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Introduction

It's less than a week until Christmas, and once again, it has not been a season of "peace on earth, good will toward men," as the Christmas carol declares. Earlier this month, the American Atheists Association waged its annual war against Christmas with billboards in large cities of the Midwest (though not in Indianapolis). Here is a picture of their billboard (put on screen).



American Atheists President David Silverman said, "Today's adults have no obligation to pretend to believe the lies their parents believed. It's OK to admit that your parents were wrong about God, and it's definitely OK to tell your children the truth." They are determined to keep as many people out of church and away from God as possible this week.

Yet, unfortunately for the American Atheists, record numbers of people all across America will be going to church on Christmas Eve. As a matter of fact, more people attend church on Christmas Eve than on Easter weekend. In response, we have even added a fourth Christmas Eve service for this week.

Though people will be celebrating the birth of Jesus this Wednesday, we will be celebrating something else about Jesus today. We call it Christmas future. Christmas celebrates the first coming of Christ. Christmas future celebrates the second coming of Christ. His first coming was humble. His second coming will be glorious. His first coming was as a tiny, helpless baby. His second coming is as a warrior and King! At His first coming, He was surrounded by shepherds. At His second coming, He will be surrounded by an army from heaven. Not once did Jesus say, "Remember My birthday." But in reference to His death and resurrection, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, and He did say, "Do this in remembrance of Me." The night before Jesus died on the cross, He said to His troubled, worried followers, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In my Father's House are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a

place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3). Jesus declared that He was coming back. Jesus is coming a second time, and that is something worth celebrating!

We will not be reading the typical Christmas text today, describing His first coming. Instead, we are going to look at a text about the second coming of Jesus. So, if you're expecting the ever-familiar, "...and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in strips of cloth and placed Him in a manger for there was no room for them in the inn," it "ain't gonna happen" – not today, that is. Luke 2 will come later this week at our Christmas Eve services. But today, we are going to hear about the second coming of Jesus, and that is something worth celebrating.

Our text is in 1 Thessalonians. It is a text that I preached long, long ago. As a matter of fact, I preached this very text in my very first sermon and I've not written a sermon on this passage ever since. My first sermon was preached on Sunday, May 25, 1969, when I was thirteen years old and just completing the seventh grade, and I prayerfully hope that the sermon today is much improved over the one from 45 years ago!

Why did Paul write his letter to the church in Thessalonica? The Apostle Paul was worried about them. They were a young, new church with many young, new Christians who did not understand much about Jesus Christ. In his typical fashion, Paul wrote the first half of his letter about doctrinal matters, and the second half of his letter about practical matters. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul wrote to them about how they should live their daily lives as how to please God, while winning the respect of those outside of the faith (see v. 12). One of the ways they could live to please God and to win the respect of unbelievers was the way in which they handled death and dying.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Brothers, we do not want you ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

This is one of the most powerful statements about the second coming of Jesus Christ. If you are like me, you've heard a message or two on the second coming of Jesus and how life will come to an end. I can even remember one message where the preacher had enormous charts and graphs of what would be happening when, and I just thought that something so simple was made so complicated. Today, we are going to take what is often complicated in the minds of people and make it so very simple to understand—and to remember. We will even use the word S.I.M.P.L.E. as a memory tool.

S for Struggle

Verse 13: *"Brothers, we do not want you ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."*

The Christians in Thessalonica were struggling with death in two ways: emotionally and intellectually. They were “grieving” as if there were no hope for life after death, that a person dies and becomes worm food. As well, they struggled with death intellectually in that Paul said that he did not want them to be “ignorant” about those who “fall asleep.” Regretfully, far too many of us **struggle** with death, even in light of the second coming of Christ. In our post-Christian culture, death has become the great unmentionable. This past year, Hugo Chavez, the 58-year-old president of Venezuela, died (3/5/13) after a long battle with cancer. The normally brash and confident leader, who often bitterly criticized the U.S. government, struggled with dying. One of his generals told the Associated Press, “He couldn't speak but he said it with his lips ... ‘I don't want to die. Please don't let me die.’” Even powerful men struggle with death.

We **struggle** intellectually in that many people are confused and don't know what happens to us when we die. Have you ever wondered about that, asking, “Where is Grandma or Uncle Bill right now?” Some people believe in “soul sleep” because of the phrase “fall asleep” in this verse, which is a teaching that the soul “sleeps” in the grave from the moment of death—until such time as when Jesus calls the dead up from the grave. The word “sleep,” however, was often used as a euphemism (a good or kind way of saying something) for stating that someone had died. Soul sleeping is the belief that Christians lay in a suspended state, being spiritually unconscious in the grave prior to the return of Christ. Yet, the Apostle Paul wrote that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Today, you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). As Christians, our last breath here becomes our first breath there with the Lord. And where is the Lord? Jesus is at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1)! There's no need to struggle intellectually or emotionally with this. We do not grieve like those who have no hope. We have hope in the second coming of Jesus Christ! Will we grieve when a loved one dies? Yes, but we grieve, we mourn with hope! Because of Jesus, we can laugh in the face of death.

I for Involved

Verses 14-15 *“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”*

Those who have died (“fallen asleep”) in the Lord are with the Lord right now, and when Jesus comes the second time, believers come with Him! Jude 14 states that “the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of His holy ones,” a word meaning believers who have died and are with the Lord. Hold on to that thought. We are involved at the second coming of Jesus, and you will soon understand why as we move through this text.

M for Majestic

Verse 16: *“For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”*

Jesus is coming again; not as a helpless, humble baby, but as a conquering King! The word “come” is a word meaning the arrival of royalty. The “loud” (authoritative) command of God will initiate the second coming of Jesus. Moreover, every eye will see Him (see Revelation 1:7)! How is that possible? What if Jesus comes down over New York City, or over LA, or over Hong Kong, or over London, Paris or Moscow? How will every eye see Him? Do not picture a globe, but a map lying flat on the floor. A person can see the entire world in a single glance when a world map lies flat. When God commands Jesus, “Go, now,” many things will happen. For one, the world as we know it will come to an end. Jesus will see the entire

world in a single glance and we will see Him in that same, singular glance, as He splits the clouds. Even with our present technology we see events happening live on the other side of the world. When 9-11 happened, I was on a mission trip to a remote, mountainous area of Guatemala. I was eating breakfast when someone yelled, "Come quick!" I ran into a room where a television was on and I saw LIVE the second airliner strike the second World Trade Tower thousands of miles away. It will be nothing for God to enable "every eye" to see simultaneously the return of His Son.

When Jesus comes the second time, there will be a "voice of an archangel." The word "arch" means ruling angel. Michael is the archangel or ruling angel, and he is a warrior of righteousness. Hold that thought. There is a "trumpet call" at the second coming of Jesus. When a king or queen enters a great hall, a trumpet fanfare is often played. When the President enters the halls of Congress to deliver the State of the Union Address, the Sergeant of Arms announces the arrival of the President and "Hail to the Chief" is played. The archangel's shout and the trumpet will announce the arrival, the second coming of Christ – and no one will mistake it for any other reason. Moreover, the trumpet call will do something still more. In the Old Testament, trumpets were blown to gather God's people together for war, and the same happens at the second coming of Jesus!

P for Purge

Verses 16b-17: *"...and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."*

Where are the dead in Christ? They are with Christ. To be absent from the body (i.e., dead) is to be present with the Lord. So then, the Christian dead are not rising up from the ground. They are rising up with Jesus as a mighty army, for the Lord comes back with thousands upon thousands of His holy ones. Why? We are a part of the final battle to win the war against evil, and it is called the Battle of Armageddon, and I'm not referring to a movie title. Mentioned only in Revelation 16:16, Armageddon is the battle in which Jesus conquers Satan, a war that has been raging ever since Genesis 3:15. We are coming back with Jesus to win the war against evil.

Revelation 19:11-16

11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. 13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. 14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.

Notice that the armies of heaven are "dressed in fine linen, white and clean." Who could that be? The answer is in verses 7-8: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)" The armies of heaven are all of us! If Christians die before the second coming of Jesus, they are immediately with the Lord, and then we are involved at His majestic second coming as we purge the evil one! Anyone ready for a good fight?

L for Life Without End

Verse 17: *"And so we will be with the Lord forever."*

The second coming of Jesus is not the "beginning of the end," but it is the "beginning that has no end." Forever. How do we define that word? Forever is beyond our comprehension because we only know measured time that passes and expires. Forever. Picture a mountain of solid granite one thousand miles high and one thousand miles square at its base; and once every one million years a sparrow comes and perches on top of that mountain and pecks away for just ten seconds. When the entire mountain has been worn away, that to eternity is but one day. That's trying to capture in our minds "with the Lord forever."

Revelation 21:1-5

1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

The second coming of Jesus initiates the making of new heavens and a new earth, where we will enjoy the presence of the Lord forever. God picks up in the last two chapters of Revelation where He left off in the first two chapters of Genesis. This is called the concept of continuance. There will be new stars, planets and galaxies—and a new earth—and all without sin. There will be no more illness, injury, death. There will be no more sadness for God Himself will wipe every tear from our eyes. Done – no more tears! The phrase "now the dwelling" is a word in Greek meaning "tabernacle, tent." In the Old Testament, God dwelled "smack-dab" in the middle among His people in the tabernacle, specifically in the Holy of Holies. The Lord will be "smack-dab" among us, enjoying a new earth for all of eternity.

This is our Christmas future, the promise of our future inheritance. Think of it this way. When Princess Diana died in 1997, she left an inheritance of more than \$20 million for her two sons, William and Harry. With investments and interest, that amount grew more than 40% while they were growing up and in their young adult years. The will stated that they could not receive their inheritance until their 30th birthdays. They each received roughly \$17 million. The estate is theirs. It was promised to them. It is in their names, and it has been set aside for them. In the same way, as followers of Christ, we have an inheritance. Based on Jesus' promise, it is ours. It's in your name, and mine; set aside for us. And at the second coming of Jesus, we will receive our inheritance in full.

E for Encourage

Verse 18: *"Therefore encourage each other with these words."*

The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, as well as the Christians at The Creek how to use this information. We are to "encourage" one another. Listen carefully. This word is *paraklasis*, similar to the word *Paraclete*, the nickname of the Holy Spirit, meaning Comforter. We are to comfort one another with news of the second coming of Jesus! But, there's more. This word is a present tense imperative, meaning that we are commanded to continually encourage one another—and not only with comfort and reassurance of the second coming of Jesus. The word encourage also means to "make an appeal." We

are commanded to make an appeal with those who we know and love with the fact that Jesus is coming again! Moreover, He's coming when least expected.

When Paul wrote this letter, he did not use chapter and verse numbers as they appear in our Bibles. It was a personal letter of Paul to some people who mattered to him. What did he go on to say in his letter? He said that Jesus will come like a thief in the night. In other words, the second coming of Jesus will happen when least expected. So, be ready. It is an appeal that we are commanded to make with others. We are to encourage them to be ready for the return of Christ.

Ten years ago at this very time of year, a revolution was happening in Ukraine. Victor Yushchenko was running for president. He is the candidate who was mysteriously poisoned and nearly died during the campaign. The dioxin severely disfigured Yushchenko's face, but he was determined to win the election. There was a record voter turnout at the polls, and with a strong 10% lead against his opponent, the state-run media declared that Yushchenko lost the election by a landslide. The election was a fraud, and what happened that very night will be long remembered. Government authorities had not taken into account one feature of Ukrainian television, and that begin sign language translation for the hearing-impaired. While the state-run media news reporter declared verbally Yushchenko's loss, a brave sign interpreter signed: "I am addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine. Don't believe what they say. They are lying and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchenko is our President!" No one in the studio understood her bold and courageous message in sign-language. Inspired by the bravery of translator Natalya Dmitruk, deaf people began using social media to inform their friends about the fraudulent elections. Soon, other journalists took courage and declared what was true. Over the next few weeks as many as a million people wearing orange flooded the capital city of Kiev to demand new elections. The government finally buckled under the pressure, consenting to new elections, and this time Yushchenko emerged as the undisputed winner."

More than two thousand years ago, an angel said to some shepherds, "Today in the city of David, a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find the baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12). A sign.

Later this week, we will celebrate His first coming. But today, we celebrate His second coming! We have the greatest news ever to be shared to people all around us. Will we be like the brave, courageous sign interpreter, whose message was heard from a small, little screen in the corner of the televisions across Ukraine? Our message is small when compared to the message being declared by our culture and sweeping across our country. But, we declare this S.I.M.P.L.E. truth: Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried in a tomb, and on the third day, He was raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven where He reigns at the right hand of God. We believe that Jesus Christ is coming again – a second time – to take us to be with Him forever.

We believe – so we celebrate!

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