

Hope

As I prepared to write this lesson today, news came that my dear friend, encourager and fellow minister, Dr.



Michael Olmsted

John Howell, has died. You will know John as the other Sunday School lesson writer for Word & Way. I will miss John, but one day we will be together again because of our Savior's promise that we will all be together again when Christ returns.

Paul describes it to those young Thessalonian Christians: "The Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God's trumpet. First those who are dead in Christ will rise. Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (to) always be with the Lord" (4:16-17).

Paul is writing (50-51 AD) before the rest of the New Testament we know was penned and gathered into book form. Judaism did not offer a clear idea about life after death, and the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection. Pagan religions offered no real message of hope.

What Paul explains is the thinking of the early church based on Jesus' teachings and his own resurrection. The four Gospels give us a fuller idea about death and life. For instance, John 14:1-4 presents Jesus teaching his questioning disciples that his approaching passion is part of God's plan and there is a place and life for all believers that has been prepared for us.

Enough time had passed that some Christians in Thessalonica had now died. Those early believers really expected Christ to return any day, but they were unsure what would happen to those who had already died. Was it too late for them? What about this idea of life after death? If Jesus is really coming back to this world when will it be, what are the signs, and what are we to do in the meantime? Those questions are still with us today.

But now, after 2000 years have passed, multiple predictions about the end of

the world and second coming of Jesus have proven false. The Bible has been formulated, meticulously examined and interpreted as we try to reduce the return of Christ to a predictable formula with identifiable clues.

Paul's admonition is clear: (1) timing and dates are not important, (2) Jesus' coming will be as surprising as the appearance of a thief in the night, (3) so, let's get on with life as an opportunity to share Christ with our world until he comes (5:1-2, 11)!

Second Coming theology is very popular today, evidenced by movies, books, Bible study programs and preachers who have it all figured out. For several years, people asked me to do a study of John's Revelation. Finally, I agreed to do a Sunday night series and it was very well attended.

One dear church member, a college professor in the field of foreign languages, asked me the same question every week: "When will you tell us the church is raptured out of this evil world so we won't have to go through the tribulation?" In my lifetime, I remember the anti-Christ identified as Hitler, Stalin, Chairman Mao, Khrushchev and a variety of other frightening figures. The turn of the last century is not the only date someone has predicted would mark the Second Coming.

Paul is sharing hope, not based on our desire for comfort or escape, not explained by a contorted timetable that involves strange biblical contortions and presumptions, but hope based on what the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished and promised. Paul declares that this message of hope is not just his idea but comes "from the Lord" (4:14). Since the four Gospels were not yet in circulation, we wonder if Paul had already had access to those developing writings within the leadership of the Jerusalem church? Had written forms of Jesus' acts and words already been collected?

Paul uses common apocalyptic images and language: trumpets blaring, angels shouting and the Lord returning victoriously in the heavens, as the dead arise and we join

Formations

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

them in God's everlasting kingdom. The concept of "rapture" appears in verse 17, meaning when Jesus calls us all home no power will be able to oppose him. As though this is all the foundation of hope we need, Paul declares, "So encourage one another with these words" (4:18).

But Paul does not use the promise of Christ's return to suggest suffering and fear are not real factors in this world of "peace and security." Paul plainly states there is pain and destruction that signal Christ's return as labor pains signal an approaching birth (5:3).

As we wait for Christ's return it is much like knowing a thief can come in the night, but we must not allow the darkness to blind us. We must not join the world in drunken celebrations. We must "stay sober, wearing faithfulness and love as a piece of armor that protects our body and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (5:8).

In a later letter to the Ephesians Paul expands this image to include "the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11-17). Paul never sees Christians simply abiding their time until the victorious Christ returns to destroy evil and gather his children home. We live "in the meantime," with the instruction: "Continue encouraging each other and building each other up, just like you are already doing" (5:11).

We look forward to that glorious day when Christ will appear in all his glory and power, when evil will be destroyed, when death will be swallowed up in God's love, when all God's children will be gathered home, never to be parted. But in all the todays we are allotted, may we love and live so those around us may discover God's gift of everlasting life.

Let your heart be filled with grace and hope, for God has promised!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.