

## First Thessalonians Outline

**Introduction:** First Thessalonians is probably Paul's first letter. The overarching concern in the letter is pastoral: a member of the community has died. And while this might be a sad occasion in any community- it's a disaster for the Thessalonians. It's a disaster because of their understanding of time. The earliest Christian communities held what is known as an "immanent eschatology", meaning they believed Jesus would come back very soon, certainly within their lifetimes, and bring God's kingdom about on earth. This immanent eschatological view led Paul in his early letters to hold an extremely dim view of marriage, for instance- why marry when Christ would be coming back so quickly and there was so much work to do? Some of these more extreme views, however, were absent in Paul by the time he wrote his final letter, the Letter to the Romans, pointing to the fact that Paul had begun to adjust to the notion that if Jesus was coming back, perhaps it was going to be awhile.

Here in First Thessalonians, though, the community was still waking up anxiously every day wondering if today would be the day. And then what a calamity it must have been for them for a member to die. What did that mean for him? Was he lost to Christ? Would he miss out on the kingdom coming to them? And where was he, anyway?

So, Paul attempts to quell this anxiety as best as he can by explaining what he believes will happen when Jesus does come back. In a nutshell he imagines that Christ will come back descending through the clouds, and everyone who is dead will be raised up in a kind of mass resurrection. And then, only after the dead have been raised, then the living will be raised up with the dead, and everyone will be lifted up as well. Unfortunately, modern readings of this text miss the central problem Paul is dealing with- namely a brother has died and the question is not about the mechanics of Jesus coming, but whether or not the brother will somehow lose out with the rest of the church because he has died. And so because of this, this text has come to be lifted up (no pun intended) by folks enamored of what is called "The Rapture" (not a Biblical term), a belief that the good guys will be beamed up to the Jesus mothership, while the bad guys will be "left behind" on earth to be tortured or what have you.

To be sure Paul certainly describes a scene here in which all are caught up with Jesus, but after this he doesn't say what happens- do they leave; do they come back down and restore the kingdom? And to be sure books like Revelation offer an entirely different view of the coming age, describing a scenario in which heaven actually comes down to earth and all dwell within a massive New Jerusalem where there are no tears. So I think it's best to read this text in context with the whole of scripture, not making it more important than Paul does (for instance, he never brings this image up again in any of his other letters) and placing it in tension with the image in that of Revelation.

Chapter 1: Greetings and thanksgiving for the Thessalonians

Chapter 2: Paul's praise for the community and explanation for absence

Chapter 3: The sending of Timothy to them and his good report

*Chapter 4: Exhortation towards sexual wholeness; issue of the dead brother*

*Chapter 5: The time Christ is coming is unknown- so be watchful; "pray without ceasing"*

Stories/texts to know: 4:13-18 the dead brother; 5:1-11 Being watchful; 5:12-16 "Pray without ceasing"