

“The Returning King”

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1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (ESV)

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.¹

Jesus is coming again. That is an important part of the story of the Bible. Jesus is now in heaven, and during this time, the gospel is being proclaimed and people are entering in the kingdom of God. One day, Jesus will return to save his people and judge those who have rejected him. And he will return to renew and restore all creation.

Yet when many people talk about Jesus’ second coming, they get a little crazy.

To illustrate that point, let me introduce you to William Miller. William Miller was born on February 15, 1782 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts to a devout Baptist mother, who hoped that one day her son would be a preacher. After marrying in 1803, Miller moved to Vermont, where his faith was damaged by the hypocrisy he saw among professing Christians. His faith was also threatened by his new circle of friends, who read and discussed the works of David Hume, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine, all philosophers who were skeptical of religious faith. Miller eventually turned to Deism, a religious system that believed in a Creator who did not interact with the world or intervene in history.

Miller had a career in law enforcement and when America became involved in the War of 1812, he joined the militia and became a captain in the military. During the Battle of Plattsburgh, Miller and 5,000 other Americans faced a force of 15,000 British troops. Seeing that the odds were against them, Miller believed that only a miracle could help them win. After a few days of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

fighting and a decisive victory by the US Navy on Lake Champlain, America won the battle, and Miller had to reassess his lack of faith.

When Miller returned home after the war, he attended his uncle's Baptist church. On a few occasions, he was asked to preach. On one occasion, the reading for the day was Isaiah 53. This prophecy regarding Jesus brought Miller to faith, and in 1816, he rededicated his life to Christ. However, he still had to face the questions that his deist friends had regarding the Christian faith. So Miller set out to find his answers. He began a two-year intensive study of the Bible, armed with nothing but a concordance. He wanted to avoid all other preconceived notions, so he avoided scholarly commentaries. With no formal training, no knowledge of the original languages, and no scholarly resources, Miller came to a stunning conclusion: the world would end sometime between 1843 and 1844.

(I should stop here and point out the obvious: Jesus gave the church teachers [Eph. 4:11] and no one is meant to interpret the Bible alone. When we ignore teachers and the whole history of biblical interpretation, we are going to make errors.)

Miller had come to this conclusion after reading the passage in Daniel 9 regarding the "seventy sevens" and the mention of 2,300 days in Daniel 8:14. Miller's calculations are too complicated to recount here, but they led him to the conclusion that the world would end soon. In 1833, he published a sixty-four-page pamphlet outlining his beliefs and he began to preach publicly. He traveled throughout the northeast, preaching in a variety of churches. Miller's end-time fever was aided in November of that year when a meteor shower was observed. Some people took this as a sign that Jesus would be returning soon. In time, he gained a large following.

In 1836, Miller published his first book, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year A.D. 1843*. His views were reported on in several national newspapers and two periodicals were created in order to spread his end-time beliefs. It is believed that he had as many as one hundred thousand followers, known as Millerites.

As 1843 approached, Miller claimed that Jesus would return between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. A brilliant comet that appeared in the sky in February 1843 seemed to confirm Miller's prediction.

Of course, March 21, 1843 came and went, and Jesus had still not returned. As March 21, 1844 fast approached, some Millerites had doubts and even Miller seemed to be ready to make

excuses. Yet some of the most fanatic Millerites were undeterred. They quit their jobs and left their families in order to sound the alarm. On March 21, 1844, some of them lost control. One journalist, reporting for the *New York Herald*, said that some Millerites actually jumped from roofs and treetops, in the hopes that they could time their jumps with Christ's return and so be caught up in the air with him. Some of these fanatics were critically injured and some even died.

After the supposed doomsday came and went, Miller issued a public apology, but he said he still believed the end was soon. One of his followers moved the date to October 22, 1844. Of course, that date was wrong, too.²

It's easy to write Miller off as some kind of crackpot. But the fact is that many Christians in every generation since Jesus' ascension to heaven have believed that he would return in their own lifetime. A number of Christians have tried to predict when Jesus would return. And a number of false teachings regarding Jesus' second coming have been taught throughout the years. That's particularly true of the nineteenth century. (Some people who followed William Miller's teachings started the Seventh-day Adventist movement.) In fact, the mainstream view of Jesus' second coming, the one that is popular in America, started around 1830.³

Today, I want to talk about what the Bible really says about Jesus' second coming and why it matters. My hope is to clear up misconceptions and to focus on the reason for Jesus' return and how it should motivate us. There are many passages in the New Testament that deal with Jesus' return, but today we're going to focus only on the ones found in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Just to give us some context: The apostle Paul planted a church in the city of Thessalonica around the year 49 or 50 (Acts 17:1-9). Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia, and it still exists as Thessaloniki, the second-largest city in Greece. Paul spent a few weeks with the Thessalonians, and then departed. But he wrote them two letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Let's first look at the passage that was read earlier, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. It seems that Paul's main point is to clear up a concern that the Thessalonians had. Paul had told them that Jesus would come again and his people would be gathered to him. It seems that the Thessalonians were concerned about some Christians who had died since Paul had planted the

² This retelling of Miller's story is based on Richard Abanes, *End-Time Visions: The Road to Armageddon?* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998), 210-227.

³ I'm referring to the teaching of John Nelson Darby and dispensational premillennialism.

church. Would they miss out on Jesus' second coming? Paul tells them that dead Christians won't miss out—they will be raised from the dead.

He begins with this statement, in verse 13: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” When Paul mentions “those who are asleep,” he’s using a euphemism for the dead. Christians don’t grieve like other people do because they know that people who are united to Christ by faith will have a future resurrection. They will live in bodies that cannot die, in a world that is perfect, and they will live with God forever. So when a Christian dies, we don’t need to feel sorry for that person. Of course, we mourn, and we grieve, and we hurt, because they are not with us. But we don’t grieve as people who have no hope. We have a great hope.

Then Paul starts to describe what will happen: When Jesus returns, the spirits of dead Christians—“those who have fallen asleep”—will come with him, and their spirits will be reunited with their resurrected bodies. As verse 14 says, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

Then Paul describes what will happen: When Jesus returns, first, the bodies of dead Christians will be resurrected and will be risen to be with Jesus. Then, those who are alive will rise to be with Jesus. Then all Christians will be with Jesus “always,” or forever. That’s what Paul writes in verses 15-18:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul’s main point is that no Christians are going to miss out on Jesus’ second coming. All those who are united with Christ will live with him forever. And that should comfort us. That’s why Paul says, “encourage one another with these words.”

I want to point out a couple of things about this passage. One, the second coming of Jesus is going to be public. No one is going to miss it. Jesus will “descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (verse 16). Jesus will cry out a command, perhaps through the voice of an archangel, for the dead to rise, just as he cried out to the dead Lazarus in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43). The

trumpet and the clouds remind us of when God met Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16-20). This is an appearance of God. Jesus comes to gather his people to himself. What's interesting is that the reference to the trumpet could also allude to times in the Old Testament when God subdued Israel's enemies. So, for example, in Psalm 47, we're told that God "subdued peoples under us,/and nations under our feet" (verse 3). Then we're told, "God has gone up with a shout,/the LORD with the sound of a trumpet" (verse 5). The trumpet announces the coming King, who will protect his people and conquer his enemies.

Some people believe that there will be a secret "rapture" of Christians, who then disappear into heaven with Jesus. (The word "rapture" comes from the Latin translation of a Greek verb that we see in verse 17, which is translated as "caught up.") But this passage does not depict anything done in secret. All will see and hear Jesus coming.

For reasons that will become more clear as we go, I don't think this view of Jesus' second coming is right. I don't believe in multiple "second" comings of Jesus. The Bible says there will be one more coming of Jesus, and this will be a time of salvation for God's people and judgment for those who have rejected him. The Bible also states that there will be one time of resurrection. Jesus himself said that in John 5:25-29:

²⁵ "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

So dead Christians and dead non-Christians will be raised at the same time, for either salvation or judgment. Christians aren't saved because they have "done good." The Bible makes it clear that they are saved by grace. Salvation is a gift that none of us could earn, and it's a gift that none of us deserve. But the lives of Christians should be marked by doing good, or obeying Jesus.

I want to point out something else in this passage. Notice that it doesn't say what happens *after* Christians meet the Lord in the air. It doesn't say if they go up or down or just stay in the air. Our answer to that question depends on our theology, and how we read other passages in the Bible. Many people assume the answer is that Christians go with Jesus back to heaven. But

nowhere in the Bible does it say that. Here's something interesting: The Greek word⁴ that is translated as "to meet" had a technical meaning in the Greco-Roman world. It referred to the meeting of a delegate of citizens and a visiting emperor or king. The citizens of the city would leave the city, meet the king, and then escort the king back into the city. Cicero uses this language to describe the receptions given to both Julius Caesar and Octavian (or Augustus), both Roman emperors.⁵ The Jewish historian Josephus uses this language to describe how Alexander the Great was greeted.⁶ Luke also uses this word in this way in the book of Acts. Toward the end of the book, a number of Christians come from Rome to meet Paul and escort him back into the city (Acts 28:15-16). Given what the rest of the Bible says about Jesus' second coming, and the meaning this word had in Paul's day, I think Jesus will gather his people to himself, and then they will descend to earth, where there will be a final judgment and then the restoration or renewal of the whole earth.

But what's important to notice is that Paul doesn't give us all these details. Again, the point is that we should be comforted and encouraged by the fact that we will be with Jesus forever. Jesus' second coming is meant to comfort us. It's not meant to fuel all kinds of speculations about when he will come, or exactly how he will come.

Jesus' second coming should also motivate us to live holy lives. We see this in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. In that passage, Paul makes it clear that Jesus' second coming will come unexpectedly, like a thief comes in the night. But he also says that Christians should be ready. This is what Paul says:

¹ Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so

⁴ ἀπάντησις.

⁵ *Ad Atticum* 8.16.2; 16.11.6.

⁶ *Jewish Antiquities* 11.327.

that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Paul is basically saying, “Don’t worry about the exact time of Jesus’ second coming. Just be ready.” Jesus is going to come like a thief in the night—unexpectedly and without warning. People who have rejected Jesus will be caught off guard. They think they have “peace and security,” but what they’ll get is “sudden destruction.” But Christians shouldn’t be caught off guard. They should be ready. Paul says they’re children of the light. He says they shouldn’t sleep. He doesn’t mean that Christians never literally sleep. He means they shouldn’t be spiritually lethargic. If you’re a Christian, you should actively follow Jesus. You should pursue a greater knowledge of him and obey him. And if you do these things, you’re ready. You’re armed with the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation. If you’re a Christian, you have nothing to fear. You’re not destined for wrath, but for salvation. Paul says in verse 10 that whether Christians have already died, or fallen asleep, or whether they’re alive when Jesus returns, they will live with him forever.

In those verses, Paul gives us a similar message, but with a bit of a different angle. Here, he says that when Jesus returns, those who have rejected him will receive God’s wrath. But Christians have nothing to fear. They should simply be ready by living as Christians. And Paul says, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (verse 11). We should encourage each other to be ready in case Jesus returns before we die. Ultimately, it’s God that causes us to be ready. Paul ends his first letter to the Thessalonians with the assurance that God will make them ready for the return of Christ. Look at verses 23 and 24 in chapter 5:

²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

God will make sure his children are kept holy and blameless. So if you are a child of God, if you have put your trust in Jesus, there is nothing to fear. Jesus took the wrath that you deserve when he died on the cross.

Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians a few months after he wrote the first one. In this letter, there are two passages that deal with Jesus’ second coming. The first one is 2

Thessalonians 1:5-12. Before we look at those verses, it's important to know that first Paul mentions their growing faith and their perseverance. He writes this in verses 3 and 4:

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

These new Christians in Thessalonica were already facing opposition because of their faith. The persecutions and afflictions they were enduring probably included a lot of social pressure and ridicule from non-Christians. If you look at how the non-Christian Thessalonians are described in Acts 17:1-15, you can imagine that they might have tried to get the Christians into legal and political trouble. Christians in Thessalonica were charged with being unfaithful to Caesar. Whatever the Thessalonians were facing, Paul wanted them to know that Jesus would take care of their opponents. So he writes this in verses 5-12:

⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—
⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that the people who afflicted them would be repaid by God. Non-Christians will face God's righteous judgment and Christians will be granted relief, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven," which is another way of describing his second coming. On this day, Jesus comes "to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed" (verse 10). So this would seem to be the very same coming of Jesus described in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. For Christians, this is a good day. It's a day when their Lord and Savior comes for them, and it's a day when their enemies receive the justice they deserve.

But for God's enemies, it's an awful day. It's a day of "vengeance on those who do not know and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (verse 8). Most commentators believe this is one group of people. Those who do not know God are the ones who don't obey the gospel of Jesus. It may sound strange to say that the gospel is something to be obeyed. Most of us think that the good news of what Jesus has done is a message to be believed. And it is. But it also demands obedience. A number of passages in the New Testament indicate that (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 6:17; 10:16; 15:18; 16:26; Heb. 5:9; 1 Pet. 1:2, 14, 22). No one is saved by their obedience to God. We're saved by grace, which is a gift. God does all the work. But if you have a relationship with Jesus, you will obey him. You won't obey him perfectly, because we still struggle with sin, but generally speaking, there will be evidence of obedience. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15; see also verses 21, 23; 1 John 2:3; 5:3; 2 John 6).

As I've said many times, Christianity is primarily about a relationship. We were made to know God, to represent him and obey him. But all of us have turned away from him. We have broken that relationship. God has provided a way to have that relationship restored. The only way to be reconciled to God is through Jesus, who paid for our disobedience on the cross. All who put their trust in Jesus—and therefore love him and obey him—will be saved from the terrible judgment described in this passage.

The reason why Jesus hasn't returned is because God is giving people time to repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus (2 Pet. 3:9). God is patient, but he doesn't wait forever. Whether we first die or whether Jesus returns while we're still living, we have a limited amount of time. So if you're not a Christian, you shouldn't wait until tomorrow to put your trust in Jesus. You may not have tomorrow.

I have no idea when Jesus will return. He could come in my lifetime, or he could come thousands of years from now. I don't know. But whether he comes very soon or not, I have no guarantee that I'll be alive tomorrow. I have no guarantee that I'll be alive this afternoon. Just this past week, I saw a story in *The Boston Globe* about a young man who was killed in an accident on 128 in Lexington. This happened last Tuesday. The wheel of a pickup truck driving south on the highway came off, somehow crossed the median, and crashed into the car of Charles Hu, who was driving north. He was declared dead at the scene. He was only 26 years old. Like

me, he was a graduate of Brandeis University.⁷ I'm sure he didn't wake up on Tuesday morning thinking it would be his last day. But, still, that was the day he died. There's simply no guarantee how much time we have. Whether Jesus comes tomorrow, or we die tomorrow, there will be judgment. Anyone united to Christ is safe, but anyone who has rejected Jesus "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (verse 9). Hell is being cast away from God's presence forever. It's like dying a slow, never-ending death, because it's being away from the source of light and life and anything that is good. Fortunately, Charles Hu was a Christian. But many die without knowing Christ.

So Jesus' return is a comfort and it's a warning. It will be a day of vindication for God's people. But it should also motivate us to live now for God. That's why Paul prays for the Thessalonians. In verses 11-12, he says, "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul prays that God would "make" them worthy of his calling. A better translation is that God would "count" them worthy of his calling. Paul wants the Thessalonians to do all that God has called them do. But only God's power and grace can make us do what he wants us to do. So Paul prays to that end. He wants Jesus to be glorified in Christians. In other words, he wants the world to see how worthy Jesus is and how much weight he carries in the lives of Christians. And Paul prays that Christians would be glorified in Jesus, that they too would be seen as worthy. The return of Christ should motivate us in the same way. We should pray that Jesus would be glorified in us, and we look forward to the day when we will be glorified in him.

There's one more passage in 2 Thessalonians related to the return of Jesus, and that is found in chapter 2. I'm not going to explain it in detail right now, but I'll do so tonight. Right now, I'll describe it a bit. Apparently there were some false teachers claiming that Jesus had already returned and this, understandably, bothered the Thessalonians. So Paul wanted them to know that "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him" (verse 1), the same event as in 1 Thessalonians 4, hadn't happened yet. That won't happen until after a time of rebellion, or literally, apostasy, occurs. At that time, a "man of lawlessness is revealed"

⁷ Laura Crimaldi, "Lexington Man Killed by Runaway Wheel Is Mourned," *The Boston Globe*, January 28, 2015, B1, 4. Available online at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/01/27/police-investigating-fatal-accident-route-lexington/eHKJXutVoaHR9IN7hdNHcL/story.html> (accessed January 30, 2016).

(verse 3) and he “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (verse 4). When Paul writes about the temple, he always uses that word to refer to the church. So perhaps some satanic figure, who already existed in Paul’s time, would come into the church, claiming to be God. Or the “temple of God” could be a reference to a temple he will set up for himself, or a metaphor for the seat of God’s authority.⁸ Regardless of the exact setting, the point is that he’ll claim to be God, though he’s clearly not. He’ll perform counterfeit miracles (verse 9) and those who have rejected God will be deceived. These people “refused to love the truth and so be saved” (verse 10). In fact, God is the one who sends these people “a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false” (verse 11). Really, we might say that these people hate the truth, so God gives them over to lies. They refuse to acknowledge the true God, so God gives them over to a false god. But when this “man of lawlessness” comes, Jesus will destroy him at his coming (verse 8).

I bring that up to give us a fuller picture of Jesus’ second coming. Before Jesus returns, and before his people are caught up in the clouds with him, there will be figure—whether it’s a person or an institution—that will claim to be divine. This “man of lawlessness” will perform “false signs and wonders” and many will be deceived. But then Jesus will come and destroy him. We really don’t know exactly what this “man of lawlessness” is and I don’t think it’s important to speculate. The point is that before Jesus comes, there will be deception. But God’s people will not be deceived, because they know and love the truth. And that should motivate us to know God truly. We need to know what the Bible says so we won’t be deceived. If we cling to Jesus and pursue him, we have nothing to fear.

So here is the picture that we get of Jesus’ return: Before he returns, there will be an evil person, or possibly an institution, that claims to be divine and performs counterfeit miracles. He will deceive non-Christians. But Jesus will come, and he will cry out with a command for his people to be raised from the dead. All the dead will be raised. Everyone united to Christ, whether dead or alive, will rise to meet him in the air, and they will be his entourage as he descends to the earth. Then, Jesus will destroy the man of lawlessness and he will judge everyone. Those who

⁸ G. K. Beale (*1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003], 207-208) believes that the temple is the church. Gene L. Green (*The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 312-313) prefers to read this phrase (“temple of God”) against the background of the imperial cult that existed in Thessalonica. In that reading, this temple is “the structure dedicated to the one who asserted himself as a god” (312). Sam Storms (*Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* [Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013], 534) believes that “Paul is employing what appears to be *stock, proverbial language for self-deification*.”

have rejected Jesus will be cast away from the presence of the Lord and will experience eternal destruction in what we know as hell. It's at this time that heaven and earth will be renewed, so that there is a "new heavens and earth" (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

Now, I realize that this picture is one that is a bit different than what many of you have heard. But after studying all the relevant passages, as well as the history of theology and biblical interpretation, I think this view is the right one. I wouldn't teach it otherwise. Yet even if you have a different view, or if this view turns out to be slightly different than the way things actually happen, we can all agree that Jesus will come again, and he will save his people and judge those who rejected him. He will bring about a new creation. And Jesus' people will live with him there forever.

All of this gives us hope. No Christian will miss out on living with Jesus forever. No one can take that away from a Christian. Persecution, affliction, and tribulation can't take us away. In fact, Jesus promised us tribulation. He said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The return of Jesus should motivate us to live for him. We should pursue a greater knowledge of him. We should obey him. We should live as if he could return at any moment. So we love God and love our neighbors (Matt. 22:34-40). We work hard, and relate to others in the church and others in our family and others in the world the way Jesus wants us to. We tell others about Jesus and make disciples (Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:18-20). We pray that God would count us worthy of the calling we've received (Eph. 4:1). We pray that we would do the works that God has prepared in advance for us (Eph. 2:10).

Here's what we *don't* do. We don't sit around speculating about when Jesus will return. We don't listen to false teachers who do speculate about such things. We don't need to worry about when Jesus will return. Instead, we should glorify him by obeying him. We also don't need to worry about repaying our enemies. God has said, "Vengeance is mine" (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). God has given us civil authorities to take care of evil people in the world (Rom. 13:1-7). And if the government fails, we know that God will make sure that ultimate justice is served. All injustices will be punished. Those who reject Jesus will pay for their injustices themselves. But for those of us who are Christians, our injustice was paid for with Jesus' blood, not our own.

Christians, we have a great hope. We don't grieve as others do, who have no hope.

If you are here today and you're not a Christian, remember, you're not guaranteed life tomorrow. At some point, your life will come to an end. What is your hope in the face of death? Many atheists simply think that life ceases upon death. But how do you know? What if life goes on forever after death? What if those who don't want God in this life have their wish granted, and they live forever without God? What if that life without God also means life without anything good, since God is the one who gives every good gift? What if that life is nothing but emptiness, loneliness, and despair? Where can anyone find hope in such a life?

The truth is that if you go through this life without wanting anything to do with God, you will get your wish granted. An eternity without God and also without anything good: no friends, no pleasures, nothing fun or pleasant or peaceful. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can turn to Jesus today.