

END TIMES CLARITY

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18



For the Lord himself will descend from heaven...”

For 2,000 years, people have wondered about the events of the end times and when Jesus will return. It can be said that more ink has been used debating and speculating about this area of doctrine than any other. Terms such as millennium, tribulation, the number 666, and antichrist are used in the media and in supermarket tabloids, but questions remain.

- Will Jesus return physically and reign on earth for 1,000 years?
- Will Christians go through a seven-year tribulation?
- Will the Second Coming of Christ occur at the same time that believers meet Christ in the air (the rapture)?
- Will Christians be raptured (removed from this earth) and other people “left behind”?
- What does the nation of Israel have to do with the end times?

Church history has shown us that within the confines of evangelicalism there are many views of end-times events held by godly men and women alike, but all share some key practical points:

- Jesus will come again for those who love Him.
- Jesus calls his followers to be ready all the time.
- No one knows the day or the hour of His return.

Although many today do not appear to do so, the Bible expects and encourages believers to look toward His coming with anticipation. Since Christ Himself is our great hope (1 Timothy 1:1), the study of end time events (eschatology) is really a study about Christ and our hope in God’s plans and purposes. Many who truly love the Lord and await His return with eager anticipation possess different perspectives in dealing with the chronology and meaning of a number of the events which surround His coming. At the same time, there are some required beliefs which are not debated among evangelicals and are quite clear from the pages of sacred Scripture.

When it comes to the discussion of eschatology at Village Bible Church, it is helpful to understand what the position is. In other words, what is required of our members to affirm? As the elders approached this matter in the drafting of our current statement of faith it was not their desire to create a litmus test of membership on the basis of secondary eschatological beliefs, but rather to focus in on the primary elements of eschatology on which all evangelicals find agreement.

So what are the essentials or non-negotiables to eschatology? Listed below are the four areas where we must agree as Christians:

- The Return of Christ
- Resurrection of Believers and Unbelievers
- Judgment of Believers and Unbelievers
- Eternal Destinies for all either in Heaven or Hell

It is for these primary elements that we are willing to contend, and we therefore cling to them for the sake of our joy, the joy of our flock, and the glory of Christ. As these are seen to be integral to Christian belief and practice, we hold to them with a closed hand.

At the same time, we hope to provide this distinctive to help our members in discussing the various debated issues, which we do not see as being of utmost importance in light of our understandings. This distinction is not intended to assert that those doctrines which we label as “secondary” are less weighty, but rather it is intended to guard against diluting that which is abundantly clear in Scripture. If you cling to all beliefs with an equal amount of zeal, then you may run the risk that disagreeing with another’s view on minor and less clear doctrine can become a rejection of their overall theology. Why not instead cling tightly to those things for which you are willing to fight and die (i.e. The deity of Christ, The Trinity, infallibility of Scripture, etc.) while holding doctrines which are less clearly attested and less central to the basic call toward gospel repentance and belief with an “open hand”?

Yet, in spite of this, there are few things in a church that cause more disunity than the issues surrounding a discussion on end times. Most churches find themselves on the edge of two extremes. The first is for a church to establish a very tight and nuanced position that allows only a small circle of Christians to affirm or adhere. This closed-hand view can allow for two unintended consequences. It gives an impression that since a church holds to such a narrow viewpoint, any and all other viewpoints are somehow defective or devoid of scriptural basis. Next, it elevates the secondary doctrines within eschatology to the same level of importance as the essential ones. The second extreme that churches can fall into is to see the study of end times as needless and unnecessary. This leads a church to shun much of the scripture as if it is good for nothing more than bringing about quarrels and disputes within the body of Christ and, therefore, not profitable for the people of God.

Village Bible Church desires to find a middle ground when it comes to the subject of end times. While recognizing the inherent difficulties that surround a subject as polarizing as the end times, we affirm the need to teach the whole counsel of God’s Word, even when at times it may be difficult. It was with this heart in mind when writing our current doctrinal statement that we sought to have a robust section on eschatology which showed our great anticipation and expectation of the Lord’s return, but also reflecting the broad understanding within Evangelicalism when it came to some of the finer points of the discussion. It was to this end that we affirmed, as members, the following position on eschatology:

At a time known only to God, Jesus Christ will descend from heaven, and all believers – both those who have died in Christ and those who are still alive – will meet Him in the air. This hope produces in us a sense of constant expectancy and motivates us to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

Every human being who has ever lived will one day be raised bodily from the dead. In judgment and condemnation, unbelievers will be consigned to eternal conscious punishment in hell, while believers will enter into eternal blessedness and joy. In the new heavens and the new earth, Christ’s Kingdom will come to full fruition as the redeemed, in gloriously renewed bodies, dwell with Him forever, serving Him, reigning with Him and giving Him unending praise and glory.¹

It is clear that this doctrinal statement affirms the future second coming of our Lord. Yet to many seasoned Christians, it is evident that much is omitted from that statement regarding things such as the length and events of a tribulation period, the timing of the rapture, the nature of the millennium, the person of the Antichrist, and the like. It is here that we allow each member the freedom to come to their own understanding regarding these secondary issues within eschatology. However, this freedom comes with a gentle admonition that brotherly love cautions us not to seek to convince each other regarding personal conviction. While discussion, and even debate, on these matter can be healthy within any church, we ask that great care and consideration of others be in the forefront. As we approach any study of eschatology, we are reminded that all of us “look through a glass dimly” and recognize the need to be humble in our own understanding of such events as well as showing grace to others who may disagree

¹ Village Bible Church Statement of Faith

or differ on the finer points. In doing so we live out the ancient motto by Rupertus Meldenius that says, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." Moreover, it is the heart of the elders that everyone at Village Bible Church can say in one voice, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

The Elders of Village Bible Church



OPEN IT

1. **When have you experienced the death of someone close? What did this loss teach you about life and death?**



EXPLORE IT

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

2. **Who does Paul want the Thessalonians not to be uninformed about?**
3. **From where will the Lord descend?**
4. **Who will be with Him?**
5. **What will happen to those who are alive at His coming?**
6. **What should we do in light of this teaching?**

GET IT

What happens when we die? The question is as old as death itself and is asked by children, senior citizens, religious thinkers and philosophers alike. Is death the end of all things? Does anything survive the grave? And what of a person's body? When a man stops breathing and his heart stops beating, does his body have any meaning or any future?²

7. What fears do people of all backgrounds have about death?

8. How does this passage help the believer not to fear death and dying?

A crisis occurred in the Thessalonian church when one of their members died. Since they had expected to all be alive when Christ returned, they were now confused. Did this mean their friend would miss out on Christ's coming? Had this person died because God was angry with them? How much longer would it be before Christ finally did return? Maybe you have fears about what will happen when you die or when Christ returns. In this passage, Paul seeks to calm our fears and encourage us to look forward to the day we meet our Maker.³

9. Why was Paul so concerned about the Thessalonians being uninformed about his subject? How could this ignorance have affected their walk with Christ?

...about those who are asleep...

Are asleep (koimao){to lie outstretched, to lie down} literally refers to normal sleep but is used figuratively in the present context referring to those who are dead and specifically those who are "dead in Christ." It was common for Greeks and Romans to use this use of word "sleep" for physical death. In other words, Paul is referring to those who are continually falling asleep as a regular course of life in the church. The believers in Thessalonica had grown increasingly concerned as their fellow believers continued to die.⁴

10. What can we learn about the Christian's life after death from Paul's use of the word "sleep"?

11. How should this give comfort to those grieving over the deaths of fellow believers?

² <http://sbcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Thessalonians.pdf>

³ <https://www.ivpress.com/bible/study.php?study=517>

⁴ http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_413-14.htm#4:13

12. What do the following verses tell us about our life after death?

- John 11:25
- John 5:24
- John 14:1–3
- 1 Corinthians 15:51–57
- 2 Corinthians 5:8
- Philippians 3:20–21

13. In what ways would Paul's mention of Christ's resurrection have been of great hope and peace to the Thessalonians? What hope and peace does the resurrection bring to you?

...we who are alive...

*This phrase clearly indicates Paul was living in the light of the imminent return of His Lord. How do we reach this conclusion? The use of the plural pronoun **we** indicates that Paul himself expected to be alive at Christ's return. Likewise, we as believers are called to live in anticipation and expectation of the coming of Jesus each and every day.*

14. How should you live in light of Christ's imminent return? Give some specific examples.

15. What causes so few Christians to live in light of His return? How does one go about changing this shortsighted view of life?

16. The return of Jesus is the blessed hope of every believer. How does Paul describe this event? What three events will accompany His return?

17. Read 2 Peter 3:3–4. What causes people to scoff at the idea of Christ's return to earth one day? What can we do to speak the truth in love to the scoffers?

A cry of command:

This implies authority and urgency. It was variously used of a general shouting orders to his troops, a driver shouting to excite his horses to greater speed, a hunter encouraging his hounds to the pursuit of the prey, or a captain of rowers exciting them to more vigorous rowing.⁵

⁵ http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_415-16.htm#4:15

18. What does the manner of His descent tell us about our Lord at His return? How does this differ from His first advent?

When a dignitary paid an official visit (parousia) to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey was called the apantēsis (meeting). Many details of this heavenly “meeting” are omitted. For example, there is no reference in verse 17 to the Christian living being “changed” (as in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52), any more than there was in verse 14 to the Christian dead being “raised.” Both are assumed.

Further, it is not clear how literally we are to understand our being caught up ... in the clouds. We know from Jesus Himself that His coming will be personal, visible and glorious, but we also know from Him that it will not be local (“There he is!” “Here he is!”) but universal (“like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other”). Presumably, therefore, our going to meet him will also transcend space. As for the clouds, they are to every Bible reader a familiar and easily recognized symbol of the immediate presence of God – at the Exodus, on Mount Sinai, filling the tabernacle, during the wilderness wanderings, at the transfiguration of Jesus, at His ascension, and at His glorious appearing. The reference to the air may be equally symbolic, for it was thought of as the dwelling-place of the devil and his demons. The fact that the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on the demons’ home ground so to speak, shows something of His complete mastery over them.⁶

19. How does the idea that we will meet Jesus upon His return give you confidence amidst times of trials and turmoil?

The entire content and worth of heaven, the entire blessedness of life eternal, is for Paul embraced, in the one thought of being united with Jesus, his Savior and Lord. This will be the acme of eternal bliss.⁷

20. What images or pictures come to mind when you think about seeing Jesus and being with Him forever?

21. What things are we holding onto tightly today that keep us from looking forward to “that day”?

Therefore encourage one another...

*The **present imperative** is a command to make this encouraging mindset your lifestyle. **Encourage** in this verse is virtually synonymous with the idea of strengthening. We have a blessed hope to share and it is surely reasonable that we **not grieve as the rest who have no hope** when our loved ones in the Lord die. Goodbyes are the law of earth. Reunions are the law of heaven.⁸*

22. How does this text allow us to be an encouragement and comfort to other believers? Who needs this encouragement around you? Ask God for opportunities to share this encouragement with others.

⁶ The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians by John Stott - The Bible Speaks Today Series

⁷ http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_417-18.htm

⁸ http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_417-18.htm