

Community Church of Issaquah
November 6, 2022
The Need for the Coming of Christ
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There are certain aspects of the Scriptures that are difficult for us to identify with or understand. Last Sunday and again today, we're trying to wrap our heads around a small group of believers who faced indescribable difficulties simply because they had left their old faith traditions and had come to believe in one God and in God's son Jesus Christ. For each of us, professing our belief in Christ and becoming followers was a simple act that has had mostly positive outcomes. That was not the case of those who made up this new "church" in Thessalonica.

Their act of forsaking centuries of worshipping the gods and goddesses of their man-made religion came with a very high price. More than likely, these new believers would have tried to keep their change of faiths in secret, lest others would find and punish them. You and I haven't experienced what is called persecution for our faith. We have grown up and lived in an environment in which the norm was to be "Christian" and be faithful church members. We made a profession of our faith and belief of Christ as Savior, joined a church, and the rest is history.

We often take for granted that this is the way the world works for people regardless of which religion they follow. It's shocking to us when we hear stories about particular groups of humankind who are truly persecuted in the very

real sense of the word. To read a news account of the genocide of the Uyghur people in China is shocking, to say the least. Or to hear about the assaults on Christians in Egypt that has caused their numbers to decline by the thousands. Or to find out that Muslims in the Hindu nations of India and Pakistan are under attack daily. Oh, we say, those are happening in other parts of the world. We don't have that problem here in our country.

It is true that as Christians we are not under that severe type of persecution. However, that is not to say that prejudice and discrimination are not happening every day in our country. But let's get back to Thessalonica. Here are people being attacked, being separated from families, being driven from their wage earning jobs, and even murdered. Is it any wonder then that when they incorrectly believed that Jesus was coming back any day, they were not sure at all what to do.

On the one hand, they feared what the second coming of Christ would do to each of them, and at the same time, they were so ready to be rescued from the difficult life they were living. They loved Jesus and were working diligently to do what they believed to be God's work. This is highlighted with Paul and Timothy's praise for their remarkable persistence. So, what were they supposed to do? Was it wrong for them to want there to be a spiritual rescue with Christ's return? It was somewhat a dilemma that they were not sure how to handle. What about us? Is it wrong for us to want there to be a spiritual rescue and for Christ to return?

My roommate in seminary was truly an unusual young man. He was the son of a Baptist preacher and his father had actually named this son after a well-known religious leader named William Carey. My roommate's name was Carey William Jones – or just Carey. He had a unique talent to impersonate singers. One moment he was singing exactly like Frank Sinatra and the next exactly like Johnny Mathis. If you weren't seeing Carey singing, you would have sworn it was a celebrity. He also had some very unique mantras that he would repeat often. Some mornings when we was waking up he would say, "My mouth feels like the bottom of a Russian horse doctor's valise." I'm not sure he even knew what a valise was. But the one thing he would say with sincerity and frequency each time we had a major test or major assignment was this, "Oh, Lord Jesus, quickly come."

I would not be honest if I did not say that there have been times in my own life when that plea was either whispered or spoken in silence. Maybe you have said it or felt it as well. The truth is, the desire for Jesus to return has been a reality for centuries. It would be impossible to name a time in history since the death of Jesus when Christians have not wished for a second coming of Christ. Yet there are so many questions concerning that possibility that we have no answers to or even know how to verbalize.

Let's begin with Paul's admonishment to these people about the possibility of Jesus's return to earth. "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose

and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back so that he may be revealed at the proper time."

Now we begin to ask questions. First, who is this man of lawlessness? For 2000 years, there have been many who fill this role. Pontius Pilate? Attila the Hun? Alexander the Great? Napoleon? Hitler? Putin? The list is huge and could even include others we wonder about. It isn't the individual himself that is the sole fear, but the acts of lawlessness that he commits that is the core of this deep concern. And even though Paul tells the church at Thessalonica that the man is doomed to destruction for doing this, the hateful acts are still committed.

This scripture passage doesn't name an individual that the believers in the little church of Thessalonica should fear, so we have no one to point a finger at. It may have been Paul's way to exercising a prophetic ability of seeing history repeat itself with lawlessness as Pilate had done, for instance. We don't know. But for me that more startling portion of Paul's statement is often overlooked in the scripture passage. My eyes popped when I read for the first time that verse that says, "And now you know what is holding him back so that he may be revealed at the proper time." I immediately asked, "What's holding him back?" Is Jesus waiting for the right lawless man? Is that what's holding him back? If that's not it, what is it?

Then to make me even more confused, there's this time element attached to this verse. "That he might be revealed at the proper time." Early believers thought it would happen during their generation, but as history records, that did not happen. So, when is the proper time? What circumstances will define that proper time? Is the world going to get worse and Christ is just waiting for a catastrophe to happen and then he'll make an appearance? It's already been 2000 years, so how much longer will it be? Question after question.

As a Bible student, I took a course in eschatology which is simply a course in the Second Coming of Christ. Though there is much in the Scriptures on this subject, particularly in the final book of Revelations, I was left with so many more questions than I had received answers. Here are just a few I struggled with:

- Where will Christ appear in his second coming?
- Will he come back to Jerusalem?
- What will he look like? Will he be a brown skin Arab as Jesus was in his life?
- Will Jesus be a faithful Jewish rabbi again?
- What kind of message will Christ bring?
- Will there be an immediate judgement day? What will happen then?
- What language will Christ speak?
- Will angels come with him?

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is two-fold. First, we do not know when Christ will return, and that should not be our greatest concern. It will happen in God's

timeline, not ours. This was the basic message Paul shared with this church who had been confused in thinking the return was eminent for them. And second, it is normal for believers who witness a lawless and broken world to want there to be a time when Christ will return to bring peace, love and justice for all. I want to join with the church of Thessalonica in both anticipating the coming of Christ but at the same time, continuing to do God's work when and where I can.

Paul's message then and now is the same. Don't worry about it. It will happen on God's timeline not ours. Just faithfully keep doing what you're doing. Having corrected their misunderstanding about Christ's return, Paul's focus was on their faithfulness. He could not guarantee that there would never be any more persecution for them, but he wanted to give them clarity and hope, plus affirmation about their continued witness of Christ. With all that said, I am quite sure there will be many times in the days ahead when the first thing that comes out of my mouth are the words of my old seminary roommate, "Oh, Lord Jesus, quickly come." And personally, I don't think that's going to be a solo, but a chorus of many.

Now as we prepare to share in the communion of our Lord, let's stand as you are able and join as we sing the hymn, "O, the Blood of Jesus."