

New Testament Epistles' Study Guide

By: Jose Morones

I did not follow a question/answer format in this study guide, but I think that the most relevant themes mentioned in the reading guide explanation and the questions therein, are concisely addressed here and give you an overall eschatological understanding of these letters.

1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter Paul addresses primarily the topic of resurrection of Christ as the foundation of Christian belief (vs 4, 17) and resurrection of the dead in general.

The Corinthian community was composed by both Gentile and Jews (1 Cor 12:13). Being originally a Greek city, however, Corinth must have been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Besides, remember that even some Jews from the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (cf. Lk 20:22). So Paul is trying to explain this “bodily resurrection” to believers influenced by Greek philosophy and Jews who may have not had a firm belief yet in the resurrection. Father George Montague¹ (260) cites N.T. Wright concerning 1 Corinthians 15 and the beliefs of non-Christian or non-Jewish believers vis-à-vis the resurrection of the dead. Wright’s description sheds important light to understanding the situation that Saint Paul is dealing with.

Who were the dead thought to be, in the ancient pagan world? They were beings that had once been embodied human beings, but were now souls, shades, or *eidola*. Where were they? Most likely in Hades; possibly in the Isles of the Blessed, or Tartarus; just conceivably, reincarnated into a different body altogether. . . . We cannot stress too strongly that from Homer onwards the language of “resurrection” was not used to denote “life after death” in general, or any of the phenomena supposed to occur within such life. The great majority of the ancients believed in life after death, . . . but, other than within Judaism and Christianity, they did not believe in resurrection.

Due to their Greek philosophical background, the Corinthians were very likely misunderstanding the mystery of the Resurrection.

The source of this misunderstanding is probably twofold: First, the Greek mind had no conception of bodily life after death. Plato held the soul to be immortal, but he certainly did not think of the person’s reclaiming bodily life. And second, the experience of the Spirit was so strong among the Corinthian Christians that some of them considered that in itself to be the resurrection that Paul proclaimed (Montague, 262).

1Thessalonians 4:13-5:28.

¹ Montague, George SM. *First Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

For our present purposes, we could narrow down 1 Thess 4:13-5:28 to two major themes: the *Parousia* or Second Coming of Jesus and the believers' concern for those who have already died. As we have seen throughout the course and is found in scholarly writings, the primitive community and especially Paul believed that the *Parousia* would take place during their lifetime. But Paul's main concern does not focus on fixing an exact *date* but on fostering a state of readiness in the Thessalonians in view of Jesus' imminent yet unknown return, for "the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night" (cf. 5:1-2).

The second concern may be more pastoral than theological in nature. If Christ will come and they will "meet the Lord in the air," what is going to happen to those who have already died? Are they going to miss the blessing and remain in their tombs indefinitely deprived of eating tacos with other faithful believers? Paul assures the Thessalonians that the opposite is in fact going to happen: the dead will not remain in their tombs but will actually take the lead in the resurrection, since "*we will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep*" but "*the dead in Christ will rise first. 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*" (1 Cor 15:15-16). In other words, Paul's main point is this: Don't miss the idea of the resurrection, Thessalonians, for those who have already died will actually beat us up and take the lead; they will eat tacos before we do (Class notes: Dr. Hanneken).

These two main points from 1 Thessalonians can be summed up with a footnote commentary from the *Anselm Academy Study Bible*. "The most important aspect of the parousia for him [Paul] was the fulfillment of union with Christ [not pointing to a fixed date]. His pastoral exhortation focuses first on the hope for the departed faithful, then (1 Thes 5:1-3) on the need of preparedness for those who have to achieve their goal."

2 Thessalonians 2

2 Thes 2 tries to give an explanation on why the parousia has not taken place yet. Here, it is probably worth noting the resonance of "cognitive dissonance" discussed last week in relation to the Millerites and other millenarian groups. Although I believe Paul failed to accurately predicting that the parousia would take place during his lifetime and in this sense resembles the same trend found in the Millerites, I feel more sympathy for Paul and tend to find some significant differences in spite of the obvious similarities between one and the other.

First, Paul must have written 20 to 30 years after Jesus's death, and he does not have as a background the eighteen centuries of history, theological interpretation, and numberless failed attempts to determine the *date* of the parousia. Paul, on the contrary, is still grappling with, interpreting, and making sense of all that Jesus did and say. Whatever the case must have been, the author of this letter (whether Paul or a pseudonymous) tries to move the Thessalonians from the fixation of wanting to know the day of the parousia to that of expectation-in-readiness instead. Because of the scope of this assignment, we cannot go into details, but suffice it to say

that 1 Thessalonians expects the parousia to take place very soon while 2 Thessalonians withdraws from that imminent expectation. The former letter resembles the case of the Millerites in the 19th century and it certainly brought *cognitive dissonance* among its readers, but the latter's task points at preventing the disillusioned Thessalonians from giving up their faith and rejecting the doctrine of the parousia or Second Coming of Christ altogether.

2 Peter

2 Peter employs a very similar tone and motif as that of 2 Thessalonians. He deals with the problem of the delay of Jesus' return and the cognitive dissonance this has caused in the Christian community. Some of them have become disillusioned and opted for living a loose, uncompromised, and disordered life in negation of the truth behind the event of an imminent parousia. Peter tries to defend God and give reasons for Jesus' delay, but his approach takes a more radical, harsh and apocalyptic tone against those "false teachers" when compared to 2 Thessalonians. The most relevant points Peter addresses in this letter are the following.

1. Denunciation of false teachers.
2. Impending judgment for all.
3. Main Reasons for Jesus' delay with regard to the parousia or Second Coming.
 - God's concept of time is different than ours since for "*the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day*" (3:8).
 - *The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard "delay," but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance* (2 Pe 3:9).
4. Delay does not mean there is no parousia; the Second coming will certainly take place.
 - *And the Lord will come like a thief* (3:10). Exhortation to perseverance and readiness.
 - And destroy the earth and the unrighteous by fire (3:7, 10, 12). Here Peter differs from 2 Thes with regard to its apocalyptic tone.
 - But the righteous can expect "*new heavens and a new earth*" (3:13).
5. In short, "the Second Coming of Christ and the judgment of the world are the doctrinal bases for the moral exhortation to readiness through vigilance and a virtuous life" instead of dwelling in the longing of an unfulfilled parousia or the negation of the Christian doctrine regarding the Second Coming of Christ (cf. footnote in *Anselm Academic Study Bible* for 2 Pe 3:11-16).