us.

**Love One Another (1 Th. 4:9-10).** Paul said that the Holy Spirit had taught his readers to love one another, that they were doing it, and that they should continue to do so. We know that the love God demands means being kind, forgiving, helpful, and tender toward others regardless of how we feel toward them. We must therefore choose to be loving. And whenever we fail by being unkind, sarcastic, or critical, we owe the person we wronged a sincere apology.

**Work Diligently (1 Th. 4:11-12; 2 Th. 3:6-15).** Paul made it clear that productive employment is a Christian duty. He pointed to himself as an example, reminding the Thessalonians how he worked at his trade so that he would not be a financial burden on them. As a man well-versed in the Old Testament, he knew that God gave Adam and Eve work to do in the Garden of Eden before the fall (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). We
are stewards of the earth and its resources. By working diligently, we gain a sense of accomplishment and benefit for both ourselves and others.

To the Thessalonian believers who had quit their jobs because they expected the immediate return of Jesus, Paul gave two other reasons for working. First, a steady job would help keep them from continuing their busybody activities and making a nuisance of themselves by minding the affairs of others (2 Th. 3:11-12). Second, by engaging in honest toil they would “walk properly toward those who are outside,” so that they would “lack nothing” (1 Th. 4:12).

Their testimony before the unsaved world was at stake. Therefore, the apostle twice commanded the obedient believers to deal with anyone who remained idle—to “withdraw” (2 Th. 3:6) and to “note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed” (2 Th. 3:14). This is a withdrawal from intimate fellowship, not the kind of withdrawal one would take when someone’s commitment to Christ is in doubt.

Treating the man as a brother (v.15) calls for gentle treatment with just enough bite to make him feel ashamed and lead to repentance. More severe measures would be required in the case of continued disobedience, but these steps are not outlined here. Paul apparently was confident that the action he specified would be adequate.

Honor Your Spiritual Leaders (1 Th. 5:12-13). Since the Thessalonian church was less than a year old, the men who served as elders and deacons were themselves new believers and probably lacked some leadership skills. But Paul commanded the church members to help them in three ways. First, they were
to “recognize” them as “over you in the Lord” with a
divine mandate to “admonish you,” acknowledging
the leaders’ responsibility to look out for their spiritu-
al welfare. Second, “esteem them very highly in love
for their work’s sake,” even if they had some idiosyn-
crasies and imperfections. Third, “be at peace among
yourselves,” avoiding any action that would create
factions in the church.

Help The Erring, Timid, And Weak (1 Th. 5:14-15). We are to do all we can to help fellow Christians.
This help takes different forms: “warn those who are
unruly” (in this case the idle who were bringing dis-
ruption into the church and harming its testimony);
“comfort the faint-hearted” (people who have low self-
estee, feeling that they have no gifts and are inca-
pable of being a help to anyone); “uphold the weak”
(people who feel unsure of their salvation, wonder if
they have really been forgiven, and tend to think that
they are unloved).

Paul went on in verses 14 and 15 to point out that
to fulfill our “helper” role we must: “be patient with
all,” no matter how often people fail or need comfort
or repeat questions you have answered many times;
“see that no one renders evil for evil,” forbidding re-
venge no matter what; “always pursue what is good
both for yourselves and for all,” focusing always on
doing and teaching the things that are lovely, pure,
and helpful.

Keep God In View (1 Th. 5:16-18). The apostle is-
sued three exhortations that we can obey only by a
continual consciousness of God’s presence: (1) “re-
joice always”—finding in the spiritual resources we
possess a reason for joy no matter what our circum-
stances and the grace to go our way with a song in
our heart; (2) “pray without ceasing”—though continually talking to God verbally is impossible, we can be always conscious of our dependence on Him and find speaking to Him as natural as breathing; (3) “in everything give thanks”—believing that God’s loving purpose is being worked out through all the changes of life, whether happy or sad, the child of God can always give thanks.

Since this is “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” we can be sure that as we depend on Him we will be enabled to obey these injunctions.

**Remain Open To God’s Voice (1 Th. 5:19-22).** Although the Lord had not yet provided any inspired New Testament documents when Paul wrote these letters, He often spoke to believers through men and women to whom He had given the gift of prophecy—the communication of a message from Him (Acts 11:28; 21:9; 1 Cor. 12:10). Moreover, from Paul’s description of first-century church services in 1 Corinthians 14, it is quite obvious that they were informal, with members participating freely. It seems likely that in Thessalonica some of the more staid members did not like enthusiastic displays of fervor. They were inclined to put a damper on ordinary people proclaiming messages they said they had received from the Lord. By doing this, they were in danger of putting out the Spirit’s fire and rejecting genuine prophecy.

These warnings against quenching the Spirit and despising prophecies, however, are not to be taken as an endorsement of gullibility. Believers on the listening end were to test carefully every professed spiritual manifestation and utterance. They were to hold fast to that which was true and beneficial, while rejecting
every manifestation and utterance that did not pass the test.

While our situation is somewhat different today because we have the complete New Testament as our standard for doctrine and practice, we must remain open to the possibility that God may sometimes speak to us through circumstances and through other Christians. In this way, believers who fellowship in liturgical, nonliturgical, charismatic, and noncharismatic churches can learn from one another. This will promote spiritual unity. Since we must base our beliefs on the Bible and refuse to compromise with what we perceive as error, we may find it necessary to place limits on organizational cooperation, but we can maintain a love for all of the Lord’s people and avoid needless conflict. This will strengthen our witness to a world that needs the Savior.

**Seeing God**

- In God’s demand for sexual purity, we see a reflection of His own perfect purity.
- In God’s demand that we live responsibly, we see His concern for our testimony before the world.
- In God’s admonition that we help the weak and timid, we see His parental tenderness.
- In God’s exhortation that we respect our spiritual leaders, we see His concern for the church.

**Seeing Ourselves**

- In the necessity for a long list of specific commands, we see our need for specific guidelines.
- In the exhortation to be always joyful and grateful, we see our need for dependence on the Holy Spirit.
ARE YOU READY?

We live as dying people on a dying planet. We can’t help but want to know why we are here and what lies ahead for us. But the most brilliant minds cannot answer these haunting questions unless they receive information from a reliable source outside our space-time world. We say “reliable” because men like Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson committed monstrous crimes on the basis of messages they perceived as coming from another world. Others, like Marshall Applewhite and his followers, have committed colossal blunders through following such revelations.

The only source of reliable other-world information that has proven itself trustworthy is the Bible. When the Israelites believed and obeyed God’s Word, they prospered. When they disobeyed, they suffered. When people believe and obey the teaching of the Bible today, their lives are transformed. The good news it proclaims is still “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

Men who were with Jesus after His resurrection have told us that He promised to return in the clouds to “catch up” the church in glorified bodies. He will then begin His program of judgment to prepare the earth for His rule. The New Testament writers warned us that His coming will be like a thief in the night. The all-important question is, “Are you ready?” If you have never received Him as your Savior, do so immediately. If you are a backslidden Christian, repent and make Him the Lord of your life. God wants the rapture to be for you a welcome surprise.
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