

**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

**How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.**

I'm a weather nut (especially when I'm waiting for snow) so I was stalking accuweather.com over Thanksgiving weekend. Accuweather posted five tweets there about the weather in Chicago. HayBear143 said, "You know the world's gonna end when it's warm in Chicago at the end of November." Another person tweeted, "Nice & warm in Chicago. Clearly the end is near." Two of the five tweets about the weather referenced the end of the world. That's 40%. Fascinating.

And it was at the same time jarring. If you have a deep and abiding belief in the second coming of Christ and destruction of life as we know it, you don't just lob it out there as a tweet. You just don't. It doesn't do the thought justice. Tweet. Tweet. The world is going up in flames. Something's wrong with that. It's jarring behavior. That's just not how you treat the end of the world. It's not a joke. It's a reality. That brings up a troubling question. How is it possible for people to be so cavalier and thoughtless about Christ's second coming? It at the very least suggests that they don't take Jesus' second coming seriously.

I asked a Christian person I trust recently, "How often do we think about Jesus' second coming?" Without blinking, a very blunt answer came back, "Not nearly enough." That's even more troubling. It suggests that even Christian people don't take Jesus' second coming seriously enough. That's the reality that was on Paul's heart and mind as he took to his pen with some very deep emotion in 1 Thessalonians 3. He was concerned about cavalier and thoughtless toward Jesus' second coming. And he was about to do something about it.

1 Thessalonians is riddled with messages about Jesus' second coming. You can't even get out of the first chapter before Paul mentions that Jesus rescues us from the wrath coming at his second coming. And you can easily understand why. Paul was concerned that some of the Thessalonians would be missing from God's family when Jesus showed up. Listen to the man's heart, "**For what is our hope, our joy, or our crown in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes** (reference to Jesus' second coming)? **Is it not you? I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you.**" (v. 2:19, 3:5) Paul's fear and I think it's fair to say also his overwhelming concern was that people he loved would be lost

on the day of the Lord's return. Again 1 Thessalonians is riddled with it.

But it's more than just a book wide phenomenon. It is a chapter three nuclear blast of emotion. You can see and feel and read Paul's emotional concern build and build toward his emotional summit. "Boy, I really, really want my Thessalonian people to stand beautifully dressed when Jesus returns." And that moment is right here. This scripture. We've arrived to the emotional center of the book. We know that because of how the book develops. But what really seals the deal - and I risk looking like a real nerd here - are the verb forms that Paul uses here. Before your eyes glaze over, hear me out. Three of the verbs in here are optatives. Super rare. It's the kind of thing that Greek nerds really get excited about (like math nerds get pumped about derivatives). To put it in perspective optative verb forms are about as rare in the New Testament as a four-leaf clover. They just don't happen. Whenever they do happen, they're special. Very, very special. They are showing an incredibly deep desire that Paul had for us. And I really can't emphasize that enough. Paul really, really, really (Did I emphasize that enough?) wants us to stand beautifully dressed when Jesus shows up again.

It's sad that Paul had to get so worked up. But it's not surprising. There is a biblical reason for it. It's the same reason why Paul might be writing a similar message if the letter he had written was called 1 Billionite. And fair warning - I'm planning to call a spade a spade. There is a part of us that doesn't think he's actually coming. There I said it. It's out there. There is a part of us that doesn't think he's actually coming - the part of us we call our original nature. How else do we explain it? If our entire being were committed to the idea that our Savior Jesus was going to ride the clouds like a chariot to the sound of a trumpet to judge the living and the dead, it would constantly be in our thinking - just like it's constantly a focus in 1 Thessalonians. I remember watching a movie called Armageddon back in high school. Asteroids were heading toward earth to destroy it. It was the constant focus of the characters. There's only one reason why we don't think the same way. Because there's a part of us that thinks Jesus' won't show.

If that's true and it is, that puts us in a somewhat desperate situation. We need God to stamp out the part of us that doesn't think Jesus will show and we need God to do it now. Basically, we're joining in a monumental prayer that's found in another part of the Bible. "Lord, I believe. Help me overcome my unbelief." That's where Paul finds us (and the Thessalonians). That's why this is Paul's emotional summit. And that's why this scripture had to be a prayer because in a situation like this only a prayer will do. Here's what Paul prayed: **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you to strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless in holiness in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."** (v. 12-13)

Paul said a lot of important things in there. For now notice what Paul is asking God, finally, to do. He's asking that when Jesus shows up again that we will be blameless in holiness. It makes perfect sense that that is where Paul ends up with his prayer. Because the day Jesus returns is the day when each one of us will be called onto the carpet for the way we've lived

our lives. One by one we'll step before the judgment seat and verdicts will be handed down. "This one is innocent," he'll say. "That one isn't." "That one is sinful," he'll say. "That one pulled off a blameless life." One by one the gavel of judgment will fall on each of us. And one by one people will be sent off to spend eternity with God or eternity under God's punishment. That's why a lot of people call this day Judgment Day.

It goes without saying that Judgment Day will be the most important day of your life. It is the day that will divide your eternity. Just to be clear, there are no take backs. You don't go spend time being punished to work out your issues so that you can get in with God later. You will never reach a time when your sentence is over; you've paid your debt to God; and now up you go. That's just not how it works. The ruling will be final. It cannot be appealed to a higher court and another law will never repeal it. That moment will decide your eternity. And that's why Paul prays that we will be blameless in holiness.

What if I told you there was a way to guarantee that outcome - a not guilty verdict? Would you believe me? There is. Let me tell you how. Find a person who will get a not guilty verdict and ask them to stand in for you. I know. I know. That presents two problems. 1. Who will you find that will get a not guilty verdict? Nobody on earth has the resume. And then even if you did find someone (you won't!) 2. Who will hand off their not guilty verdict to you? They'll need theirs. This is where I get to tell you Christianity's joy. We know that the Judge himself wants to stand in for you. That's why he came the first time. He came to get a not guilty verdict for his conduct that he could pass on to you. And we know the plan worked. The Bible tells us that Jesus' resurrection was God's gavel on Jesus' life slamming down with a loud, "Not guilty!" Jesus pulled it off. He was found not guilty. Christianity's joy is that the Judge is going to stand in for you. A big part of Paul's prayer is that you know that, but that's not all of it.

Faith in Jesus as your stand in gives birth to love. Lots and lots of love. For people in your home church and for everyone else too. It has to. That's the way faith works. Listen to Paul's prayer: **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else."** (v. 12) Theologically, it's true that faith is the cause and love is the effect in the Christian heart. Remember though that theology is life. It's not sterile. It's not standoffish. It's you. Think it through. Paul's prayer is that the not guilty verdict guaranteed to you causes you to show up to Jesus' second coming dressed to the nines with the glitz and glam of a ridiculously loving life. No, it won't earn you a not guilty verdict. Your stand in, Jesus, gets that for you. But I'm sorry, Jesus has done way too much for us to show up to the great day squabbling with a friend, or arguing with a spouse, or irritated at a co worker - it just won't do. That's like showing up to the big day in jeans.

I've yet to see a bride walk down the aisle on her wedding day in jeans. In fact, I've known brides to scour the earth to find just the right dress. I was watching a show called Shark Tank the other day. A lady came in to pitch her business model for selling wedding dresses. This is what one of the sharks said, "I'd love to get a foothold in the wedding industry. There is no other industry with such opulence and the ability to pull off 7000% mark-ups." Brides will go to the end of the earth and they will spare no amount of energy or

money to get “the dress.” And why do they do it? I’ll tell you one thing. It’s not because they’re afraid their husband might leave them at the altar. It’s because they love their future husband and want to look their best for him. Jesus won’t leave us at the altar on the Great Day. He will stand in for us. He will get us a not guilty verdict. At the same time, we don’t want to show up at Jesus’ second coming wearing jeans. I’m putting on my best tux. What do you plan to wear?

Jesus’ second coming will be the biggest day of our lives. That’s become abundantly clear. It’s a big enough deal that when someone tweets, “It’s warm in Chicago at Thanksgiving. The end is near.” it feels jarring and cavalier to us. It’s a big enough deal for Paul to write a big, powerful, emotional prayer. It’s a big enough deal for us to become personally invested in that prayer and pray it right along with Paul, “May we show up to Jesus’ second coming knowing that the Judge will stand in for us. May we show up with total confidence that the Lord Jesus’ final word about us will be, ‘Not guilty.’ And may we show up dressed to the nines with a life of love for everyone.” ‘Cause let’s face it. When we see Jesus face to face for the first time, jeans just won’t cut it. Amen.