

Second Thessalonians

Jesus' Flight Back to Earth Has Been Cleared to Land. But When?

Magellan, like Sinatra, Elvis and Monica, says, "Say no more."

Os Guinness, of Britain's beer family, writes in *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, Word Publishing (1998):

"When Magellan set sail from Spain in 1519 ... he could have no idea his trip would take three long years ... or that only one of his (five) ships would return and that he would perish. ... He sought ... to circumnavigate the globe to show that the world was round. ...

"Out of the original Armada crew of 265, only 18 completed the 39,300-mile, round-the-world voyage. ... Magellan demonstrated the fortitude of a life in focus. (God's calling on *your* life) directly counters the great modern pressure toward *pluralization* because the call of Jesus provides the priorities and perspectives that are essential for ***a focused life in an overloaded age.***"

In our voyage through the Bible we're checking out this ancient, most-unread, best-selling collection of history, poetry, songs, prophecies, philosophy, sermons and personal letters.

In July 1998 *The Seattle Times* reported, "There's been a real surge in the search for meaning, an eruption in matters of the spirit."

In these lunches we've been trying to determine if the Bible is relevant today. We've focused on its superstar, Jesus Christ, God's only procreated Son. With your new Bible savvy, I wonder -- did you see Christmas through different eyes this year? If so, how?

Shuffling the Bible's Deck

Most of the Bible takes place in tiny Israel in the "Fertile Crescent" between the eastern Mediterranean and the endless Arabian desert. "The Promised Land" is less than 150 miles north to south. Early Jerusalem was not a metropolis. It was more like a waystation between Egypt and Mesopotamia, hard by the Tigris and Euphrates.

God's Word, a collection of ancient books and letters recopied through the centuries, covers from the Stone Age to the Roman Empire, but its message is timeless.

Its first 39 books (Old Testament) were penned on papyrus scrolls in Hebrew and Aramaic. For ages the oldest Hebrew manuscripts dated from the 9th and 10th centuries AD. They contained the OT's first five books. Then in 1947 the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, dating back 1,000 years *earlier* than the 9th century! They contained every OT book except Esther.

Jewish tradition says the scribe Ezra (central figure of the OT Book of Ezra) was the first to collect and arrange all the OT's books. The OT tells what happened from Creation up to about 400 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It's all about how God dealt with old Israel during, as Shakespeare put it, the best and worst of times.

The NT's 27 books were written in Greek, with thousands of manuscripts to prove it. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each describe Christ's 33 years on earth. The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke the physician, the Bible's only Gentile author, chronicle the days following Christ's return to heaven, telling how His followers began to broadcast His message out to the edges of the then-small world. Next come many personal letters written mostly by Paul. Finally, the book of Revelation -- a breathless peak into the still-to-come future. But the Bible's primary mission is not to be our crystal ball; it's to introduce us to Jesus.

**Now, ladies and gents ...
Paul and the Thessalonians!**

Last month we did Paul's *first* letter to the Thessalonians, written about 51 AD, some 18 years after Christ's resurrection. The Roman Empire was headed by Claudius, just before Nero.

The scene is northern Greece in the Roman-ruled city of 200,000, Thessalonica, situated on the major trade route linking Rome and Byzantium (today's Istanbul, Turkey).

In the first century there was rampant Greek pagan worship, with more tin horn gods than NBA millionaires. Christendom's first and greatest missionary, a converted, scholarly Jew named Paul, hits town with his pals Silas and Timothy. They preach in the synagogue about Jesus, the Jews' promised Messiah, and many Jews and Greeks choose to follow Christ.

This riles up the local Jewish religious brass who drive Paul and his two buds out of town, charging them with treason against Caesar for touting *another* king, namely Jesus. Paul winds up in Corinth in southern Greece. There he writes both Thessalonian letters, about a year apart, probably two of the three earliest written NT books.

The new Thessalonian converts hit the ground running in their commitment to Christ. Tho' under fierce persecution for their faith, they were holding up well. Paul wrote these letters to "attaboy" them -- and to signal the next two chief events in world history, two events which, now some 2,000 years later, have yet to occur.

Reflecting on The Rapture

Last month we had almost zip time to devote to one of these two mega-events, an incredible, global production known as “The Rapture.” CNN Headline-style, here’s the time line.

When Jesus was on earth, He announces His coming “kingdom” (which hasn’t yet come), but city fathers think He’s out to overthrow Rome’s grip on Palestine. So, they crucify Him.

Three days after dying on a cross, where He forever paid the debt for your sins and mine, Jesus busts out of His grave. Forty days later He jets back to heaven. Another 50 days and the Holy Spirit (of Father, Son and Holy Spirit fame) arrives in Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost.

Christ’s followers get a new jolt of power from the Spirit and tell the throngs in Jerusalem that if they’ll repent of their sins, Jesus will return and roll out His kingdom. But they blow that off. So God selects a Jew named Saul, famous for torturing Christians. Saul then takes on his Gentile name, Paul, after being spectacularly converted (can you say “Damascus Road Experience?”), becoming God’s ambassador to the Gentiles.

Paul preaches the Good News (that Christ died for us) all the way to Rome before being beheaded there for preaching about Jesus.

Paul taught that Jesus will one day return “in the clouds” to snatch up those of us who’d identified ourselves with Christ -- both deceased and living. That’s “the Rapture,” and, of course, it ain’t gone down yet. The next event will be the arrival of a great leader who’ll usher in a period of unprecedented -- but false -- world peace for a period of almost three-and-a-half years.

Then this super-savior (with a small s) is revealed as the, yup, Anti-Christ. At this point, ending the seven-year period known as The Tribulation (or Day of the Lord), the “war to end all wars” erupts in Israel, with all of the world’s major powers converging on this little patch of tormented real estate. And, boom, “The Second Coming” (mentioned 300 times in the NT) happens as Christ returns again! But this time, instead of just circling the field in the clouds, he lands on the Mount Olives east of Jerusalem and leads His heavenly armies in a rout at Armageddon of the Anti-Christ and his minions, banishing them to a fiery spot called hell.

Next, comes what the Bible calls The Great White Throne Judgment when those who’ve given their lives to Christ will advance to “Go” as Christ kicks off His kingdom here on earth during His 1,000-year Millennium reign (mentioned only once in the Bible, in Revelation). Sadly, those who have *not* chosen to follow Christ will be doomed forever, the Bible says, to live in eternal torment. Not a pretty sight.

The Rapture is one of the most colossal spectacles ever. So, let's hit the pause button, re-read First Thess. 4:13-18, then get your thoughts on this awesome event.

Can Second Thessalonians Top *This*?

The new Christ-followers in Thessalonica had become targets of heavy persecution due to their faith in Jesus. Someone had sent them a letter, forging Paul's name, alleging that they were going through the actual Tribulation. So Paul wrote this second letter to relieve them of this misinformation, to say that God hadn't forgotten them (the objects of His grace) -- or their tormentors (objects of His justice)!

Today in our "land of the free" those who travel with Christ are often splattered with scorn, a far cry, for sure, from sufferings and death delivered to Jesus' followers in many nations today. God tells the Thessalonian believers He's tracking these crimes and will, one day, rain judgment down on those who refuse to believe in His Son. He says He'll send them to "everlasting destruction." Wherever that is, the worst part is that it's forever out of God's presence. Just think, God is the Author of EVERYthing GOOD -- beauty, love, joy, peace, forgiveness. And He wants you and me to enjoy it with Him for eternity. But He says if we *choose* otherwise, we'll *get* otherwise.

Let's read Second Thess. chapter 1.

Paul next debunks the bogus report that the Tribulation had already begun. He says two things must happen first. Actually, three. And Christians do differ about the chronology of the first two.

1. The Rapture has to occur. Some Bible translations refer here to this event as a great "rebellion." Literally, however, that Greek word means "**departure**." Remember, the Rapture is when Jesus comes in the clouds, not landing on earth, to pick up His followers, both dead and alive, and they "depart" with Him to heaven or wherever.

2. Then "the man of lawlessness" has to be revealed. 's interesting that in 1999 we're caught up in a front-page debate over the sanctity of the law. This "man of lawlessness" is that Anti-Christ cat, that false Christ. When the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, which has been in ruins since AD 70, is rebuilt right where the Muslims' Dome of the Rock now stands, Anti-Christ will set up shop there.

3. Then all unholy hell breaks out in a bloody, age-ending battle that rages for some three and a half years and would, says the Bible destroy everyone on earth were it not for ta da "the Second Coming of Christ."

Let's tackle ch. 2.

Finally, Paul addresses how to cope with difficulty and pressure. (How much more practical can the Bible get, eh!)

Some of the Thessalonian Christians had dropped out, thinking they'd just chill out 'til Christ's return. And that was some 2,000 years ago! (Could these be the founders of the modern welfare state?) Paul says, basically, "Only God the Father knows the day and hour when Christ will return, so get off your duff, get a job, help others, obey the law, and keep your eyes on Jesus.

[Let's click on ch. 3.](#)

Some of you have accepted God's generous invitation to know and walk through life and eternity with Him. Perhaps some of you have not taken that step of faith yet. If you have questions about it and want to talk one-on-one, feel free to call me.

As Os Guinness wrote, "God has called us, and we are never more ourselves than when we are fully stretched in answering. There is no yawning in response to (His) call. ... Do you long to escape the smallness of a life with no purpose higher than your own? To rise above the mediocrity, tedium and quiet desperation of so many around you? To know a purpose no odds can daunt and no failure can dismay? Listen to Jesus of Nazareth; answer His call."

His Deal

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