

# Are Matthew 24 and 1 and 2 Thessalonians Talking about the Same Thing?

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Many passages in the New Testament speak of our hope to be united once-and-for-all with Jesus at his coming. But of all the places in the New Testament which speak of this reunion, it is the Thessalonian letters of Paul that teach most directly and clearly about it. This paper will consist of a careful and close reading of the Thessalonian epistles in comparison with the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, to answer the question of whether Paul and Jesus are both talking about the same event—the second coming of Jesus. Other passages from the New Testament will be brought in where they appear to illuminate or be illuminated by Paul’s teaching.

## Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians

In 1:10, Paul says that we “wait for his Son from the heavens...who delivers us from the wrath to come.” In 3:13 he prays that the Thessalonians will be “blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the arrival (Greek *parousia*) of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” Paul says we are waiting for Jesus’ “arrival” from heaven, at which time we will have to stand before God the Father, but we will be delivered from his wrath because Jesus himself will have established our hearts “blameless in holiness.” Also see 1 Thess. 5:23. Jesus’ coming is to be the occasion of a judgment on the present world and everyone in it, in which God’s wrath will be revealed. But Paul assures us that “God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9). On that day, our hope, like Paul’s, will be to be “found *in him*, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil. 3:9).

Who are the “saints” (3:13) whom Jesus will bring with him? Surely they are those who have died in the Lord, probably including “OT saints” as well as Christians. But Paul does not tell us that specifically. He says: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (4:14).

Now Paul says something *very interesting*: “Now this we say to you by the word of the Lord...” (4:15). This sounds like a prophecy, doesn’t it? But it is actually

something else: what Paul is going to say, he has gotten directly from the teachings of Jesus. “The word of the Lord” here *means* the teaching of Jesus, just as in Acts 20:35 Paul’s teaching on giving was based on Jesus’ own words: “I showed you...that you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” So it seems all but certain that Paul is affirming in 1 Thess. 4:15 that his teaching is based directly on Jesus’ own teaching about his return. But even in the case that it *were* prophecy, we would be certain that it would be completely in line with Jesus’ teaching: Jesus must certainly be consistent with himself. Compare carefully:

*Mt. 24:29-31, 43-44*

Immediately after the affliction of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the (1) **Son of Man** will (2) appear **in heaven**, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see (3) **the Son of Man coming** on the (4) **clouds of the sky** with great power and great glory. And he will send forth his (5) **angels** with a (6) **great trumpet** and they (7) **will gather together his elect** from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

*Mt. 24:43-50*

(8) Therefore **keep watch**, because you do not know on what (9) **day your Lord will come**. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at (10) **what time of the night the thief was coming** he would have (8) **kept watch** and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason, you be ready too, for (9) **the Son of Man is coming** at an hour when you do not think he will. [A bad servant will (11) **drink with drunkards**]

*1 Thess. 4:15-17; 5:2, 6; 2 Thess. 2:1*

For this we say to you by word of the Lord, that we who are alive will not precede those who are asleep.

For the (1) **Lord himself** will (2) **descend from heaven** with a shout, (see Rev. 14:14-16) with the voice of the (5) **archangel** and with the (6) **trumpet of God** and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be (7) **caught up together with them** (4) **in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air**; thus we will always be with the Lord. (2 Thess. 2:1 “The (3) **coming of our Lord Jesus Christ** and (7) **our gathering together to him**.”)

*1 Thess. 5:2, 6*

For you yourselves know full well that (9) **the day of the Lord will come** (10) **just like a thief in the night**... so let us not sleep as others do, but let us (8) **be on the alert** and (11) **sober**.

Now what is important to note first is that virtually all the important ideas of 1 Thessalonians are paralleled perfectly by Jesus' words. Both passages teach that the Lord Jesus will come down from heaven in the clouds, both speak of angelic participation. It's true that Paul's mentioning of the archangel's "shout" here is closer to Revelation 14:15 (which of course is also a revelation from Jesus). Paul does speak directly of many angels being involved in Jesus' coming in 2 Thess. 1:7: "...the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire..." Both speak of a gathering of the elect (those who are alive) "from the four winds" in Jesus' words; "in the air" in Paul's. It is clear that in both cases it is a "gathering" both together with one another, and together with him. 2 Thess. 2:1 says this with the very same word (Greek *episunagō*). In both cases there is a great trumpet blast, which Paul connects with the resurrection and "changing" of those who are alive at Christ's coming. In 1 Cor. 15:52: "in a moment—in the twinkling (blink) of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we [i.e. those who are left alive] shall be changed." What Paul adds to the explicit teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24 is the idea that the dead in Christ are already risen and with him when we "get there" ourselves. This he bases on his conviction that those who are asleep "in Jesus" are already with him now, and when he comes they will be coming with him—and since he is resurrected from the dead, so they who are "in him" will certainly have resurrection bodies given them "before" the living believers rise to meet the Lord—that is, if two events that both happen "in the blink of an eye" can happen one after the other). Paul may be thinking here of the words of Jesus that we find in Jn 14:3: "I will come again and receive you to myself [cf. 2 Thess. 2:1], that where I am you may be also," which would explain his words, "thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

When will Christ Jesus come again to receive us to himself, bringing all his angels and the faithful who have fallen asleep? When will he gather us together once for all to himself and his elect in the clouds of the sky? Paul doesn't specifically say so, but Jesus does: it will be "immediately after the affliction of those days" Mt. 24:29).

Now, for those that are tempted to read Jesus' parable of the thief (Mt. 24:42-44) as allowing the possibility that the thief might come and go without someone noticing it until later, notice that Paul's interpretation of it doesn't take it that way. The point of the parable for Paul (and in the application Jesus gives it) is the suddenness and *unexpectedness* of the coming for the one who is not on guard (see Mt. 24:42) and one's inability to predict exactly when it will happen; *not* the supposed fact that the coming goes unnoticed (as in a "secret rapture"). In fact, Paul sees the "thief" idea as a metaphor of the suddenness of *destruction* of the wicked (1 Thess. 5:3; compare Mt. 24:37-29) at Jesus' coming—a far cry from the wicked being unaware of his

presence! See esp. Matt 24:27 as a parable of the fact that Jesus' coming is exactly impossible to miss.

### **Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians**

In Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24, he emphasizes that there are certain events that have to precede his coming on the clouds at the end of "the affliction of those days" (Mt. 24:29).

*Mt. 24:3, 4, 9, 10, 15, 24*

"What will be the sign of (10) **your coming** [Greek *parousia*] and of the end of the age?" Jesus answered... "See that (11) **no one misleads you**.

Then they will deliver you up to affliction (i.e. persecution) and you will be hated by all nations on account of My Name, At that time (12) **many will fall away** and betray one another and hate one another. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet (13) **standing in the holy place...**

For (13) **false Christs** and false prophets (cf. the beast and false prophet of Rev. 16:13; 19:20) will arise and will show great (14) **signs and wonders** (Greek *semeia megalia kai terata*) in order to (15) **deceive** if possible even the elect.

Now in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul's purpose in citing (outlining, in fact) Jesus' teaching about his coming in the Olivet Discourse was to give the Thessalonians hope for those who had died before the Lord's coming. But because that was his purpose, he didn't outline the first half of the Discourse, which dealt with what happens *during* the time of affliction that precedes Jesus' coming. As I understand it, someone had either given a false prophecy or forged a letter from Paul after his first letter, claiming that Jesus would return *any minute* and that everyone should drop everything and wait for him (see 2 Thess. 2:2; compare 3:11, 12, 17).

*2 Thess. 2:1-4, 9-10*

Now we request you dear brothers and sisters, with regard to (10) **the coming** [Greek *parousia*] **of our Lord Jesus Christ** and our gathering together to him, that you not be quickly shaken...let (11) **no one in any way deceive you**.

For the (12) **apostasy** must come first...

and the man of lawlessness be revealed who exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship so that (13) **he takes his seat in the temple of God displaying himself as being God**.

Whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and (14) **signs and false wonders** [Greek *semeia kai terata pseudous*], and with all wicked (15) **deception...**

**If you examine the parallels between Mt. 24:3-24 and 2 Thess. 2:1-12, you will see that Paul gives an outline of precisely those salient points of Jesus' teaching that he left out in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5.**

When Peter asks Jesus "what will the sign of your coming...?" Jesus tells him:

(1) wars, rumors of wars, (2) a great falling away, (3) false Christs with false signs, (4) the abomination of desolation; i.e., a blasphemous image set up in the Temple. Paul doesn't mention the first point about wars and rumors of wars, but he teaches explicitly about the other three (see above). Now a question arises. Is Paul talking about one event or more than one when he uses the terms "the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ," "our gathering together to him," and "the day of the Lord" (2 Thess. 2:1, 2)? Certainly the first two belong together (see 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:13; 5:23). But certainly the third belongs with the first two also, since he says in 1 Thess. 5: "You yourselves know full well that the *day of the Lord* will come just like a thief in the night...but you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, that *the day* should overtake you like a thief...therefore let us be alert and sober." (1 Thess. 5:2, 4, 6) So the day of the Lord is for us the day of salvation and reunion with Jesus (1 Thess. 5:9, 10; 4:14, 17). When reading 2 Thess. 2:12, it is also by far the most natural way of understanding Paul to see him simply using two equivalent terms, the coming of Jesus, and the day of the Lord. But he *begins* by saying: "Now...with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him..." So when in 2 Thess. 2:3 he says "Let no one in any way deceive you..." we certainly expect him to begin talking about "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to him." Otherwise he has changed the subject without even having addressed it yet. No one explains something by saying,

Now we request you, brothers and sisters, regarding the Thanksgiving dinner and our gathering at the church social hall, that you not be misled by any word of mouth report or misprint in the church newsletter to the effect that Easter has already come. Because it will not come unless Christmas comes first, and the children's Christmas tableau is revealed...

There is a further problem. Paul does *not say* in verse 3 that "*that day will not come until...*" All the italicized words are missing in Greek and have to be supplied in English for good sense. What I am saying is this: the Greek is extremely *compact* here so that you have to supply English words. Paul says (literally): "...to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Because unless the apostasy comes first..." The sense is, if these things don't happen, then what he was talking about won't happen. Verse three, in other words, does not refer back directly to the term "the Day of the Lord" at all—it refers back generally to the event(s) about which he is speaking—

which first and foremost is “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to him.”

So, if the revelation of the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3) and the “apostasy” have to come first, when is “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to him?” Paul says at Jesus’ coming he will “slay” the man of lawlessness with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming.” Since he is slain by Jesus “at his coming,” Jesus’ coming and “appearance” will be (as Mt. 24:29, 30 also says) immediately after the great time of “affliction.” For the man of lawlessness and all his followers, the second coming of Jesus will be a day of wrath, but for those who trust God through Christ, it will be a day of salvation (2 Thess. 1:6, 7):

...for it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict [i.e. persecute] you and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:16, 17).

These two scriptures are undoubtedly speaking about one single event.

In summary, when we examine the 15 distinct parallels between the words of Jesus in Matthew 24 and Paul’s closely related teachings in 1 and 2 Thessalonians—without a priori commitments as to what Jesus can and cannot be talking about in Matthew 24—the conclusion becomes irresistible: Paul understood Jesus to be talking about Jesus’ *publicly visible, post-tribulational coming* in the Olivet Discourse that we know from Matthew 24.