

# “When the Lord Jesus Is Revealed from Heaven”

An Expository Commentary On Paul’s Thessalonian Letters

The Second and Third in a Series of Expositions of the Letters of Paul

In Memory of David A. Bramwell (1958-2002)

Known to his friends as "Big Dave"

Who first introduced me to Reformed theology  
and Amillennialism

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this expositional commentary on Paul's Thessalonian letters is three-fold.

- To exegete the biblical text in light of the original setting and circumstances of the letter's composition
- To interpret the text of First and Second Thessalonians in light of the church's on-going reflection upon the meaning of the text, with consideration given to the significant debates (some historic and some contemporary) over the text and its meaning
- To develop application arising from the exposition of the text, drawing upon historic and Reformed sources (with special emphasis given to the Reformed confessions and to the commentaries upon these letters by John Calvin). The reader will also find frequent references to recommended Reformed sources for further reflection and study

The text of the "When the Lord Jesus Is Revealed from Heaven" falls somewhere between biblical exposition and a commentary. The text has not been professionally edited so as to make it available free of charge to listeners of the Blessed Hope Podcast who complete the fifteen episodes of Season Two

## **History**

This expositional commentary on Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians began as a series of lectures given for the Wednesday night Bible Study at Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim, CA (URCNA) in 2005, and expanded in 2016. The 2016 lecture notes were, in turn, edited and became the script for the Blessed Hope Podcast Season Two series on the Paul's Thessalonian letters. The script was revised and edited in 2024 as a premium for listeners to the Blessed Hope Podcast.

# The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

## Introduction to the Thessalonian Letters

“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ shall come again” is a memorial acclamation from the ancient church incorporated into many liturgies of the contemporary church. This is a thoroughly Pauline expression. Grounded in the first two acclamations, the final phrase of the triad, “Christ shall come again,” captures the focus of Paul’s two Thessalonian epistles. Each of the five chapters of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians mentions Christ’s second advent, as do two of the three chapters in his second Thessalonian letter. When quantified by percentage, “over a quarter of 1 Thessalonians and nearly half of 2 Thessalonians deal with issues regarding the *parousia* or coming of Christ from heaven,”<sup>1</sup> or as Paul speaks of it as the moment, “*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels*” (2 Thessalonians 1:7).

These two remarkable yet often overlooked letters were written to a newly established Christian congregation in the mid-first century Greek city of Thessalonica by one who identifies himself as both their spiritual “mother” (1 Thessalonians 1:7) and “father” (1 Thessalonians 1:11). The author of these letters is the apostle Paul. The recipients were fresh in Paul’s memory. He is both worried for them and encouraged by their perseverance in the face of their trials.

In writing to this new church using these familiar and fond expressions, we gain much insight into Paul’s pastoral concern for this particular congregation—one of the fruitfruits of the harvest of his second Gentile mission, this time with the apostle moving out from the confines of Asia Minor into Europe. But after preaching the gospel to the Thessalonians and watching the Lord of his church establish this congregation, Paul was soon driven from Thessalonica by an angry mob of Jews, memorably described in the KJV as “Lewd fellows of the baser sort,” or as a “rentamob” by professor Bruce.<sup>2</sup> Paul quickly moved on to Berea, and then to Athens, where he famously encountered a number of pagan Greek philosophers and religious “lookie-loos” on Mars Hill (cf. Acts 17:16-24).

Because of his forced absence from the congregation he had just founded, and worried about them in light of the open hostility which he had faced in the city, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage these new believers (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:5). When Timothy later caught up with Paul in Corinth (cf. Acts 18:1), Timothy reported that although the Thessalonian congregation was doing quite well under the circumstances, several significant questions had arisen which required Paul to address them in some detail via letter.

In light of the specific matters brought to Paul’s attention by Timothy, the purpose of Paul’s Thessalonian letters is two-fold. First, the apostle exhorts the Thessalonians to stand firm in

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<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 10.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, vol. 45, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1982), xxiii.

their faith. John Calvin notes that “the greater part of this letter consists of exhortations,”<sup>3</sup> before the apostle turns toward matters concerned with the Lord’s return. With obvious pastoral affection, Paul encourages them with his prayers knowing these letters were to be read and perhaps circulated throughout the church (1 Thessalonians 5:27). Second, Paul addresses the specific questions raised by the Thessalonians about the return of Jesus Christ, who died, was raised from the dead, and then ascended to the Father’s right hand, but who had not yet come again as many thought that Paul had promised.

Given these two circumstances, we should not be surprised that these letters deal with local matters—specifically the questions brought to Paul by Timothy. This is unlike Paul’s prior letter to the Galatians which involved widely dispersed churches in Galatia, Antioch, and Jerusalem. No doubt, such questions arose in Thessalonica due to the fact that Paul spent limited time with the congregation (a mere three Sabbaths) and may not have been able to complete his instruction, nor answer their questions in person.<sup>4</sup>

Paul’s face to face instruction got the Thessalonians started in the Christian faith, but in light of the questions now put to him through Timothy, Paul must complete his teaching regarding the return of Jesus at the end of the age via letter. In his first Thessalonian letter Paul addresses the timing of the day of the Lord, as well as explaining what happens to those who unfortunately die before Jesus does return—an obvious matter of concern to those who had loved ones die *before* the second advent. If the Lord’s return is delayed (or takes longer than expected) how should Christians continue to live their lives in light of this unrealized promise?

The Thessalonian letters also reveal that this congregation had gotten off to a great start despite their current trials. But in light of what had happened two years before in Galatia (the challenge to the gospel raised by the Judaizers), Paul knew that confusion about such an important doctrine and the ground of their future hope—our Lord’s second advent—would create unnecessary tension in a new church and possibly bring about internal dissension and faction, and this at a time when a new church was facing a fair degree of hostile opposition. In his second letter, Paul replies to news of additional confusion in the church about whether the day of the Lord had already come to pass, and since it had not, Paul explains what must transpire before that great day will occur. One of these future events is the appearance of a mysterious figure, the Man of Sin, commonly known as the Antichrist.

### **The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica and Beyond**

Before we begin our verse by verse exposition of the two Thessalonian letters, it is important to consider the background to the gospel first being preached in Thessalonica during the opening

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 15.

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, The Gospel and the End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 9-10.

phase of Paul's second missionary journey. Preaching first to Jews in local synagogues, where Paul could find a "common starting-point in the Jewish Scriptures,"<sup>5</sup> and then preaching to Gentiles in the city's public spaces, the missionaries witnessed the conversion of sufficient numbers of Christian believers that an apparently thriving church had been founded in the Greek city of Thessalonica just over twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Our Lord's promise to his disciples in Acts 1:8 comes to mind. "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" In many ways, Paul's missionary journeys are the means through which our Lord's promise is fulfilled. The gospel was now going to the ends of the earth, largely through Paul's preaching to Gentiles.

The church in Thessalonica, along with the new churches in Philippi, Berea, and Corinth, all have their origin in the so-called "Macedonian Call," which is recounted by Luke in Acts 16:6-10. As a result of a vision given Paul while he was still in Asia Minor, the second missionary journey gets under way as the gospel came to two Greek cities in southern Europe—Philippi, and soon after to the city of Thessalonica. Luke's account of the Macedonian Call sets the stage for what follows in Philippi (Acts 16), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) Berea (Acts 17:10-15), and Athens (Acts 17:16-34). The "Macedonian Call" is a significant event in the early church, and is recounted in Acts 16:6-10,

*And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

Given what we know about him in light of his calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul continually sought direction from the Lord about where to take the gospel when planning his second missionary journey. Two apparent open doors slammed shut. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit prevented Paul's group of missionaries from going east into Asia (Cappadocia, Armenia, or Syria). Then, Luke says, "the Spirit of Jesus" blocked them from going to Bythynia, a region in the northern portion of Asia Minor extending to the Black Sea. But closed doors meant that the Lord would open others. The Spirit directed the missionaries to cross the Aegean Sea and "go west" into Macedonia, a Roman province which includes much of modern Greece and Albania. It was God's appointed time for Paul to take the gospel into Europe.

In Acts 16:11 ff. Luke recounts that Paul and his three companions, of which Timothy and Silas (Silvanus) are specifically mentioned by Luke, went west to Troas. Troas is a small port at the Northwestern tip of Asia Minor. The missionaries crossed the Aegean Sea (a short voyage),

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<sup>5</sup> George Milligan, Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians, reprint ed. (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xxi.

heading for Samothrace, a small island in the Aegean Sea where Paul and his companions spent the night before going on to the city of Neapolis on the Macedonian mainland (Acts 16:11-12). It is worth noting that this is the first section in the Book of Acts where Luke likely includes himself in the narrative via the use of “we.”<sup>7</sup> The shift to “we” in verse 11, implies that Luke too went along with Paul, Silas, and Timothy from Troas to Neapolis. Neapolis (now the Greek city of Kavala) was a small village near Philippi where Luke seems to have remained when Paul and company went on to Thessalonica.<sup>8</sup>

The city of Neapolis may be insignificant, but the surrounding area plays a significant role in Greek and Roman history. Brutus and Cassius used the harbor at Neapolis to provision during the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, when opposed by the armies of Octavian and Mark Antony.<sup>9</sup> By Paul’s time, Neapolis had become a way station on the *Via Egnatia*, which was the main Roman road through the area and built in the second century BCE. It ran from the Adriatic Sea in what is now Albania, to Philippi in Macedonia, and then on to Byzantium (modern Istanbul) in Asia Minor. The road provided an effective means of communication between Philippi and Thessalonica, which explains the rapid communications of news of Paul’s presence in both cities, as well as the rapid travel by missionaries between cities as implied in Luke’s account.

After landing at Neapolis, Paul went directly to Philippi, a Roman colony which was originally named in 356 BCE for Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. Luke recounts how Paul and his companions began preaching the gospel upon arrival in the city, but quickly found themselves at the center of heated controversy. They were subsequently arrested, imprisoned, and beaten for preaching Christ crucified. But as recounted in Acts 16:16-40, they were also vindicated by God, who delivered them by sending an earthquake to open the doors of the city’s jail. We read of the conversion of Lydia, a merchant dealing in purple dye and cloth, along with the account of the Philippian jailer. Both came to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of Paul, and then presented their households for baptism.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after, Paul and his companions were asked to leave Philippi (Acts 16:39). Luke tells us that “*now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a “synagogue of the Jews”* (Acts 17:1). The presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica meant an opportunity to preach the gospel to the Jews in the area. Luke’s account of the gospel

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<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 3-7.

<sup>8</sup> Luke switches back to the third person in Acts 16:40, an indication that he did not proceed with Paul and the others on to Thessalonica.

<sup>9</sup> For background see, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Philippi-Roman-history-42-BC>

<sup>10</sup> The practice of household baptism is an important plank in the Reformed argument for infant baptism. “The individualism of contemporary Western society would have been quite foreign to the way of thinking in Paul’s day. Decisions would have been taken corporately, or more probably, by the leading member of the household on behalf of others. Hence we read of household conversions and baptisms (Acts 16:15, 31–34; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16).” See D. J. Tidball, “*Social Setting of Mission Churches*,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 888.

reaching the city of Thessalonica and the subsequent founding of the church there is given in Acts 17:2-9.

*And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.*

Forced to leave Thessalonica, Paul and company headed west to Berea, where the Jews once again managed to stir up trouble for Paul and Silas as we read in Acts 17:10-15.

*The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.*

While Paul apparently began his ministry in Thessalonica by preaching in the synagogue, even winning a few Jewish converts (Acts 17:4), likely the church was made up of mostly Gentiles including a number of women of high social standing. Paul informs us of this in the opening chapter of his first epistle (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10); "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." The mention of Gentile idolatry is a clear indication that the varied practices of Greco-Roman paganism were embraced by much of the city's population. Luke's account confirms this by pointing out that, "some of them were persuaded [to leave the idols behind] and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). If most of the Jewish population was hostile to Christian preaching, a number of prominent Greek women were persuaded by Christian preaching, came to faith in Jesus, and made up a significant portion of the new church (Acts 17:4).

The gospel had been preached in Philippi, then in Thessalonica, then Berea, and then in Athens, the very heart of the Hellenic world. The Macedonia Call was heard and acted upon. The gospel had been proclaimed in Europe and the second missionary journey was bearing much



fruit with many converts and at least three new churches.

### First Century Thessalonica

Built on the ruins of the ancient town of Therma, the city of Thessalonica was founded about 315 BCE by Cassander, King of Macedon. Cassander named the city for his wife Thessalonike, who was a half-sister of Alexander the Great as well as the princess of Macedonia since she was also a daughter of Philip II. As part of the Macedonian kingdom, the city retained its own autonomy and parliament, and eventually became the most important city in Macedonia. The city was always more Greek than Roman.

After Macedon fell to the Romans in 168 BCE, because of its size and economic significance, Thessalonica eventually became the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia (146 BCE). It also was declared a free city of the Roman Republic under Mark Antony in 41 BCE, which meant Thessalonica possessed significant autonomy from Roman control. As a free city, which could mint its own coinage, Thessalonica was spared from Roman military occupation and housing retired Roman soldiers, as was the case in neighboring Philippi. Local institutions remained intact. Ancient family ties and religious practices were strongly linked to political office (through the worship of familial gods), giving the established families of the city much power and influence in civic life.<sup>11</sup>

An important trade hub, the city was located on the *Via Egnatia*, which connected Thessalonica by road and by seaport to Rome to the west and to Byzantium to the east. The city possessed a fine harbor, and was located on the most important north-south route through the Balkans, linking region (and the important Danube River) to the rest of Greece. By the mid first-century, Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia with a population of about 200,000. It was an ideal place to plant a church.<sup>12</sup>

There was an established synagogue with a number of Jews living in the city, typical of much of the Greco-Roman world. This stands in contrast to neighboring Philippi, a prosperous Roman colony, which had only an open-air meeting place (*proseuche*) with little or no Jewish presence.<sup>13</sup> Like other cities of the Greco-Roman world, there were a number of pagan religions and practices present in Thessalonica, which played prominent roles in the city's cultural and political life. As a Greco-Roman city, Thessalonica was also a pagan city. Ruins from this

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<sup>11</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians 3.

<sup>12</sup> As Gene Green notes, "the great success of Thessalonica was due in grand part to the union of land and sea, road and port, which facilitated commerce between Macedonia and the entire Roman Empire. No other place in all Macedonia offered the strategic advantages of Thessalonica, a fact not lost on the Christian heralds. See, Gene L. Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 2.

period include a portion of a first century forum, likely the gathering place of the lewd fellows of a baser sort. There are remains of an older Macedonian agora (marketplace) and an inscription from the Vandar Gate which spanned in the *Via Egnatia* and contains an inscription which refers to the *politarches*, the “city authorities” mentioned in Acts 17:6 which dates from the time of Paul.<sup>14</sup>

Those called to faith in Jesus Christ through Paul’s preaching, very likely came from pagan backgrounds (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:14). But unlike pagan religions, once you became a Christian you could not add a new religion to the pantheon of gods worshiped by your family. These gods were seen as generational patrons in which the religious life of the household was centered. The family gods were thought to bless pious households with children, ward off illness and calamity, and ensure economic success. But once you became a disciple of Jesus, you must break away from these pagan religions in what was a very public act—baptism. Thessalonian converts to Christianity would be known to all and likely estranged from their families upon making a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ and undergoing baptism. When we read of men and woman of high-standing becoming Christians, they likely paid a high price for doing so.

The news of Paul and his companions arriving in the city, preaching a gospel of a crucified and risen Savior in whom you must place your trust to be delivered from the wrath to come, no doubt generated much consternation on the part of the Thessalonian pagans, as well as among the Jews. The latter had already heard of what happened recently in Phillipi and possibly knew of the rapid spread of Christianity throughout Asia Minor. The rumor making its way into Thessalonica was that Paul and company “had turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). To stop the “Way” from spreading, the preachers must be driven from town before they could gather a following. The apostolic preachers of Paul’s second missionary journey were considered by the Jews to be “known Jewish revolutionaries” who were undermining the *pax Romana*.<sup>15</sup>

The act of confessing Jesus as Lord was a declaration that he, not Caesar, was truly King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To become a Christian was to publically reject the divinity of the Roman Caesar (a cause of consternation on the part of Gentiles), as well as those gods your family may have worshiped for generations. But the confession “Jesus is Lord” raised a difficult question. If Jesus is King of Kings, where is he? Where is his throne, over what kingdom does he rule, and what kind of earthly power and authority does he possess? When will he return to judge the world as Christian preachers were claiming?

Paul’s answer was that Jesus had ascended into heaven to rule and reign over all things. Jesus will soon return in triumph to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. Perhaps, this expectation of the Thessalonian Christians explains, in part, why it is that there

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<sup>14</sup> J. W. Simpson, Jr. “*Thessalonians, Letters to The*” in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 933-934.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce W. Winter, Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christian Responses (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 250-251.

were so many questions about the nature and timing of Christ's return.<sup>16</sup> It did not help that Paul was driven from the city before he could complete his catechesis. But confessing Jesus as Lord put the confessor in direct opposition to friends, family, and civil authorities, who worshiped the same gods Christians were now rejecting. It also raised questions about Jesus's promised return. When? How? Are there signs to warn us?

### Who? When? Why? What?

As for "who?" in the opening verse of his first Thessalonian letter, Paul, identifies himself as the author and names his co-senders. "*Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.*" These three names appearing together reflect the fact that Timothy and Silvanus were well-known co-laborers associated with Paul. According to Luke's account (Acts 17:14), Silvanus and Timothy were both with Paul in Thessalonica.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Paul's letter to the Galatians, there have been several nineteenth century critical scholars who challenged Paul's authorship of at least one of the letters (usually the second). F. C. Baur, the biblical critic associated with the Tübingen school in Germany, is the best known objector. Baur regarded this letter as reminiscences taken from the Book of Acts, which he believed was composed in the second century, long after Paul was dead and gone. Few have followed Baur and even critical scholars accept Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>18</sup>

The second century church father, Irenaeus (c. 130-202), quotes from the letter and attributes it to Paul in his *Against Heresies* (5.6.1 and 5.30.2), as does Tertullian (155-220), who quotes it in his response to the early heretic Marcion. 1 Thessalonians is mentioned among the Pauline letters in the Muratorian fragment, a second century list of canonical books.

In addition, Paul occasionally uses the first person (1 Thessalonians 2:8, 3:5, 5:27), something the primary author of such a letter is likely to do.<sup>19</sup> According to Stanley Porter, "First Thessalonians is now placed among the undisputed letters."<sup>20</sup> Charles Wanamaker adds, "no

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<sup>16</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Helpful discussions of the date and authorship of Paul's first Thessalonian letter can be found in several New Testament introductions and commentaries: D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 343-358; Stanley E. Porter, The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 200-246. Especially helpful is the introductory section in the commentary by Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, ix-xlvii.

<sup>18</sup> "The response to the objections was strong and decisive, as well as instructive for us, despite the fact that this issue is not one of current scholarly debate." See Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 218.

<sup>20</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 208.

contemporary scholars of repute seem to doubt the authentic Pauline character of the letter," before noting, "the same, however, is certainly not true of 2 Thessalonians, and in fact in the last two decades the balance of expressed opinion has tilted decisively against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians."<sup>21</sup> We will address these objections when we take up Paul's second letter.

When challenges to the integrity of Paul's first letter are raised, they are usually framed in terms of conflict between 1 Thessalonians and the events recounted in the Book of Acts (especially chapter 17), or because of a well-developed ecclesiology, such a level of organization, which critics contend, could not have developed so soon after Paul and the missionaries arrived.<sup>22</sup> But the fact that Paul speaks of "*those who have charge of you*" (1 Thessalonians 5:12), points us to the fact that the early church had a ready-made model for church government in the organization of the Jewish synagogue and Sanhedrin. It is very likely that these new churches would have been set up on day one like a small synagogue with elders giving oversight.

Furthermore, Carson, Moo, and Morris (in their *Introduction to the New Testament*) jab objectors to Pauline authorship by asking the obvious question, "why would anyone in the second century write a letter to this church dealing with a current crisis, claiming to be Paul, when everyone in that church would have known it wasn't from Paul, who had been dead for some time?"<sup>23</sup> Remove the burr out from under the critical saddle, and it is clear that Paul wrote this letter under the circumstances described in what follows.

As for the "when?" question, the majority of critical and evangelical scholars place the composition of First Thessalonians in 50-51 CE., followed shortly after by Paul's second letter.<sup>24</sup> Paul had gone on to Corinth after leaving Athens, and Timothy later caught up with him there, bringing the apostle news and the questions from the Thessalonian congregation. Paul responded soon thereafter in this letter, adding Silvanus and Timothy as co-senders, since both were well known to the Thessalonians.

The details of Paul's biography are well-known and I spent a fair bit of time on his life in the prior exposition of Galatians. But the biographies of Paul's co-senders tell us much about the

<sup>21</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Porter contends, "there is internal evidence of an early date for 1 Thessalonians in 5:12, where Paul, referring to church organization, mentions 'those who ... have charge of you.' This seems to imply that at this point there was not a formal title for those in positions of leadership within local congregations of believers. That such titles apparently were developed quite early is confirmed by Phil 1:1, but that letter was probably written ten years later. (Acts 14:23, which mentions the appointment of 'elders' [πρεσβυτέρους] on Paul's so-called first missionary journey, indicates the establishment of positions of church leadership early on but does not necessarily contradict this, since the author of Luke-Acts may be retroactively ascribing titles developed by the time of his writing, if indeed these are titles." See Porter, The Apostle Paul, 213.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 346.

<sup>24</sup> G. K. Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 14; Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xxxv; Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 347; Gordon D. Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 5; Porter, The Apostle Paul, 211.

history of the early church and his second missionary journey, and we should not overlook them. We start with Mr. Silvanus (which is his Roman surname). "Silas," as he was commonly known, is also a Greek name, the transliteration of the Aramaic name "Saul." Silas was a leader in the Jerusalem church, and was sent with Paul back to Antioch (Acts 15:22, 23), where, apparently, he did some preaching. Recall that Paul and Barnabas disagreed about taking Mark on the upcoming second missionary journey with Barnabas and Mark leaving Paul and instead going to on Cyprus.

After this unfortunate division occurred between Paul and Barnabas, Paul chose Silas to become his coworker during his second missionary journey. He likely remained in Corinth and ought to be considered as one of the founders of the Thessalonian church.<sup>25</sup> Silas is mentioned again among Paul's associates in Acts 18:5 and 2 Corinthians 1:19. Silas was later closely associated with Peter. In 1 Peter 5:12, we learn that Silas eventually made his way to Rome and was serving as Peter's amanuensis (secretary), and probably put Peter's words to parchment in the form of Peter's first letter.<sup>26</sup>

The second co-sender mentioned is Timothy, a very prominent figure in the early church. A Greek, he may have come to faith through Paul's preaching in Lystra (Acts 16:1). We learn elsewhere that his mother, Eunice (who was a Jewess) and his grandmother, Lois, had already come to faith before Paul arrived in Lystra (Acts 16:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:10-15; 2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy may have already been a believer when Paul arrived in Galatia on his first missionary journey. Or perhaps, Timothy was converted under Paul's preaching. We do not know.

But we do know that Paul considered Timothy a spiritual son and a trusted co-worker (cf. Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2). On a number of occasions, Timothy was entrusted with important tasks in support of Paul's missionary work (Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10; Philippians 2:19; 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 6). His name is found in the opening verses of a number of Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Philemon 1). According to Acts 20:4 (written at the end of Paul's third missionary journey), we find a good indication that Timothy had gone with Paul to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. But two of the so-called pastoral letters, written shortly before Paul's death (1 & 2 Timothy), indicate that after leaving Paul in Rome, Timothy had become the pastor of the church in Ephesus. The author of the Book of Hebrews, tells us that at some point Timothy too had been imprisoned.<sup>27</sup> Both he and Silas are important figures in the early church and their contributions should not be overlooked.

### **The Occasion of Paul's Thessalonian Letter**

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<sup>25</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 83.

We know Paul did not stay in Thessalonica for a long period of time—weeks not months. Luke tells us that the apostle was in the synagogue for a mere three Sabbaths reasoning with the Jews from the Scriptures. Luke also indicates that the riot in Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17:5-10 occurred shortly after this third Sabbath. The Jews did not welcome Paul with open arms. Word of success of the gospel reached Thessalonica before Paul arrived. According to Luke, the Jews managed to stir up significant trouble.

At this point, the law of unintended consequences rears its ugly head. By driving Paul out of Thessalonica, Paul went on to Berea, Athens, and then Corinth, where he preached the gospel and saw many Jews and Gentiles come to faith in Jesus—the very thing the lewd fellows who attacked Jason’s house did not want to see happen. The Edict of Claudius, which was issued in 49 A.D., expelled the Jews from Rome. The edict had strictly forbidden Jews from holding meetings or harboring proselytes and new converts. The Jews may have feared that this is what Jason was doing, which might lead to a charge of treason and further Roman crackdowns on the Jews in Thessalonica.<sup>28</sup> But to drive Paul out of Thessalonica was to send him elsewhere to preach the gospel and turn additional parts of the world upside down.

Since Paul speaks of working with his hands day and night so as not to be a burden on anyone (1 Thessalonians 2:7-13), some take this comment as an indication that Paul stayed on for a longer period of time than a mere three weeks. We are also told that the nearby Philippian church sent Paul gifts while he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16). Yet, when we consider all of the evidence (especially that in Acts), it seems that Paul was there for at least three Sabbaths, but less than four weeks, the maximum period of time seemingly allowed by the reference to “three Sabbaths.”<sup>29</sup> Paul apparently worked a “day job” while there to support himself. We know that Paul had a trade, “tent making,” and so he may have gone to work with someone in the congregation. This would have placed him in contact with numerous Gentiles who otherwise would have no contact with Paul’s preaching in the synagogue. What is clear is that God graciously brought about a great harvest through Paul’s preaching. The result was a thriving church in a major center of commerce, communication, and influence.

Therefore it is probable that Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians was written not long after he and his companions were forced to leave the city. After leaving Thessalonica, Luke tells us that Paul was forced to move on to Berea, though the Jews stirred up trouble there too after following him from Thessalonica to Berea. Paul then went on to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas behind in the city for a brief period (Acts 17:15). When Timothy arrived in Athens, Paul apparently sent him back to Thessalonica. Paul was worried about those whom he was forced to leave behind. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, *“Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith.”*

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christian Responses* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 252.

<sup>29</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 7.

It was not long after Paul left Athens for Corinth that Silas and Timothy rejoined him there, bringing him a favorable report which let Paul know that believers in Thessalonica were still standing firm in their faith despite some confusion over doctrine, and despite some degree of persecution stirred up by the Jews (1 Thessalonians 3:6-9).

Upon receiving Timothy's report, Paul composed his first Thessalonian letter, in part, to encourage them and inform them that he will indeed pray for them (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13). This is fairly strong evidence that Paul composed this letter during his time in Corinth soon after his arrival there after leaving Athens. If 1 Thessalonians was indeed written in 50-51 CE, this makes this letter one of the earliest writings in the New Testament, written about two years after his Epistle to the Galatians.<sup>30</sup>

There is also strong evidence that 2 Thessalonians, which contains virtually no repetition of the material in the first epistle, was written a short time later—although, as just mentioned, this is challenged by critical scholars. The interval between the composition and sending of the two letters is apparently quite short.<sup>31</sup>

Since we may wonder if Paul ever saw the Thessalonians again, the answer seems to be “probably.” On his third missionary journey (which took place about 56 CE) and which is recounted in Acts 19:21 and Acts 20:3, Paul went to Achaia (a region on the western side of the Greek Peloponnese) and may have visited Thessalonica on this journey.<sup>32</sup> It is hard to conceive of Paul being so close and not stopping in the city.

### **An Overview of the Theology of Paul's Thessalonian Letters**

Upon reading Paul's two Thessalonian letters it becomes apparent that Paul is dealing with circumstances much different from those in Galatia. There are no issues with Judaizers since the matter of justification by faith was addressed and settled at the Jerusalem Council two years prior—although the Judaizing error will continue to resurface and require Paul to address elements of it later on (cf. Romans 2-3; Colossians 2). But in Thessalonica, there is no mention of debate over “works of law” or justification. This is largely because the Thessalonian church is composed primarily of Gentiles. Their lack of knowledge about Moses and the law of God frees them from a prior misunderstanding of circumcision, the blessing/curse principle, or

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 12-13; Cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 347 ff. Kümmel is a bit more tepid in his assessment, although he comes down on the side of Pauline authorship, dating the letter about 50 CE. He contends that Paul is writing from Corinth as a testimony to his missionary endeavors, and affirms the overall integrity of the letter. See W. G. Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament, rev. ed (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1977), 257-262. B. B. Warfield contends that this is Paul's earliest letter, not Galatians. See, B. B. Warfield, “*The Prophecies of St. Paul*,” in Biblical Doctrines, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 601.

<sup>31</sup> “Most scholars assume that 2 Thessalonians was written after 1 Thessalonians, and because of the similarity in themes it is usually held that the time between the two letters was short.” Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 218.

confusion about the priority of Abraham and the covenant of grace to Moses and the Sinai covenant as would be the case in a congregation with significant numbers of Jewish believers who had to “unlearn” their prior incorrect understanding of the Old Testament.

One helpful way to think about the fact that Paul’s letters are consistent in their theology, yet that same theology is applied in a number widely different circumstances has been suggested by Christiaan Beker. Beker identifies what he calls a “coherence-contingency” pattern in Paul.<sup>33</sup> As recent Pauline scholarship has pointed out (especially Beker), we ought not think of Paul as a “systematic theologian,” or as a theological “innovator” who makes up his doctrine on the fly as he goes along. Instead, we should understand Paul through his apostolic office, applying his core belief of an unchanging gospel grounded in the saving merits of Jesus (who revealed this to Paul) to specific, yet very dynamic situations facing new congregations.<sup>34</sup> This, in turn, became the occasion for a number of the Epistles of Paul which appear in our New Testament canon.<sup>35</sup>

As seen in his apologetic speeches in the Book of Acts, and then in his epistles, Paul proclaims one gospel (Christ crucified) to diverse audiences (Jew, Gentile, slaves, free, people of high standing and noble birth) who stand poles apart from one another in terms of both their respective knowledge of the Old Testament, their varying intellectual backgrounds and their interpretive “world and life” view (i.e., their presuppositions). Paul can assume things about the Thessalonians which could not be assumed about the Galatians. But the Thessalonians were struggling with their own unique set of issues. One gospel (coherence), multiple situations and circumstances (contingency).

When we begin to work through Paul’s Thessalonians letters our expectation about what we will find is nicely summarized by Doug Moo. “Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians its famous for its teaching about eschatology.”<sup>36</sup> To many, this means Paul will talk about signs of the end, the “rapture” (whether it is “pre” or “post” tribulational), the so-called seven-year tribulation period, and the identity of the coming Antichrist.

But if we wish to make proper sense of Paul’s letter in its context, we need to keep in mind the big picture consideration of Paul’s focus upon eschatology,<sup>37</sup> especially in light of G. K. Beale’s assertion that “to understand the New Testament in its fullness, we must be familiar with how

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<sup>33</sup> “contingency-coherence” model is set out by J. Christiaan Beker, in *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), especially pages 23-36. See also J. Christiaan Beker, “*Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Scheme as Interpretive Model*,” in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 1, ed., Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>34</sup> See the discussion in J. M. Everts, “*Conversion and Call of Paul*” in, Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 156-163.

<sup>35</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 23-36.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 88.

<sup>37</sup> See Richard B. Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 245-299



the biblical authors viewed the `end times.'"<sup>38</sup> The critical point, cautions Beale, is that "both nonevangelical and evangelical scholars increasingly recognize that the New Testament authors understood the latter days not merely as future but as beginning with Christ's first coming."<sup>39</sup> To put it another way, Paul is writing to a new church which has specific questions about the return of Jesus. Although what he says to the Thessalonians about the end times ought to inform our own views regarding eschatology, Paul is not writing to explain or answer our current eschatological debates.

Beale's point is vital if we want to correctly understand Paul's teaching and answers to the Thessalonians about the end-times. Just twenty years removed from the events associated with Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Paul's operating assumption is that the last days have already dawned when Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended to the Father's right hand, and then poured out his Spirit upon his people at Pentecost. The fact that the last days have already commenced carries with it the expectation that Jesus Christ will bodily return at the end of the age. No doubt, such an emphasis upon these big-picture turning points in redemptive-history provoked the questions raised by the Thessalonians, just as they still do today. What does it mean to live in the "latter days." "When will the Lord return?" And "what happens when he does?"

As Beale points out, "the phrase `latter days' and similar phrases occur about twenty-five times in the New Testament, and only exceptionally do they refer exclusively to the very end of history. They are used the majority of the time to describe the end times as beginning already in the first century!"<sup>40</sup> This is a strong indication that Paul understands the period of time beginning with Christ's resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost as the "last days"-the final period in human history. Therefore, God's people have been living in the "last days" for two thousand years in eager anticipation of our Lord's return and the resurrection on the final day of human history. Two thousand years removed from the questions being asked by a first century congregation, we risk misreading Paul to the degree to which we regard what he says here as limited to the period immediately before our Lord's return.

In speaking of the latter days as he does throughout this epistle, Paul draws heavily upon Old Testament usage of the phrase. This should not be a surprise to us since even though Paul is writing to a predominantly Gentile church, the Old Testament is central to Paul's thought world-his default setting as it were. He was a highly trained rabbi who probably knew most of the Old Testament from memory as well as much of the rabbinic commentary on it. Beale summarizes the meaning of the "last day" in the Old Testament, which clarifies for us the categories which are in Paul's mind when he explains how the coming of Jesus Christ and his promise to return frames all future Christian hope and expectation.

In the Old Testament this wording is prophetic and refers to a future time. (1) There

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<sup>38</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 18.

will be a tribulation for Israel consisting of oppression (Ezek 38:14–17), persecution (Dan 10:14; 11:27–12:10), false teaching, deception and apostasy (Dan 10:14; 11:27–35). (2) After the tribulation Israel will seek the Lord (Hos 3:4–5) and be delivered (Ezek 38:14–16; Dan 10:14; 12:1–13), while their enemies will be judged (Ezek 38:14–16; Dan 10:14; 11:40–45; 12:2). (3) This deliverance and judgment will occur because a leader (Messiah) from Israel will finally conquer all of its Gentile enemies (Gen 49:1, 8–12; Num 24:14–19; Is 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–3; Dan 2:28–45; 10:14–12:10). (4) God will establish a kingdom on the earth and rule over it (Is 2:2–4; Dan 2:28–45; Mic 4:1–3) together with a Davidic king (Hos 3:4–5). As in the New Testament, the concept of eschatology appears even when the actual terminology does not. For example, Daniel 12:2 speaks of the final resurrection of all people, and Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 refer to the coming new heavens and earth.<sup>41</sup>

Paul tells us the messianic mission of Jesus occurs in the fullness of time (cf. Galatians 4:4–6), which indicates the final epoch in human history has begun.<sup>42</sup> Jesus’s messianic mission therefore marks the beginning of the final epoch of human history characterized by the fulfillment of all of these Old Testament messianic expectations. This, in turn, sets the stage for the eschatological expectations of the “latter days,” i.e., which is the entire period of time between Christ’s first coming and his second advent, when all of these expectations set forth by Israel’s prophets are gloriously and finally realized. This establishes two very important interpretive points. The first is an important time-marker. The last days dawn with the commencement of Jesus’s messianic mission and will end when Jesus returns at the end of the age. Second, this places the second advent of Jesus at the heart of New Testament eschatology—not the rapture, nor the establishment of an earthly millennial age.

From the very beginning, Christians have confessed and hope for the Lord’s return, seeing it as the main event in all of future biblical prophecy. We confess in the Creed,

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Christ’s church confesses its belief in the Lord’s return to raise the dead, adding in the third stanza of the creed (regarding the Holy Spirit), we believe in “the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.” This tells us that from the earliest days (i.e., the “rule of faith” and the “Old Roman” creed which preceded the Apostles Creed, and dating from about 390 CE.), Christians expected Jesus to return, raise the dead, and judge the world, as necessary to

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<sup>41</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Geerhardus Vos, Pauline Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 1-41; Ben Witherington III, Jesus, Paul and the End of the World (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 26.

establish “life everlasting.”<sup>43</sup> This is a concise eschatology centered upon the Lord’s return and drawn largely from Paul’s teaching about the Lord’s return as set out in his Thessalonians letters.

Upon reading Paul’s answer to the questions put to him by the Christians in Thessalonica, it becomes clear that Paul is setting forth some of the most important teaching in the New Testament concerning Christ’s return to raise the dead, judge the world, and usher in the new creation as foretold in the Old Testament and confessed by Christians in the post-apostolic age. But Paul does speak of climactic events which precede the second coming of the Lord Jesus; a “rebellion” connected to the appearance of a “man of sin.” This will come after a time of restraint comes to an end. This too is part of the expectation of Israel’s prophets (especially Daniel).

Christian expectation regarding the end-times develops against the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism which anticipated two eschatological ages to come; a present age associated with evil and wickedness which is to be superseded by an age to come, which is depicted as a time of the glory of the resurrection and consummation. As but one example where we find such an expectation expressed in the New Testament is Luke 20:34-36,<sup>44</sup> wherein Luke quotes Jesus as saying,

*the sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.*

Jesus will return to usher in the age to come in the fulness of the resurrection, not to establish an earthly throne in Jerusalem ruling over people in natural bodies who are still bearing children as typical of premillennialism.<sup>45</sup> Procreation, Jesus says, is an impossibility after his return in the age to come.

As we proceed to work through the two Thessalonian letters, we note from the beginning that both Jesus and Paul use the same two age or two realm terminology.<sup>46</sup> Both have the same expectations for the course of human history after our Lord’s ascension and Pentecost. Although Jesus’s preaching primarily centers upon the kingdom of God,<sup>47</sup> the gospels tie the

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<sup>43</sup> Michael J. Kruger, Christianity at the Crossroads (London: SPCK, 2017), 136-145.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xxxvi-xxxix.

<sup>45</sup> G. K. Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology: Understanding of the Old Testament in the New (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 130.

<sup>46</sup> Vos, Pauline Eschatology, 15-94; Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology, 130-136; 140-141.

<sup>47</sup> Herman Ridderbos, The Coming of the Kingdom (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), xxviii.

dawn of the kingdom to the same time frame as the arrival of the age to come. In Mark 1:14-15, we read “*now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’*” For Jesus, the declaration that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” is nothing less than the dawning of the age to come.<sup>48</sup> The kingdom has arrived because the time is fulfilled. Jesus, the king, has come.

In this we see the tension between the “already” (the kingdom is present) and the “not yet”—although a very present reality, the kingdom is not consummated, and will not be until Jesus returns at the end of the age.<sup>49</sup> This is especially significant in light of Jesus words in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:3-14, 29-44), when Jesus describes the present age as being like the “days of Noah,” even after the fulness of time has arrived in his own person. As with Jesus, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12, Paul similarly warns of difficult conditions for God’s people until Jesus returns to consummate his kingdom Christ’s kingdom has come, but is not yet consummated. To expect otherwise gives us a highly over-realized eschatology.

The contrast between these two ages or realms is one between “this age” (things temporal and destined to perish) and the “age to come” (eternal things) is found in both Jesus’s and Paul’s teaching regarding the course of human history and our Lord’s bodily return to earth at the end of the age (a point Paul will make in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12). Another example of this two age structure can be seen in Matthew 13:36-46 in the Parable of the Sower in which Jesus contrasts the two ages in connection with his second coming, with his return as the critical factor in this age giving way to the age to come. The distinction between the two ages is also made by Paul in Ephesians 1:21, when Paul, echoing Jesus, speaks of the Lord’s ascended rule, as “*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*”

Neither Jesus nor Paul were “golden age” millennialists. That is, they do not look forward to a golden age of great economic, cultural, political, and religious progress either before or after our Lord’s return on the last day. Nor do they understand our Lord’s second advent as ushering in a millennial age which will be characterized by earthly conditions much better than the present age, yet which remains something less than the final glorification and re-creation of all things. In Romans 8:21-23, Paul looks forward to a new creation, not a “golden age” millennium when he speaks of . . .

*the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

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<sup>48</sup> Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 68.

<sup>49</sup> See the discussion in Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 68-69.

Jesus and Paul look forward to the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the consummation at our Lord's return, not a partial and provisional restoration of the earth as taught in premillennialism. The flow of redemptive history reveals that the final consummation comes when the temporal gives way to the eternal, when time gives way to eternity.

The decisive events ushering in the age to come are the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his ascension to the Father's right hand, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost which secures our redemption on the last day (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). In Ephesians 1:3-14, the Holy Spirit is spoken of as a deposit guarantying the resurrection our bodies.<sup>50</sup> But the present evil age will not end until Christ's second coming brings about the general resurrection and final judgment as taught in passages such as Matthew 13:36-43; Matthew 25:31 ff.; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; and 1 Corinthians 15:50-55. We also see this in John's gospel as he recounts Jesus' speaking of the resurrection on the "last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24). In his second epistle, the apostle Peter ties the recreation of the heavens and earth directly to Christ's return at the end of the age (2 Peter 3:3-13) so as to usher in a new heaven and earth, the home of everlasting righteousness.

When we look at all the New Testament teaching, we find that at his second advent, Jesus will raise all the dead (the general resurrection), judge the world (separate sheep from goats, etc.) and usher in the new creation. There is no room or need for a millennial age to follow Christ's return, nor can there be a millennial golden age before he does.

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## Excursus - New Testament Texts (From Jesus and Paul) Which Distinguish the Two Ages

### Biblical Texts Which Speak of "This Age"

- Matthew 12:32 - There is no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit
- Matthew 24:3 - The end of the age will be preceded by signs
- Matthew 28:20 - Christ will be with us until the end of the age
- Luke 18:30 - There are material rewards given to us in this life
- Luke 20:34 - The people of this age marry and are given in marriage
- Mark 10:30 - The present age is an age of homes, fields, and families

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<sup>50</sup> As Seyoon Kim puts it, "Paul was convinced that the *eschaton* had broken in with God's saving act in Jesus Christ." Seyoon Kim, The Origins of Paul's Gospel (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 72

- Romans 12:2 - We are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world (age)
- 1 Corinthians 1:20 - Philosophy is the wisdom of this age
- I Corinthians 2:6-8 - Wisdom and rulers are of this age
- II Corinthians 4:4 - Satan is the god of this age who has blinded the minds of men and women
- Galatians 1:4 - The present age is evil
- Ephesians 1:21 - Christ reigns in the present age
- Ephesians 2:2 - The ways of this world (age) are evil
- I Timothy 6:17 - Those who are rich in this age, are not to hope in their wealth for the next
- Titus 2:12 - We are to live Godly lives in the present age

In every instance, the qualities associated with “this age” are temporal in nature. These texts describe the present course of history before the return of Christ and are things which pass away at his return.

### **Biblical Texts Which Speak of the “Age to Come”**

- Matthew 12:32 - No forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit
- Matthew 13:40 - The weeds will be thrown into the fire
- Mark 10:30 - Eternal life as a reward
- Luke 18:30 - Eternal life as a reward
- Luke 20:35 - No marriage or giving in marriage
- I Corinthians 6:9-10 - Evil doers will not inherit the kingdom of God
- I Corinthians 15:50 - Flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God
- Galatians 5:21 - Those who live evil lives will not inherit the kingdom
- Ephesians 1:21 - Christ will reign in the age to come

- Ephesians 5:5 - Immoral people will not inherit the kingdom of God
- I Thessalonians 2:12 - We are encouraged to live lives worthy of the kingdom
- II Thessalonians 1:5 - Faith will count you worthy of the kingdom of God
- I Timothy 6:19 - The coming age has life that is truly life
- II Timothy 4:18 - The Lord will bring us to the kingdom of God

In marked contrast to “this age” the qualities assigned to the age to come are all eternal (or non-temporal) in nature. These references are clearly describing the future eschatological state of believers (and non-believers, if you factor in the references to judgment).

### **The Line of “Demarcation” Between the Two Ages**

- Matthew 13:39 - The harvest is the end of the age, and the angels are the harvesters
- Matthew 13:40 - The weeds will be burned in the fire at the end of the age (judgment)
- Matthew 13:49 - The angels will separate the wicked from the righteous

As is clear from the Parable of the weeds, this age ends when Jesus returns. This is also the day of judgment.

### **Other New Testament Texts**

- According to John 6:39, Jesus will raise up his own on the last day. Similarly, in verse 40 of that same chapter, John tells us that those who believe in the Son and have eternal life, will be raised up on the last day. In verse 44, we are told that our Lord will raise up his own on the last day. Finally, in verse 54, we read “whoever eats the flesh of Christ will be raised up on the last day.” Clearly, in John’s mind, the last day is a day of blessing. It is the day of resurrection.
- Later in John’s gospel, the same phrase appears again, but this time it is not limited to blessing. In John 11:24, Martha states that she knows that Lazarus will rise in the resurrection on the last day. We are told in the very next chapter (12:48), however, that those who reject Christ will be condemned on the last day. The last day will not only be a day of blessing for God’s people (the elect), it will also be a day of curse for those who are not.
- In Acts 2:20, Luke says that there will be cosmic signs—the sun and the moon will be turned to blood—before the day of the Lord. In the next chapter he tells us that Jesus, “must remain in heaven until he comes to restore all things, as he promised long ago

through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:20-21).

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As we will see when we work our way through the text of the Thessalonian letters, Paul's focus on eschatology reflects this two-age framework in which the decisive events are:

- 1). Jesus's first advent (his messianic mission) as foretold by Israel's prophets in which the kingdom of God and the age to come dawn
- 2). Then comes the interadvental age in which we live during the overlap of the two ages, often spoken of as the already and the not yet. This is the "great tribulation" as well as the age of "the great commission"
- 3). The day of the Lord marks the end of this age, "*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus*" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8)
- 4). Christ's second advent is the day of resurrection, the judgment, and the establishment of a new heavens and earth—the kingdom is consummated and the age to come fully realized

It is in this light that we should seek to understand the nature of the confusion within the Thessalonian church about our Lord's return which prompted Paul to correct the misconception via letter. The confusion likely stems from the short time that Paul spent with them. According to F. F. Bruce,

The Thessalonians had received some eschatological instruction while the missionaries were with them. They were taught to expect the Advent from heaven of the Son of God who had been raised from the dead; by his Advent they would be saved from the end-time retribution to be experienced by the ungodly (1 Thess 1:9, 10: 5:9, 10) and would receive a share in his kingdom and glory (1 Thess 2:12). But the missionaries had to leave the city before the teaching necessary for their converts' equipment had been completed; some questions therefore were left unanswered in their minds. What would be the relation of the Lord's Advent to the condition of "the dead in Christ"? Would believers who died before the Advent be at some disadvantage as compared with those who survived to witness the great event? And what relation did the Advent bear to the last great rebellion against God which also figured in the general pattern of expectation?<sup>51</sup>

Paul writes his first letter to the Thessalonians in large measure to inform them that those who die before the second advent will not miss out on the resurrection, nor the inheritance promised by Jesus and associated with the age to come. When Jesus returns, he tells us, "*the dead in Christ*

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<sup>51</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xxxvii.



*will rise first*" (1 Thessalonian 4:16-17). The apostle goes on to describe in some detail what happens to those who are still alive when Christ returns and who are then caught up to meet the Lord when he returns in judgment (the so-called rapture of the church, which is best understood as the general resurrection, when the wheat and tares, and sheep and goats are assembled for final judgment.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that an expectation of our Lord's return is to be a source of encouragement to them, not fear (1 Thessalonians 4:18, cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22). For believers, the second coming is pure good news (gospel). But for unbelievers, the second coming is pure law (condemnation). In his first epistle, Paul strictly forbids the Thessalonians from engaging in undue speculation regarding the time and date of our Lord's return (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). But many Christians find it difficult to resist the temptation to do otherwise. Jesus too was emphatic in his comments about this: "*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*" (Matthew 24:36).

Likewise, in his second epistle, Paul reminds the Thessalonians (2:1-2), "*Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.*" Eschatological hopes and expectation must be tempered by an awareness of God's providential purposes. In regard to Antichrist speculation, Vos cautions, "2 Thessalonians belongs among the many prophecies, whose final and best exegete will be the eschatological fulfillment, and in regard to which it behooves the saints to exercise a peculiar kind of eschatological patience."<sup>52</sup> Christ's return will bring about the final consummation on the day appointed by God, not on the day we might wish. We are exhorted to be patient.

But Paul does not leave the matter here. He also cautions the Thessalonians in his second letter, "*Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction*" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Paul is telling us that while our Lord's return may be sudden and unexpected—as a thief in the night—the return of Christ is paradoxically preceded by certain signs, in this case, the appearance of the "man of lawlessness." The idea that an evil figure, who is the arch-enemy of Jesus Christ, is to be revealed before Christ's bodily return has, no doubt, led to more end times speculation than perhaps any single other reason. Just who or what is the Antichrist, and when will he (or she) appear?

### **Paul's Doctrine of God-YHWH, the God of Israel**

Raised in a pious Jewish home and trained as a rabbi under the famous Gamaliel, Paul has what amounts to a Ph.D. in Judaism. He knows much of the Old Testament through memorization or through constant use and familiarity. Although raised in a dual Hellenic-

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<sup>52</sup> Vos, Pauline Eschatology, 133.

Hebrew culture in Tarsus (Asia Minor), the Old Testament forms the apostle's primary thought world. Paul never speaks of God in the abstract as a Greek pagan might do—as the “one,” or a god residing at the top of a hierarchal pantheon of human-like demigods living on Mount Olympus, like Zeus. Instead, Paul speaks of the “true and living God” who is spoken of in the Old Testament. YHWH is the God of Israel to whom Gentile pagans must turn when they give up their idolatry (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9).<sup>53</sup>

Paul identifies YHWH as “God the Father” in the opening verse of the epistle. As Paul will go on to say in verse 3, YHWH is also Father of his children, yet he is also the Father of Jesus Christ “his Son” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). The true and living God of the Old Testament is the Father of all those who are believers in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the eternal son of God, while we are adopted sons and daughters.

It is remarkable that Paul does not engage in apologetics with these Gentiles (based on what we read in Acts), rather, he “assumes without argumentation the conceptual framework of several theological beliefs.” Paul does not argue for but supposes the existence of the “living and true God.”<sup>54</sup> That said, throughout the Book of Acts, the apostle does make direct appeal to Christ's resurrection as the basis for the truth of the gospel he preaches—that Christ died for his people, was raised from the dead, and is now exalted to the Father's right hand until he returns. I identify this as the “Proclamation-Defense” model of apologetic discourse.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile the Holy Spirit confirms the truth of Paul's preaching in the hearts of believers, and enables them to progress in holiness in the Christian life.

Since God has chosen his people, the Jews (1 Thessalonians 1:4), therefore YHWH is the true and living God and the only proper object of faith, not pagan deities (1 Thessalonians 1:8). YHWH's authority as the Creator-Redeemer is the basis of the apostles' confidence to preach the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:2). YHWH's words must be believed since he has created all those who hear them and redeems those who trust in Jesus. YHWH has entrusted the apostolic preachers (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) with the gospel revealed in the person and work of Israel's Messiah (1 Thessalonians 2:4) which has brought many Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ. Christians are to conduct themselves in the light of his word (the Old Testament). God has called his people to be holy and see themselves as set part for his purposes, which is the primary meaning of sanctification. He is the one who will bring them to his goal and their inheritance—the salvation unto which he has appointed them.<sup>56</sup> Presumably, this was communicated to these new Gentile converts during the time Paul spent with them.

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<sup>53</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvi.

<sup>54</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, “*For the Sake of the Gospel: Paul's Apologetic Speeches in the Book of Acts*,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f81cd67b88d47b94051ed/t/605918d75368d7164d746cb7/1616451799572/Paul%27s+Apologetic+Speeches+%282%29.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvi.

## Paul's Christology and Explicit Trinitarianism

Brian Rosner identifies a foundational element of Paul's theology—his trinitarianism.

Paul's letters rank along side the Gospel of John as containing the richest vein of trinitarian theology in the New Testament. While the doctrine of the Trinity is not assembled in any one place, and the key terminology from the classical expression of the Trinity (person, substance, etc) is obviously not present, there are at least three places in his letters that can be described as explicitly trinitarian.<sup>57</sup>

Rosner cites 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone"*; 2 Corinthians 13:14: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"*; and Ephesians 4:4-7: *"There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift."*

Paul's frequent references to Jesus Christ in his two Thessalonian letters assume that God bears witness to the exalted place which Jesus currently occupies with the Father. Paul also affirms that the worship of God and Jesus are connected to the person of the Spirit. This explicit Trinitarianism is characteristic of Christian preaching and worship in the apostolic age.<sup>58</sup> To proclaim Jesus as the resurrected and exalted Lord marks Christianity off as distinct from the religion of Israel. Christians are not mere monotheists (although we are), but we are essentially Trinitarian—one God (one divine essence) who exists in three eternal subsistences (or persons), Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul's Trinitarianism is also evident in the actions he ascribes to each of the three persons when discussing the works of God in creation and redemption—by the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.<sup>59</sup>

Paul was not in Thessalonica for long, but even after such a brief period of instruction, he repeatedly "alludes to knowledge [of the person and work of Christ] they already shared saying 'you know' no less than ten times (1 Thess 1:5; 2:1; 2:2; 2:5; 2:9 [remember] 2:11; 3:3; 3:4;

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<sup>57</sup> Brian S. Rosner, "Paul and the Trinity" in *The Essential Trinity*, ed., Brandon D. Crowe & Carl R. Trueman (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2016), 118.

<sup>58</sup> Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, xlvi-ii.

<sup>59</sup> Witherington points out the difficulties Christians monotheists would face in Thessalonica. "The danger for monotheists in this environment, be they Jewish, Samaritan, or Christian, was the constant cultural pressure in the direction of syncretism, especially because other eastern cults, such as those from Egypt, were quite readily being blended with some of the local deity celebrations." See Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 8.

4:2; 5:2 [are fully aware].”<sup>60</sup> We often read past these kinds of statements without much consideration, but they do play a prominent role in Paul’s correspondence.

A quick survey of Thessalonians bears this out. The church to which Paul is writing is said to be “*in God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). God’s grace and peace—the grace and peace of God which are in Christ—are pronounced upon Paul’s readers (2 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:12). Paul directs his prayers on behalf of the congregation to “our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 3:11) or to “our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father” (2 Thessalonians 2:16).<sup>61</sup> F. F. Bruce points out what is too easily overlooked,

... the very indifference of the sequence in which the two are named is significant. If the Father is God (*theos*), the Son is Lord (*kurios*), and much that is said of God can be said equally well of the Lord: alongside “the God of peace” (1 Thess 5:23) we have “the Lord of peace” (2 Thess 3:16). If believers are “loved by God” (1 Thess 1:4), they are also “loved by the Lord” (2 Thess 2:13).<sup>62</sup>

B. B. Warfield adds that God and the Lord are the object of Paul’s prayer, which indicates that “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ could not be more indissolubly knit as essentially one.”<sup>63</sup> Gordon Fee summarizes what is now obvious. “We are seldom reading of Paul’s argued Christology, but rather his assumed Christology.”<sup>64</sup> Such a high Christology is vital to Paul’s trinitarianism.

According to Paul, Jesus’s word is authoritative (1 Thessalonians 4:15), because he speaks YHWH’s words. Paul goes on to say, “[Jesus] *who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him*” (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Jesus’s death and resurrection are critical for Paul as seen in the fact that the Thessalonian believers “*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” Paul places the dead, “in Christ [and who] will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Christians are to wait for the Son to return.

Christ’s return brings about the end of this age (things temporal). Jesus will grant relief and glory to his people and final judgment to the ungodly (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). This is the message Paul preached from the beginning as we learn in Acts 10:42, when, in one of his first recorded sermons, Paul declares that Jesus is the “judge of the living and the

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<sup>60</sup> Fred Sanders, The Triune God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 205.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvii.

<sup>62</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvii.

<sup>63</sup> B. B. Warfield, “*God Our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*,” in Biblical Doctrines, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 218-219.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon Fee, Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study (Peabody MA: Hendricksen, 2007), 4.

dead.”<sup>65</sup> When viewed in light of the contingency-coherence model, these are the same doctrines revealed to him by Jesus on the Damascus Road, further developed in consultation with the apostles before composing his letter to the Galatians. But these doctrines are given quite different emphases in the Thessalonian letters which are written to a predominantly Gentile church composed of very recent converts to Christianity from Greco-Roman paganism. There are no Judaizers present to challenge his teaching on justification, only questions about the nature and timing of the Lord’s return.

### **Paul on the Holy Spirit and the Christian Life**

Paul informs the Thessalonians that the gospel revealed to him by Jesus is effectual only through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:5). The Spirit calls God’s elect to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the gospel.<sup>66</sup> Preachers only need proclaim the word, not make up stories and become motivational speakers—a form of public speech with which Paul’s Gentile hearers were familiar. The indwelling Spirit is said to be the source of joy for the people of God (1 Thessalonians 4:8). It is the Spirit who sanctifies believers who have been set apart from pagan idolatry to serve the true and living God (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul warns believers not to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Those in union with Christ through faith also manifest the Spirit’s sanctifying power through the work of proclaiming the gospel and/or supporting the work of those who do so (1 Thessalonians 1:8). The age of the Spirit is the age of mission and evangelism—seen in the Spirit issuing to Paul the Macedonian Call. The apostle goes on to instruct the Thessalonians to be thankful by following his example in “remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). The power of the Spirit working in and through the gospel enables Christians to endure their various trials (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4), and to demonstrate love for one another (1 Thessalonians 3:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). The indwelling Spirit empowers Christians to remain chaste in the face of pagan sexual mores (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8), to be honest in their dealings with other (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13) and to do good to all (1 Thessalonians 5:15).<sup>67</sup>

### **Numerous Old Testament “Echoes”<sup>68</sup>**

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<sup>65</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvii.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied (William B. Eerdmans, 1980),

<sup>67</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, xlvii

<sup>68</sup> See Richard B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), on the significance of such “echoes” (allusions to Old Testament passages but not cited directly). See also, G. K. Beale, Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 31-36.

Paul does not cite a single verse from the Old Testament in either of his Thessalonian letters. Because of this, some scholars contend that Paul shows little interest in the Old Testament because the church in Thessalonica is predominantly composed of Gentiles who knew nothing about it. But when we look closely, there are a surprising number of echoes (allusions to Old Testament texts or events) appearing in these letters taken from the Old Testament and of which we will take notice as we work our way through the letter.<sup>69</sup> I include a brief survey of these echoes here because it is vital that we keep in mind that Paul's basic theological categories have their roots deep in the Old Testament, especially God's dealing with Israel and the Gentile nations, along with the way in which God redeems his people.<sup>70</sup> If we wish to understand Paul's teaching about the end times, we need to keep his interpretive grid in mind—the promises made in the Old Testament regarding the redemption of Israel in the messianic age and beyond.

The first echo we encounter is when Paul speaks of the church as “the assembly” (*ekklesia kyriou*). This is the way the LXX often speaks of the people of God when translating the Hebrew word *Qahal* (assembly) into Greek. In Deuteronomy 23:1, 4, 9, for example, the assembled Israelites are described as the “ekklesia of God.” Remarkably, the same thing is now said of a Gentile church established during Paul's Gentile mission. The church is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, one redeemed people of God.<sup>71</sup>

We find a second echo when Paul speaks of the Thessalonians as people “chosen by God.” No doubt, the apostle has in mind Deuteronomy 7, and the basis for God's choice of Israel as recounted in verses 7-8:

*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

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<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians” in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 871.

<sup>70</sup> Frank Thielman, Paul and the Law (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 73-78.

<sup>71</sup> According to the *Belgic Confession*, Article 27: The Holy Catholic Church – We believe and confess One single catholic or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that Christ is eternal King who cannot be without subjects. And this holy church is preserved by God against the rage of the whole world, even though for a time it may appear very small in the eyes of men—as though it were snuffed out. For example, during the very dangerous time of Ahab the Lord preserved for himself seven thousand men who did not bend their knees to Baal. And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

In the new covenant, God calls his elect to faith in Jesus on the same basis he called Israel to be his people—according to his purpose, however mysterious that purpose might be until revealed. We do know that God does not choose his people based upon anything good or anything desirable in the creature (such as foreseen faith or good works).<sup>72</sup> Paul reminds the Corinthians to keep their self-worth in check, when he tells them, “*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong*” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

A third echo can be heard when Paul speaks of God calling the Thessalonians to turn from idols (gods formed in the sinful human imagination) just as he has called Israel to do in Egypt and upon entrance into Canaan. God’s people were to reject the gods of Egypt and its Pharaoh, along with all the deities of Israel’s Canaanite neighbors. So too, the Thessalonians are to turn away from their Greco-Roman and familial idols to serve the true and living God, exactly as required of Israel in the second commandment.

*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

What God requires of Israel, so too he requires of Gentiles who embrace the gospel through faith (the Israel of God—Galatians 6:16).

The covenant promise given to Israel is reaffirmed of the church by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:16: “*What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people,’*” a text which loudly echoes the promises made to Abraham and Israel being fulfilled in a Gentile church.

A fourth echo is heard when Paul requires of the Thessalonians the same sexual ethic revealed to Israel. God’s people are called out from the nations to be “holy,” that is, set apart as his own people who are to reflect in their sexual conduct the differences between a holy people who worship and serve the true and living God, and an unholy people who worship and serve pagan gods and excuse their every urge to indulge themselves through the worship of fertility gods and gods of revelry. The Thessalonians were to reserve sexual relations for marriage (where they are a blessing), and to reject pagan indifference to fornication (sex before marriage), adultery (sexual relations outside of marriage) and homosexuality (sexual relations with a same sex partner).

Finally, when Paul speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit, he is presupposing that the coming of the Spirit of God associated with the restoration of Israel in the final days is now a reality with

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<sup>72</sup> See Francis Turretin on why God’s election of sinners in Romans 8:28-20 cannot be based on foreknowledge. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), I.350-362.

the coming of Jesus to commence the long anticipated messianic age.<sup>73</sup> What had been predicted by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—a coming “age of the Spirit” – is now a reality after Pentecost. The promised new covenant has dawned, along with the present reality of the kingdom of God, with both being prominent features of the “age to come.” In this time of fulness, Gentiles too have been called by God to faith in Israel’s Messiah. As foreseen by Israel’s prophets, “in the process of so much radical change [to come], another shocking event had taken place: Gentiles had turned from idols to the God of Israel and had joined the eschatological people of God.”<sup>74</sup>

This change in perspective regarding God’s dealing with the Gentiles in relationship to Israel may explain, in part, the violent reaction to Paul’s preaching on the part of the Jews in Macedonia. Jews living in a Greco-Roman culture were struggling to preserve their religion and heritage. Paul’s preaching of a crucified Messiah was in their minds an unprovoked assault upon the Jewish people. Paul shows up at the synagogue arguing that Jesus was that one foretold in the Old Testament. Yet these Jews refused to see in a crucified Jesus that one of whom Moses spoke, “*the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen*” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

These echoes taken collectively or separately assume that there is one people of God—the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, with the church now identified as the new Israel in the New. This new Israel entails the addition of countless Gentiles to the one people of God, the church, in addition to the believing remnant of Israel, a group which includes the Apostle Paul. As Paul argues in Galatians 3:7, together these are children of Abraham. This is an important point, given the perennial dispensational accusation that amillennarians teach that the church “replaces” Israel and this is the basis for modern antisemitism. Much better to see Paul’s theology in terms of “fulfillment” of God’s purpose for Israel, rather than as “replacement theology,” in which the church is thought to “replace” Israel.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “Paul’s Eschatological Concept of the Spirit,” in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 95-125.

<sup>74</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 77-78.

<sup>75</sup> “Paul carries over concepts of corporate election from early Judaism into his theologizing about the Christian assembly. But his use of texts like Hos. 2:25 does not mean that he operates with a replacement theology, as if God has reneged on his promises to Jews, but it does mean that those promises are now and in the future to be fulfilled through and by the Lord Jesus. The church has not replaced Israel, but Jews like Paul who believe in Jesus are viewed as the true Israel, the true descendants of Abraham, and those Gentiles who join them have become part of the people of God, grafted into the true olive tree. Paul’s is a fulfillment rather than replacement theology.” Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 65.



## Outline of Paul's First Thessalonian Letter<sup>76</sup>

### Introduction

### Excursus - New Testament Texts (From Jesus and Paul) Which Distinguish the Two Ages

#### I. PRESCRIPT (1:1)

#### II. THANKSGIVING (1:2-10)

### Excursus on Premillennialism and Dispensationalism and the "Wrath of God"

#### III APOSTOLIC DEFENSE (2:1-12)

A. The Missionaries' Visit (2:1-4)

B. The Missionaries' Behavior (2:5-8)

C. The Missionaries' Example (2:9-12)

#### IV. FURTHER THANKSGIVING (2:13-16)

#### V. PLANS FOR A SECOND VISIT (2:17-3:13)

A. Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind (2:17-20)

B. Mission of Timothy (3:1-5)

C. Joy and Thanksgiving at Timothy's Report (3:6-10)

D. First Wish-Prayer for the Thessalonian Christians (3:11-13)

#### VI. EXHORTATION (4:1-5:24)

A. On Keeping the Traditions (4:1, 2)

B. On Sexual Purity (4:3-8)

C. On Brotherly Love (4:9-12)

D. On the Faithful Departed (4:13-18)

### Excursus on Dispensationalism and the "Rapture"

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<sup>76</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 3.

**E. On Times and Seasons (5:1-11)**

**F. On Recognition of Leaders (5:12, 13)**

**G. On Various Christian Duties (5:14-22)**

**H. Second Wish-Prayer for the Thessalonian Christians (5:23, 24)**

**VII. LETTER CLOSING (5:25-28)**

## I. Prescript (1:1)

### **1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.**

Paul begins his first Thessalonian letter with a customary apostolic greeting, the usual form of letters from this period. Paul does not send the Thessalonians a systematic theological treatise on the end-times, but is instead sending “a real letter arising out of the situation in which Paul and his friends find themselves.”<sup>77</sup> The apostle is not writing to Christians two thousand years removed from first century Thessalonica to promise them that the rapture (of the “left behind” variety) is imminent, or that the Antichrist is about to make a peace treaty with Israel, or to answer questions about the nature and character of a millennial age.

This letter is a response to a specific set of circumstances; to encourage a congregation in first century Thessalonica to stand firm, and then to clear up any confusion in the congregation about the nature of our Lord’s return reflected in their questions to Paul. Paul’s discussion of Christ’s return has much to say about what will happen at the time of the end, but we must be careful to let Paul tell us what questions we ought to be asking and not expect him to directly answer our questions which arise from our own contemporary debates about which millennial camp we ought join, or whether we think the rapture will be “pre” or “post” trib. The unique situation in Thessalonica explains the scope of the material that Paul will address in this letter. Much of what we find in his answers is drawn from the Old Testament understood through the lens of the person and work of Jesus.

We have discussed the fact that Paul is the primary author of the letter who then adds the names of his co-senders, something he does in other Pauline letters found in the New Testament: Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, and even in Galatians when he speaks of the “brothers with me.” All three men (Paul, Silas, Timothy) are well-known to the Thessalonians and should be considered as the founders of the Thessalonian church. In Greco-Roman culture, attaching the names of the co-senders to a letter ties them to the author and grants them authority to represent him.<sup>78</sup> Paul is clearly the senior of the three,<sup>79</sup> but all three played important roles in the apostolic church. As Wanamaker points out, “the letter should be read primarily as an embodiment of Paul’s thought,” especially in light of Paul’s use of “I” (the first person singular) in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, 3:5, and 5:27.<sup>80</sup> It is Paul’s letter with co-senders included.

“Mr. Silvanus,” or better known as Silas, was chosen by the Jerusalem Council to take their

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<sup>77</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 33.

<sup>78</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 68.

<sup>79</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 67.

letter to the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-22). He was called “a leader among the brothers,” and apparently was considered a prophet (a Spirit-empowered preacher) who did much to encourage the Christians in Antioch (Acts 15:32). Later on, Silas becomes a close associate of Peter (1 Peter 5:12).

Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother who not been circumcised as an infant, hence Paul’s desire to have Timothy circumcised before taking him along on his next missionary journey to eliminate any potential conflict with local Jews (Acts 16:1-3). Invaluable to Paul, the apostle sent Timothy on several trips as a courier/messenger as mentioned in Acts 19:22, 1 Corinthians 4:17, and Philippians 2:19. Paul mentions him six times as co-sender of his letters: 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Since he is mentioned in the salutation of both Thessalonian letters, many commentators have concluded, correctly, that Timothy was one of those who helped bring the gospel to Thessalonica and establish the church there.

It is interesting that Paul does not refer to himself as an apostle, but only as “Paul.” This can be taken as an indication that these letters were written very soon after his visit to the city and no one has challenged his apostolic authority, as was the case in Galatia. There is no need to pull apostolic rank. Paul addresses both of these epistles to the “church of the Thessalonians” (v. 1). We Americans have Congregationalism in our blood streams—a carry over from our democratic republican political culture which influences our ecclesiology. Paul does not see Christ’s church as a voluntary assembly wherein everyone has an equal say in what goes on. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul speaks of respecting those “*who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.*”

“Those who labor” among them seem to exercise a ministry and oversight function, and is likely a reference to elders being established in new churches from their founding (cf. Titus 1:5). In Israel, elders were either an older person, or someone with authority within a family (Deuteronomy 21:19; 22:15; Joshua 20:4). As would be the case in a new synagogue, the church had elders who form a ruling body. In the synagogue, elders were mature men, who oversaw the congregation, usually with one man appointed to handle day to day affairs of the congregation.<sup>81</sup> In the apostolic church, elders likewise were usually older mature men, (although Timothy was young) who act as overseers (bishops) and shepherds of Christ’s flock. We are to respect our elders just as the Thessalonians were to respect theirs.<sup>82</sup>

Paul also speaks of the church in Thessalonica as being in “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This too is significant because such language points to a Trinitarian theology (coherence) which is primarily revealed in God’s saving purposes in the person and work of Jesus and the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.<sup>83</sup> There are a number of points worthy of

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<sup>81</sup> John D. Barry et al., eds., The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), s.v. “Elders in the Synagogue.”

<sup>82</sup> Barry, The Lexham Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Elders.”

<sup>83</sup> Sanders, The Triune God, 208.

consideration here.

First, the church as the assembly (*ekklesia*) is, on the one hand, taken over from the Greco-Roman world where the term referred to any public assembly, but was most often used in a political context (i.e., the *demos*).<sup>84</sup> But the term has profound Old Testament significance. According to Jeffrey Weima, “in the LXX, the word *ekklesia*, describes the people of God, whether they are assembled for worship or not (Deut. 23:2–3; 31:30; 1 Sam. 17:47; 1 Chron. 28:8; Neh. 13:1).”<sup>85</sup> Weima goes on to note,

[Paul’s] references to the “church(es) of God” both later in the letter (2:14) and elsewhere (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 11:16; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13), it seems unreasonable to doubt that in I Thess. 1:1 Paul is thinking of the Christians of Thessalonica as members of the ‘Church of God,’ and that he is fully aware of the biblical background and theological implications of his use of the term.<sup>86</sup>

Weima concludes, “the term *ekklēsia* reflects Paul’s understanding of the predominantly Gentile church of Thessalonica as the new people of God is confirmed by his subsequent reference to them just three verses later as those who are ‘loved by God’ and who know their ‘election’ (1:4) – terms used in the OT to refer to Israel but now applied to NT believers.”<sup>87</sup> Beale agrees, noting that for Paul the church is a continuation of true Israel. This came about through their identification with God and the resurrected Christ, who was Israel’s messianic king.<sup>88</sup>

As foretold by Israel’s prophets, YHWH’s salvation has been extended to the Gentiles as they now become members of YHWH’s *ekklesia*, or the church.

Second, the Old Testament background identified by Weima is worth additional elaboration. According to Frank Thielman, Paul . . .

uses a phrase similar to the term “assembly of the LORD” (*ekklesia kyriou*) found in Deuteronomy to designate the gathering of Hebrews at the time of the covenant’s ratification and Israel’s designation as God’s special people (Deut 23:1, 4, 9 LXX). Moreover, when Paul reminds the Thessalonians of their “election” and that they are “brothers beloved by God” (1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13–14; compare 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:11), he recalls the frequently repeated statement in Deuteronomy that God “loved” Israel and demonstrated his love for them by “electing” their ancestors and eventually

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<sup>84</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 84; Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 70.

<sup>85</sup> Weima, “1-2 *Thessalonians*,” 871.

<sup>86</sup> Weima, “1-2 *Thessalonians*,” 871.

<sup>87</sup> Weima, “1-2 *Thessalonians*” 871.

<sup>88</sup> Beale, Union with the Resurrected Christ, 166.

says that God “calls” or “has called” the Thessalonians much in the same way that the second part of Isaiah refers to God’s election of Israel as his “call” to them. Just as God would call Israel from the ends of the earth (Is 41:9; compare 42:6) and had called Israel’s ancestors (Is 48:12) in order to bless them and make them a great nation (Is 51:2), so Paul tells the Thessalonians that God calls them in sanctification (1 Thess 4:7; compare 2 Thess 2:14), that he will be faithful to the Thessalonians because of his role as the One who calls them (1 Thess 5:24).<sup>89</sup>

In the creation of Gentile churches throughout Macedonia, God is bringing to pass the promised restoration of Israel spoken of by Israel’s prophets. This is a strong indication that once Jesus has come in the fulness of time (cf. Galatians 4:4-6) we have entered the final stage of human history as we await the Lord’s return to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. The dispensational insistence upon God having distinct salvific purposes for Jew and Gentile<sup>90</sup> runs into a major Pauline roadblock here and elsewhere (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22).

Third, Paul sees the “assembly” in Thessalonica as something quite different from the public assemblies known to the Greeks and Romans. As with those assemblies which are called by public or political figures, those who are now members of the church in Thessalonica have been called by God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s church is not a political assembly with political aims and goals (like the *demos*). The church is not a voluntary society—like a political party—which we can join or un-join on a whim. The church is not democratic since Christ is its king who rules it through his officers (ministers, elders, and deacons). The church is the assembly of all those called by God through the gospel of his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Gene Green puts this point into perspective. “Calling the Christians in Thessalonica a *church* shows their continuity with the ancient people of God and at the same time establishes an alternative form of social identity that stands as a challenge to existing structures of power whose god is another.”<sup>91</sup>

Next, we ought to carefully consider Paul’s use of the phrase, “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” which is easy for modern readers to overlook but is quite important since the church is said to be “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>92</sup> According to F. F. Bruce,

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<sup>89</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 73.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “*Israel and the Church*,” in Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, Issues in Dispensationalism (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 113-130.

<sup>91</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 84-85.

<sup>92</sup> According to Green, “The *church of the Thessalonians* finds its unique identity in its union or relationship with *God the Father* and the exalted *Lord Jesus Christ*. The social dimension (*church*; cf. 5:26–27) and the vertical (*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*) are thus inseparably joined. The importance of this dual relationship is highlighted by their alienation from their contemporaries in the city (2:14) and the abandonment of their ancestral and civic deities (1:9).” Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 85.

The spontaneous joining of “God the Father” and the “Lord Jesus Christ” under a single preposition bears witness to the exalted place which the risen Christ occupies in the thoughts of Paul and his colleagues (cf. 3:11). In resurrection Christ wears a heavenly humanity as a “life giving Spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45-49) and has been invested by God with the title *kurios*, “lord,” the “name which is above every name” (Phil 2:9).<sup>93</sup>

Paul believes that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh and is of the same substance as the Father. The same holds true of the Holy Spirit. The trinitarian formula, “by the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit,” arises, in part, from expressions like that used here and elsewhere by the apostle.

Paul’s assertion is all the more remarkable when we note that the members of this “church” were but a short time before pagan idolaters who knew not of Christ, nor that he was sent by the Father on his mission of redemption, nor that God is one in essence and three in person, nor that God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell them (1:9-10). All of these recently revealed doctrines are the ground of the Christian faith which has been taught them by Paul in a very short period of time.<sup>94</sup> For Paul, to be “in Christ” is to be in “the church of God the Father and Jesus Christ.” The New Testament nowhere envisions a Christian as a lone ranger existing apart from membership in a local church. Nor can we conceive of a church which does not draw its life and mission apart from its union with its living head.

There is also much to be found in the now familiar apostolic blessing, “Grace to you and peace,” which possibly originated with Paul and it appears in all his letters (in some form).<sup>95</sup> Leon Morris weighs in on the importance of this phrase:

“Grace” is from the same root as the salutation commonly employed in Greek letters; it is possible that Paul is taking over and adopting the usual salutation . . . . It comes to signify what is due to grace, namely, God’s good gifts to us, especially the power to live as Christians, and finally the attitude of thankfulness that all this should awaken within the Christian. When it is used in greetings the free gift of God is meant, but the word necessarily evokes memories of the free gift of Calvary . . . . The Hebrew *shalom* meant prosperity in the widest sense . . . . Peace was seen as a gift of God; there is a definitely

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<sup>93</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 7.

<sup>94</sup> I. Howard Marshall points out that the key is Paul’s teaching and preaching regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ; “Paul expresses this relationship—one that would be especially significant for former pagans—by the unusual phrase in God the Father (2 Th. 1:1; Col. 3:3). Its meaning is determined by the phrase and the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a common Pauline term. It probably refers to the way in which the existence of the Christian is determined by the fact of Christ crucified and risen. The Christian stands in such a relationship to Jesus that his life is determined by his death and resurrection, both in that through Christ he is a new being and in that he is summoned to live a new life in the fellowship of the church. The church, then, is constituted by its relationship to God the Father and to Jesus. Its members know God s their Father, since he has made them his children (cf. 2 Th. 1:1, where the fact that God is `our' Father is made explicit), and they know Christ as their Lord.” See I. Howard Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 49.

<sup>95</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 37.

spiritual aspect to the completeness it denotes. The word order is significant. Paul . . . says “grace to you and peace” . . . [which] is all the more striking in view of the common use of “peace to you” as a greeting. But for Paul grace is primary; it is only because of grace that we have real peace.<sup>96</sup>

Following Pauline precedent, the early church incorporated these apostolic greetings into the Christian liturgy.<sup>97</sup> By using these same words in Christian worship today, the minister is extending the same apostolic greeting to the church of [insert the name and location of the congregation] through God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who sends his grace to us and grants peace to his people living at the ends of the earth.

## II. Thanksgiving (1:2-10)

**2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**

In verse 2, Paul thanks God in his prayers for the Thessalonians, reminding them of the uselessness of the pagan “gods” and idols that these new converts once served before coming to faith in Jesus. Those gods to whom they once prayed can do nothing for them. But the true and living God to whom Paul prays on their behalf, *“is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen,”* as Paul later tells the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:20-21).

As he opens his letter (verse 2), Paul makes the importance of prayer clear to this congregation. He says, *“we give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul (along with his companions, seen in the use of “we”) is genuinely pleased with their progress. Paul gives such thanks in all his letters, Galatians excepted, since

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<sup>96</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 37-38.

<sup>97</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 8.



in that case he really had nothing for which to be thankful, since the news which came to him from Galatia was decidedly bad.<sup>98</sup> But as far as the Thessalonians were concerned, the circumstances are much different. Paul has much for which to give thanks! Paul's prayers on their behalf also serve as instruction to the Thessalonians for whom prayer to God in the name of Jesus (the mediator), in the power of the Holy Spirit, was something learned just a few weeks prior. His prayers for them teach them how to pray for him as well as others.

Paul speaks of praying for the Thessalonians consistently, or better "persistently."<sup>99</sup> John Calvin observes that Paul does not merely congratulate the Thessalonians for persevering (which might make them careless), but rather, he is exhorting them to continue on persevering.<sup>100</sup> They are at the beginning of the Christian life, so there much perseverance will be needed ahead. As Paul persistently prays for this congregation, so too they should persist in those things mentioned in the verse, where Paul spells out that for which he is thankful, in what some have identified as the triad of Christian virtues: faith, love and hope.<sup>101</sup> These virtues ought to characterize the Christian life.

He starts by commending them for their "work of faith," which is a way to describe the fruit of faith, or the good works which spring forth from faith, as Paul states in Ephesians 2:10, "*for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" Morris reminds us of the role of such works.

There is no reason to doubt that the meaning of the phrase [work of faith] is "your work that springs from faith" . . . . Paul is very emphatic that salvation is a matter of faith, not works and he uses the very strongest expressions to make clear that people are not saved by works of any kind. But when this truth is not in dispute [as it was in Galatia] he does not hesitate to speak of the good works that characterize the life of faith.<sup>102</sup>

The first Christian virtue mentioned by Paul is given elaboration in 1 Thessalonians 5:13, where Paul goes on to speak of having high esteem for those who work in love. The apostle speaks similarly in a number of passages in his First Corinthian letter of "working in love" (cf. 1

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<sup>98</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 88.

<sup>100</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 17.

<sup>101</sup> As Wanamaker notes, "The well-known triad of faith, love, and hope recurs often in Pauline and other early Christian literature (cf. 1 Thes. 5:8; Rom. 5:1–5; 1 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5:5f.; Col. 1:4f.; Eph. 4:2–5; Heb. 6:10–12; 10:22–24; 1 Pet. 1:3–8, 21f.; Barn. 1:4; 9:8; Pol. 3:2f). Paul uses it here to express the essence of his readers' experience as Christians. He does this by using each member of the triad as a subjective genitive to the verbal idea contained in the governing noun. Thus Paul remembers "their work that proceeds from their faith," "their labor that proceeds from their love," and "their steadfastness that proceeds from their hope." See Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 75.

<sup>102</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 39-40.

Corinthians 3:11-15; 15:58; 16:10). For Paul, faith is a warm personal trust in a living Savior.<sup>103</sup> Yet, such faith cannot but transform the whole of life and issue in work of many kinds. In fact, we can say that the faith in Jesus Christ which justifies inevitably leads to good works, which recalls to mind Paul's point in Galatians 5:5-6. "*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*" The faith which justifies will produce good works as a cause and effect relationship. We might say that love of neighbor (a divine image-bearer) is the fruit of justifying faith, not that our good works (such as loving our neighbor) are to be done to gain something from God—such as justification.

At first hearing, we might think of this "labor of love" as something to which we have devoted significant personal energy. But Paul's point is a bit stronger. Motivated by love, the Thessalonian Christians have labored to the point of weariness.<sup>104</sup> Their circumstances may be difficult for them, but the Thessalonians are striving with everything in them to love their fellow Christians, their leaders (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:13), as well as those in other nearby congregations in Berea and Philippi (according to 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10) who were of great encouragement to them.<sup>105</sup>

Jews would have considered certain labors—aimed primarily toward the Jewish community as an island in a Gentile world—as required to fulfill the commandment to love their neighbor. These works would include things like charity to the poor, visiting the sick, and hospitality to strangers, as concrete acts which demonstrates love of neighbor. The Greeks and Romans emphasized similar actions, but focused upon one's family, the community in which they lived, or upon civic virtue as required of a good citizen who was loyal to the emperor.<sup>106</sup> The Thessalonians were engaged in such works, but now these were acts of worship *and* civic virtue and for this Paul is thankful.<sup>107</sup> Even in the three short weeks he was with them, Paul taught them that the primary motivation for our efforts to serve one another in love, is God's prior love toward us in Jesus Christ as stated in 1 John 4:10, where we read "*in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*"

As for the third virtue which arises from faith, Paul mentions "hope." For Paul, hope is directly

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<sup>103</sup> Warfield contends, "It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; and in this the whole biblical representation centers, so that we could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself." See B. B. Warfield, "*The Biblical Doctrine of Faith*" in *Biblical Doctrines*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 218-219

<sup>104</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 40.

<sup>105</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 90.

<sup>106</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 80.

<sup>107</sup> Weima notes, "Paul's application of terms originally reserved for Israel to the predominantly Gentile congregation of Thessalonica is not coincidental, but rather stems from his conviction that the church, consisting of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, now constitutes the renewed Israel of God." Weima, "*1-2 Thessalonians*" 872.

related to eschatological expectation associated with the person and work of Jesus Christ. We have hope for the future because of Christ's resurrection and in the promise of his return following his ascension (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Paul is not speaking of a passive resignation to accept those trials and troubles which God may allow to come into our lives (as in certain forms of ancient stoicism which can function as a sort practical atheism).<sup>108</sup> Rather, the hope of which Paul speaks is that all those things which God has promised to his people in Jesus Christ, will, at some point, become a wonderful reality. As Green points out,

The Christians' hope was bound up with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, an event that is mentioned frequently in these letters (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; 2:1; and cf. 1 Thess. 5:8). The hope they held was not some vague expectation about a better future but rather solid confidence rooted in the expectation of Christ's coming. This was the strong foundation that gave the Thessalonians the power to endure and persevere in the face of the tremendous hostility leveled against them.<sup>109</sup>

Such hope enables Christians to endure and remain steadfast knowing that *"for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose"* (Romans 8:28). The life of Jesus in which the agony of Calvary leads to glory of Easter is also exemplary for Christians as well. Suffering precedes glory. We know that we are not left on our own to suffer from the ambiguities of life as would a pagan or an atheist, who have no such hope and whose gods (if there are any) are weak, capricious, and arbitrary. As Christians, we may not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. Christ's work of redemption is the basis for our hope for the future regardless of present circumstances. Although new Christians, Paul gives thanks to God that the Thessalonians embraced this hope as fruit of their faith in Jesus. As is clear from the beginning of the letter, Paul is an eschatological thinker and has taught the Thessalonians that our Lord's return is the "blessed hope" (cf. Titus 2:13).

Since Paul is not merely commending the Thessalonians for doing so well, ("way to go!" "nice job!") but encouraging them to continue on in faith and manifest these virtues, Paul takes the opportunity to remind them of the source of the faith now evident in their labors in faith, hope, and love. God's electing love is the basis of their call to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the gospel. In verses 4-5a, he writes, *"for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."*

Based upon statements such as this in an early Pauline letter, and in light of more comprehensive statements he will make in later texts like Romans 8:28-39 and Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul is unashamedly a predestinarian. The tangible proof that God has chosen us to be his people is that Jews and Gentiles come to believe that Jesus is the Christ and that his merits alone can save sinful people from the wrath to come.

As Calvin put it, "Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may,

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<sup>108</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 42.

<sup>109</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 91.

contemplate our own election.”<sup>110</sup> The practical syllogism comes to mind; “how do you know whether or not you are numbered among the elect? The follow-up question is “do you believe in Jesus?” If you do, it is because God has chosen you in Christ.

For reasons not made known to us, God chooses to redeem a multitude of sinners (both Jew and Gentiles) so vast they cannot be counted (cf. Revelation 7:9) and then conform them to the image of Christ. Paul is clear in the passages just cited that God chooses to save his people based solely upon his mercy and his sovereign purpose. In Ephesians 1:13-14, for example, Paul speaks of God’s purpose (εὐδοκία), the mystery of his will (μυστήριον), and his council (βουλή). In Romans 8:28, Paul tells us that calling is based upon God’s purpose (πρόθεσις), and that such calling does not depend upon anything we have done, but on God’s sovereign will—“As it is written, “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*” (Romans 9:9-13). Paul connects election to the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit who produces full conviction (faith in the certainty of God’s promise). The end (election unto salvation) is connected to the means through which it is accomplished (the preaching of the gospel).

According to Jeffrey Weima, Paul’s comments contain additional echoes from the Old Testament,

Paul addresses his readers with the striking phrase “loved by God.” As with the noun “church” . . . here too we have an instance of language originally applied to Israel (e.g., Deut. 32:15; 33:12; Ps. 60:5; 108:6; Isa. 44:2; Jer. 11:15; 12:7; Sir. 45:1; Bar. 3:37) being reapplied to the Christian church. Especially in this context where the emphasis is on God’s election (“because we know, brothers loved by God, your election”), there can be little doubt that Paul’s application of terms originally reserved for Israel to the predominantly Gentile congregation of Thessalonica is not coincidental, but rather stems from his conviction that the church, consisting of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, now constitutes the renewed Israel of God.<sup>111</sup>

The mystery hidden in the Old Testament now revealed in the New, is that in Jesus Christ, God will save a multitude of Gentiles (Revelation 7:9) in addition to elect Jews (Romans 9:6). He does this through the person and work of Jesus Christ through whom the love of God is displayed for all to see, and in which God’s purposes in election are realized.

For Paul, the coming of Jesus Christ is the great event foretold in the Old Testament and therefore, “according to the Scripture” (Romans 1:17; 3:28; Galatians 3:6 ff; 4:21 ff; 1 Corinthians 10:1-10; Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 9:10, 2 Timothy 3:16).<sup>112</sup> All those who presently believe in Jesus have been chosen by God in eternity past. This is true of the Thessalonians, who heard

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<sup>110</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3.24.5.

<sup>111</sup> Weima, “*1-2 Thessalonians*,” 871.

<sup>112</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans., John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 44-90, especially 51.

the gospel preached to them by the first missionaries, because the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from going into Asia and instead directed him to cross the Aegean Sea and preach to Gentiles in Macedonia. God sent Paul to Thessalonica, who then preached Christ to them, their faith being the fruit of God's election of sinners unto salvation.

Frank Thielman notes yet another Old Testament echo in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6—one pointing to the promised new covenant and promise of the Holy Spirit now present in Jesus Christ.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the era of the restoration of God's people by the sanctifying presence of God's Spirit had arrived . . . . From Paul's perspective, then, something earthshaking had occurred when the Thessalonians believed and experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst (1 Thess 1:5-6). The eschatological era predicted by the prophets [Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel] had come, and a new covenant had been established with God's people. In the process of so much radical change, another shocking event had taken place: Gentiles had turned from idols to the God of Israel and had joined the eschatological people of God.<sup>113</sup>

The on-going success of Paul's Gentile mission is nothing less than God fulfilling the promises of a new covenant and the restoration of Israel as foretold by Israel's prophets. This change in perspective regarding God's dealing with the Gentiles in relationship to national Israel (at least from a Jewish point of view) may go a long way to explain the violent reaction on the part of the Jews throughout Macedonia to Paul's preaching of Christ crucified. How can Gentiles claim that God's messianic promises belong to them, not Israel? Paul's use of such Old Testament echoes is also a strong argument in favor of one people of God, Israel in the Old Testament and the church as the renewed Israel in the New Testament.

Let us not miss the loud echo from Israel's restoration as taught by the prophets. "Uncircumcised Gentiles who turn from idols to believe the gospel constitute the fulfillment of the biblical predictions of Israel's restoration."<sup>114</sup> This is the theological underpinning of the entire Gentile mission. Paul spells this out in Ephesians 2:11-22:

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with*

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<sup>113</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 77-78.

<sup>114</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 79.

*the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

With the redemptive purposes of God hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament, now brought out into open in the light of Jesus Christ, Paul connects the certainty of election to the fact that the gospel had been preached to the Gentile Thessalonians. Furthermore, Paul's preaching was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, who gave the Thessalonians a deep conviction of the truth of the gospel message. The preaching of the gospel is the primary means by which God calls his people to faith.

If God chooses those whom he will save (his elect), he also chooses the means by which his elect will come to faith—the preaching of Christ and him crucified. In Paul's theology, election is tied to calling, and calling is tied to the message of the gospel (Christ crucified). The gospel came to the Thessalonians, not simply with words but also in the power of the Holy Spirit, and was therefore accompanied by deep conviction that his message of Christ crucified and raised from the dead was true (1 Thessalonians 4:8). The gospel of a crucified and risen Savior was the message which brought both Jew and Gentile to faith. This makes it obvious that all proper Christian mission and evangelism should be grounded in the gospel, and will fail to the degree to which it is not.

In the last half of verse 5, Paul takes the opportunity to remind the Thessalonians *“you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”* Paul's mission as apostle to the Gentiles was to preach the gospel to those to whom he had been directed by the Holy Spirit, not build a religious empire or attract followers to himself. Paul was not a wandering itinerant evangelist for yet another new mystery religion, sect, or speculative philosophy, as was common in the first century. The commitment of Paul, Silas, and Timothy to the gospel while among the Thessalonians was known to all. And their conduct was above reproach.

Paul was called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ as seen in and through the power of the Holy Spirit in his preaching, which was clearly evident in the fact that a number of Jews, as well as a number of Gentiles, were now believers in Jesus Christ. The signs and wonders which accompanied his preaching had nothing to do with carnal-like leg-lengthening or filling cavities to wow and entertain their audiences, or guilt them into making bigger monetary contributions. Rather, these signs confirmed God's call of men and women to faith in Jesus Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit (and Paul is not specific about any signs and wonders performed in Thessalonica), he reminds the Thessalonians that this same power (which raised Christ from the dead) was also very evident in his own life. Therefore, he was able to appeal to the fact that the Thessalonians knew *“what kind of men we proved to be.”* What God was doing for the Thessalonians, he had done for the apostle and his colleagues. Paul's own life was a testimony to this fact. The Spirit will do the same for the Thessalonians.

In verses 6-7, Paul asks the Thessalonians to consider how they *“became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”* The Thessalonians were being molded

and shaped by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result of their own calling and subsequent conversion, they, in turn, followed the example of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, who followed the example of Christ.

Throughout his letters, Paul urges Christians to imitate his conduct which is his own imitation of the Lord. Paul writes, *"I urge you, then, be imitators of me"* (1 Corinthians 4:16), and *"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul exhorts the Ephesians (5:1-2) to *"be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* In a congregation such as Thessalonica where there was apparently little confusion about the doctrine of justification, Paul spends a great deal of his energy focusing upon the Christian life, which is to be lived out of gratitude for what God has done for his people in Jesus Christ who first loved and chose us (1 John 4:10). Having embraced the gospel by faith, we are to imitate the Savior who has freed us from the curse of the law by dying on the cross for the guilt of our sins, and by living a life of gratitude through striving to obey the law, as the Spirit bears his fruit in our lives.

In spite of persecution at the hands of the Jews and the indifference and opposition to the gospel from Greco-Roman pagans, the Thessalonians received Paul's message of Christ crucified with the joy given them by the Holy Spirit. As Paul puts it in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, *"for you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews."* In the midst of opposition from the Jews and resistance from Greco-Roman paganism which dominated civic life, the Thessalonians rejoiced in the joy and power of the Holy Spirit. Now experiencing the same sort of rejection and persecution that the Savior had experienced, they were faithfully following his example in the midst of persecution.

In doing so, the Thessalonians became a powerful example for other new churches already and yet to be established during Paul's second missionary journey. In verse 8, Paul tells them, *"for not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."* Other churches in Macedonia and Achaia were drawing strength from the Thessalonian's example. Many were enduring very difficult persecution, yet were still filled with the joy created by the power of the Holy Spirit, which as Paul points out, is a fruit of the Spirit created by the preaching of the gospel (cf. Galatians 5:22). "The word of the Lord" rang out from the Thessalonian church and had great influence, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but was also known to churches everywhere. Paul's confidence is not in the Thessalonians, but in the word of God proclaimed, through which the Holy Spirit works in power, creating faith and granting assurance of salvation.

In verses 9 and 10, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of that which is being reported about them throughout the region. Despite their questions, the Thessalonians apparently did well in Paul's eschatology class. *"For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."* Paul makes several key points here: (1) The Thessalonians have turned from idols, (2) They are to wait for the risen and ascended Jesus to return from heaven, and (3) upon his return, Jesus will deliver his people from the wrath to come. This connects Christ's return to deliver his people directly to the day of wrath (judgment). One writer speaks of this as the double edge sword of rescue

from the wrath to come<sup>115</sup>—the ultimate realization of the blessing/curse principle.<sup>116</sup> This leaves no room for any sort of premillennial golden age to occur between Jesus’s return and the final judgment.

There are several other points here worth careful consideration as well. The first of these is that Gentiles who turned from idols to serve the living God paid a heavy price for doing so. Christians could not do what Greco-Roman pagans would do when they encountered a new religion—simply add the new religion to the pantheon of the existing ones, including the family gods. Embracing the living God through faith in his Son, Jesus, meant all the pagan gods were nothing but the figment of sinful human imagination. The Thessalonian pagans would have felt much anger and dismay at any family member who became a Christian. When a pagan became a Christian in Thessalonica it meant rejecting family traditions, household gods, and religious celebrations, all of which centered around the veneration of such gods in light of their role in the afterlife.

The dramatic break with the past at the time of conversion meant that it did not take the Jews long to realize the serious threat Christianity posed to their traditions. But the pagans too were coming to realize that new Christians rejected their former gods (polytheism) and were therefore thought to be intolerant. They insisted that Jesus was Lord and that you could not follow him and still keep your idols.<sup>117</sup> These Christians had acquired quite the reputation—they had turned the world upside down!

Second, while easy to miss, there is yet another significant Old Testament echo when Paul speaks of the Thessalonians “turning from idols” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). According to Frank Thielman,

Taken individually, Paul’s application of these terms [i.e., assembly of the LORD, and “called”] to the Thessalonians would not be particularly significant. After all, the term *ekklesia* had been used in Greek literature for centuries prior to Paul to refer simply to an assembly of people for a particular purpose. Paul certainly could have referred to Thessalonians as “chosen” and “loved by God” without thinking specifically of the use of that language to describe Israel in the Bible . . . Yet Paul’s use of these terms together and his use of them to describe the transformation of the Thessalonian believers from people who worshiped idols to people “who serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9) shows he views the conversion of the Thessalonians as analogous to—perhaps even a recapitulation of what happened to Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Once we realize Paul’s purpose in using this language, it should come as no surprise that in spite of the Thessalonians’ good behavior (1 Thess 4:1), Paul emphasizes their “sanctification” in the two letters. Just as in Leviticus Israel’s pursuit of sanctification is a response to God’s election, so in the Thessalonian correspondence the believer’s election and their

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<sup>115</sup> Constantine Campbell, Paul and the Hope of Glory (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 154.

<sup>116</sup> Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (self published), 57-73.

<sup>117</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 106.



sanctification go hand in hand (1 Thess 4:7; 5:23-24; 2 Thess 2:13-14). Moreover, just as in Leviticus the purpose of sanctification is to separate Israel from the surrounding people, so in the Thessalonian correspondence it is intended to distinguish “the assembly of the Thessalonians in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ” from “those outside” who do not belong to the community (1 Thess 4:5 “like the heathen who do not know God,” compare 4:12 “the respect of outsiders”).<sup>118</sup>

We, the contemporary readers of the Thessalonian letters, are much like the Gentile converts of the first century. The Old Testament is not our thought-world as it was for Paul. We may connect “turning from idols” to conversion (faith and repentance), as Paul does since we are familiar with the concept. But given his deep knowledge of the Old Testament, the apostle also sees Gentiles turning from idols as connecting the Gentiles to the true Israel of YHWH, a point we are apt to miss if we are not listening for these echoes from Paul when he is writing to Gentiles.

A third point to be drawn from verses 9-10 is that when Paul refers to the fact that there is one God, the true and living God, who has raised his Son from the dead, and who has promised that His Son will return from heaven to rescue believers from his wrath (or eternal punishment), he is likely summarizing the content of early Christian preaching grounded in the basic facts about God’s free salvation offered in Jesus Christ—his sinless life, his death and burial, his resurrection and ascension.<sup>119</sup>

Gordon Fee points out something easy to overlook. “It should be noted that this is the earliest known reference in Christian literature to the resurrection of Christ, the single most crucial event in early – and all – Christian faith.”<sup>120</sup> The fact that the Thessalonians responded to this message in faith, Paul attributes to the power of the Holy Spirit, not his rhetorical skill in “closing the deal.” Paul describes his hearers and readers turning to the true and living God from their Greco-Roman gods and family idols as strong evidence that the majority of those in the Thessalonian church were Gentiles. It is unlikely that Paul would speak of Jews as turning from “idols,” although many Jews had made peace with the Gentile idolatry all around them.

The conversion of these Gentiles was clearly demonstrated in their new conduct which was obvious to those around them. They had repented from their sin (idolatry) and turned to the true and living God supremely revealed in Jesus Christ. There had been, as Morris puts it, “a reorientation of the whole of life.”<sup>121</sup> They rejected idolatry and they were striving to live lives of gratitude, having come alive to the commandments of God. This is clear evidence of genuine repentance, since these new Christians had turned from their idols despite the personal cost and placed their faith in the Jesus preached by Paul. Although not mentioned, they were undoubtedly baptized in a public ceremony (Christian worship). This is the sort of thing

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<sup>118</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 74.

<sup>119</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 109.

<sup>120</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 48.

<sup>121</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 53.

people notice.

Throughout the Book of Acts, repentance, which is the act of turning to God and away from sin (usually as a response to the preaching of the law) is often spoken of as conversion, especially in Acts (Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; 28:27). Those in the Reformed tradition typically speak of conversion as the conscious awareness of prior regeneration, specifically the act of coming to faith in Jesus Christ which produces a corresponding turning away from sin (repentance).<sup>122</sup> In the case of the Jews, conversion amounted to giving up a false or incomplete belief about YHWH, acknowledging Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God, as well as receiving the merits of Jesus through faith, and no longer counting upon “works of law” to justify. But “in the case of Gentiles it is [turning] from the worship of false Gods to worship of the true God” who is revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>123</sup>

The Jews reacted with such anger to Paul’s preaching likely *because* of the implications Paul was drawing from the Old Testament. They caught the echoes in Paul’s preaching which we probably miss. Paul is preaching that those whom they thought of as “dogs” (Gentiles) because they were ceremonially unclean, are now included among the people of God. This was hard to swallow. Witherington explains the impact that Paul’s preaching may have had upon the Jews in Thessalonica.

If Paul indeed came and preached in the synagogue in Thessalonike proclaiming that the Thessalonians needed to turn from idols, worship the one true God, and recognize his only Son Jesus (1 Thess. 1:9), we can understand why some Jews would immediately be alarmed. Already in a compromised situation because of the very recent expulsion of Jews from Rome [i.e., the edict of Claudius in A.D 49], Jews in Thessalonike knew they had to show the utmost loyalty to the emperor lest they too be suspected of sedition. If they had, unawares, allowed Paul to preach his message in their synagogue, they themselves could be accused of being troublemakers or disloyal to the ethos of the city. This explains both the enormous reaction of Jews recounted in Acts 17:6 and the equally polemical response and outburst by Paul in 1 Thess. 2:14–16.<sup>124</sup>

The Jews would have greatly feared that any toleration of Christians (who were thought to be subversives because they claimed to serve a king named Jesus and not Caesar) might lead to conflict with the civil authorities, something they did not wish to see happen. The irony is that in rejecting Christ as Israel’s long-expected Messiah, the Jews are seen by Paul as those who had turned away from YHWH, while Gentiles did the opposite when they turned from their idols to worship YHWH.

There are only two references to atheists in the Old Testament. “*The fool has said in his heart, there is no God*” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). But there are many warnings about idolatry flowing out of the first two commandments. Here again a number of Old Testament echoes about idolatry lay

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<sup>122</sup> Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 482-483.

<sup>123</sup> Marshall, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 57.

<sup>124</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 8-9.

behind Paul's comments. The Psalmist, for example, had written, "for all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (96:5); in Psalm 115:3-8 we read,

*Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.*

Another text which is clearly in the background is Jeremiah's pronouncement of God's warning to Israel found in Jeremiah 10:1-10.

*Hear the word that the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good." There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood! Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the craftsman and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is violet and purple; they are all the work of skilled men. But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.*

To be "converted" (in Christian theology) is to turn from these false gods to faith in the true and living God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ, and embrace YHWH's covenant promise to be God to his people.

Not only did the Thessalonians turn to the true and living God, they also were awaiting the return of his Son from heaven because he will provide their ultimate deliverance. The verb "to wait" used here is unique to the New Testament (ἀναμένω) although widely used in the LXX.<sup>125</sup> It means waiting with patience and trust as something sustained and which does not waver when the expected result does not immediately occur.<sup>126</sup> Christians are to wait patiently and to live in holiness until the blessed hope, Jesus Christ's return.<sup>127</sup> The centrality of such hope and the exhortation to wait is a solid indication that not only did Paul preach the bodily resurrection of Christ crucified to the Thessalonians (v. 10), but Christ's second advent was a central theme of his preaching summarized in the church's liturgical formula, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ shall come again."

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<sup>125</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 109.

<sup>126</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 54.

<sup>127</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 18.

The hope of the Thessalonian Christians was therefore anchored in the expectation that Jesus Christ would soon return to earth to deliver his people and spare them from the final judgment. Many of the Thessalonians fully expected this to occur in their own lifetimes (1 Thessalonians 4:15; 17; 5:4), despite Paul's exhortation to wait patiently should the Lord's return be delayed. As we look back on Paul's exhortation two thousand years later, we ought have a good sense of the patience required by the people of God. Indeed, Paul's instruction about the nature and timing of the Lord's return explains the questions raised precisely because of the delay of our Lord's second coming. These questions prompted Paul to write to instruct and correct some of these misconceptions. The basis for the Christian hope is that as God had raised Jesus from the dead, so too our Lord's second coming will be to raise believers from the dead.<sup>128</sup> As the Father raised his Son, he will raise all those who trust in the Son on the day of his return, when, as Paul adds, we are delivered from the wrath to come.

The fact of Christ's bodily resurrection, followed by his ascension to the Father's right hand (his rule over all the kingdoms and affairs of men, his so called "kingly office")<sup>129</sup> set the stage for his bodily return to earth to deliver his own and judge the world on the last day. Christ's resurrection gives the Thessalonians hope that they will be delivered from God's eschatological judgment. The term Paul uses when he speaks of deliverance is (ῥύομαι), which means to rescue from harm, danger, and even imprisonment.<sup>130</sup> As the Thessalonians, in the midst of their struggles, look ahead to this great day, they are to live lives of gratitude which reflect Christian (not pagan) morality.<sup>131</sup>

But the same does not hold true for unbelievers, which is why it is important to consider in some detail Paul's doctrine of the coming wrath of God. Paul directly connects revelation of such wrath to the appearing of the Son (Jesus) from heaven. While the Christian believer looks forward to the coming of Christ as the day of redemption, the non-Christian can only look forward to final judgment. For those who trust in him, Christ's return is pure gospel (grace and mercy). For the non-Christian, Christ's second advent is pure law (guilt and condemnation). The former is the best possible news. The latter is the worst possible news.

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<sup>128</sup> Marshall writes, 'it can be urged that the title Son is used here at the climax of Paul's statement to stress the fact that it is the One who stands closest to God whom Christians await, and also that it is One whom God declared to be his Son by raising him from the dead. The mention of the resurrection here is probably motivation by the desire to give a basis for the future hope. If God raised Jesus from the dead, it follows that he is now where God is, namely, in heaven, and the God who raised him can and will bring him back to earth for his people. It is this Jesus who delivers believers from the coming wrath. The end will witness the outpouring of God's wrath upon sinners, but Jesus is able to deliver men from that fate. How he does so is not stated here, but in 4:9f. we learn that it is because Jesus died for us; and the thought is elaborated in Rom. 5:9 where future salvation from the wrath of God is based on present justification or acquittal by the blood, i.e. the sacrificial death, of Jesus.' See Marshall, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 59.

<sup>129</sup> Michael S. Horton, The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 521-537.

<sup>130</sup> ῥύεσθαι ("to save") is not as common in Paul as its synonym σῶζειν, but when it does occur, it refers to being saved or rescued *from* something (cf. Rom. 7:24; 11:26; Col. 1:13). The present tense of the participle here may indicate that the saving activity of God's son is already in progress, but since the thought of the passage is oriented to the future return of Jesus this point should not be pressed. See Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 88.

<sup>131</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 109.

B. B. Warfield says of Paul's preaching "it is undeniable that the staple of Paul's preaching to Gentiles was God and the judgment." To Jews, Paul preached the Messiah to whom their prophets had foretold. "But with Gentiles [Paul] could appeal only to conscience; and he preached Jesus to them as Him through whom God would judge the world in righteousness, whereof he hath given assurance to all men in that he hath raised him from the dead."<sup>132</sup>

Warfield's assertions cause many to cringe. No one wants to think about a coming day of judgment yet ahead when God's wrath will be revealed, much less preach or talk about it. Sermons on God's wrath are not popular, they make people uncomfortable, therefore they are rare and mocked when they are given. But the tsunami of God's wrath was already on the horizon in Paul's day. It has advanced much closer in the two millennia since.

But Paul is clear as clear can be that there is a day of wrath to come (v. 10). He mentions it multiple times in his letters (Romans 1:18; Romans 9:22; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6) in addition to his several mentions of the coming wrath in his letters to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9 Paul writes, "for God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ," and in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, he states,

*Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Given the discomfort raised by the topic, many of our contemporaries reject the very idea of the wrath of God, especially since God is elsewhere said to "be love" (1 John 4:8).<sup>133</sup> If God is love, how then can he be wrathful?<sup>134</sup> According to Leon Morris, who frames the issue well,

The idea of wrath of God is uncongenial to many people in modern times, and there have been attempts to get rid of the whole idea [i.e. C. H. Dodd]. It is sometimes said that it has no foundation in the Old Testament, the prophets and the psalmists being concerned only to point out that when people sin, disaster follows. God's direct intervention is not stressed, so that a more or less impersonal process is being described. Such an attitude can be maintained only by neglecting a great number of OT passages. The prophets and the psalmists know nothing of an impersonal process of retribution. They see the hand of God everywhere, in the punishment of the wicked as well as in the rewarding of the righteous. The same is true of the New Testament . . . "All things are of God" (2 Cor. 5:18; cf Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 8:6). In any case the wrath is explicitly linked

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<sup>132</sup> Warfield, "The Prophecies of Paul," in Biblical Doctrines, 602.

<sup>133</sup> Most notably C. H. Dodd in his Bible and the Greeks (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935).

<sup>134</sup> Bruce responds by pointing out, "To the objection that personal ὀργή is unworthy of the God of love the response might be made which Paul makes elsewhere to a rather different objection: "What shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath?... By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" (Rom 3:5, 6). See Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 20.

with God (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; 9:22; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 11:18; 14:10, 19; 19:15).<sup>135</sup>

The renunciation of God's wrath is common in mainline Protestant liberalism, but is also found in much of American evangelicalism. Clark Pinnock's 1992 case for *A Wideness in God's Mercy* was challenged by many upon publication, but his stress on God's mercy winning out over his wrath, coupled with a proposal for a more inclusive view of salvation found among the world religions (along the lines of Karl Rahner's universalism) introduced the concepts into the evangelical blood stream, where they have in many places become the norm.<sup>136</sup>

Other books have followed in the wake of Pinnock's, such as *The Lost Message of Jesus*, which rejects the "myth of redemptive violence" as associated with the death of Jesus which excludes all notions of God possessing wrath in response to human sin.<sup>137</sup> This kind of thing succeeds in contemporary America given the stress placed upon political egalitarianism and Rawlsian notions of "justice as fairness."<sup>138</sup> Many who hold to strong private religious opinions (even orthodox ones) are reluctant to speak of God's wrath. People are reluctant to contend that their own religion is true to the exclusion of all others—even if by its very nature Christianity is a truth claim which summons its adherents to turn from idol worship to serve the true and living God or else face the wrath of God in the judgment (as the Thessalonians were warned).

Our contemporaries regard any hint or mention of God's wrath as "the sin of judgmentalism." How dare a Christian tell a non-Christian that if they do not trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation they will be eternally condemned. Those who believe this are considered "fire and brimstone" rubes, who hang on to outdated and ridiculous beliefs when intelligent moderns know better and dismiss them. The Thessalonians likely heard first century equivalents for rejecting Greco-Roman gods, especially those of home and hearth. The Greco-Roman pagans no doubt worried that Christians are exclusive, divisive, and therefore a subversive threat. In their minds it is better to drive the missionaries out of town before they could gain a foothold. We can only wonder how many in the *pentecost* were Gentiles.

Despite the difficulties people may have with the inevitability of a coming day of judgment, Paul locates the time of God's eschatological wrath (i.e., the idea of a final judgment) at the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. What is to come for those who trust in Jesus, the "blessed hope," (i.e., deliverance from the wrath of God), is at the same time for unbelievers, the day when . . .

*The kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,*

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<sup>135</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 54-55.

<sup>136</sup> Clark Pinnock, A Wideness in God's Mercy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>137</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, The Lost Message of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), especially pages 125-129.

<sup>138</sup> John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," Philosophy and Public Affairs 14 (Summer 1985): 223-51.

*calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17).*

Jesus Christ's return is judgment day, the final day in human history when the final and ultimate covenant blessings and curses are pronounced.

Despite modern sensitivities, the notion of God's wrath is an important biblical doctrine and must not be overlooked because it is frightening, uncomfortable, and divisive to those who renounce the Savior who alone can rescue them from it.

In order to gain the proper biblical-theological perspective on this, recall that Jesus's messianic mission commenced when John declared of him,

*"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12).*

In fact, Jesus had more to say about the reality of the final judgment than did any of Israel's prophets.<sup>139</sup> Jesus's teaching (and Paul's) cannot be reduced to a mere reciprocity principle—you do bad things to others, bad things will happen to you creating a personal "hell on earth." This is nothing but a Christianized version of *Karma*. No. Both Jesus (and Paul) tell us that there is a final judgment and eternal punishment to come. There is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.

To comfort believers in Thessalonica who had questions about these matters (much like we do today), Paul reminds them that they not need fear the approaching day of wrath. All who believe in Jesus are reminded that Jesus is both the "rescuer" of his people and the righteous judge of those who are not—the double-edged sword image mentioned previously. If Jesus has taken away the wrath of God for his people in his sufferings on the cross (cf. Romans 5:9), then we need never face God's wrath, nor fear the day of judgment.

But the question remains. What does Paul mean by the "wrath of God?" In light of Paul's two-age eschatology, Christians presently live in an age characterized by the tension between the already (the blessings and benefits we presently possess in Christ) and the not yet (the final consummation when all benefits of salvation are realized in their fullness). The current age is, therefore, an age of common grace when the full weight of God's judgment has not yet been meted out, nor has salvation been fully realized in the resurrection and glorification of our bodies.<sup>140</sup> But Paul's warning remains—God's patience will one day come to an end.<sup>141</sup> This will

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<sup>139</sup> Horton, The Christian Faith, 975. Horton cites Matthew 5:30; 8:10-12; 13:40-42, 49-50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30, and parallels; cf. Luke 16:19-31.

<sup>140</sup> G. L. Bochert, "Wrath, Destruction," in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 991-993.

<sup>141</sup> Horton, The Christian Faith, 974-975.

occur at God's appointed time—on the last day, the Day of the Lord. A day of final wrath is certain to come.

When Paul speaks of God's wrath (ὀργή) he uses a word which refers to the revelation of God's anger toward sin, specifically human wickedness and rebellion as an expression of his holiness. "God's wrath is the execution of his just judgment against those who violate and oppose his law."<sup>142</sup> Wanamaker writes,

"Wrath" is an important theological category in Paul because it is associated with God's righteous judgment against those who are evil and disobey the truth (Rom. 2:5, 8). According to Paul, God cannot judge the world with justice without inflicting wrath on evildoers (Rom. 3:5f.). God's wrath, therefore, is as necessary as God's grace and mercy. Although God's wrath against sin and those who practice it is currently being revealed (Rom. 1:18), the day of judgment will be a time of wrath for the disobedient and a day of deliverance for the people of God (cf. Rom. 5:9; 1 Thes. 5:9). Thus the coming wrath to which Paul refers in v. 10 is the wrath that will come on the day of judgment.<sup>143</sup>

Morris adds, "when Paul speaks of the 'coming wrath,' he brings before us the eschatological wrath." Paul is referring to eternal punishment, or what we commonly speak of as "hell." Yet, as Morris goes on to say, there are both present and future elements in view. "The wrath of God is not only something that is experienced here and now. It will endure to the end of all things. Indeed, it will be especially manifested in the end of all things. It is inevitable, a thought conveyed by the present participle: it is coming even now."<sup>144</sup>

One of the clearest pictures we have of such wrath in Paul's letters is that of a suffering sinless Savior who is a propitiation for sin (*hilasterion*), bearing in his own body the wrath of God so that those for whom he is dying will be delivered from judgment day (Romans 3:25). Paul says God's wrath is revealed in the preaching of the gospel (cf. Romans 1:18), as the "wrath of God" is being revealed because in the death of Jesus we see how seriously God regards human sin.<sup>145</sup> But at the time of the end, Christ's death will not turn aside the wrath of God toward those who reject his mercy, choosing instead to stand before God in their own righteousness, the most foolish decision anyone could ever make. They will face the full fury of God's wrath without a mediator or an advocate.

As Michael Horton cautions us regarding what is now obvious, the wrath of God is not an easy concept to grasp or fully understand.

It is certainly true that the images of the last day and heaven and hell are communicated in an apocalyptic form. Therefore, such images are not meant to be read like a morning

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<sup>142</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 110.

<sup>143</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 88.

<sup>144</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 55-56.

<sup>145</sup> Bochert, "Wrath, Destruction," 992.



newspaper. Nevertheless, they are also not meant to be ignored. They indicate realities that are beyond our conceptual grasp, yet are certain to come to fruition.<sup>146</sup>

To put the matter simply, there is coming a great and terrible day when those who reject the grace of God in Jesus Christ will receive eternal punishment in the fire and outer darkness of hell. Whether literal or not, God's wrath means an eternity in the presence of the Holy God without any mediation on the part of Jesus.

### **Excursus on Premillennialism and Dispensationalism and the "Wrath of God"**

Paul's contention in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 that the day of God's wrath (and the final judgment) occurs when Jesus returns on the last day, raises insurmountable difficulties for all forms of premillennialism. Premillennarians contend that Jesus returns to establish a millennial kingdom on the earth, usually thought to be structured upon the theocratic nation of Israel with Jesus physically ruling over the earth from David's throne in Jerusalem. At the end of the millennial age, supposedly, Satan is released from the Abyss and organizes the nations which collectively revolt against Christ and his church (Revelation 20:7-10). In response to this last outbreak of evil, when God casts Satan and his minions into the lake of fire, only then does the final judgment take place, fully one thousand years after Jesus Christ returns to deliver his people from the coming wrath of God.

In light of the premillennial misinterpretation of the scene in Revelation 20:1-10—supposedly occurring after our Lord's return, instead of seeing John as referring to the interadvental period and its consummation when Jesus returns—premillennarians (including dispensationalists) must assert that God's eschatological wrath is not manifest until the thousand year millennial age comes to an end. Both camps affirm they hold this view based upon what they claim to be a literal reading of an apocalyptic text. But the impossibility of the premillennial view becomes all-too clear when Paul, in an epistle written to answer specific questions about the Lord's return, informs the Thessalonians that God's eschatological wrath occurs when Christ returns to deliver them (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10), not one thousand years later. This leaves no room for a millennial age after our Lord's return. None at all.

The irony here is that those who attempt to read apocalyptic literature literally (which is not how such literature ought to be read) are forced to insert gaps (a quite non-literal thing to do) so as to separate Christ's return by a thousand years from the final judgment. Paul tells us plainly in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 that we are delivered from the wrath of God when Jesus returns at the end of the age, not a thousand years later. What is the justification for inserting the thousand year gap? Especially when one claims to read prophetic texts literally?

All dispensationalists are premillennial, but not all premillennarians are dispensationalists. A key difference between the two is the dispensationalist notion of God's people being spared from a future seven-year tribulation period—a time of unprecedented trouble for Israel and the persecution of those left behind by the end-times antichrist. The tribulation, supposedly,

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<sup>146</sup> Horton, The Christian Faith, 976.

begins with the rapture and ends when Jesus returns to destroy the Antichrist during the final battle of Armageddon.

The embrace of a supposed seven year tribulation period also gives rise to the question and a once-heated source of debate (now relatively quiet), about whether or not someone is “pre” or “post trib.” When I am asked about this, my answer is that the question itself is based upon a number of incorrect assumptions about the timing of the tribulation and the nature of the Lord’s return. My view (Reformed amillennialism) is technically “post-trib,” but is framed very differently from the in-house debate among evangelicals, since I believe the “great tribulation” will encompass the entire interadvental period and not merely seven-years of “tribulation” immediately before the Lord’s return.

Our dispensational brethren contend that the wrath spoken of here by Paul is temporal (i.e., physical and economic persecution from the Antichrist and those who do his bidding) and is therefore limited to the so-called “seven-year tribulation,” supposedly predicted by the prophet Daniel (cf. Daniel 9:24-27). Based upon Jesus’s promise to the church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10 (“*because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth*”), when Paul then speaks of the wrath to come in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 dispensationalists assert that he’s referring to the wrath that the world experiences after the church has been removed from the earth (the “rapture”) brought about by the Antichrist and the various judgments of God upon the earth during this time.<sup>147</sup>

It is important to point out the hermeneutical “chasing of one’s tail” practiced by dispensationalists arises from the unsubstantiated premise upon which the entire dispensational contention regarding the rapture is grounded—God’s people avoid God’s temporal wrath during a future seven-year tribulation. Dispensationalists believe that Daniel 9:24-27, particularly v. 25, is speaking of a future seventieth week of Daniel which commences at (or about) the time of the rapture. Believing Jews and Gentiles are removed from earth during this time of temporal wrath.

Rather, I take Daniel 9 to be a messianic prophecy fulfilled by the coming of Christ at his first advent.<sup>148</sup> Daniel says nothing about a future seven-year tribulation, since he’s referring to Christ’s messianic mission—events associated with his first advent. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 clearly points to eternal wrath of God (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10) which fits well within Paul’s two-age eschatology, the end of time and the dawn of eternity. Paul instructs the Thessalonians, and us, to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

One of the dispensationalist stalwarts from the prior generation, J. Dwight Pentecost, argues that this text (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) is proof that the rapture occurs before the beginning of the

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<sup>147</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012), 94-95).

<sup>148</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “*The Covenant of the Seventieth Week*” in The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Oswald T. Allis, ed. by J.H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 452-469.

seventieth week of Daniel. He writes, "Paul clearly indicates that our expectation is not wrath, but the revelation of `his Son from heaven.' This could not be unless the Son were revealed before the wrath of the seventieth week falls on the earth."<sup>149</sup> This view collapses under the weight of Paul's assertion that eschatological wrath occurs when Jesus returns, not a full one thousand years later. Ironically, in one sense, Pentecost is absolutely right. God's people are spared from the wrath to come. But Paul is not talking about temporal wrath from an end-times Antichrist during a future seven-year tribulation. Rather, he's speaking of the final eschatological wrath on judgment day.

When dispensationalists, like Pentecost, limit God's wrath here to some sort of temporal wrath, and contend that God did not appoint believers to experience such things, a number of obvious questions arise—those nasty unintended consequences. What does this say about those Christians who fell to Roman persecution in Paul's day? Was that not some sort of temporal wrath? If so, why were Christians not delivered from it? What about the countless martyrs who have fought various satanic beasts, false prophets, and antichrists throughout the long centuries past? Are we really to believe that if the saints and martyrs were not removed before facing such wrath, then they should have lived at the time of the rapture when Christians will be spared from such things?

Dispensationalism has long created much confusion about eschatological matters, all with the best of intentions, which is defending the "literal" reading of the Bible. But this is a claim they cannot keep when they insert a one thousand year gap between Christ's second advent and the final judgment, especially when it is painfully obvious (or least should be) that Paul is speaking of eschatological wrath (final judgment) from which Jesus delivers us through his redemptive work and not temporal wrath Christians will supposedly face in a future seven year tribulation.

The Christian believer, on the other hand, has the glorious hope that Christ's return does not mean God's wrath will fall upon them, because of his death at Calvary, Jesus has already delivered his people from the wrath of God and the fear of eternal punishment faced by those who reject the gospel and who dare to stand before God on judgment day clothed only in the rags of their own righteousness. Paul's doctrine of the return of Christ is intended to give comfort and hope to believers, not provide material for dispensational end-times prognosticators.

### III. Apostolic Defense (2:1-12)

In a new section of his letter, Paul discusses the mission and motives of the missionaries (vv. 1-12), before moving on to discuss the Thessalonians and his reason for thanksgiving (vv. 13-17).<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 217.

<sup>150</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 76.

### A. The missionaries' visit (2:1-4)

**1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. 2 But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. 3 For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.**

At this point (especially in verses 5-8), Paul discusses his stay with the Thessalonians using a series of denials mixed among positive assertions.<sup>151</sup> In verses 1-2, he writes, *“for you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.”* Paul appeals to certain facts that were fresh in the Thessalonian memory. The Thessalonians knew of Paul’s troubles elsewhere in Macedonia—especially in Philippi, where he had been before coming to Thessalonica. They saw firsthand how the apostle conducted himself while living and working among them.

The need for Paul’s reminder may be due to the fact that Paul was likely accused of all kinds of things by those Jews who bankrolled the rentamob which drove him from the city. The main charge coming from those Jews who were well established in Thessalonica seems to be Paul’s insincerity. This probably ran along the lines of, “if this guy was a true apostle of the God of Israel, why did he flee and not stick around when challenged?” “Why did God not vindicate him?” In response, Paul appeals to how he conducted himself and to the fact that his time among them, while short, had not been a failure. The gospel he preached had come in power and the Holy Spirit, the fruit of which is the fact that the Thessalonian Christians believed it with deep conviction and were standing firm in the face of fierce opposition from both Jew and Gentile.

Paul recounts to the Thessalonians how he had been treated in Philippi. He had been arrested, beaten, and placed in stocks in order to shame him. But such terrible abuse did not prevent him from coming to Thessalonica where this sort of ill-treatment only continued. Paul, no doubt, bore recent scabs and bruises from a flogging in Philippi. He was a Roman citizen and should have been exempt from such physical abuse. Yet, he was arrested without trial, contrary to Roman law.<sup>152</sup> No wonder he speaks of the treatment he received as shameful (ὕβρισθέντες, from which we get our word “hubris”). This man was anything but self-serving. As he preached the gospel in Philippi to the Greco-Roman pagans there and paid the price for doing so, so too he went to Thessalonica despite the hostility of the local Jews.

Paul faces head-on the accusation that he was but another itinerant philosopher-sage who wandered throughout the land pontificating upon the secrets of life, offering folk wisdom, and championing pagan religion—not an uncommon occurrence in the Greco-Roman world.

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<sup>151</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 79.

<sup>152</sup> Ernest Best, The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistles to the Thessalonians (London: Adams and Charles, 1972), 90.

Witherington notes, “the social background here is that Paul is contrasting his behavior with that of the many wandering charlatans [who] made their way about the Greek world, peddling their religious or philosophical nostrums and living at the expense of their devotees (like Lucian’s false prophet Alexander).”<sup>153</sup> When things got tough, such hucksters moved on to a new audience and greener pastures. Not Paul.

His message and conduct proved that he was not out to dupe these people or profit through his preaching. He tells them in verses 3-4, “*for our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.*” Paul invokes a formal oath—God is his witness that he is telling the truth, a loud echo from the Old Testament when speaking of “pleasing God” who examines our hearts and knows our motives.<sup>154</sup> Paul makes the same point in Romans 8:27, when he writes that God who “*searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*” Since God examines his heart, Paul indicates that his motives are tied to the success of the gospel, not fame, fortune, or accolade. God is his witness.

Paul’s being approved by God is evident in the fact that he has been entrusted with the gospel revealed to him by Jesus. This has more to do with the recognition of his particular calling as apostle to the Gentiles and who was directed by God to Thessalonica (through the Macedonian call) than it does with his natural abilities to entertain and captivate an audience. God took initiative in and through Paul, entrusting him with the gospel and then sent him into Macedonia. It is not the case that Paul was “approved” because he achieved a high status which entitled him to his apostolic office. “Apostle to the Gentiles” is not a job Paul sought and then beat out all other competitors. God called him to this office.

## B. The missionaries’ behavior (2:5-8)

**5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. 7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.**

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<sup>153</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 78.

<sup>154</sup> Weima summarizes the biblical background here. “The apostle here, as he will again later in the letter (4:1), makes use of the characteristically OT purpose of “pleasing God” (e.g., Num. 23:27; 1 Kings 14:13; Job 34:9; Ps. 19:14; 69:31; 104:34; Prov. 15:26; 16:7; Mal. 3:4). By identifying God as “the one who examines our hearts,” Paul may be alluding to Jer. 11:20 (Malherbe 2000: 141), where the Lord is described as one who “judges justly, examining minds and hearts.” The notion of God as the tester of human hearts, however, occurs frequently in the OT (e.g., 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Chron. 28:9; 29:17; Ps. 7:9; 17:3; 139:23; Prov. 17:3; Jer. 11:20; 12:3), and so it seems more probable that the apostle has in mind the general idea of a God who examines hearts rather than any specific text. Paul employs this common OT concept to show that the God who examined him and found him worthy to be entrusted with the gospel (2:4a) also continues to examine him (note the present tense of the participle *dokimazonti*) and thus ensures that the apostle’s motives are pure.” Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 873.

Paul did not use flattering words to tell the Jews and pagan Thessalonians what they wanted to hear. He proclaimed the truth as revealed by God—he preached the law and the gospel. Wanamaker points out the significance of Paul’s reference to “flattery [which] was so common among street-corner philosophers that it was used in stereotypes of them.”<sup>155</sup> Paul is no “flatterer.” It was not his practice to calculate the “felt-needs” of his audience and accommodate his preaching to them. He did not “put on a mask” as a Greek actor might do, playing a role which masked his true intentions and motives.<sup>156</sup> With Paul, what you see and hear is what you get.

Paul’s comments serve as a rebuke to our contemporaries who contend that style (presentation) is more important than content (message). What does this say to those who aren’t stylish, like Paul, who certainly could not measure up as an orator when compared to the wandering sages of his age? Paul teaches us that if ministers of the gospel are not preaching the biblical text and the doctrines contained within it—carefully explaining the text in its context and properly distinguishing the law and the gospel—then we end up preaching ourselves. We ministers must get it in our heads that the movies we have seen, the books we have read, the doings of our kids, wives, and pets, is not the proper content of our preaching.

Professor Bruce adds another matter of concern—how the minister lives his life,

Not only could the gospel be neutralized by inadequacies or distortions in the language in which it was communicated; it could be neutralized by conduct on the preachers’ part which was inconsistent with its character or unworthy of the God whose gospel it was. Not for nothing is it repeatedly emphasized that it is *the gospel of God*. The preachers knew themselves to be responsible to God—the tester of hearts—for their conduct, language and thought-life.<sup>157</sup>

Paul understood full well that he was accountable to God—he swore an oath to that effect—and knew that he would give an answer for every idle word that came from his mouth (cf. Matthew 12:36). First and foremost, the apostle is concerned with being faithful to God’s word, preaching correctly and accurately, rather than flattering those in his audience. Sans mask, Paul preached Christ and him crucified, even though that gospel be a stumbling block to a Jew and foolishness to a Greek (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23). He can rightfully claim in verse 6, “*nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.*”<sup>158</sup> Paul took nothing from the Thessalonians, but left behind the most precious gift possible—the gospel of Christ crucified. Although he could rightly expect

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<sup>155</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 97.

<sup>156</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 65.

<sup>157</sup> Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 28.

<sup>158</sup> “It should also be noted that this is the first appearance of the word ‘apostle’ in the New Testament, and while it may be moot as to whether it also includes Timothy in this case, there can be little question that the plural intentionally includes Silas. The evidence from Paul’s letters is that he knew nothing about “the Twelve Apostles” as a title on its own. Elsewhere he refers to “the Twelve” as being included, but not exclusively so, among those designated as “apostles” (1 Cor 15:5, 7–8).” Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 64.

monetary support while among them, the apostle asked for nothing and worked with his hands.<sup>159</sup>

In verse 7-8, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the missionaries conduct while in the city. *“We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”* While there is some debate about the proper translation of the word “gentle” (i.e., νήπιος—a nursing infant) this rendering fits well with what follows.<sup>160</sup> One commentator points out that, Paul “compares himself to a wet-nurse (*trophos*), a woman who was contracted to suckle and care for the child of another person.”<sup>161</sup> The ESV renders *homeiromenoi* (ὀμειρομαι) as “affectionately desirous of you.” The word means to “long for” in an affectionate, but not erotic sense. The word appears in a funerary inscription in which parents are said to “long for” their deceased son.<sup>162</sup> This is how Paul feels about the people in this congregation. He misses them. Along with Timothy and Silas, Paul shared his life with the Thessalonians. They became one with the Thessalonians while there. Paul cared for these new Christians as gently as a mother cares for her children.

### C. The missionaries’ example (9-12)

**9 For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. 11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**

In verse 9, Paul asks his hearers, do *“you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”* This is

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<sup>159</sup> Bruce notes, “being able to make demands,” refers to the right which preachers of the gospel had, according to Paul, to be maintained by their converts and others to whose spiritual welfare they ministered—a right which Paul chose not to exercise (cf. 2 Thess 3:7–9; 1 Cor 9:3–18; 2 Cor 11:7–11). This right (as Paul points out in 1 Cor 9:14) was conferred by Jesus on those whom he sent out (ἀπέστειλεν) on a preaching and healing mission in his name in the course of his Galilean ministry (Mark 6:7–13; Matt 10:5–15; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–12): “the laborer,” he said to them, “deserves his pay” (μισθός, Luke 10:7) or “his food” (τροφή, Matt 10:10). Paul took the Lord’s instructions to mean that his servants were entitled to their maintenance but not compelled to require it (cf. Dungan, *Sayings*, 27–40).” See Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 30-31.

<sup>160</sup> While some ancient manuscripts read “gentle” (*ēpioi*), others insert a word that differs by only one letter in the Greek, “infants” (*nēpioi*). The evidence from the manuscripts themselves favors the reading “infants,” but many commentators and translators prefer the reading “gentle” since it makes what appears to be better sense of the verse. How could we understand the logic of the argument if the apostles claimed to be “infants” among the Thessalonians and then compare that state with maternal care: “like a mother caring for her little children”? Moreover, while Paul frequently talks in his letters about those who are “infants” (Rom. 2:20; 1 Cor. 3:1; 13:11; Gal. 4:1, 3; Eph. 4:14), he speaks about ministers being “gentle” (2 Tim. 2:24) while never comparing himself with an “infant.” Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 126.

<sup>161</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 127.

<sup>162</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 128.

good circumstantial evidence that the first Thessalonian letter was written not long after Paul left the city. While Paul can later tell the Corinthians that *“in the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel”* (1 Cor. 9:14), in this case, he focuses upon the fact that his life and work demonstrated anything but conduct typical of a traveling evangelist as may have been alleged.

Even though a preacher of the gospel is entitled to financial support (food, shelter, etc.) because of the nature of his calling, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, labored and toiled the whole time they were in Thessalonica without asking for anything. According to Gene Green,

We know that during Paul’s stay in Thessalonica, the Philippians had sent offerings for his support (Phil. 4:15–16). But these donations were not adequate to permit Paul and his companions to devote themselves completely to the evangelistic mission. For this reason they engaged in manual labor, and in doing so they also left an example for the Thessalonian believers to follow (v. 9; 2 Thess. 3:8–9).<sup>163</sup>

As noted previously, at least one argument likely raised by the Jews against the missionaries was that these evangelists were nothing more than opportunists—perhaps even dangerous. The Jews informed Gentiles that these “preachers” were not welcome in the synagogue because of their subversive preaching that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord.<sup>164</sup> Another accusation may have been that these men want nothing more than to exploit the Thessalonians with their novel message so as to gain a following and empty Thessalonian wallets. Paul’s recent history in Philippi dispels that falsehood.

This would explain why Paul calls attention to his labor while there. Since it was the custom that every rabbinic student learn a trade or vocation so as to support himself and not be a burden, Paul is careful to note that he too, was still following this model—although he does not require this of others who come after him. In Acts 18:3, we learn that Paul was trained as a tentmaker (σκηνοποιός), hence, there is every likelihood that even though Paul was entitled to be supported by the Thessalonian Christians because of his calling, he chose not to do so. It was important to the Gentile mission that he not be a burden upon his hosts as evidenced by his hard work and toil, day and night, clearly indicating a heavy workload, and the physical exhaustion that goes with it. His hard work was the best evidence that such charges were false. Paul did not have a “sweat allergy.” He was not a wannabe celebrity. His callouses and tent-making skill prove as much. He was no stranger to hard work and will have much to say to those who refuse to work with their hands—a matter he will address in chapter 4:11-12.

Continuing his defense of his mission and personal honor, in verses 10-12, Paul reminds the Thessalonians, *“you are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”* Paul’s affection for these people is evident. He sees himself as their

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<sup>163</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 130.

<sup>164</sup> See the discussion in Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 42-43.



“spiritual father,” a metaphor which carries with it the responsibility to see that the Thessalonians were “raised properly.”<sup>165</sup>

Not only were the Thessalonian Christians witnesses of his parental care but Paul invokes God as a witness yet again. Swearing such an oath is no small matter, especially for someone trained as a rabbi. Paul moves from his own conduct to the fact that the repentance demonstrated by the Thessalonians (in their turning from idols to the living God), is also indicative of Paul’s example, since it was he who urged them to “*walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*” Again, we return to the familiar Pauline theme of “calling.”

The key takeaway is that calling is God’s activity. Apart from God’s call made effectual by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, people do not (indeed cannot) respond to the gospel. Jesus was crystal clear about this. “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day*” (John 6:44). Jesus even goes on to say, “*you did not choose me, but I chose you,*” (John 15:16). Elsewhere, Paul draws a direct connection between election, calling, and justification in Romans 8:28-30.

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

In Ephesians 2:4 and Colossians 2:13, Paul speaks of men and women as being “dead in sin,” until they are “made alive” by God in Jesus Christ. All people are fallen in Adam (who acts as our federal and biological head), and therefore under God’s just condemnation (i.e., God’s wrath) because of our rebellion in Adam. As Adam’s children, we are enslaved to the guilt and power of sin. Because of an inherited sinful nature, no one will not respond to gospel when it is preached to them, unless they are first “called” by God and made alive (regeneration) to do so.

Michael Horton connects the dots regarding God’s initiative in salvation (calling) as tied to the preached word, which he places against the big picture backdrop of redemptive history:

Chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, redeemed by Christ in history, receiving an inheritance in Christ, and being sealed in Christ by the gospel, we are being saved from start to finish by the work of the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit (Eph 1:3-14). In fact, in Romans 8 it is this realization of God’s gracious election, calling, justification, and glorification (vv. 29-30) that leads Paul to the summit of doxology, first in verses 31-39, and then again finally in 11:33-36. All of this means that the gospel is

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<sup>165</sup> According to Wanamaker, “the father in the ancient world was normally responsible for the moral instruction and behavior of his offspring (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14), and he took the leading role in socializing his children into the socio-economic and cultural way of life into which they were born. Paul of necessity took responsibility for resocializing his “children in the faith” to the sometimes radically different demands of their new social existence as Christians. Religious conversion requires resocialization to the distinctive ideas and values of the new religion if the convert is to be effectively incorporated into it.” See Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 106.

not an experience that we have, much less one that we can bring about. It is an announcement that creates faith in the Redeemer who makes it. It comes to us from the outside. It *creates* new experiences and inner transformation that yields good works, but the gospel itself – and the Spirit’s effectual calling through that gospel – remains the source of everything that is done by us or within us. The gospel is God’s life-giving word, creating a new world out of nothing (Ro 4:16–17; 1 Pe 1:23, 25).

Those whom God chose before the creation of the world, he also calls in due time by his Spirit (Eph 1:4–15). The connection between election and calling is well attested, both within the Pauline corpus (Ro 9:6–24; Eph 1:4–13; 2 Th 2:13–15; 2 Ti 1:9) and elsewhere (Jn 6:29, 37, 44, 63–64; 15:16, 19; Ac 13:48; 1 Pe 1:2; 2 Pe 1:10), and both election and calling proceed as the execution of an eternal covenant of redemption within the context of a historical covenant of grace. In effectual calling, the Spirit unites us here and now to the Christ who redeemed us in the past.<sup>166</sup>

To summarize, the means which God uses to call elect sinners to faith in Jesus Christ is the preaching of Christ and him crucified (Galatians 3:1–5; 6:14). The realization that the Thessalonians turned from serving idols to trusting in Jesus Christ to be their rescuer from the wrath to come arises from an eternal covenant of redemption before time, which is tied in time to both election (the end) and calling (the means). Paul has already told his readers in verses 4–5 of the opening chapter, *“for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”* The Holy Spirit is said to work through the proclamation of the Word of God.

The importance of Paul’s understanding of the Spirit working in and through the Word (Scripture) should be obvious. If we desire to see men and women come to faith in Jesus Christ, we should concentrate upon two things. First, we must make sure that we have the correct message (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1–8; 2 Corinthians 5:19, cf. Galatians 3:1–5). Knowing the gospel precedes sharing the gospel. We too should preach Christ and him crucified, not ourselves. Each of us ought to work hard to be able to communicate to a non-Christian the message of human sin (through the law) and be able to recount the historical events of Christ’s life: his sinless life, his personal fulfillment of all the demands of the law, his death as a payment for sin, his burial and his resurrection—this is “preaching the gospel.” God promises that he will call those who are dead in sin to faith in Jesus Christ through this message and no other!

Second, Paul everywhere connects the work of the Spirit in bringing men and women to faith to the preached word (Romans 10:14–17; cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5). In the Book of Acts, Luke repeatedly speaks of the spread of the word (Acts 6:7; 9:42; 12:24; 13:49). We should direct our own prayers to this end, namely, that God would give to us the supernatural boldness necessary to share the Gospel with others with power and clarity, and that God would accompany this message with the power of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:2–13).

Paul’s focus upon the end times resurfaces again when he connects the preaching of Christ crucified and the present activity of the Holy Spirit directly to the presence of the kingdom of

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<sup>166</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 566.

God, in anticipation of a future consummation.<sup>167</sup> Paul would have little sympathy for dispensationalists who tell us that Jesus Christ came and preached the gospel of the kingdom to Israel, but then withdrew his offer of the kingdom when the Jews rejected him. Supposedly, Jesus will not restore the kingdom to Israel until the beginning of the millennial age.<sup>168</sup> For Paul, the kingdom of God is another expression of his two-age eschatology, and reflects the teaching of Jesus.<sup>169</sup> The kingdom is present because Christ the Messiah has come.

The present reality of the kingdom of God is a very prominent theme in Jesus's preaching. The kingdom (or rule) of God is manifest throughout our Lord's messianic mission as seen in Jesus's words recorded in Mark 1:15: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*" Believers enter that kingdom when responding to the call to come to faith in Jesus. The kingdom is consummated when Jesus returns to deliver his people from the wrath to come.

The spiritual nature of the kingdom can be seen, for example, in Luke 17:20-21, when Jesus declares that "*the kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*" In John 18:36, when Jesus was asked whether or not his kingdom was a theocratic one (i.e. tied to the national restoration of Israel), he replied "*my kingdom is not of this world . . . My kingdom is from another place.*" The kingdom is inaugurated by Jesus in his messianic mission and consummated by Jesus when he returns. As Gaffin notes, "a kingdom without a king and a king without a kingdom are practically meaningless abstractions."<sup>170</sup>

Paul makes much the same point in Romans 14:17, when he states that "*the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" The kingdom is present (inaugurated) but not yet consummated (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:5). In Acts 20:25, we are told by Luke that when departing from Ephesus, Paul told his brothers, "*and now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.*" With some confidence we can say that Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God more widely in his preaching than mentioned in his epistles. Vos is correct to point out that Paul's reference to the

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<sup>167</sup> Paul refers to the kingdom of God fourteen times and is used to describe the kingdom as both present and future. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters*, 249.

<sup>168</sup> See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 467-475. According to Pentecost, "During this present age, then, while the King is absent, the theocratic kingdom is in abeyance in the sense of its actual establishment on the earth. Yet it remains as the determinative purpose of God. Paul declared this purpose when he was 'preaching the kingdom of God' (Acts 20:25). Believers have been brought into the 'kingdom of his dear Son' (Col. 1:13) through the new birth. Unbelievers are warned they will not have a part in that kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Others were seen to have labored with Paul 'unto the kingdom of God' (Col. 4:11). Believers were enjoined to suffer to be 'counted worthy of the kingdom of God' (2 Thess. 1:5). It was Paul's expectation to be preserved 'unto his heavenly kingdom' (2 Tim. 4:18). Such references, undoubtedly, are related to the eternal kingdom and emphasize the believer's part in it. They can not be made to support the theory that the church is that earthly kingdom that fulfills all the prophecies of the Word" (471-72). Pentecost's surprising dismissal of the plain meaning of the texts he cites (as they self-evidently refute the point he is trying to make) is largely due to his insistence that the kingdom yet to come is a theocratic kingdom, rather than a "spiritual one."

<sup>169</sup> L. J. Kreitzer, "*Kingdom of God/Christ*," in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 524.

<sup>170</sup> Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time*, 69.

kingdom of God is perhaps but another way of speaking of “heaven,” or “eternity.”<sup>171</sup> But it is clear that Paul is referring to a spiritual kingdom, not a geopolitical one such as the Jews of Jesus’s day were expecting. Gaffin notes the centrality of the *basileia* (kingdom) in the gospels and Paul’s letters because the kingdom is “the eschatological rule and realm of God, already present and still yet future.”<sup>172</sup>

According to Paul’s comments in Romans 14:17, believers experience some of the blessings of the kingdom here and now. But the emphasis in verse 12 of 1 Thessalonians 2 appears to fall upon the future consummation of the kingdom, although Moo cautions that whether Paul is speaking of a present or future kingdom here is not clear.<sup>173</sup> As just noted, in 2 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul speaks of the consummation of the kingdom when Jesus returns; “*this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering . . .*” The “already” but “not yet” is another way of speaking of an inaugurated yet future consummation of the kingdom. This also fits with Jesus’s and Paul’s understanding of redemptive history as the unfolding of two eschatological ages—the present evil and temporal age, which is destined to perish, and a future age to come, characterized by the general resurrection unto life eternal and revelation of God’s glory. The kingdom of God breaks into the present age guaranteeing the final consummation and ultimate realization of all the blessings of the age to come (i.e., eternal life).

Because of the present reality of the kingdom, even in the midst of the sufferings of the present evil age, the Christian believer is given a foretaste of the age to come, when the kingdom is consummated when Jesus delivers us from the coming wrath of God (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Because of such a hope, this provides motivation for faithfully living the Christian life in difficult times.<sup>174</sup>

In his answer to the Thessalonians’ question (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13– “*we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*”), Paul connects the consummated kingdom with God’s eschatological glory. Those who are called by God through the preaching of the gospel even now enter into the kingdom of God and participate in its glory, which is tied to the promise of a bodily resurrection and an eternity in the presence of God which is yet to come. In several passages found elsewhere, Paul speaks of the indwelling Holy Spirit as a pledge or deposit, guaranteeing the final and ultimate redemption of our bodies (cf. Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 8:23). Through our present union with Christ through faith and because indwelt by the Spirit, all believers will be beneficiaries of the consummated kingdom (i.e., the age to come). This is why our hope for the future is not grounded in our current circumstances, but in Christ’s empty tomb, where the future glory is revealed and the new creation dawns.

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<sup>171</sup> Vos, Pauline Eschatology, 12.

<sup>172</sup> Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 241.

<sup>173</sup> Moo, A Theology of Paul and His Letters, 249.

<sup>174</sup> Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 488.

Beale summarizes the first twelve verses of the passage, by pointing out, “the main point of 2:1–12 is that Paul’s witness among the Thessalonians was effective (2:1) because it was based on his bold proclamation of the truth of the gospel (2:2). The two motives undergirding and inspiring this testimony were that Paul wanted to please God (2:3–4) and wanted others to please God in order to glorify him (2:5–12).”<sup>175</sup> A sound eschatology is the basis for all Christian hope.

#### IV. Further Thanksgiving (2:13-16)

**13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. 14 For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind 16 by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved – so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!**

In verse 13, Paul connects his own gospel message with the written word of God—the Old Testament. Paul rather boldly asserts that the message he preached to the Thessalonians was not his own message, but God’s message given to him to proclaim (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:9). There is an implied apologetic in Paul’s declaration. Bruce points out that,

Paul was accustomed to having his message dismissed by his enemies as man-made, something devised by himself; hence his solemn protest in Gal 1:11, 12: “the gospel which was preached by me . . . is not according to man; for I did not receive it (παρέλαβον) from man nor was I taught it (by man).” He therefore found it especially encouraging when it was sincerely and spontaneously welcomed as good news from God.<sup>176</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-16, which was likely his next epistle, Paul will expand upon this point in great detail. He was the messenger called by God, merely proclaiming that which was given to him—the gospel of Christ crucified. He gives thanks for the fact that the Thessalonian Christians clearly recognized that this was the case. The message he had spent three Sabbaths teaching them was not merely the words of men, but was instead the word of God and on the same footing as the Old Testament. The apostle Peter certainly thought so.

*And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).*

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<sup>175</sup> Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 76.

<sup>176</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 45.

Paul's language is emphatic, the message you heard "from us" was "of God."<sup>177</sup> He also speaks of this word proclaimed as "at work in you believers" (ἐνεργέω – be at work) As Morris explains,

The verb rendered "is at work" is almost always used in the New Testament to denote some form of supernatural activity. Mostly it is that of God (1 Cor. 12:6; Phil. 2:13, and elsewhere), but sometimes, by contrast, that of Satan (Ephesians 2:2). It can be used of faith (Gal. 5:6), prayer (Jas. 5:16), and life or death (2 Cor. 4:12), in each case referring to a force not human. Here it draws attention to the fact that the power manifested in the lives of the converts is not of this world, but divine. Where the word of God is welcomed with obedient faith, there the power of God is at work. And it is a present reality . . . . When he speaks of believing Paul uses the present tense, conveying the idea of a continuous process of belief (rather than a single acts of decision that would more naturally be expressed by the aorist). It is the condition of the working of God in people that they continue to exercise faith. Or to put it another way, we cannot live today on the spiritual capital of yesterday.<sup>178</sup>

Morris catches well the significance on Paul's connecting the work of the Holy Spirit directly to the preached word as Paul has done throughout the opening chapters of this letter. If we long to see the Spirit at work in our churches, then we must preach and teach the word of God in power of the Holy Spirit. Where is our confidence? In our sales pitch? Or in the power of the Holy Spirit who breathes forth the content of Christian preaching? If it is the former, we should write our own script. If the latter, then we preach God's word and its central message, Christ and him crucified.

In verse 14, Paul speaks to his spiritual children, reminding them, "*for you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.*" Once the Thessalonians embraced this gospel (described in verses 14-16), through which the Spirit was at work in their midst, it was only a matter of time before the persecution originally aimed at Paul, Timothy, and Silas carried over to the Thessalonian Christians. These new converts, like the first Jewish converts to Christianity who experienced persecution from the Jews in Jerusalem, Damascus, and Asia Minor, were now experiencing such hostility themselves. It bears repeating that coming to faith in Jesus and turning from idols carried with it a high price among the Thessalonians—as it

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<sup>177</sup> The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) puts it this way: THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven; and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good. Neither do we think that therefore the outward preaching is to be thought as fruitless because the instruction in true religion depends on the inward illumination of the Spirit, or because it is written "And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor.... for they shall all know me" (Jer. 31:34), and "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). For although "no one can come to Christ unless he be drawn by the Father" (John 6:44), and unless the Holy Spirit inwardly illumines him, yet we know that it is surely the will of God that his Word should be preached outwardly also, God could indeed, but his Holy Spirit, or by the ministry of an angel, without the ministry of St. Peter, have taught Cornelius in the Acts; but, nevertheless, he refers him to Peter, of whom the angel speaking says, "He shall tell you what you ought to do."

<sup>178</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 81.

often does today. When you come to faith in Jesus Christ and turn from the idols around you, you can expect to be persecuted.

In verses 15-16, we encounter one of the most controversial passages in all of Paul's letters. Paul uses very strong language when speaks of his own people, the Jews, as those "*who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved – so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!*" Paul's comments are considered by many to be hateful and anti-Semitic. People often take great offense at such language—especially with anti-Semitism still found in the long shadow of the holocaust. Several critical scholars have even argued that these words were inserted into Paul's letter at a later date, so as to escape the difficulties this presents.<sup>179</sup> Sadly, the apostle's words have been twisted by those who seek to justify violence against the Jewish people. What are we to make of this?

To start with, context is everything. Paul has just recounted to the Thessalonians how he had been treated in Philippi, then in Thessalonica, and even in Berea. This is the only place in his epistles where he speaks of the Jews as responsible for the death of Jesus.<sup>180</sup> In speaking this way, Paul echoes the apostle John, who in his gospel, speaks of "the Jews" as those associated with the chief priests who opposed Jesus throughout his entire messianic mission.<sup>181</sup> John's reference does not extend to the Jewish people as a whole, but to the priests and scribes who sought to put Jesus to death.

Similar language is found in the Book of Acts, as Luke likewise ties the crucifixion to the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem.<sup>182</sup> It is a fact of history that the Jewish religious leaders (i.e., led by the high-priest Caiaphus) turned Jesus over to the Roman governor Pilate as a seditious blasphemer who was a threat to the peace and security of Jerusalem during the Passover. It is also a fact of history, that shortly before writing these words, Paul was driven from Thessalonica by a mob (the "fellows of a baser sort") which surrounded Jason's house and exacted bail from him, while Paul was rescued and fled for his life from the city. Any discussion of Paul's words here must consider this context.

Second, Paul is not playing the victim nor rashly speaking in anger (although we could understand why he might be angry), but he connects what has happened to him at the hands of the Jews from the time of his conversion, to Israel's own history.<sup>183</sup> He now sees matters such

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<sup>179</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 83.

<sup>180</sup> Although in 1 Corinthians 2:8, he writes, "*none of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory,*" in reference to all those opposed to Jesus, the Jewish leaders as well as Roman.

<sup>181</sup> Ridderbos, points out that in John's gospel, "the Jews . . . as so often in the Fourth Gospel refers to the Jewish authorities in their hostile attitude toward Jesus." See Herman Ridderbos, The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 117.

<sup>182</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 46-47.

<sup>183</sup> Seyoon Kim, The Origins of Paul's Gospel (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 67-99; N. T. Wright, Paul (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 108-128.

as the law, the covenants, and redemption from sin through new eyes—those given him by Jesus on the Damascus Road. His own people were perishing in their sins. We know that Paul was heartbroken by this fact as he tells us in Romans 10:1—*“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”* Yet, he was obviously frustrated by his own people who sought to prevent the gospel from being proclaimed to Jew and Gentile.

Furthermore, it is very important to catch the fact that Paul ties the crucifixion of Jesus to the past history of Israel, which includes the death of any number of prophets sent by YHWH to call the disobedient covenant people to repentance. As Witherington notes, “V. 15 needs to be seen in the long prophetic tradition of the critique of wicked Jewish leaders who persecute and execute the prophets (e.g., 1 Kgs. 19:10–14; 2 Chron. 36:15; Jer. 2:7–8; Ezek. 14:9–11; 34; Heb. 11:32–38).”<sup>184</sup>

A couple of examples are helpful. Nehemiah lamented of Israel, *“nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies”* (Nehemiah 9:26). In Romans 11:3, Paul appeals to Elijah who cried out in despair, *“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.”* Luke also makes the connection between the persecution and death of Israel’s prophets when recounting the words of Stephen at his martyrdom, when Paul was present. Stephen challenged the mob, *“which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered”* (Acts 7:52). Paul is reaffirming what Israel’s own prophets had already said.

Third, we cannot read modern atrocities and anti-Semitism back into Paul’s words. Witherington nails it when he writes,

This critique of wicked leaders cannot be globalized such that the one delivering it can be accused of critiquing all Jews. Paul’s critique stands in this long tradition. Furthermore, he associates those who “killed the Lord Jesus” with those who keep him from speaking the gospel to Gentiles. Clearly in neither case can Paul be talking about Jews in general but rather those who oppose Jesus and the gospel.<sup>185</sup>

We cannot take Paul’s words as an anti-Semitic rant, but as is clear from the context, the apostle is frustrated with all those who oppose the gospel, and who are repeating the unbelief of his ancestors which has and will bring judgment down upon the nation.

Fourth, Paul has just mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 that God’s wrath is coming upon the whole world. Such wrath will fall on those Greco-Roman pagans and their Caesars who persecute Christ’s church, every bit as much as it will befall those Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem who delivered Jesus over to the Romans who then crucified him. The certainty of future judgment and wrath on all who reject Jesus Christ remains today for both unbelieving

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<sup>184</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 85.

<sup>185</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 85.



Jew and Gentile. There is no basis for anti-Semitism in Paul's comments, since all races, tribes, and tongues are subject to the coming wrath. But this warning must be seen against the fact that Christ's church is composed of every race, tribe, and tongue under heaven. This is a matter of personal guilt before God, not a matter of racial discrimination.

Yet Paul does speak of "fill[ing] up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last"! This phrase has troubled many a commentator and at first glance does seem to refer to God's wrath upon Israel prior to his eschatological wrath at the end of the age. Witherington points out the verb (*ephthasen*) is in the aorist tense and translated in the ESV as "has come." This would indicate that Paul is speaking of a current situation, such as the troubles then unfolding in Jerusalem (in A.D. 48-52) when there was great upheaval and a number of Jewish leaders were imprisoned and taken to Rome.<sup>186</sup> But as Weima explains, the current situation for Israel has an important redemptive-historical context.

The Pauline mission (2:15-16a) has a logical outcome: "with the result that they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins" (*eis to anaplērōsai autōn tas hamartias pantote*). Paul here employs an OT theme that is developed also in later Jewish writings: there exists a fixed amount of sins to be committed, after which punishment will be meted out. The verb *anaplērōō* suggests the picture of a vessel or cup that is in a slow but constant process of being filled up, and once it is completely full, judgment will take place.<sup>187</sup>

Beale concurs that the explanation as to what this "filling up of the full measure of sin" means is found by seeing Paul's words in light of the broader context of redemptive history. He writes,

The answer lies in observing that the concept of "filling up sins" occurs elsewhere at significant redemptive-historical epochs to describe the opponents of God's plan to subdue the earth with his truth by his redeemed people. God stated in each case that his enemies had to complete a certain amount of sin before they could be considered ripe for definitive judgment, which would always conclude a particular epoch and launch another. For example, God prophesied that Abraham's descendants would not emerge from Egypt until the sin of the Amorites was "filled up" (*anaplērōō*, Gen 15:16). Similarly, Daniel 8:23-25 states that judgment will come at the end of the age when sins have been "filled up."<sup>188</sup>

Since Jesus ushered in a new age in redemptive history, but was rejected by his people as predicted throughout the Old Testament, Jesus brought both salvation to and judgment upon that generation who "filled up" the measure of those sins which would bring about the wrath of God. Jesus even identifies his use of parables as such a judgment (cf. Matthew 13:13-15)

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<sup>186</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 86.

<sup>187</sup> Weima, "1-2 Thessalonians," 873.

<sup>188</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 84.

when he speaks of the meaning of his parables as unintelligible to those who will reject him.

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.

Both Jesus and Paul echo Isaiah 6:9-10, which reads, "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."<sup>189</sup>

Beale concludes,

That they fill up their sins *always* or continually (*pantote*) suggests that more than the Jewish generation of Paul's day is in mind. All prior Israelite generations who sinned "throughout time" (a possible translation of *pantote*) in the same way are in view, though the present generation is the focus, since in them the sin of the nation as a whole comes to climactic conclusion in the rejection of Christ. Thus, the aorist verbal infinitive "fill up" in 2:16 has in mind "an act ... already in progress [i.e., in the past history of Israel] and ... then brings the action to a conclusion."<sup>190</sup>

If true, this would mean that Israel's collective sin has provoked God's wrath (currently being revealed) and resulting in the nation's hardening of heart, which led to the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution of God's people (i.e., Paul and the followers of Jesus), as the visible climax of Israel's sin.<sup>191</sup> This, it seems to me, fits with Paul's understanding of the course of redemptive history when Jesus's messianic mission (his first advent) sets in motion the final epoch in human history (the "last days") and leads to (as a form of judgment) the diaspora of Israel after 70 CE—the covenant curse falls upon Israel once again leading to eviction from the promised land. The seeds of this judgment were already present in Paul's day and evident in Israel's rejection of Jesus and the efforts on the part of many Jews to hinder the preaching of the gospel.

But if we do choose to take Paul's words out of their historical context—and if we do so we must have an agenda which dictates a meaning unknown to Paul—only then can we make the apostle say and mean something most modern folk should never say, namely, we assign to the Jews as a race responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ and then warn them of God's wrath to come. You can still get a strong whiff of the charges that Paul and his followers were cruel anti-

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<sup>189</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 84-85.

<sup>190</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 85.

<sup>191</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 86.

Semites, who laid the egg which an Adolph Hitler hatched during *Krystalnacht*. There is no doubt that anti-Semitism was, and is, a serious problem.

Several additional things ought to be said. Modern sensitivities aside, a contemporary Jew is no more guilty for the death of Christ than I am guilty for slavery since I am a white European male whose ancestors settled in South Carolina in the 1740's and held slaves. Anyone who faces the wrath of God will do so because of the guilt of sin—Adam's and theirs, not because their ancestors engaged in any number of horrible practices—including chattel slavery.

Since racial discrimination and anti-Semitism have such a long history in North America, as Christians we need to be very direct when discussing such things. First, we must make it clear that God's eschatological wrath is coming upon the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike, upon all who reject Christ and persecute his beloved church. This was Paul's message and it must be ours as well. There is a judgment day yet ahead. Second, as Christian citizens living in a democratic republic, we must do everything in our power to defend the civil rights of all religious and ethnic groups (since their freedom is ours too) while at the same time not conceding that other religions are true. We ought to champion free speech, which includes our freedom to preach Christ, and at the same time use such freedom to persuade others of the truth of Christianity as well as warn of a coming day of wrath.

Second, there is also a sense in which the Christian witness to Jews is especially important, since Christianity has been so often been evoked as one of the reasons for anti-Semitic practices. Martin Luther is often reviled as an anti-Semite. There are many circles in which our reverence for Luther's Reformation is understood much differently than that of confessional Protestants. We must do all that is in our power to speak out against anti-Semitism, not because Israel occupies a "favored nation" status in the New Testament (as dispensationists teach), but because we follow Paul's stated desire to see his countrymen come to faith in Christ. His prayer ought to be ours. "*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.*" If we are truly students of Paul, we ought to adopt his attitude toward the Jewish people and work and pray for their salvation while protecting them from anti-Semites seeking to do them harm.

Moving closer to home, there is no doubt that anyone who embraces the gospel in the contemporary West will be persecuted. If you follow Jesus Christ, you will feel the icy stares and hear the ridicule from your non-Christian friends and families. On a far less serious scale, but nonetheless a reality, if you are a Reformed Christian, you might even experience the same thing from your evangelical friends and families. If you are a confessional Reformed Christian, who happens to believe that the historic Reformed doctrines and practices of worship and evangelism are biblical to the exclusion of all others, then you will receive the same iciness from those who find historic Christianity offensive.

Yes, in our age, it is difficult to be a Reformed Christian. Feminist philosopher Ann Douglas once pointed out in conversation that confessional Calvinists received perhaps the most significant defeat of any religious group in America.<sup>192</sup> We have taken our lumps, no doubt, but

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<sup>192</sup> In "greenroom" conversation when she was a guest via phone interview on the White Horse Inn.

the way to turn back the tide is to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit through the preached gospel. He will lead us to out think, out pray, out evangelize, and out live those who disagree with us. If we are right, God will vindicate our efforts in his own due time. If not, he will frustrate our efforts and judge us accordingly.

The reality is that we are and always will be pilgrims in this present evil age, making our journey through the wilderness to the heavenly city. To the degree to which we follow Jesus is the degree to which we will be persecuted.

## V. Pleas for a Second Visit (2:17-3:13)

### A. Out of sight, out of mind (2:17-20)

**17 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, again and again – but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy.**

Paul expresses his sincere desire to return to the Thessalonians using rather strong language—*“we were torn away from you for a short time.”* Obviously, this is a reference to the fact that Paul was forced out of Thessalonica against his will by the Jews after a mere three Sabbaths in the city. While defending himself against false accusations, the apostle takes the opportunity to inform the Thessalonians that it is his sincere desire to make a second visit to the city, apparently to counter the accusation that he had no interest in returning. Paul very much wants to return.

In the original language, the phrase “torn away,” is a term which could be translated as “being orphaned,” or “bereaved.”<sup>193</sup> This fits with Paul’s previous use of the familial terms “mother” (v. 2:7) and “father” (2:11). Separated from the Thessalonians by circumstances outside his control, Paul describes himself as being orphaned, and torn away from his family. He assures them that he has made every possible effort to get back to be with them, but so far he has been prevented from doing so. Paul is emphatic in verse 18 (“*I, Paul*”),<sup>194</sup> when revealing that he had made repeated efforts to get back to Thessalonica. In fact, he says, he tried “*again and again.*” Even though he himself had been prevented from coming back, Paul was able to send Timothy to them (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Paul directly attributes his inability to return to Thessalonica to the activity of Satan, who Paul will go on to describe as “the tempter” in 1 Thessalonians 3:5. He reveals that “*Satan hindered us,*” literally “cutting into” the path so as to make Paul’s return impossible at this time, a term

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<sup>193</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 104.

<sup>194</sup> Bruce notes, by the declaration “I Paul,” “We may envisage Paul as interposing with these words, either orally while the letter was being dictated by a colleague or in writing when it was read over to him after completion.” See Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 55.

which Paul also uses in Romans 15:22– “*this is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.*” Green points out the context in which Paul uses the term here.

So great was [their] effort that only Satanic opposition could explain why they did not return! *Stopped* [hindered] is a term that comes from the military. In order to stop the advance of enemy armies, soldiers would tear up and destroy the road to hinder their passage. Warfare imagery is embedded in the metaphor, Satan himself being their adversary. The battle was over the souls of the Thessalonian believers whom Satan tempted to commit the sin of apostasy.<sup>195</sup>

Satan is the arch-enemy of the gospel and has prevented Paul from returning to further the gospel’s spread. This raises a number of important issues regarding the activity of Satan.

First, as one commentator reminds us, “Satan is referred to in every section of the New Testament.”<sup>196</sup> In his letters, Paul speaks frequently of Satan. The apostle’s primary emphasis in these references is that Satan attempts to hinder the progress of the gospel, as we see here. In his second Thessalonian letter, Paul goes on to speak of Satan as responsible for hindering the preaching of the gospel through the use of false signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). This presents a serious warning to those who contend that “signs and wonders” occurring in the present time necessarily accompanies the preaching of the gospel, so as to confirm its truth and as the sign we have entered the last days—the so called, “third wave.”<sup>197</sup> But Paul does not connect the preaching of Christ crucified to signs and wonders. Instead, he refers to the preaching of the gospel as the public placarding of Christ. Paul’s focus is upon the preached word, not upon ongoing signs and wonders.

Those who encourage people to believe the gospel because of the signs which accompany it are often tempted to manipulate people into thinking that such signs still occur. But with the close of the apostolic age, the office of apostle ceases along with the miraculous signs associated with that office. Those who believe and expect such signs to be present go to great lengths to encourage people to testify about miracles they have seen or experienced. Yet the sorts of things they usually report as “miraculous” have very little in common with the signs and wonders which took place in the apostolic age—which were often performed in the presence of those who have the means, motive, and opportunity to prove them false. We are being naive if we don’t think Satan will seek to infiltrate these signs and wonders movements to undermine the gospel since the door is wide open to deception in such circles.

Second, at the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of the fact that “*God will soon crush Satan under his feet*” (16:20), and he reminds the Colossians that the devil has already been made a public spectacle because of Christ’s victory over him on the cross (2:15). Satan is a defeated foe. As Luther so wonderfully put it in his hymn a *Mighty Fortress*, “His doom is sure, one little

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<sup>195</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 152.

<sup>196</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 99.

<sup>197</sup> See, for example, C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Ann Arbor : Vine, 1988); and John C, Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986)

word shall fell him.” In Revelation 20:1-10, John depicts Satan as currently bound through the preaching of the gospel, yet he is to be released before the end of the age. As we will see, I take 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, as a parallel passage to Revelation 20:1-10, since both speak of the binding of Satan in the present age.

Third, nevertheless, even though his fate is sealed, Satan remains a foe to be reckoned with. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul speaks of being afflicted by a messenger of Satan who tormented him. *“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”* Even though Satan was in some way responsible for Paul’s affliction, Paul assigns this to the mysterious providence of God. Luther was correct when he spoke of the devil as “God’s devil.”<sup>198</sup> Satan is not free to operate as he will—he is a finite creature, currently bound (in the sense of being restrained from doing particular things, though not eliminated) through the preaching of the gospel. The truth of the gospel exposes his lies for what they are—lies. And this, in effect, restrains him from deceiving the people of God.

Fourth, when Paul speaks of Satan as “the tempter” later in this letter, he worries that the tempter may be able to persuade some of the Thessalonians still on the fringes to give up the faith (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:5; *“For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain”*). Jesus said of the devil, *“you are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”* If Satan was a liar from the beginning, then Paul fears that any people foolish enough to listen to his lies may be taken in.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul explicitly speaks of Satan as tempting married people who have a lack of self control (1 Corinthians 7:5– *“Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control”*), playing upon our sensual proclivities and weaknesses.

Finally, Satan does more than tempt people to act upon their sinful urges. Now defeated, he has limited power because he is bound in the present age. Paul speaks of Satan as the supreme in the realm of spirits, and as *“the ruler of the kingdom of the air.”* He is *“the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”* (Ephesians 2:2). Elsewhere, Paul speaks of Satan as the “god of this age” who has blinded the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is spoken of here as “the tempter” (3:5), and as “the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Given this extensive Pauline data (along with other considerations), there are a number of conclusions we ought draw about the devil and his work. One is that there is nothing in Pauline theology that would lead us to believe that Paul endorsed a “devil made me do it” approach to sin, though he clearly teaches that Satan plays upon our sensuality and weakness

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<sup>198</sup> Often quoted, but I have not been able to find the exact quote in Luther’s works. This comes close. “For, where God built a church, there the devil would also build a chapel . . . In such sort is the devil always God’s ape. See *“Colloquia Mensalia* (1566) ch. 2 (tr. H. Bell as Martin Luther’s Divine Discourses, 1652)

by tempting those who lack self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5). Another is that in dealing with Satan, James tells us to “*resist the devil, and he will flee from you*” (James 4:7). We resist Satan by living in the light of the truth of God’s word. We must also beware, “*so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs*” (2 Corinthians 2:11). Our “devil radar” should be always employed. We do this just as our Lord did, by knowing and proclaiming the Word of God which is always sure and not subject to the same weaknesses we are (Matthew 4:1 ff). Scripture is clear that Satan’s efforts are aimed at stopping the spread of the gospel because through it his lies and tactics are exposed and he is therefore said to be “bound.” The best remedy against his many devices is a sound theological awareness and knowledge of the Scripture.

As Donald Grey Barnhouse (for many years the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia) once said in a sermon I heard long ago via the medium of cassette tape, “Satan is not trying to make good people bad and bad people worse. He tries to make people good without Jesus Christ.” To paraphrase another Barnhouse quip, “if Satan owned any one town in America, it would immediately become the most lovely town in the country. There would be very little crime, great prosperity, and everyone attends a church . . . where Jesus Christ is not preached.”<sup>199</sup>

Calvin also warns us of Satan’s efforts,

It is certain that everything that hinders us proceeds in some way from Satan. If only this sentiment were deeply impressed upon the minds of all pious people – that Satan is continually contriving, by every means, in whatever way he can hinder or obstruct the edification of the church! We would then assuredly be more careful to resist him; we would take more care to maintain sound teaching, of which that enemy strives so keenly to deprive us. We would also, whenever the course of the Gospel is retarded, know from where the hindrance proceeds.<sup>200</sup>

Paul’s point to the Thessalonians is that Satan’s primary mission is to hinder the gospel, either by diluting its purity or resisting its spread. We most effectively resist his efforts through preaching the correct gospel, and doing so in the power of the Holy Spirit. Those errors which spread in theological darkness are quickly exposed by the light of the gospel.

However, we must be careful and not try and resist the world or the flesh in the same way we would resist the devil. Paul does not exhort us to resist these temptations, but instead, he exhorts us to flee from greed, envy, and so on, as he warns in 1 Timothy 6:9-11,

*But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue*

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<sup>199</sup> Michael Horton recounts a similar version of this Barnhouse quip in, Christless Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2008), 15.

<sup>200</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 34.

*righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.*

There are other examples too when Paul tells us to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18) and idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14 ff.). We are to resist the devil with the gospel, but we are to flee from worldly temptations whenever we encounter them. It is important to keep these things clear in our minds. Satan is resisted through correct doctrine (“the light of truth”), while the weakness of our flesh is dealt with by fleeing from those things which tempt and entice us. Fleeing from Satan allows him to have his way with the gospel, but trying to resist temptation, rather than fleeing from it, is a sure precursor to being done in by it. The devil and the flesh must be dealt with appropriately.

Paul follows up his previous comments to the Thessalonians by declaring his great esteem for them. In verse 19, he writes, “*for what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*” Paul describes his readers as his “hope, joy and crown” using athletic imagery as he often does. “The ‘crown of exultation’ alludes to the wreath which was awarded to the victor in an athletic contest: victory in such a contest afforded the victor and all associated with him ample ground for καύχησις (“boasting”).”<sup>201</sup> Wanamaker points out that . .

Paul uses [crown] here in the sense of a “crown of pride” like the victory wreath placed on the heads of victorious military commanders or the winners of athletic contests to signify their achievement. For Paul the Thessalonians were like a victory wreath of which he could be proud at the coming of Christ. They were a proof of his toil and achievement for Christ as a missionary to the Gentiles.<sup>202</sup>

The Thessalonians will reach maturity and Paul will present them to Jesus when our Lord returns.<sup>203</sup> Paul is not boasting about his own accomplishments, but is instead taking great delight in what God has accomplished through the gospel that he had preached in Thessalonica. Paul is like a proud parent, taking joy in what God had been pleased to do through his efforts. The language here is notably exuberant, reflecting Paul’s great joy at what God had done throughout his second missionary journey. We too, should feel free to rejoice at the wonderful things that God does in our midst.

When writing this letter to this congregation, Paul is never far from thinking about our Lord’s return, especially since the Thessalonians had questions about it. This is the first instance in the letter where Paul uses the term “coming” (*paraousia*, παρουσία) in reference to Jesus Christ’s return; i.e., “*before our Lord Jesus at his coming*” (v. 2:19). Paul, along with the Thessalonians, will present themselves to the Lord when he comes, the coming (or return of Jesus), a theme which was preciously mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, and which will appear again in this letter (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:5; 5:23) as well as in 2 Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8).

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<sup>201</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 56.

<sup>202</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 123.

<sup>203</sup> Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 91.



Preaching that Jesus was the King of Kings who is soon to come is, according to Luke (cf. Acts 17:6-7), likely one of the reasons for the anger directed at Paul in Thessalonica.<sup>204</sup> Greco-Romans took Paul to be a subversive, preaching against Caesar and civil authority, while Jews did not want Christians upsetting the Romans which would be another crackdown like the Edict of Claudius.

The main idea associated with a *parousia* is the arrival of a high ranking official, dignitary, king, or a deity to a sacred or important place (a temple, a city, etc.). Josephus uses the term *parousia* to speak of YHWH as “coming to Moses or Israel.” Nero’s visit to Corinth was celebrated with the striking of coins celebrating Nero’s “coming” to the city.<sup>205</sup> The visiting dignitaries receive a gift (flowers or tribute), an honorarium (i.e., a civic structure is named in their honor), or a crown or a scepter (a symbol of royal rule and authority), upon their arrival. Leon Morris adds.

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In the ordinary language of the people the term [*parousia*] was especially used for the arrival of a great personage, a king or an emperor, and it was the technical expression for a royal visit. In the New Testament, it became a technical expression for *the* royal visit, the second coming of our Lord. From the New Testament it passed into Christian literature generally. Milligan maintains that, as distinct from other words for the second coming, it “lays stress on the ‘presence’ of the Lord with His people, which, while existing now, will only at the Return be completely realized.” So here Paul uses for the first time in Christian literature that term which was to be the characteristic designation of the Lord’s triumphant return. And even then, says Paul, the Thessalonians will be his hope and joy and crown of boasting. It may not be without significance that on the occasion of a royal *parousia* the people sometimes found themselves under the necessity of providing a crown. But at coming of this King, the crown will be his people’s.<sup>206</sup>

According to Morris, in Jesus’s return to deliver his people a great irony is apparent. It is Jesus who himself had been humiliated at the cross, yet now risen, will return to reward his people with the crown of salvation. Those who followed Jesus (i.e., Paul, Silas, and Timothy) were humiliated when driven from the town, but they are now promised that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will give them the crown of salvation.<sup>207</sup> So too will all the Thessalonian believers receive this crown, no matter what their social standing in the world.

Paul connects this popular term used for the “royal visitation” directly to Jesus Christ’s coming glory, when he receives the victor’s crown at his physical return to earth to deliver his people and bring about the final judgment. Yet it is the returning king who rewards his people. This is, in part, seen in the conversion of those Thessalonian Christians, who are the crown that

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<sup>204</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 155.

<sup>205</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 155.

<sup>206</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 90-91.

<sup>207</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 125.

Christ receives at his triumphant return to earth. Paul says of them, “for you are our glory and joy.” The terms which Paul uses to describe our Lord’s return are quite significant as we will see throughout these two letters. We will return to a discussion of the *parousia* of Jesus in more detail when we take up 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.

### B. The Mission of Timothy (3:1-5)

**1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, 3 that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4 For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.**

After expressing his deep concern for the Thessalonian Christians, Paul informs them that this led to his decision to send Timothy to them (v. 2-3), since as Paul has stated, he could stand the separation no longer. After fleeing Thessalonica for Athens, Paul sent Timothy back “to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions.” We are not sure why, but Paul was not able to return in person, sending Timothy instead. Because of the hindrance of Satan, Paul stayed in Athens alone—as recounted in Acts 17:16-34. Yet, this gave Paul the opportunity to preach the gospel in the heart of Greek culture and history.

Paul valued Timothy very highly. It is not as though he is sending the “second team.” The term used by Paul of Timothy, “co-worker” (from the word *συνεργός*), is a word which Paul uses to speak of his companions in the ministry.<sup>208</sup> The term expresses the idea that Timothy was willing to go wherever, and do whatever was needed in spreading the gospel of Christ. Witherington adds,

Paul likes to speak of the collegial nature of ministry and he uses the term *synergos* with considerable regularity (cf. Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Phlm. 24). What is striking about the usage here is that Timothy is called not Paul’s coworker but rather God’s. This same idea is repeated in later letters as well (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1). Whatever else one says about this, it makes clear that Paul thinks that ministry is a cooperative venture between God and some humans, and the latter have the inestimable privilege of working not only for but with God in spreading the Good News.<sup>209</sup>

It was important that the Thessalonians understand why Paul sent Timothy; “to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions.” The particulars of the affliction are not named, but in light of the rentamob which drove Paul, Silas, and Timothy out of town, it could be easy to misread Paul’s actions, as though he did not care enough to come in person,

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<sup>208</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 159-160.

<sup>209</sup> Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 92.

or that he was simply afraid for his life. So, instead he sent a young man to do a more experienced and mature man's job. Therefore, Paul feels the need to defend himself and explain his actions.

Paul also reminds his readers of something, while difficult to understand, is certainly an important truth of Scripture. He tells the Thessalonians, "*for you yourselves know that we are destined for this.*" Christians are called to suffer and be persecuted for Christ's sake. Christians should expect that as followers of Jesus, the world will hate them. Jesus told us that "*in the world you will have tribulation*" (John 16:33), and Luke pointed out that "*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). Tribulation and suffering are part of the Christian life, and should be expected by those who follow our Lord. Jesus suffered terribly, and at times, so will his people.

The inevitability of some measure of persecution because we are followers of Jesus indicates that we are not telling people the truth if we evangelize them on the basis that Jesus will "fix" all of their problems. Or, once they become Christians everything will be a bed of roses. No such prosperity gospel is found anywhere in Scripture. We should evangelize on the same basis that Paul did, that the risen Jesus appeared to Paul and revealed to him the gospel. We focus upon the truth of the Christian claim, not its utility.

But elsewhere learn that such suffering does have a purpose. One of the reasons we are called to suffer is so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. Paul says in Romans 5:2-4,

*Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

However mysterious the reasons for it might be, suffering plays a role in the Christian life. As Morris points out,

Suffering, then, is part of the very process of living out the Christian life, and Paul suggests that we should not regard it as something monstrous and alien. The God who is over all watches over his children, and the affliction that comes to them is only such as he permits. There is always some lesson to be learned from it. It is always part of our being shaped into what God would have us to be. It is inevitable. We are appointed to it.<sup>210</sup>

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that persecution and suffering will inevitably continue—something he no doubt taught them when he was with them. He shows his love and concern for these Christians, in part, by being candid with them about the consequences of discipleship and the cost of following Jesus when turning from idols.

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<sup>210</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 97.

Paul also warns the Thessalonians to be on guard for the wiles of Satan, now spoken of as the tempter. “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” There is an echo here from the Old Testament, yet another reminder that the Old Testament is Paul’s intellectual default-setting. Jeffrey Weima points out,

Paul expresses his fear that, due to Satan’s malevolent activity of tempting the Thessalonian believers, “our labor might have been in vain” (*eis kenon genētai ho kopos hēmōn*). The apostle’s language here may echo that of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in Isa. 49:4: “I have labored in vain” (*kenōs ekopiasa*) (see also the eschatological hope of Isa. 65:23, which envisions a time when the Lord’s servants “will not labor in vain” [*ou kopiasousin eis kenon*]). This possibility is strengthened by the fact that Paul alludes to this text elsewhere (Phil. 2:16) to demonstrate that his apostolic calling and labor parallel that of the prophets.<sup>211</sup>

As in his letter to the Galatians, Paul indicates that there are those who appear to believe for a time, but who will fall away. In this case, those who are deceived by Satan will likely embrace some form of false teaching which is friendly to outsiders. There are also those who cannot withstand persecution and the loss of family who come to resent their conversion to Christianity. These professing Christians have what is described as “historical,” or “temporal faith,” in contrast to saving faith.<sup>212</sup> Such people may be members of the visible church, but they are not numbered among the elect. They do not persevere to the end. For good reason, Paul is worried that these are the people whom Satan may target.

### C. Joy and thanksgiving at Paul’s report (3:6-10)

**6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you – 7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. 9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?**

Paul informs the Thessalonians that the time between Timothy’s return to Thessalonica and his report back to Paul was unbearable. When Timothy returned to Paul after visiting the Thessalonians, Paul was greatly encouraged by Timothy’s report about the state of the church. Paul was quite worried about the Thessalonians– “when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith,” (v. 5), but now he has heard back from Timothy, who “has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we

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<sup>211</sup> Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 874.

<sup>212</sup> See the discussion of these categories in, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 501-503.

*long to see you” (vv. 6-7).*

While Satan may be able to hinder Paul from going back to Thessalonica, Satan has not been able to undo the work of the gospel there. Paul is encouraged that they are still standing firm in the Lord, especially since that had not been the case in Galatia, where many had turned to another gospel, which was really no gospel at all. In verse 8, Paul speaks of “standing fast,” and again in two other texts, he exhorts Christians elsewhere to stand firm (1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Corinthians 1:24). True believers will be able to withstand persecution and reject false teaching. When circumstances are hard we learn who is a true disciple of Christ, because despite times of doubt and wavering, they will stand firm in the faith to the end.

Paul’s response to what God had done in the midst of the church in Thessalonica motivates him to respond by expressing his thanks to God in verse 9. *“For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.”* While Paul expresses his satisfaction and pleasure with Timothy’s report, it is again not a self-congratulatory sense based upon his own accomplishments. Paul expresses the kind of satisfaction that any Christian feels when he or she is allowed to *“taste the power of the word of God and the coming age,”* according to the author of Hebrews 6:4-6. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses similar sentiments: *“For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God”* (2 Corinthians 4:15). Paul rejoices in the fact that both he and the Thessalonians to whom he is writing—even though physically apart from each other—are both in the presence of God. This, then, is Paul’s motivation for praying “night and day,” not a reference to twice daily prayers at morning and evening, but better understood in the sense of continual prayer—from morning until evening (i.e., all day long).

#### **D. Prayer for the Thessalonian Christians (3:11-13)**

**11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.**

Paul lets it be known that he continually prays that he might be able to return to the city (v. 11), and that God will increase their love for each other to the point of overflowing. The phrase translated as “direct our way,” is drawn from a common figure of speech referring to “keeping on the path,” so as to reach one’s goal.<sup>213</sup> Paul petitions the Lord for God to increase the people’s love for each other. He has seen the consequences of division—as in Galatia—and he knows how destructive this can be.

In another petition in his prayer, Paul asks God to *“establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints”* (v. 13). Paul also prays that the Thessalonians will not be shaken by any event, or even confusion about the return of Christ, which is Paul’s primary reason for writing them.

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<sup>213</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 176.

Several points here require comment. What does Paul mean when he prays that the Lord “*may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father*”? Leon Morris contends . . .

The thought is not exclusively ethical. The apostle goes on to bring in the notion of holiness, in which the basic idea is that of being set apart for God. Paul’s word is one that signifies the state rather than the process. In the Greek Old Testament it is used only of God himself, and in the New Testament it is applied to people in only one other passage (2 Cor. 7:10). Paul leaves no doubt as to the wholeheartedness with which the Christian is given over to his Lord. The most usual designation of Christians in the New Testament is simply “the Holy ones,” or, as we usually translate it, “the saints,” the word being from this same root. Believers do not simply live uprightly; they belong to God and thus are set apart entirely for God’s service. Paul’s prayer is that this may be fully realized among the Thessalonians. The apostle takes this notion as far as it will go by bringing in the thought of the second coming. He prays that right through, until this event that will usher in the end of the age, the Thessalonians will realize the glorious destiny of which he has been speaking. It is that aspect of the Parousia which means the end of this present form of existence that is in mind.<sup>214</sup>

Paul is *not* saying that those who live in victory, and who achieve a certain measure of holiness and blamelessness, will be united with Christ at his coming. Rather, he says that those who have been called to faith in Christ through the gospel are in view here. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they are set apart by God for his purposes to live a life worthy of the kingdom. Paul’s stress falls upon believers living out God’s call through a life of obedience to God’s word, an obedience which is a response to God’s prior and gracious call to faith—not a human achievement. This is what the *Heidelberg Catechism* describes as a life of gratitude. Obedience to God’s commandments is an effect of his prior call, and a fruit of justification by faith.

We cannot err any more seriously than by teaching that only those who earn God’s favor through their obedience need not fear Christ’s coming. This recalls to mind the dread created by the Sunday school rhyme taught me in my youth, “O be careful little hands what you do.” Rather, those whom God calls to faith in Jesus Christ demonstrate this call by a life lived in gratitude and obedience to the commandments. Calvin is no doubt correct here, when he speaks of the holiness begun in this life, as culminating in perfection at the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, i.e., at his return to earth.<sup>215</sup> In this sense, the believer, who is already declared righteous in Christ through imputation, will at long last cease to be a sinner, and will now be a glorified saint. The process begun in this life will finally be completed at the moment of death or at Christ’s return—whichever comes first.

What does Paul mean when he speaks of our Lord as returning with his “holy ones” (*hagioi*—ESV “saints”)? Is Paul referring to angels, or to Christians who have died and entered the presence of the Lord, or to both? There is significant evidence that both are in view. In the

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<sup>214</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 110.

<sup>215</sup> Calvin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 41-42.

gospels, we read that “the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers” (Matthew 13:41). We read in Matthew 25:31, “when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.” In Mark 8:38) Jesus tells us, “for whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

That Paul is referring, in part, to angels receives additional support in the Old Testament, when we are told that “let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!” (Psalm 89:5). In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar sees the messenger, a “holy one” coming down out of heaven. Similarly, Zechariah, refers to the coming of the Lord, “and all the Holy ones with him” (14:5). There is a great deal of evidence which speaks of the legion of angels who accompany our Lord at his return, as “holy ones.”

Yet, Paul also speaks of the Thessalonian Christians as “holy and blameless,” or “saints.” Green points out,

Are these deceased Christians (4:16) or celestial angelic beings (see 2 Thess. 1:10 and comments)? *Holy ones* or “saints” is a common way in which Christians are described in the NT (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1), and so it appears possible that deceased Christians are those who will accompany Jesus in his coming. However, the author alludes to Zechariah 14:5 at this point: “Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.” While in the OT “holy ones” may refer to human beings (Lev. 21:7–8; Num. 16:5, 7), in Zechariah and other OT texts they are the celestial beings who accompany Yahweh (Deut. 33:2; Job 5:1; 15:15; Ps. 89:5, 7; Dan. 4:13; 8:13). Elsewhere in the NT the celestial beings, called either “angels” or “holy ones,” will accompany the Lord in his coming (Matt. 13:41; Mark 8:38; 13:27; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14–15; and cf. 1 Enoch 1:9). 1 Thessalonians 3:13 reflects this hope. The Lord Jesus will come with power and glory, as a warrior on the day of the Lord (Zech. 14:1–9), and his *holy ones* will come with him.<sup>216</sup>

Given the immediate context, Paul’s meaning is very likely inclusive, referring here to the angelic host along with those believers who have died in Christ and who will return with him. Paul will speak of this in more detail in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 ff. As Green concludes, “here at the close of this section of the letter, Paul’s prayer introduces one of the great themes of the second part of this letter, the coming of the Lord. He will come with armies greater than those of Alexander III or the Romans. He is the coming King whom they await!”<sup>217</sup>

## VI. Exhortation (4:1-5:24)

### A. On keeping the tradition (4:1-2)

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<sup>216</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 181.

<sup>217</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 181.

**1 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.**

Leon Morris calls to mind an important characteristic of the structure of Paul's epistles seen here:

It is Paul's habit to treat doctrinal matters, answers to correspondents, and like in the earlier part of his epistles. Then at the end he deals with the practical implications for living the Christian life. Throughout this letter his concern for spiritual advance in the Thessalonian church has surfaced a number of times, but now he gives it more concentrated attention. Until now he has had a good deal to say about what had happened in the Thessalonian church, but now he launches into a section telling them what they should do and there is a sharp rise in the use of imperatives.<sup>218</sup>

Recall our prior discussion of Beker's coherence/contingency model (i.e., Paul has a set body of truth which he applies in different situations). After defending himself from false charges made against him, Paul moves on to give a series of exhortations regarding godly living.

In Paul's letters, imperatives (commands) follow the indicative declarations (statements of fact) as to those who are "in Christ." Such commands, which we are to strive to obey, fall under the heading of what has historically been identified as the "third use" of the law.<sup>219</sup> That is, as Christians, justified by grace alone through faith alone on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ alone, we are to obey the law of God (his commandments). We do this not to earn favor with God through "works of law," but we obey out of a profound sense of gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Failure to understand this point almost always leads to doctrinal havoc—the gospel (a message to be believed) becomes a command (something to be done). We do not "do" the gospel. We "believe" the gospel.

In Thessalonica, unlike Galatia, where the doctrine of justification by faith was a source of controversy, the Thessalonians appear to have embraced Paul's gospel with little, if any, objection. So, assuming the congregation was grounded in the doctrine of justification, Paul issues a series of exhortations about living in a new way to these newly-appointed ambassadors residing in this Christian embassy in a hostile and foreign land dominated by Greco-Roman ways of thinking and doing.

Paul's use of the term translated as "finally" (λοιπός) should not lead us to conclude that Paul is wrapping up his letter. Rather, Paul uses the term while making a transition to a discussion of the way in which we as Christians are to live in the midst of those who think and live differently than we do, and who see in Christian morality a sort of rigid self-righteous moralism bent upon judging others.

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<sup>218</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 113.

<sup>219</sup> Horton, The Christian Faith, 677-680.



The serious nature of the apostle's series of exhortations which follow is evident with the use of a double injunction, "*we ask and urge you.*" Paul is not scolding the Thessalonians, since he affectionately calls them "brothers" in the midst of the exhortation. The point of this exhortation—"you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more" is to encourage the Thessalonians to make progress in the Christian life, even in the midst of persecution they are presently facing. This not mere advice, but a matter of necessity to the Thessalonians, if they are to continue to stand firm as a Christian oasis in a pagan moral desert. A number of terms Paul uses here deserve further explanation.

The term "received" (παραλαμβάνω) refers to the careful passing along of Christian tradition to others which is now inscriptured in Paul's epistle. The content of what is "passed down" to the Thessalonians by Paul is nicely summarized by F. F. Bruce.

The tradition (παράδοσις) of Christ in the apostolic writings has three main components: (1) a summary of the gospel story, whether it takes the form of preaching (κήρυγμα) or confession of faith; (2) a rehearsal of deeds and words of Christ; (3) ethical and procedural guidelines for Christians. These guidelines are derived from the teaching and example of Christ, who is indeed the embodiment of the tradition: "as you received (παρελάβετε) Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him, just as you were taught..." (Col 2:6, 7). The tradition was apparently delivered in the form of a catechesis, grouped under such captions as "Put off (old vices)," "put on (new virtues)," "be subject (to those in authority and one to another)," "watch and pray" (cf. Col 3:5-4:6). Paul can safely assume that the Roman Christians, who were not his own converts, have learned such a catechesis (Rom 6:17): "you have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were committed" (εἰς ὃν παρεδόθητε, meaning perhaps "which you had delivered to you"). Paul and his colleagues made it their aim so to imitate Christ that they in turn became embodiments of the ethical tradition; cf. Phil 4:9, "what you have learned and received (παρελάβετε) and heard and seen in me, do."<sup>220</sup>

The Thessalonians are also exhorted "to walk" according to the teaching carefully handed down to them from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. To put it simply, the Thessalonians are to act according to the teaching they have been given. The term "to walk" is adopted from a Hebraism, meaning "to live." A believer's "walk," is a euphemistic way of speaking of how one lives one's life,<sup>221</sup> especially in light of the fact that those outside the church are watching. Green adds, "Paul wants the Thessalonians to 'walk' (*peripatēte*; see 2:12; 4:1; 2 Thess. 3:6, 11) or conduct themselves with "decorum" (*euschēmōnōs*, translated *may win the respect*) among the

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<sup>220</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 78-79.

<sup>221</sup> According to Weima, "This is suggested in a general way by Paul's (1) threefold use of the verb "walk" (4:1 [2x], 12), a common OT and rabbinical term denoting moral conduct; (2) employment of the verb "receive" (4:1), which functions as a technical term in rabbinical writings for the transmission of traditional material; (3) call to "please God" (4:1) as the goal of human conduct, an idea rooted in the OT (see, e.g., Num. 23:27; 1 Kings 14:13; Job 34:9; Ps. 19:14; 69:31; 104:34; Prov. 15:26; 16:7; Mal. 3:4); (4) concern to make a good impression on those outside the community (4:12), an aspiration found throughout the OT (e.g., Exod. 32:12, 25; Num. 14:14-16; Deut. 9:25-29; 1 Kings 20:28). Paul's indebtedness in this passage to the OT is seen in a more specific way, however: his emphasis on the theme of "holiness" in vv. 3-8, which is to be a defining characteristic of Israel as God's covenant people, and his allusions to the OT in vv. 5, 6, 8b, and 9. Weima, "*1-2 Thessalonians*," 876.

unbelievers, who are here called *outsiders* (*tous exō*; Mark 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12–13; Col. 4:5; and see 1 Tim. 3:7).<sup>222</sup> This is why, perhaps, the church is spoken of throughout the Book of Acts as “the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:22) since Christians live according to a different standard than the pagans around them. Morris points out,

It may be that the metaphor suggested itself from the idea of continual, if unspectacular, advance, which should of course characterize the Christian. Walking is connected with pleasing God. The whole Christian life is God-centered. Christians do not “walk” with a view to obtaining the maximum amount of satisfaction for themselves but in order to please their Lord (elsewhere Paul warns against walking in evil paths, 2 Cor. 4:2; 10:2). Paul does not specify any particular point in which they should “please” God; he is concerned with the whole bent of the life.<sup>223</sup>

Paul covered this ground with the Thessalonians previously, since as he notes, “*you received this from us*” when he had been among them. In light of how other Christians throughout Macedonia have been encouraged by the Thessalonian’s example (as mentioned previously in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7), it is vital for them to continue on in their present walk. These instructions were not something that Paul and Timothy and Silas decided upon as useful, rather these exhortations to Godly living are grounded in the law of God and therefore come from the quill of Paul but possesses the authority of Jesus. Paul is called to be Christ’s agent (indeed a “bond servant”), passing on to the churches he has established that which the Lord himself has revealed to him.

### B. On sexual purity (4:3-8)

**3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.**

Following his pattern of issuing imperatives necessary “to walk” in such a manner as to please God, Paul gives a series of exhortations to live in sexual purity. Such purity should, in part, define our sanctification, being called and set apart by God for his purposes. The Christians in Thessalonica are to embrace a distinctly Christian sexual ethic while at the same time rejecting the prevailing sexual ethic typical of the Greco-Roman world described here by Paul as “*πορνεία*” or “sexual immorality.” The term is often understood in connection to prostitution,

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<sup>222</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 212.

<sup>223</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 115.

fornication, and adultery.<sup>224</sup> F. F. Bruce points out that “when the gospel was introduced into pagan society, therefore, it was necessary to emphasize the complete breach with accepted mores in this area which was demanded by the new way of life in Christ.”<sup>225</sup> If this message was new to the Thessalonians, it has been largely lost to professing Christians today, many of whose views on sexuality are far more like the pagans around us than that revealed in the biblical text.

The context for Paul’s series of exhortations is that in first century Greco-Roman culture, typical of cities like Thessalonica, sexual immorality was wide-spread with temple prostitution, fornication, adultery, and homosexuality all widely practiced and viewed as generally acceptable practices. Bruce contrasts the main differences between pagan and Christian approaches to sexuality.

Christianity from the outset has sanctified sexual union within marriage (as in Judaism); outside marriage it was forbidden. This was a strange notion in the pagan society to which the gospel was first brought; there various forms of extramarital sexual union were tolerated and some were even encouraged. A man might have a mistress (ἑταίρα) who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine (παλλακὴ), while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot (πόρνη). The function of his wife was to manage his household and be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs.<sup>226</sup>

Paul and his fellow missionaries, no doubt, had taught basic Christian sexual ethics to the Thessalonians. It is likely that when Paul met up with Timothy again after the latter had visited Thessalonica, Paul learned that Christian sexual ethics was a source of on-going tension within and outside the congregation.<sup>227</sup>

I would be remiss not to point out that something like the Christian sexual ethic stress described above has been the accepted standard of sexual conduct (although not always practiced) in Christendom for centuries (especially in western Europe), but has increasingly given way to a contemporary sexuality which has much more in common with the libertine Greco-Roman views described by Bruce. Virtually all of Paul’s exhortations given to the first century Thessalonians should be shouted from the housetop to contemporary American Christians since we have become much like ancient pagans in our religion and views on sexuality.

In verse 3, Paul expresses his point in unmistakably clear language. “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*” Put simply, it is God’s will that his people be “holy.” This expectation

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<sup>224</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 151.

<sup>225</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 82.

<sup>226</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 82.

<sup>227</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 150.

requires us to consider the meaning of “sanctification” in a broad or theological sense, before we take up a discussion of the specifics of sexual purity which flows from sanctification.

It is vital to keep in mind that Paul’s indicative (we are reckoned “holy” based upon the imputed righteousness of Christ, which establishes our union with Christ) precedes the imperative (God’s will is that we be sanctified), just as the law precedes the gospel, and the second use of the law (the law as teacher of sin) precedes the third (the law as the rule of life). Paul’s exhortation assumes the apostle’s teaching (coherence) that in God’s call of sinners to faith in Jesus Christ, God is setting us apart unto himself and for his purposes. This divine act produces a change in both the standard to be followed (God’s law) but also the moral affections of his people (our sexual desires). What should we desire in terms of our conduct? Holiness, which is the will of God? Or to indulge the desires of the flesh? Paul could not be any clearer about what God expects of his people.

Upon trusting in Jesus Christ, we are justified (declared righteous) and through the same act of faith, we begin the life-long process of sanctification, or the living out of our calling and justification (cf. Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 6:11). Like justification, sanctification too is by faith and not by works. As taught in Galatians, good works are the inevitable fruit of saving faith (i.e., Galatians 5:18 ff. when Paul discusses the “fruit of the Spirit”). Paul also tells us that all Christians are presently “holy” (*hagios*),<sup>228</sup> since Jesus Christ’s perfect and personal obedience has already been reckoned to us through the instrument of faith (justification—cf. Philippians 3:9). Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, God also progressively sanctifies us by conforming us to the image of Christ, finally resulting in glorification—at our death or our Lord’s return, whichever comes first. Since we are called to be “holy” and are set apart as God’s own possession, as a consequence we can no longer live as pagans attached to our idols, whatever they may be. We are continuously being sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace (i.e., the preached word and the sacraments—the engine of the Christian life).

Moving on from the broad concept of sanctification to the specific sexual conduct mentioned by Paul, those called to be set apart and declared to be “holy,” are to live out this calling by “*abstain[ing] from sexual immorality*” (v. 3b). Paul’s language is emphatic. Christians are to avoid fornication (*porneia*), broadly meaning all forms of unbiblically sanctioned sexual intercourse before marriage (fornication), sex outside of marriage (adultery—which substitutes an unsanctioned sexual relationship in the place of a legitimate one), or sexual relations with same sex partners (homosexuality—which Paul elsewhere describes as unnatural—Romans 1:26).

Frank Thielman points out that there is yet another loud Old Testament echo here in which

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<sup>228</sup> According to Berkhof, “the really characteristic word of the New Testament, however, is *hagios*. Its primary meaning is that of separation in consecration and devotion to the service of God. With this is connected the idea that what is set aside from the world for God, should also separate itself from the world’s defilement and share in God’s purity. This explains the fact that *hagios* speedily acquired an ethical signification. The word does not always have the same meaning in the New Testament. (a) It is used to designate an external official relation, a being set aside from ordinary purposes for the service of God, as for instance, when we read of ‘holy prophets,’ Luke 1:70, “holy apostles,” Eph. 3:5, and “holy men of God” 2 Pet. 1:21. (b) More often, however, it is employed in an ethical sense to describe the quality that is necessary to stand in close relation to God and to serve Him acceptably, Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Col. 1:22; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16. It should be borne in mind that in treating of sanctification we use the word primarily in the latter sense. When we speak of holiness in connection with sanctification, we have in mind both an external relation and an inner subjective quality.” See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 528.

Paul sees the Gentile church as a renewed and redeemed Israel because the nation too is called to sexual holiness. He writes,

This last parallel between the sanctification of Israel in Leviticus and the sanctification of the Thessalonian believers in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is especially clear in Paul's admonition about sexual purity in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 . . . . In other words, Paul wants the Thessalonian community to be particularly careful not to commit sexual improprieties because he wants them to be distinct from the Gentiles. Since Paul is writing to people who in the eyes of most-first century Jewish Christians, were Gentiles, this is an extraordinary statement indeed . . . . Any first-century Jew familiar with the Greek translation of Scripture would have understood immediately what Paul was doing. The pictures of Israel in solemn assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai entering into a covenant with God and the receiving instruction from Moses on their election and sanctification while poised at the border of the Promised Land were deeply etched in Jewish religious consciousness. How Paul thought he could legitimately use such language of uncircumcised Gentiles who only a few months earlier had worshiped idols is another question entirely. From Paul's perspective, what had happened to make such a radical move legitimate.<sup>229</sup>

What happened was that Jesus included Gentiles (like the Thessalonians) among the people of God (the redeemed Israel), setting them too apart unto holiness.

Therefore, to engage in fornication, adultery, or homosexuality is to live in a manner contrary to God's revealed will (as revealed in his word), and in direct conflict with God's call to be set apart, or "holy." This is a long-standing aspect of the holiness of God's people as spelled out throughout the course of redemptive history. We think of the account of Phinehas for example, who ran a spear through an Israelite man and a Midianite woman engaging in sexual intercourse in the man's tent in the midst of the Israelite camp (Number 25:1-18). To indulge in sexual immorality is to act in the same manner the disobedient Israelites did at the foot of Mount Sinai. When God calls us to faith in Jesus Christ, he sets us apart as his own people and he takes a dim view of our desire to engage in sexual immorality—especially with unbelievers or pagans.

To be clear, Paul is not teaching that all sexual urges and activity are evil, for the apostle elsewhere tells Christians that we are to fulfill our marital duties to our spouse (1 Corinthians 7:3), adding that it is far better to marry than to "*burn with lust*" (1 Corinthians 7:9). The author of Hebrews says, "*let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous*" (Hebrews 13:4). Sex is both for procreation and our enjoyment within biblical parameters—marriage. Paul has much to say about this. In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, he writes that a Christian's body belongs to God and to our spouse, which is a remarkable assertion in the first century world—a wife "owning" her husband's body would be unthinkable to first century people who saw often saw women as mere chattel. Furthermore, Paul says that our bodies are said to be temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-20), which is perhaps why Paul can describe sexual sin as a sin against "our own body,"

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<sup>229</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 74-75.

since we become one flesh with our sex partner (1 Corinthians 6:16) while indwelt by God's Spirit. This undoubtedly explains why sexual sins often create more guilt and shame than other sins.

Paul's sexual ethics are relatively simple if altogether foreign in the modern age as they were in Thessalonica. Marriage is the only acceptable place to engage in sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is a wonderful fruit of the marriage bond, and is to be enjoyed as frequently and in whatever manner that both partners mutually agree upon. Withholding sex from one partner by the other is considered a sin by Paul (1 Corinthians 7:4). Desertion (*χωρίζω*) may be defined, in part, when one partner abandons the marriage bed and withholds sex from the other.<sup>230</sup> To those who struggle with lust and sexual sins, Paul's advice is equally simple; "it is better to marry than to burn!" There is no biblical support for the Roman Catholic notion that marriage is a sacrament (rather, it is part of creation), or that sexual intercourse is solely for the purpose of procreation.

Paul's exhortation in verses 4-5, is that each of us should learn to control our own bodies, unlike the pagans, who simply indulge every sexual urge without regard to God's revealed will or the consequences. Here, he exhorts the Thessalonians, "*each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; This is, after all, God's will for those who have been called to faith in Christ, and set apart from the world.*" There is much debate about how to translate *skeuos* (*σκεῦος*), which the ESV renders "body."<sup>231</sup> Wanamaker sees this as a euphemism for the male genitalia,<sup>232</sup> as do Bruce and Morris, while Green sees this as a reference to one's wife—the word is often used of a "vessel" and elsewhere Peter speaks of a wife as the "weaker vessel" (cf. 1 Peter 3:7). But Green's summation is no doubt correct. "Whatever the interpretation of the word, we can assume that the Thessalonians knew what Paul was talking about."<sup>233</sup> Control your sexual urges!

In verse 6a, Paul adds that sexual sins defraud others when he writes, "*that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.*" Christians are not to overstep the boundaries given us by God and that to do so risks incurring God's anger. Again, Paul assumes that his readers know what he is talking about, but the general idea is captured by Wanamaker. "If a Christian used his familiarity and friendship to gain sexual favors from a member of a Christian brother's family or extended household, then he had overstepped the mark by taking advantage of or defrauding τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ("his brother") in Christ."<sup>234</sup> In a similar vein, the church father Chrysostom noted that,

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<sup>230</sup> This is addressed by G. F. Hawthorne, "*Marriage and Divorce, Adultery and Incest,*" in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 594-601.

<sup>231</sup> See the discussion in Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 32B, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 226-227.

<sup>232</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 152.

<sup>233</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 193.

<sup>234</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 155.

To each man God has assigned a wife. He has set boundaries on nature and limits sexual intercourse to one person only. Therefore, intercourse with another is transgression, and taking more than belongs to one, and robbery. Or rather it is more cruel than any robbery; for we grieve less when robbed of our riches than when our marriage is invaded . . . . Paul does not mean by the use of the word “brother” that we are free to sleep with the wife of an unbeliever. Paul shows that God will avenge and punish such an act, not to avenge the unbeliever but to avenge himself. Why? You have insulted God. He himself called you, and you in turn have insulted him. Whether you sleep with the empress or your married handmaid, it makes no difference. The crime is the same. Why? Because he does not avenge the injured persons but himself. (*Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 5*)<sup>235</sup>

In the case of adultery, sex with someone other than our spouse, this defrauds our spouse, and subjects them not only to shame of violating the most intimate of human relationships, but also in our time and culture, subjects them to possible biological havoc as well. In the case of premarital promiscuity, we defraud our future partner of our own virginity (and perhaps theirs), and there is always the possibility of children born out of wedlock, which often defrauds them of a normal and healthy family unit.

When asked whether sex outside of marriage is a sin, 53% of those evangelicals polled for the 2022 Ligonier State of Theology” poll, said “yes.” When asked whether biblical teaching about homosexuality still applies today, 46% said “no.”<sup>236</sup> The fact that Christians are split evenly about these matters demonstrates the church’s failure to properly instruct its members (especially its youth) about the Christian sexual ethic. Far too often sexual ethics are taught as negative prohibitions (“thou shall not”) without any theological context—the doctrine of creation, the imago Dei, and the proper relationship between the law and the gospel, and the necessity of sexual holiness.

Christian sexual ethics are properly grounded in the fact that the family is the basic building block of human society. We are also divine image-bearers who are created male and female, each with different roles within the family. Thus there is an important context in which Christians are free and even encouraged to engage in sexuality activity—marriage. To teach sexual ethics as pure prohibition without this biblical context is not a only a strategic failure (the polls just mentioned prove that this has not given us a sufficient defense against current libertine sexual enticements—i.e., film, pornography, social media), but ignores the connection between a biblical sexual ethic and our doctrine of sanctification.

Paul adds that God takes such matters so seriously that, “*the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you*” (v. 6b). The idea here is that God is an avenger who will punish all violators of his law (including those who engage in sexual immorality), both temporally and eschatologically. The vengeance mentioned is likely that

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<sup>235</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 115-116.

<sup>236</sup> <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

resulting from a negative legal verdict with God as judge.<sup>237</sup> God is just and that all violations of his moral law (including sexual sin) will certainly accrue a number of temporal consequences. Moderns may have embraced a libertine sexual ethic, but God has not. Those who engage in libertine sexual behavior do so without regard to the fact that God takes such sin seriously.

Many in Paul's day depreciated the significance of the body—the body's urges are evil because material, therefore, sex is only intended for procreation. Or, conversely, whatever we do to indulge our sexual urges really does not matter in terms of personal morality. Sex is just another—although very pleasurable—bodily function. Paul, building upon the creation account sets forth a high view of the body, that it is good (indeed the high point of creation), and a temple of the Holy Spirit. Christians are not to defile their bodies by uniting it to another outside of marriage. To do so is sin, it defrauds, and it provokes the anger of the Lord.

Just as in Thessalonica, many in our culture embrace a similar sexual ethic, i.e., a form of naturalistic materialism, in which sexual acts are morally neutral and a matter of indifference, provided the partner is willing. The marital act, on the other hand, is a wonderful gift from God and cannot be viewed by Christians as morally neutral since the two become "one flesh" (1 Corinthians 6:16). The quest for sexual satisfaction cannot be seen as an end in itself. We also see this in the contemporary emphasis upon sexual performance and sexual gratification, rather than intimacy and the nature of the sexual union with our partner. These things stand diametrically opposed to biblical sexuality. We cannot view our spouses merely as sex partners. As Christians, we must learn to control our passions, and the way in which we do this is either choose celibacy, which Paul says is a gift and calling from God (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:7-8), or in the bond of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:8).

God takes these things seriously and will judge those unrepentant of sexual sin. The havoc brought upon a society which embraces a libertine sexual ethic is seen in the rampant increase in sexually transmitted diseases, child abuse, sexual perversion, promiscuity, a high divorce rate, loneliness and alienation, and in the sad fact that many children are now born out of wedlock. This is the sad and ongoing legacy of the West's sexual liberation and the championing of libertine behavior. The consequences just mentioned may be, in part, what Paul is getting at when he speaks of God's wrath coming upon the earth (1 Thessalonians 1:9; 5:9). Whether the cause or the effect, American society and culture are reaping the whirlwind.

In verse 7, Paul re-states the point that he made in verse 3. "*For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness,*" which echoes his comment in verse 7, "*for God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*" In verse 4, Paul spoke of sanctification and honor (v. 4), and now he once again returns to the theme of sanctification and purity. Again, Paul's point is very simple and straight-forward. Because God has called us and set us apart, we are not to live a life

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<sup>237</sup> Bruce explains, "διότι ἔκδικος κύριος περὶ πάντων τούτων," "because the Lord is an avenger in all these matters." The κύριος is Jesus; this is in line with general Pauline usage and is required by the change of subject to ὁ θεός in v 7. The only other NT instance of ἔκδικος uses the word of the civil magistrate (Rom 13:4). In 2 Thess 1:8 it is "the Lord Jesus" who will mete out ἐκδίκησις ("retribution") on the ungodly; in 1 Cor 4:5 it is "the Lord" who at his coming "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." In Eph 5:6 and Col 3:5, 6 "the wrath (ὀργή) of God" falls on those guilty of fornication, impurity, covetousness and associated vices. Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 85.



characterized by impurity, or given the context, sexual immorality. If we are Christians, we cannot live as pagans.

Leon Morris is again helpful in putting this together:

The priority of God's call is a major point in Pauline theology. Everywhere the apostle insists that our salvation is brought about not because we have taken action, but because God has. He goes further. When the natural man learns that he cannot remove the burden of his sins but must rely on Christ's atoning work for it all, he may try to save some shreds of self-respect by claiming at least the credit for turning from sin to God. But that too, is ruled out. People come to God only because of God's effectual call. In this place it is not so much the fact that God called the Thessalonians initially that is in mind as the kind of living to which he has called them. He has called them to be set apart for him, that is, to live in sanctification. The change of preposition from "for" with uncleanness to "in" with sanctification is interesting. The former expresses purpose (cf. its use in Gal. 5:13; Eph. 2:10). When God called the Thessalonians it was not an aimless procedure. He had a very definite purpose, and that purpose was not uncleanness. "In" gives us rather the thought of atmosphere, of the settled condition in which he required them to live out their lives. The atmosphere for the believer is sanctification. This is the very air he breathes.<sup>238</sup>

In verse 8, Paul takes the matter a step further. *"Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you."* Not heeding Paul's instruction about sexual immorality is to sin against the very word and presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. One who rejects these instructions also rejects God. Again, to be clear, Paul is not saying that someone who falls into sexual sin is immediately rejected by God. But he is saying that the one who willingly and contemptuously rejects God's revealed will in this regard will be subject to God's avenging wrath. Not a good place to be.

Yet, we must never forget that God can forgive all sexual sin through faith in Jesus upon confession of sexual sin and repentance. We are now clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness, so that God sees those who were the most promiscuous among us as though we were spotless virgins.

### C. On Brotherly Love (4:9-12)

**9** Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, **10** for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, **11** and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, **12** so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

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<sup>238</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 125.

Paul moves on from discussing sexual purity in relationship to sanctification to treating matters of brotherly love and a Christian work ethic. In the broader context of the letter, these matters are also connected by Paul to the idea of our “walk” as Christians. In manifesting this sort of behavior Paul is calling for is part of what it means to live a life, which according to Paul, is pleasing to God. Those whom God has called to faith and set apart as his own will demonstrate a specific corresponding character in various concrete ways. Here too, his words directly challenge affluent, narcissistic Americans who seek to live as Francis Schaeffer once described as the impoverished values of personal peace and affluence.<sup>239</sup>

On two prior occasions, Paul has already commented upon the degree to which the Thessalonian Christians demonstrated their genuine love for one another (1:3; 3:6). They have been transformed by God’s *agape* love, and now demonstrate *philadelphia*, the love that one has for their brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>240</sup> When Paul broaches the subject here, he remarks “*now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.*” The phrase “taught by God,” is interesting. According to Morris,

[Paul] uses a very uncommon word [θεοδιδακτος], one that occurs here only in the New Testament (though a very similar expression is found in John 6:45). We also read of being taught of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). This is relevant to our present passage because Paul has just been speaking of the Holy Spirit given “into” the Thessalonians. So his thought is that God within them shows them, the right way.<sup>241</sup>

Through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of each and every Christian, we are “taught by God” from his word through the teaching office of Christ’s church. This is why the Thessalonians have already developed a bond between them, which becomes part of their “walk” as Christians. All Christians are called to love one another since together we are being redeemed by Christ. Apparently, Timothy’s report to Paul indicates that this is the case in Thessalonica and Paul is quite pleased about this.

Such brotherly love was not limited to Christians within the Thessalonian congregation, but it extended to Christians throughout all of Macedonia. Calvin is certainly right when he points out that this is “an argument from the greater to the less; for as their love diffuses itself through the whole of Macedonia, he infers that it is not to be doubted that they *love one another.*”<sup>242</sup> Since this is the case, and the result was that this served as a major factor in attracting non-Christians to the church and in the Thessalonians standing firm in difficult times, Paul exhorts them “*to do this more and more*” (v. 10). “Keep it up!”

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<sup>239</sup> Francis Schaeffer, How Should We Then Live? in The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1882), V.211.

<sup>240</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 128.

<sup>241</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 128-129.

<sup>242</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 46.

Three times in a very short space, Paul speaks of the love of the Thessalonians as “abounding.” This was no doubt a major factor in the rapid spread of the gospel and in the church withstanding the pressure placed upon it from the non-Christians in the city. Christian love for brothers and sisters was especially important in a congregation facing outside persecution, when many of those in this church had likely been cut off from their families and ostracized from much of the community.

Paul also makes a brief mention of a “Christian work ethic” as an important part of the Christian life and which too is an aspect of our sanctification. He exhorts the Thessalonians to “to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” You will look in vain to find “laziness,” “couch-surfing,” and “free-loading” among the various lists of Christian virtues. You will not find “be a burden on others” listed among the various fruit of the Spirit. Indeed, we ask how can Christians help the genuinely needy among us if the resources of a church are consumed by people who should be contributing and carrying their own weight, but who refuse to do so?

The need to remind the Thessalonians about this matter was probably necessary, in part, due to end-times speculation and confusion about the second advent of our Lord. Apparently, there were a number in the church who were so-preoccupied with speculation about the coming of our Lord. It is possible that they had ceased working, and perhaps, began taking advantage of the brotherly love previously described. In these early congregations from the apostolic age when life was of necessity more communal than today, there were probably some parasitically living off the hard work and charity of others. Paul makes the connection between the work of our hands (i.e., the fulfilling of our calling and vocation) and the kind of life that pleases God, who has called us to holiness. It is a connection that we too must make. We are apt to miss the connection Paul draws between working hard and contributing to the well-being of others and our sanctification. But we ought be careful not to miss this.

When Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “*work with your hands*” he is probably challenging those with high social standing not to see themselves as “above” sweat equity. The affluent and socially prominent Greeks despised manual labor, which they understood as something which was reserved for slaves and from which freemen were usually exempt. Paul is reminding them that Adam was created to tend the garden and this to fulfill his calling, so too, we are created to work with our hands and fulfill our callings. It is, after all, better to be able to give, than to demand that we receive.

In his assertion in verse 11, “*aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs,*” Paul is engaging a kind of wordplay, with the meaning something like “make it your ambition to be unambitious!”<sup>243</sup> A good paraphrase might be “mind your own business.” The idea here, is that we are to “aspire” to live a quiet life, which is a phrase used elsewhere in the New Testament for the silence that follows after speech, or silence that follows the cessation of an argument.<sup>244</sup> In other words, we are to live our lives in such a way that our quiet character—the

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<sup>243</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 131.

<sup>244</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 128-129.

going about our daily business and working with our hands without calling undue attention to ourselves—is directly related to fulfilling our various callings.

By serving quietly in our vocation and minding our own business, we win the respect of those outside the church. Given the disdain those around us feel about the church and its all-too-often public hypocrisy, it is vital to think about such things and consider the church's witness as important. The church's reputation is far more important than we often think. Is the church a haven for sinners? Or is it a place of self-righteous judgment, gossip, and criticism? Does a congregation care for its members in accordance with the word of God? People outside our churches notice when we fail to do such things even if they do not always notice when we get it right. But it is important to do what is right nonetheless.

In an age of social media where we live our lives rather publically (and in ways impossible in Paul's day), and since the narcissism of modern America has become a plague upon the land, this is a message we all need to hear. Paul's doctrine of sanctification, which challenges us to live quietly—going about our business without minding the business of those around us—can be a difficult undertaking. Of course, there are reasons to speak up and call attention to our work, our families, share things of general interest with others, and make public certain elements of our lives and vocation. What Paul is condemning here is the behavior of someone who read and re-read their own social media posts far more often than those they hope will read them. Paul is speaking to the narcissistic tendency within us to promote ourselves unnecessarily out of ambition or self-importance. I doubt that Paul would have much patience with those who create fictional lives and identities through the social media, but who have few relationships in the real world with people with whom they see and can speak with in person.

By quietly doing our jobs and going about our business, we not only win the respect of non-Christians, but we will not be dependent upon others. By doing so, those outside the church will have our respect, and we will be able to produce more than we need so that we will be able to share with others out of our excess.

#### **E. On the faithful departed (4:13-18)**

**13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 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, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.**

Paul now takes up the question which prompted him to write his letter to the Thessalonians, "what about those who have died before Jesus returns to earth?" "Do they miss out on the blessings of the resurrection?" Apparently, Timothy brought news to Paul about confusion in

the church regarding this matter, which prompted the further instruction spelled out in his first Thessalonian letter in two parts. The first part is the question of what happens to those who die before Jesus returns. Paul addresses this particular question in chapter 4:13-18. His answer is simple and direct. Those who die in Christ before his return do not miss out on the resurrection—they are raised from the dead when Jesus returns. A second and related matter addressed in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 is the “when?” question, which has fascinated Christians for two thousand years. “When will Jesus return?”

No doubt, these questions arose because of the short time Paul spent with the Thessalonians—a mere three Sabbaths. He could not teach on this matter in detail, nor answer their questions face to face. The Thessalonians accepted Paul’s teaching regarding our Lord’s bodily return at the end of the age to raise the dead, judge the world, and usher in the new creation, but there were still a number of questions raised in their minds about the Lord’s return. Paul writes this letter, primarily, to clear up any misunderstanding.

One of the most pressing matters of concern is the fact that the Thessalonians believed that our Lord’s return was imminent, that is, it could occur at any moment—quite likely within their own lifetimes. The latter is a misunderstanding of something Paul previously taught them about the certainty of the Lord’s return. This, in turn, raised questions because it appears that some of their own number had died, or would die before Christ returned. What is the fate of these loved ones? The situation is well summarized by Morris:

We get the impression that the Thessalonians had understood Paul to mean that the Parousia would take place within their lifetime. They had become perplexed when some (or even one) of their number died. Did this mean that they had lost their share in the events associated with that great day? What a calamity to be robbed of taking part in the ultimate triumph by failing to live out the few years intervening, and this after having passed out of darkness of heathendom into the light of the gospel!<sup>245</sup>

Paul’s response to this confusion is framed in light of his understanding of Jesus’s death, resurrection, ascension—especially our Lord’s promise to return to raise the dead, judge the world, and usher in the new heavens and earth.

It is critical that we understand the original context and the specific occasion for Paul’s discussion of the return of Christ in order to properly understand his teaching regarding Christ’s second advent. To best do this, we begin with a survey of the broader teaching of the Old and New Testament regarding the return of Christ, then work our way through verses 13-18 of chapter four in some detail, before offering a brief response to the very popular but erroneous view of the “pre-tribulational rapture” as taught by dispensational premillennarians. That done, we will take up 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and consider Paul’s discussion of the circumstances surrounding Christ’s return.

We begin with the broader biblical background to Christ’s return. The Old Testament prophets could not yet understand what Jesus’s messianic mission would accomplish (through his

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<sup>245</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 135.

sinless life, death for sin, resurrection from the dead, and his ascension). These are *the* central events in biblical history. But the most significant event yet future in all of human history is the bodily return of Jesus to earth—his second advent. All of the New Testament writers expected our Lord to return to earth in the same manner he had ascended. Indeed, Jesus final words to his disciples are recorded in Acts 1:6-11.

*So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

The New Testament writers also teach that the Lord's return marks the end of the age, and is the final consummation (or what we commonly speak of as "judgment day"). When Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new, the temporal gives way to the eternal. All effects of human sin (the curse) will be removed, and all of God's promises are fulfilled and the eternal state begins. No unfinished business remains. This is the blessed hope, the day of Christ's return, the day that all Christians hope to see so that they never need taste the sting of death. And so we confess, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!"

The Bible connects three concomitant future events directly to the return of Jesus Christ. The first is the so-called "general resurrection" on the last day. While the main focus in Scripture is upon the resurrection of the righteous, the resurrection of the unrighteous unto judgment is specifically mentioned in the Old Testament in Daniel 12:1-4, where we are told that the resurrection occurs after a time of unprecedented tribulation. Daniel foresees that . . .

*At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.*

The resurrection of the unrighteous (those not justified) is taught in several additional texts.<sup>246</sup> Jesus teaches this in John 5:28-29, "do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." Paul speaks of it in Acts 24:15, "having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the

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<sup>246</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 723.

*unjust.*" The resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous is also taught in Revelation 20:13–15.

*And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

In two places in Isaiah's prophecy, the prophet speaks of a coming resurrection of the righteous after a long period of anguish. Isaiah foresees a time when the coming deliverer "will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 25:8). Likewise in 26:19, Isaiah speaks of a time when, "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead." Apart from knowledge of Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, Isaiah's understanding of the intermediate events associated with Jesus's messianic mission which explain how this will come to pass is obviously limited, but he does foretell the certainty of the resurrection of believers at the end of the age—the climax of the future restoration of Israel.

In the Book of Job, the suffering prophet too speaks of the coming resurrection.

*Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19:23–27).*

Job anticipates that one day he will see God with his own eyes, which points to the resurrection of the body on the last day.

Paul, who was trained as a Pharisee—the Jewish sect which defended the bodily resurrection of the righteous at the end of the age—was intimately familiar with these texts and the expectation of Israel's prophets. At the end of time, all the dead will be raised and face the day of judgment. But as revealed to him by the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, Paul's main emphasis is that our Lord's return will be the occasion of the bodily resurrection when the righteous are delivered from God's wrath.<sup>247</sup>

In this letter, Paul places the resurrection of believers at the "last trumpet," when Jesus returns (I Thessalonians 4:16-18). He does the same in I Corinthians 15:50-55, where his discussion of the resurrection makes appeal to Isaiah 25:8, when Isaiah speaks of death as swallowed up in victory. Here, Paul alludes to the inclusion of Gentiles in the resurrection of the redeemed at the end of the age when the nations make their pilgrimage to Zion to worship YHWH as

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<sup>247</sup> Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 224-225; Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 167-203.

foretold in Isaiah 2:2-4; 25:6-8; 56:6-8; Micah 4:1-4; and Zechariah 8:2-23.<sup>248</sup>

Paul also describes the day of Christ's return as the "day of the Lord," as indicated in a number of texts. In I Corinthians 5:5, Paul speaks of the man to be excommunicated and delivered over to Satan, in the hope that he will be "*saved in the day of the Lord.*" In 1 Thessalonians 5:2, he alerts the Thessalonians to the fact that "*the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*" He makes a similar point in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, when he tells the Thessalonians "*not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.*" As he will go on to tell them in his second letter, that day will not come until the Man of Sin is revealed unto destruction at the Lord's return. If Paul does not say so directly,<sup>249</sup> the apostle John does, placing the resurrection of believers and unbelievers on the "last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24).

The return of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the believing dead is proclaimed as a source of comfort since it is that day when all those "in Christ" are delivered from the wrath that is to come (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:19-10). In Titus 2:13, Paul speaks of "*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*" This is a point Paul unpacks in verses 13-18.

A second event tied to our Lord's return is the final judgment and the revelation of his wrath.<sup>250</sup> The broader teaching of the New Testament reveals that such judgment is the work of the triune God, but Jesus is spoken of as the future judge who returns at the "end of the age" (Matthew 13:40) to separate the sheep (believers) from the goats (unbelievers) as recounted in Matthew 25:31-32). Jesus' kingly office comes into view when he saves his people, vindicates them before the watching world, and then ensures the complete and final end of the curse (death).<sup>251</sup> God sends his angels to pull the weeds out from among the tares and throw them into the fire (Matthew 13:36-43), an event which is confirmed in our Lord's Olivet discourse, where in Matthew 24:31 we read, "*and [Jesus] will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*" It is the time of final judgment described in Revelation 20:11-15. It is the end of unbelief and rebellion, it is the last day—the day of judgment, when in John 12:48, Jesus says, "*the one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.*" This will be the most frightening and horrible day known to humanity.

As noted previously, Paul speaks of the coming wrath of God at the return of Jesus Christ as a dreadful time of judgment which is no longer delayed by God's now exhausted patience. In Romans 2:4-5, Paul reminds his readers of God's patience, "*or do you presume on the riches of his*

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<sup>248</sup> Thielman, *Paul and the Law*, 107, 277n38.

<sup>249</sup> Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 213-225.

<sup>250</sup> Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 133-166.

<sup>251</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 731-32.



*kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."* The day of final judgment has been delayed because God is both exceedingly kind and patient in what is identified as his common grace toward all his creatures.<sup>252</sup> The Lord will bring each and every one of his elect to faith before Christ returns.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 Paul speaks of the "wrath to come," and as we will see in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, he writes of God's wrath coming upon those who afflict God's people,

*. . . and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Final judgment and God's wrath may be delayed, but nevertheless it is sure to come.

Third, the second coming of Jesus is also tied to the restoration of all things. In Acts 3:21, shortly after Pentecost, Peter tells the people gathered in Solomon's Portico,

*Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.*

The author of Hebrews contrasts things to be shaken—the present creation—with things which cannot be (i.e., heavenly things). In Hebrews 12:27, the author proclaims that "*this phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.*"

But the clearest declaration of the coming restoration of all things falls to Peter, who in 2 Peter 3:1-13, writes the following,

*This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do*

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<sup>252</sup> Common grace is discussed in, Horton, The Christian Faith, 364-368.

*not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

Although he emphasizes the personal aspects of the new creation—being raised with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10)—Paul also has something to say about the new creation in terms of cosmic renewal. In Ephesians 1:10, he speaks of Jesus, who, in the fullness of time will “unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Similarly in Colossians 1:16, Paul says of Jesus, “for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.” This reflects Paul’s teaching that the renewal of all creation is centered upon and achieved by Jesus.<sup>253</sup>

One more brief point needs to be made. Although Paul will take this up in the next chapter (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11), Christ’s return is described as a sudden (unexpected) and imminent return (it can occur at any moment)—yet, paradoxically, it is preceded by specific signs, many of which are spelled out in the Olivet Discourse (cf. Matthew 24:3–25:46; Mark 13:3–37; Luke 21:5–36). This is a source of tension found throughout the New Testament, between the “suddenness” of Christ’s return, and the fact that his return is preceded by various and distinctive signs. For the church, the “signs of the end” along with the tribulation the church will face throughout the age, are the guarantee that Christ is coming to end this age. Christians are exhorted to be watchful.

But to non-Christian, these same signs are seen as reasons that Christ is not going to come at all (II Peter 3:1-13), further increasing their guilt. It is important for Paul that believers not be ignorant about this matter so as to know not to be discouraged by mockery from unbelievers. Paul will address this momentarily.

Therefore, when considered in light of the broader teaching of the New Testament, the consummation of all things occurs on the “day of the Lord” (or the last day) when Jesus Christ returns. Concomitant events associated with Jesus’s return include:

- 1). The general resurrection of all the dead and the deliverance of God’s people from death and the curse
- 2). Jesus will judge the nations and all people—assigning to each their eternal destiny

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<sup>253</sup> Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory*, 329.

- 3). Our Lord's return brings about the new creation (a new heaven and earth)
- 4). Both the kingdom of God and the age to come are realized in their fullness (the consummation)
- 5). Nothing remains to be fulfilled. God's people enter into everlasting life (eternity), while those who are not Christ's experience everlasting punishment in the form of the wrath of God

This leaves no room whatsoever for any sort of partially renewed earth (a millennial age) before or after Christ returns.

It is against this broad background of the New Testament's teaching regarding the second advent of our Lord that we take up verses 13-18 of 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul is addressing the question brought to him by Timothy regarding the fate of those who die before Christ returns. Since Paul had been gone from them for a short period of time, many have wondered about how it is that this question would arise, since it is not likely that many people in the congregation would have died during the brief time span between Paul's departure and Timothy's return trip. Perhaps some were martyred due to persecution, but this is improbable. Although many proposals have been put forth as an explanation, Green wisely cautions us,

The reconstruction of greatest merit argues that at the moment of confronting the reality of death, the Thessalonians did not allow their confession to inform their reaction to this human tragedy. Alternately, they may simply have not understood fully the reality of the resurrection from the dead, especially in light of the general Gentile consensus that such things simply do not happen.<sup>254</sup>

In verse 13, Paul tells the Thessalonians, "*we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers.*" In the prior portions of this chapter, Paul speaks of the Thessalonians as knowing certain details (i.e., 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2; 6, 9) but here he speaks of the need to inform them (of what follows) so it is likely that this matter was not fully dealt with when he had been among them previously.<sup>255</sup> What follows is important. Specifically, Paul does not want the Thessalonians to be ignorant about "*those who are asleep,*" i.e., those who have died before the Lord's return. As former Greco-Roman pagans and new converts to Christianity, the very idea of the resurrection of the dead was difficult. It was common in the first century to believe in the immortality of the soul—often seen as an underworld journey, such as crossing the river Styx—but the idea of the dead coming back to life in redeemed and resurrected bodies was completely foreign.<sup>256</sup>

It was common for the ancients to speak of death as "sleep," especially the Greeks (i.e., Homer, Sophocles). The Old Testament also speaks of people who have fallen asleep with the fathers

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<sup>254</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 215.

<sup>255</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 216-217. It is an expression used by Paul in several other places, i.e., Romans 1:13; 11:25; 1 Corinthians 10:1; 12:1, 2 Corinthians 1:8 to explain why he is covering the ground that he does.

<sup>256</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 126-127.

(Genesis 47:30; Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; Job 14:12 ff.; Psalm 13:3; Jeremiah 51:39 ff.).<sup>257</sup> Christians could use the metaphor of sleep because of belief in the resurrection at the end of the age, while pagans viewed this sort of sleep as having no end—i.e., no redemption of the body.<sup>258</sup>

Unlike the Greco-Roman pagans of Paul's day, Christians need not "*grieve like people who have no hope.*" There is an intermediate state, described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:8—"*we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" Those who die in Christ immediately enter into the Lord's presence at death. Yet, this intermediate state is temporary. Christ's bodily resurrection guarantees the bodily resurrection of his people—the first fruits of a great harvest at the end of the age (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20). In Ephesians 2:12, Paul reminds Christians to "*remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*" All eschatological (future) hope is grounded in Christ's resurrection—his victory over death and the grave. For Paul, to deny the resurrection of the believer is to deny the resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:12-18).

Paul is not saying that Christians should not grieve when their loved ones die—anyone who has ever buried a loved one knows such grief is real and heartbreaking. But Paul is confident that Christians grieve with hope. Calvin puts it this way, "the grief of the pious is to be mixed with consolation, which will train them in patience. The hope of a blessed resurrection will bring this about."<sup>259</sup> Because of this sure and certain hope of the resurrection, like Paul, the Christian grieves with hope that the dead will be raised. In fact, along with Paul, a Christian can even mock death despite its seeming finality. "*Death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Christian hope shows itself most vividly in death, which is entrance into the presence of the Lord, until the day of resurrection. The apostle tells the Philippians, "*for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21). It is here where the gulf between Christianity and paganism is the greatest and most obvious. Grounded in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the hope of the resurrection of the body is the fundamental confession of the Christian faith. Paul preached the resurrection to the Greeks in Athens, "*explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ'*" (Acts 17:3). According to 1 Corinthians 15:3-9, Paul taught them . . .

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

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<sup>257</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 167.

<sup>258</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 96.

<sup>259</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 48.

In verse 14 of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul directs his hearers/readers back to the facts of what Christ has accomplished in history. He puts this in the form of a conditional sentence grounded in the assumption that the outcome will be true.<sup>260</sup> *“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”*<sup>261</sup> The probability of a positive outcome is so great that it cannot be doubted (as beyond a “moral certainty”). “We believe” is a creedal formula. Paul confesses that Jesus died for our sins and that he was raised bodily from the dead. When our Lord returns, Paul says, God will bring with him all those who have died in Christ, who have been in his presence awaiting the resurrection of their bodies (cf. Revelation 6:10).

This is Paul’s initial answer to the Thessalonian’s question about the fate of those who die before Christ returns. At death, believers immediately enter God’s presence and are never separated from him. When Jesus returns, those with him in heaven will return with him, they will be raised immortal and receive their heavenly inheritance. Paul offers no explanation of how this will occur, only that it will.<sup>262</sup>

It is worth noting that Paul does not speak of Jesus as “sleeping,” as he does of Christians who have died in Christ. Paul speaks of Jesus as “dying and rising again from the dead.” Fee points out that “Paul is *not* stating that he expects to be alive at the Parousia. Rather, he was simply currently among ‘the living’ who are set out in contrast to ‘the sleeping.’<sup>263</sup> Christ truly died, his soul was with the Lord, and his body lay buried in the tomb. This was not because Jesus sinned, but because he bore the guilt of our sins imputed to him (Romans 5:8, 12, 18-19). Jesus bore the Father’s wrath so that we will be delivered from it. Then God raised Jesus from the dead in triumph—the absolute defeat of Satan (as promised in Genesis 3:15 which was understood by Paul to have been fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He tells the Colossians,

*And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath (Colossians 2:13-16).*

Our Lord’s resurrection is also the proof that his sacrifice had been sufficient to undo the penalty for sin, which is death. Christ’s death and resurrection are the central events in redemptive history. Because Jesus *has risen* and then ascended to the Father’s right hand, so too, we *will rise* at his return to earth. Christ’s resurrection is the basis for our future hope. When our Lord returns to earth, so too, will those “who sleep in him,” and on that day, we

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<sup>260</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 219-220.

<sup>261</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 138, n. 63.

<sup>262</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 170.

<sup>263</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 175.

shall be raised imperishable.

In verse 15, Paul addresses the question raised by the Thessalonian church with more specificity. *We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.* The phrase Paul uses to open the sentence, “*for this we declare to you by a word from the Lord,*” probably indicates that what follows refers to our Lord’s own words given to Paul (as part of Paul’s fixed body of doctrine–coherence), perhaps memorized and passed down to his disciples and followers, but which appear nowhere else in the New Testament. There were obviously many things that Jesus said that were memorized and later taught by his disciples, and which do not appear in the New Testament. They do however, lose all normative authority subsequently to the production of the books of the New Testament canon (contra Rome). Jesus’ words which are inscripturated are in fact the words of God.

In a similar vein, John tells us that “*now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*” (John 21:25). The same applies to our Lord’s deeds as well as his words. There are other instances in the New Testament, as for example in Acts 20:35, where Luke records our Lord’s words, “*in all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*” There is every possibility that this is one instance where one of our Lord’s sayings is repeated in a New Testament epistle, but is not found in one of the four gospels.<sup>264</sup>

But Paul may also be referring to the gospel as a public message revealed by Jesus to Paul and the apostles, which was preached throughout the apostolic church.<sup>265</sup> Much of what Paul says here contains loud echoes from the Olivet Discourse, especially Matthew 24:29-31 and 40-41,<sup>266</sup> which tends to support the idea that these were memorized words from Jesus and applied to the specific circumstances in Thessalonica.

Paul’s point in verse 15b, is that “*we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.*” There is no diminished blessing for those who die before our Lord’s return. They don’t miss out on anything. There is no need to worry about them. Since they entered the Lord’s presence when they died (the first resurrection, cf. John 5:24– “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life*”), they will return with Jesus when he does.

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<sup>264</sup> According to Weima, “in these verses the apostle may well be making use of material that had taken shape before his use of it here, and this in turn suggests that he may or may not have been conscious of any allusions to the OT in this quoted material.” See Weima, “*1-2 Thessalonians*,” 880.

<sup>265</sup> Ernst Best speculates that these words might be spoken by prophets who would have identified their words (of prophecy) with the Lord’s own word. This seems unlikely because of the reasons explained above—the many echoes from the Olivet Discourse in Paul’s words here. Best, *The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 191-192.

<sup>266</sup> See the chart comparing Paul’s comments here with the language of the Olivet Discourse in, Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, 137; Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 221-222; and Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 135-136.

Paul describes Jesus's return as his *parousia* (παρουσία), a term with a very rich cultural background, and which we briefly touched upon when we considered Thessalonians 2:19. According to Green, *parousia* is,

. . . a term that commonly meant the glorious "coming" of a deity or the official visit of a sovereign to a city, who himself was often honored as divine. An imperial visit was an event of great pomp and magnificent celebrations, with rich banquets, speeches that praised the imperial visitor, a visit to the local temple, rich donations, celebration of games, sacrifices, statues dedicated, and arches and other buildings constructed. Money was minted to commemorate the event, crowns of gold might be given, and at times a new era was inaugurated. As we will see in the exposition of v. 17, the officials and a multitude of people would head out of the city to receive the one who came, all dressed with special clothing.<sup>267</sup>

The nature of the coming of the Lord requires careful reflection. The mechanics of "how Jesus will return" are beyond our full comprehension. Beale addresses the difficulties this presents noting that "what has been traditionally understood as the second coming of Christ is best conceived as a revelation of his formerly hidden, heavenly 'presence.' The old-world reality will be ripped away, and the dimension of the new, eternal reality will appear along with Christ's 'presence.'"<sup>268</sup>

This understanding of the *parousia* fits well with Paul's two-age eschatology and the promise of a final consummation such as that disclosed in 1 Corinthians 15, when Paul contrasts earthly bodies which perish (because they are mortal) and heavenly bodies fit for eternity (which are said to be imperishable). When the last trumpet sounds, the transformation from mortal to immortal occurs, as Paul says, in a moment, which he describes as the "twinkling of the eye," (1 Corinthians 15:52). Therefore, we have every reason to expect something quite different than the mere re-animation of our once dead bodies when Jesus returns. We should expect "a transformation of an old-world body into a new creational body that can inhabit the dimension of the new world in Christ's and God's presence."<sup>269</sup> The resurrection should not be confused with apocalyptic dystopias such as the "walking dead," but should be understood as a complete and instantaneous transformation of our personal existence. We once lived in an earthly body of dust (as did Adam), but then we will possess a heavenly body, glorified, which is perfectly suited for heavenly dwelling and immortality (1 Corinthians 15:47-51).

Beale also wrestles with the difficulties we face in getting our arms around the question of how the Lord can return bodily (Jesus ascended into heaven in a gloried human body), and yet return in such a manner that every eye will see him.

When Christ appears, he will not descend from the sky over Boston or London or New

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<sup>267</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 222.

<sup>268</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 137.

<sup>269</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 139.

York City or Hong Kong or any other localized area. When he appears, the present dimension will be ripped away, and Christ will be manifest to all eyes throughout the earth (see Mt 24:27). Just as one can lay flat a map of the whole world and see it all at one glance, so Christ will appear and be able to behold humanity at one glance and they him. How this is possible in literal geographical terms is certainly unclear, but the answer lies in recalling that a new dimension will break into the old physical dimension, and the possibilities of new kinds of perception and of existence beyond present understanding will then be realized. Interestingly, Revelation 21:3, 22 say that directly following Christ's final coming, God and the Lamb will form a "tabernacling" presence over all redeemed believers.<sup>270</sup>

Perhaps one helpful way to think of this is that when Jesus returns, the boundary between the visible world and the invisible world is no more. Meredith Kline proposes . . .

in biblical revelation, we may catch a glimpse of something of the nature of heaven and how heaven relates to our visible world . . . . In theological reflections heaven is sometimes considered to be a place outside the cosmos, out beyond our universe. Or if it is regarded as within our space-time-matter-energy continuum, it is thought of as a separate part of the cosmos, at some distance from the environs of planet earth. There are biblical indications, however, that suggest otherwise.<sup>271</sup>

Kline goes on to point out . . .

For instance, in Isaiah 6 the heaven-temple (vv. 1-4) is identified with the whole earth (v. 3). And there are those episodes reported in Scripture when the eyes of earthlings have been supernaturally opened to perceive heavenly phenomena and they discover that the very spot where they are is the gate of heaven (Gen. 28:16-17) or that [the space] is filled with heavenly beings (2 Kgs 6:17). Heaven, it would seem, is not remote from us but present right here, even though unseen. Also, there does not appear to be anything in Scripture that would contradict the assumption that the invisible heaven is co-extensive with the visible cosmos in its entirety.<sup>272</sup>

Kline concludes that because the mechanics of this are currently beyond our comprehension, and "because of our inability to apprehend the heavenly reality itself, it was necessary that these prophetic disclosures be cast in such symbolic forms."<sup>273</sup> In light of this, he proposes that because of the glory present throughout John's vision of the heavenly temple in the Book of Revelation, we speak of the invisible dimension revealed to us at the Lord's return as the "Spirit-dimension" (the Glory present is that of the Holy Spirit) not merely the "invisible"

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<sup>270</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 224-225.

<sup>271</sup> Meredith G. Kline, God, Heaven and Har Magedon, (Eugene Or: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>272</sup> Kline, God, Heaven and Har Magedon, 4.

<sup>273</sup> Kline, God, Heaven and Har Magedon, 5.



becoming visible.<sup>274</sup>

If true, when Jesus returns and the boundary between things seen and unseen is removed, we are instantaneously given our imperishable resurrected bodies suited for this new transformed reality, unbelievers are removed unto judgment in a full catharsis of evil and defilement from the world, human culture is transformed into heaven reality, and the entire cosmos is renewed and purified of all hints and traces of human sin and the curse.

While beyond our understanding, the scenario proposed by Beale and Kline avoids the problems of Jesus's return entailing transporting himself from heaven (a distant place) to earth-like Superman flying across the sky. Likewise, unbelievers are taken to a place within our cosmos to face final and eternal judgment. This is much more plausible (and fits well with our Christology—that Christ's glorified human nature still has locality).<sup>275</sup> All of this takes place within created reality (not in a place far removed from us—"planet heaven"), which is now brought to its final consummation and fully reflects God's glory. To put it simply, Christ's *parousia* entails a complete reorienting of the natural order—a new heaven and earth if you will.

Paul expands upon this in verse 16 when he writes, "*for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*" The Lord's second advent presupposes his prior resurrection and ascension to the Father's "right hand," or what we commonly speak of as "heaven." For Paul, heaven is created space where angels dwell (Galatians 1:8), it is said to be the dwelling place of Christ, from which he came down in his incarnation (Romans 10:6 Ephesians 4:9). It is the place to which Jesus returned (Ephesians 4:10), and where he is said to be now (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 1:4, Romans 8:34). It is also the place from where he returns (Philippians 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:16, and 2 Thessalonians 1:7). Heaven is also said to be the dwelling place of believers (2 Corinthians 5:1, 2; Philippians 3:20; Galatians 4:20), and where salvation is "being kept (Colossians 1:5).<sup>276</sup> Heaven is not God's home (where he lives), rather it is that space created by God where he is said to "dwell" (in the sense of meeting) with his creatures. Heaven is a present reality, if unseen to us who were created to live and serve in a visible world, unlike the angels who dwell in the same space, though unseen to us.

There is another loud Old Testament echo in Paul's words because, according to Weima . . .

The main clause of 4:16, "because the Lord himself will come down from heaven," recalls in a very general way the prophetic literature of the OT that envisions "the day of

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<sup>274</sup> Kline, God, Heaven and Har Magedon, 8-9.

<sup>275</sup> Peter Martyr Vermigli writes, "we recognize that apostolic teaching also announces this true humanity of Christ, which is in place, as well as the true divinity, which is always immense. To show that the body of Christ, truly a man, is contained in a place, the Apostle Paul asks the Thessalonians: 'How have you turned to God from idols, to serve the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus?' and he indeed shows that he will come bodily from heaven since he knew that he had been raised bodily from the dead." Peter Martyr Vermigli, Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ, trans John Patrick Donnelly (Lincoln NB: The Davenant Press, 2018), 110.

<sup>276</sup> J. F. Maile, "*Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise*," in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 381.

the Lord,” when God will come to judge the wicked and save the righteous (Isa. 2:10–12; 13:6, 9; Ezek. 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:7–8, 14, 18; 2:2–3; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 3:2; 4:5).<sup>277</sup>

All indications are that Paul envisions the return of Jesus Christ as the summing up of all things. No hint here of premillennial expectations after Christ’s return, with people subsequently living on in natural bodies (and then dying) intermixed with people in resurrected bodies (who cannot die again), with Jesus physically ruling from David’s throne in Jerusalem, and yet where human sin is still present which ends in a future revolt against Christ after he’s ruled over the earth for a thousand years. No. Christ’s return is the end of human history and the dawn of eternity. Our Lord’s return brings about the complete transformation of human existence.

Paul emphasizes three things in relation to Jesus’s *parousia*. First, Paul affirms that it is our Lord himself who returns bodily. “It will be no angel or other created being to whom will be committed the task of bringing this age to an end.”<sup>278</sup> He will come in a glorified body, the same body in which he ascended into heaven, and which we will possess post-resurrection, complete with the scars from nail wounds on his hands and feet and from the spear thrust into his side. Our hope lies in the fact that the very one who died and rose again and then ascended to the Father’s right hand is the same one who will return to raise the dead and deliver us from the wrath to come. Jesus Christ himself will descend from heaven (visibly) in glorified human flesh.

Second, Paul emphasizes the majesty and glory of our Lord’s return using three military commands as his return is a victorious triumph.<sup>279</sup> Paul speaks of “*a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.*” Green points out the obvious. “Far from being a secret event, the coming of the Lord will occur amid a great amount of noise as God gives his order that the dead be raised.”<sup>280</sup> It is not clear whether these are three distinct announcements, or three ways of speaking of the same thing. But no one will sleep through the Lord’s return! All of these are loud and so probably connected to the resurrection of those who are said to sleep.<sup>281</sup> As my *White Horse Inn* compatriot, Ken Jones, once put it, this is not a cosmic dog-whistle which only the elect can hear when the rapture occurs.

One of the terms that Paul uses, “a cry of command” has an interesting background. The word was used by a ship’s master giving orders to its rowers, or as a command “by a military officer to his soldiers, or even by a hunter to his hounds, or by a charioteer to his horses. When used to military or naval personnel, it was a battle cry. In most places it denotes a loud, authoritative

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<sup>277</sup> Weima, “*1-2 Thessalonians*,” 880.

<sup>278</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 142.

<sup>279</sup> Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 373.

<sup>280</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 224.

<sup>281</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 173.

cry, often one uttered in a thick of great excitement."<sup>282</sup> This may be an echo from Jesus, who, in John 5:25, declared "*truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*"

Next Paul speaks of the voice of an archangel—who may be the one issuing the loud command. We cannot be sure whether this is a single angelic creature, as Paul does not name him, or if the reference is to multiple angels. The only other place where the term "archangel" appears is in Jude 9. Jewish tradition claimed that seven archangels stand in the presence of God.<sup>283</sup>

As for the trumpet call, there is significant cultural importance. Green points out that,

The trumpet was not primarily a musical instrument during this era but found its place rather in military exercises, cultic events, and funeral processions. In the Roman army nothing happened without sounding the trumpet. In funeral processions the trumpets were sounded, and so common was this custom that when the emperor Claudius died the sound of the trumpets was so deafening that it was thought that the dead could hear them.<sup>284</sup>

Paul associates the trumpet call with the resurrection at the end of the age (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:52). It is part of the great divine announcement, heralding our Lord's triumphant return to earth. The primary Old Testament antecedent is Exodus 19:16. "*On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.*" The same sort of thing is also seen in Joshua's instructions at Jericho (Joshua 6:8-20) to sound trumpets to announce YHWH's judgment upon the city when the walls came down. In Isaiah 27:13, the prophet speaks of the trumpet calling exiles from Egypt and Assyria to worship YHWH on his holy mountain. "*And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.*" Then in Zechariah 9:14-16, the prophet foresees a time when

*the LORD will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. The LORD of hosts will protect them . . . . On that day the LORD their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land.*

Meredith Kline offers an interesting take on this by noting that when the Lord is revealed in the *parousia*, there is an allusion to the glory-cloud of Exodus (the Spirit-Glory) which is closely tied to "Spirit of the day" (Genesis 3:8) and to the day of the Lord mentioned throughout the prophets. Luke mentions in Acts 1:9, that when Jesus was taken up, he disappeared into a cloud. Peter uses this language in 2 Peter 3:11-12 when speaking of the new creation, and it is

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<sup>282</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 143.

<sup>283</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 100.

<sup>284</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 224-225.

alluded to by Paul as well when he speaks of the day of Jesus Christ as associated with great noises—especially the voice of YHWH in Eden immediately after the Fall, when God approached them in judgment in “the day.”<sup>285</sup>

Collectively then, as Kline contends, this sets the *parousia* of Jesus Christ against the backdrop of the Glory-Cloud in the Book of Exodus and the “day” when YHWH confronts Adam in Genesis 3:8. The cloud is present again at our Lord’s ascension (cf. Acts 1:9). Christ’s second advent then, is the ultimate revelation of God’s glory which was foreshadowed in the Glory-Cloud and references to the day of the Lord found throughout the Old Testament.<sup>286</sup>

There is also little doubt that in First Thessalonians 4, Paul echoes Jesus’s words in the Olivet Discourse. According to Matthew 24:30–31, Jesus foretold that . . .

*then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

The third point that Paul makes is that “*the dead in Christ will rise first.*” Anyone in the Thessalonian congregation who was worried that those who have died before Christ’s return will suffer eternal loss are to have hope. Those who have died prior to our Lord’s return will be the first ones to rise. The dead have priority over those still alive when Jesus returns!

In verse 17, Paul addresses the fate of the living when our Lord comes back. “*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, and so we will always be with the Lord.*” Several of the terms that Paul uses have significant doctrinal importance. The first of these terms is *harpadzo* (ἁρπάζω), which means “to snatch up, to seize, to carry off by force, to rapture. The word often identified as “the rapture,” denotes the emotion of a sudden swoop, and usually that of a force which cannot be resisted.”<sup>287</sup> The idea of suddenness and power is dominant.<sup>288</sup> Those still alive will be caught up and taken away for a joyful reunion with our Lord and those who have been asleep in him, and who are now returning with him. It is from the Latin rendering of this term, *rapeimur*, that we get the term

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<sup>285</sup> Meredith G. Kline, Images of the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 122, 130.

<sup>286</sup> Kline, Images of the Spirit, 122.

<sup>287</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 145. According to Lowe and Nida, “ἁρπάζω: to grab or seize by force, with the purpose of removing and/or controlling—‘to seize, to snatch away, to take away.’ ἐκέλευσεν τὸ στράτευμα καταβῆν ἁρπάσαι αὐτὸν ἐκ μέσου αὐτὸν ‘he ordered soldiers to go down (into the group) and snatch him away from them’ Ac 23:10; ἔρχεται ὁ πονηρὸς καὶ ἁρπάζει τὸ ἐσπαρμένον ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ‘the Evil One comes and snatches away the seed that was sown in his heart’ Mt 13:19. In Mt 13:19 the context as a whole is figurative, but a more or less literal rendering of ‘snatches’ or ‘seizes’ is probably satisfactory.” See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), Vol. 1.220.

<sup>288</sup> Best, The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistles to the Thessalonians, 198.

“rapture.”<sup>289</sup>

The second of these terms is *apantesis* [ἀπάντησις] which is used to “meet” the Lord in the air. The term conveys the idea of a triumphal reunion and glorious return together.

The term is most literally rendered “meeting.” The word had a technical meaning in the Hellenistic world in relation to the visits of dignitaries to cities where the visitor would be formally met by citizens, or a deputation of them, who had gone out from the city for this purpose and would then be ceremonially escorted back into the city.<sup>290</sup>

In this case believers do not voluntarily leave to meet the dignitary, but are “caught up.” The idea is that at our Lord’s return, those who are caught up meet the triumphant Lord at his return, are reunited with those who have died in Christ, and who then return together to earth in triumph. The other important phrase is that this occurs in “the air.” According to Morris,

There may be significance in the meeting place being “in the air.” In the first century the air was often thought of as the abode of demons (Satan is described as the “ruler of the kingdom of the air,” (Eph. 2:2). That the Lord chooses to meet his saints there, on the demons’ home ground so to speak, shows his complete mastery over them.<sup>291</sup>

When Jesus descends from heaven, our Lord’s triumph is complete. Jesus raises the dead, judges the world, and ushers in the new creation. He destroys the devil and all his works. This is the blessed hope! In verse 18, Paul concludes with the exhortation; “*therefore, encourage one another with these words.*” What could be more encouraging than to live life in the light of certainty of our Lord’s second coming? Gene Green summarizes this quite well and his words are worth repeating.

The previous passage has suffered much ill as it has been mined to provide clues concerning the timing of the “rapture” of the church. Will this great event occur before seven years of tribulation, in the middle of this period, or at the very end? In the haste to answer this question, the real purpose of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is overlooked. This teaching was presented to comfort those in grief by connecting the confession of the creed (“Jesus died and rose again”) with the reality of the resurrection of the dead in Christ. This is not the stuff of speculative prophecy or bestsellers on the end times. The text is located at the funeral home, the memorial service, and the graveside. It is placed in the hands of each believer to comfort others in their time of greatest sorrow. The decidedly bizarre pictures of airplanes dropping out of the sky and cars careening out of control as the rapture happens detract from the hope that this passage is designed to teach. The picture presented here is of the royal coming of Jesus Christ. The church, as the official delegation, goes out to meet him, with the dead heading up the procession as those most honored. One coming is envisioned, which will unite the coming King with

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<sup>289</sup> John F. Walvoord, The Rapture Question (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 12.

<sup>290</sup> Best, The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistles to the Thessalonians, 199.

<sup>291</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 146.

his subjects. What a glorious hope!<sup>292</sup>

Green is correct. This text is not given by Paul to a confused congregation so as to prompt bizarre speculation. Rather, this is a text which should give comfort to the grieving and hope to the living.<sup>293</sup>

### **Excursus on Dispensationalism and the “Rapture”**

At this point, we address the dispensational doctrine of a “pre-tribulation” rapture. The issue here—summarized capably by Green above—are the practical consequences the dispensational teaching of a rapture of Christian believers occurring at the beginning of a supposed seven year tribulation period. Many Christians have embraced dispensational teaching and although on the decline, it is still a widely held view among those evangelical Christians who take the Bible and Christ’s second coming seriously.

There are three types of dispensationalism. The first type—a popularized, less theological version—is dominated by Bible prophecy pundits (identified as “pop” dispensationalism by Hummel)<sup>294</sup> who excel at reading the Bible through the lens of current events. I will pay them little mind in what follows. The second type is the classical dispensationalism such as that taught at Dallas Theological Seminary in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This group takes a more serious and careful approach to Scripture than the former type, and includes evangelical stalwarts like John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost and Charles Ryrie. John MacArthur and Michael Vlach and others continue to defend the classical view with some minor modifications. There is also a third type, so-called “progressive” dispensationalism, but this school comes closer to historic premillennialism than either of the first two types. Since I have responded to premillennialism in general throughout our time in Paul’s Thessalonian letters and elsewhere, here I will focus upon the classical dispensational interpretation of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

To arrive at a dispensational understanding of the “rapture” in making appeal to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, one must previously accept the classic dispensational hermeneutic. According to J. Dwight Pentecost (who was a capable spokesman for the classical dispensational view) the dispensational understanding of the rapture rests upon several essential presuppositions: 1). A “literal interpretation” of the Scriptures. 2). “The church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan.” 3). “The church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament. This present mystery age intervenes within the program of

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<sup>292</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 224-225.

<sup>293</sup> According to Calvin, “These words [from Paul] more than sufficiently disprove the aberrations of . . . the Chiliasts. When believers have once been gathered together into one kingdom, their life will no more end than Christ’s. To allot Christ a thousand years afterwards He would cease to reign, is too horrible to speak of.” Calvin on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, 8.366.

<sup>294</sup> Daniel G. Hummel, The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2023), 347.

God for Israel's rejection of the Messiah at His first advent." He writes, "This mystery program must be completed before God can resume His program with Israel and bring it to completion."<sup>295</sup> The rapture is the first step in resolving the mystery by restoring Israel's place in redemptive history, specifically in the nation's relationship to the Messiah. This requires the removal of the Gentile church to eliminate the present mystery.

The dispensational hermeneutic as defined by Pentecost defaults at a number of critical points. According to Pentecost's categories, the church is, in effect, God's alternate plan, spanning the time from when Jesus withdrew his offer of the kingdom until Gentiles are raptured from the earth and God returns to dealing with national Israel during the seven-year tribulation.<sup>296</sup> The dawn of the "messianic age" and the arrival of the kingdom of God and the age of the Holy Spirit, are a parenthetical period until God is ready to return to his chosen people (Israel) and primary plan of redemption (the arrival of the Davidic kingdom in the millennial age).<sup>297</sup>

The Reformed, on the other hand, see the church as standing in direct continuity with Israel (in light of our embrace of covenant theology)<sup>298</sup> with the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). He was previously hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament before coming in the fullness of time to fulfill all righteousness (his obedience), to die to remove the guilt and break the power of sin, and to rise from the dead and then ascend to the Father's right hand (cf. Acts 2:33).<sup>299</sup>

We have already noted a large number of echoes earlier in the First Thessalonian letter in which Paul connects the church (and Gentile Christians) to the latter day restoration of Israel. Dispensationalists may reject this,<sup>300</sup> but the Old Testament prophets repeatedly point ahead to the fact that the future people of God (the church) would include Gentiles (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Isaiah 49:6). Therefore, the church is not a "mystery" during this age as Pentecost contends.<sup>301</sup> Rather, the church in the Old Testament was hidden in type and shadow (including those elect believers—Jew and Gentile—within it). It is a dramatic fulfillment of God's *eternal* purpose revealed to his Old Testament prophets to redeem Israel in the coming messianic age. Herman

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<sup>295</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 193.

<sup>296</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 199-200.

<sup>297</sup> The "great parenthesis" is a term used by Hal Lindsey regarding God's dealing with the church until the rapture when God's focus returns to Israel during the tribulation. See Hal Lindsey, The Rapture (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 69-84.

<sup>298</sup> Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 290-301

<sup>299</sup> Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 44-53.

<sup>300</sup> According to Walvoord, "it is safe to say that pretribulationism depends upon a particular definition of the church, and any consideration of pretribulationism that does not take this major factor into consideration will be largely beside the point." See Walvoord, The Rapture Question, 16.

<sup>301</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 200-201.

Ridderbos speaks to the revelation of this mystery in Paul's writings by noting that it can be summed up in one word—Christ.<sup>302</sup> If the church and the salvation of the Gentiles is a significant element in God's eternal purpose, and is directly tied to the redemptive work of Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah, and it is he who ensures the salvation of God's elect (both Jew and Gentile) and the revelation of God's consummate glory—then dispensational presuppositions simply do not fit with Paul's statements to the contrary.

As the body of Christ, the church is revealed as the new Israel in the New Testament—in the sense of the restored Israel foretold by the prophets. In I Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul speaks of the church as the “temple of God.” In Galatians 6:16, Paul identifies the church (composed of Jewish and Gentile believers) as the “Israel of God.” Paul speaks of Gentiles being grafted into the righteous root (who is Christ or Israel) in Romans 11, with Israel being re-grafted at the time of the end. There is only one root which spans both testaments. The author of Hebrews (12:18-29), also tells us that the church is spoken of as the heavenly Zion.

Therefore, the distinction drawn between the redemptive programs for the church and Israel as understood by dispensationalists arises solely because of their presuppositions about distinct redemptive purposes for Israel and the Gentile church.<sup>303</sup> This requires adherents to overlook, downplay, or ignore the echoes we repeatedly hear in Paul's letters about God's purposes for Jew and Gentile in the present age (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22). Because the New Testament makes a distinction between the church and Israel in the *historica salutis*, this does not mean that God has two distinct redemptive purposes for each, but merely that both groups occupy unique places in redemptive history—Israel's Old Testament story precedes the coming of Jesus and the establishment of his messianic kingdom.

In making his case, Pentecost lists a number of “distinctions” between a “rapture and the second advent,”<sup>304</sup> which supposedly prove his point. But these are difficult to sustain. He contends, “the translation [the older term for the rapture] entails the removal of all believers, while the second advent entails the appearing or manifestation of the Son. . . . the translation sees the saints caught up into the air, and in the second advent He returns to the earth.”<sup>305</sup> Pentecost believes that because two programs are mentioned in those texts discussing the return of Christ to the earth—one with believers being “raptured away,” and the other involving a physical appearing of Jesus Christ—there are two mutually exclusive events, separated by a seven-year tribulation, so two different comings must be involved.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 49.

<sup>303</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 200-201.

<sup>304</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 206 ff.

<sup>305</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 206-207.

<sup>306</sup> A single event—in this case the return of Christ, might have multiple facets. Richard Gaffin, for example, speaks of the arrival of the Messiah, having a dual, twofold character—the dawn of the messianic age, followed, after an extended interval, the Lord's parousia. See Gaffin, In the Fullness of Time, 282. To distinguish is to merely identify these various elements and their relationship to one another. To separate includes a much more radical action, in the case in view here—changing the whole



Apart from dispensational presuppositions, no one would conclude that the *parousia* of Christ is actually two separate advents, one of them being secret (to non believers), supposedly separated by a seven year tribulation, and which accomplish entirely completely different things! The irony here is that dispensationalists agree that Jesus has two advents (his first and second), but then contend there are three “comings,” because the rapture is a true return of Jesus to snatch away believing Gentiles, even if not his bodily return. Pentecost is clear that these are two distinct programs, “and can not be unified into one event.”<sup>307</sup> So, how many comings are there? The first advent, the rapture, and the second coming if Pentecost is correct.

The parables are also problematic for dispensationalists. When Matthew and Mark describe the “end of the age,” they clearly place the church (the elect) on the earth. The parable of the wheat and the tares, for example, makes little sense in light of the dispensational presuppositions (cf. Matthew 13:24-30; 36-42). John Walvoord, quite incredibly contends that chapter 13 of Matthew faces the question, “what will happen when the rejected king goes back to heaven and the kingdom is postponed until his second coming? The concept of the kingdom postponed must be understood as a postponement from the human side and not from the divine, as obviously God’s plans do not change.”<sup>308</sup> But God’s program did change. So what does this say about human actions thwarting God’s sovereign decree? There is no biblical justification whatsoever for assuming that the kingdom was merely offered but then “postponed” because Israel rejects Christ’s messianic kingship. This is not John the Baptist’s understanding of the coming of the kingdom in Matthew 3:1,2 or Mark 1:15 when he declares “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

In fact, the terminology used to describe the return of Christ in the New Testament clearly excludes a dispensational understanding of “a rapture” preceding Christ’s bodily return by seven years. Dispensationalists often downplay (or ignore) the big picture approach I have taken, concentrating instead on exegetical details. Louis Berkhof’s summary of the New Testament terminology for Christ’s return, further elaborated by Anthony Hoekema is very helpful in light of our prior discussion. What do the exegetical nuts and bolts tell us? According to Berkhof,

Several terms are used to denote this great event [Christ’s return], of which the following are the most important: (1) *apokalupsis* (unveiling), which points to the removal of that which now obstructs our vision of Christ, I Cor. 1:7; II Thess. 1:7; I Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13; (2) *epiphaneia* (appearance, manifestation), a term referring to Christ’s coming forth out of a hidden background with the rich blessings of salvation, II Thess. 2:8; I Tim. 6:14; II Tim. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:13; and (3) *parousia* (lit. presence), which points to the coming that precedes the presence or results in the presence, Matt. 24:3, 27, 37; I Cor. 15:23; I Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; II Thess. 2:1-9; Jas. 5:7, 8; II Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12; I John

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category of a single event with multiple components, into multiple events with single components.

<sup>307</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 207.

<sup>308</sup> John Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press 1974), 96.

2:28.<sup>309</sup>

Anthony Hoekema adds,

In I Thessalonians 4:15 Paul uses [*parousia*] to describe what pretribulationists would call the rapture. But in I Thessalonians 3:13 the same word is used to describe the “coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” –the second phase of Christ’s return, according to pretribulationists. And in II Thessalonians 2:8 Paul uses the term [*parousia*] to refer to the coming at which Christ shall bring the antichrist to naught—which is not supposed to happen . . . until the Second Coming.<sup>310</sup>

Hoekema continues,

Turning next to the use of the word [*apochalypsis*], we find Paul using it in I Corinthians 1:7 to describe what these interpreters call the rapture: “as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But in II Thessalonians 1:7-8 the same word is used to describe what pretribulationists call the second phase of the Second Coming: “At the revelation [*apochalypsis*] of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire.”<sup>311</sup>

Adding to this, Hoekema says,

The same thing is true of the use of the word [*epiphaneia*]. In I Timothy 6:14 it refers to what pretribulationists call the rapture: “I charge you to keep the commandments unstained and free from reproach until the appearing [*epiphaneia*] of our Lord Jesus.” But in II Thessalonians 2:8 Paul uses the same word to describe the coming of Christ at which he will overthrow the man of lawlessness: “And then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus shall...bring to nought by the manifestation [*epiphaneia*] of his coming.” This will not happen, however, according to pretribulationists, until the end of the great tribulation.<sup>312</sup>

Hoekema concludes, “the use of these words, therefore, provides no basis whatever for this kind of distinction pretribulationists [like Pentecost] make between two phases of Christ’s return.”<sup>313</sup>

A telling criticism is the language used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and following, the very

<sup>309</sup> Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 695.

<sup>310</sup> Anthony Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 166.

<sup>311</sup> Hoekema, The Bible and the Future. 166.

<sup>312</sup> Hoekema, The Bible and the Future. 166.

<sup>313</sup> Hoekema, The Bible and the Future. 166. As noted Pentecost speaks of distinct programs.

passage used by dispensationalists as a proof text for the two comings of Jesus Christ—one in the clouds and the other bodily to earth. As we noted previously, three times in the passage, Paul uses terminology designed to convey the idea that Jesus Christ’s return to earth is accompanied by divine announcements, clearly universal in nature. In verse 16, Paul mentions that “*the Lord himself will come down from heaven,*” 1). With a loud command, 2). With the voice of the archangel and 3). and with the trumpet call of God. The thrust of the three-fold announcement of the loud command, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God, is self-evident that God announces to the world the return of Jesus Christ, in such a fashion as all will certainly hear the command (even the dead!), and then witness the subsequent seizing away of un believers (v. 17) unto judgment.

If dispensationalists are correct, that the coming (*parousia*) of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is not visible, and that only believers will hear the announcement, indicates that this is yet another example of a text where the champions of “literal interpretation” cannot take the passage literally!

Berkhof’s concise summary of the argument for a single-stage second advent is helpful and serves as a good summation of our discussion:

In II Thess. 2:1, 2, 8 the terms *parousia* and “day of the Lord” are used interchangeably, and according to II Thess. 1:7-10 the revelation mentioned in verse 7 synchronizes with the *parousia* which brings the glorification of the saints of which the 10th verse speaks. Matt. 24:29-31 represents the coming of the Lord at which the elect are gathered together as following immediately after the great tribulation mentioned in the context, while according to the theory under consideration [dispensationalism] it should occur *before* the tribulation. And finally according to this theory the Church will not pass through the great tribulation which is represented in Matt. 24:4-26 as synchronizing with the great apostasy, but the representation of Scripture in Matt. 24:22; Luke 21:36; II Thess. 2:3; I Tim. 4:1-3; II Tim. 3:1-5; Rev. 7:14 is quite different. On the basis of Scripture it should be maintained that the second coming of the Lord will be a single event.<sup>314</sup>

As Pentecost admits, adherents must assume a dispensational model (the “literal” interpretation of Scripture, the redemptive historical separation of Israel and the church into two respective “programs”, and the mystery of the church age)<sup>315</sup> before beginning study of New Testament eschatology. If these things are not assumed *a priori* you cannot find two comings of Christ’s return, the first phase being secret (Jesus appearing only to believers), the second, seven years later, which is bodily and visible.

The dispensational reading of the passage undermines the unity of the most important event in human history yet to come—an event which the signs of the end promise is coming, and an event which will come upon the world as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:4). Yes, Jesus

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<sup>314</sup> Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 696.

<sup>315</sup> According to dispensationalists, even in those cases where the New Testament writers themselves “spiritualize” Old Testament passages which refer to Israel, by applying them to the church. The most famous of these is found in Acts 15, vv. 16-18, where Luke applies a passage in Amos, referring to Israel, to the church, specifically to the Gentiles.

will return on the final day of human history to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. But there is no biblical evidence whatsoever for dividing Jesus' *parousia* into two distinct phases (or programs) of his coming, apart from dispensational presuppositions. The dispensational notion of the rapture cannot be sustained.

#### E. On times and seasons (5:1-11)

**1** Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. **2** For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. **4** But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. **5** For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. **6** So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. **7** For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. **9** For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, **10** who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. **11** Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Having dealt with the primary question coming to him from the Thessalonian church about the nature of the Lord's return and the fate of those who die in Christ before he comes back, Paul moves on to address another pressing question. "Yes, Jesus is coming back, but when?" "Today?" "Tomorrow?" "A month from now?" "A year from now?" It is also important to keep in mind that in addressing this question, Paul is speaking to the fate of those still living.

Date setting has been a perennial problem in the Christian church even from the earliest days. We do not know if this matter was a specific question put to Paul through Timothy (likely),<sup>316</sup> but we do know that even though Paul had taught them about this matter previously, some of the Thessalonians understood Paul to say that Jesus's return could occur at any moment. But then they mistakenly concluded that Paul expected it very soon, within their own lifetime. Whenever Christians come to believe that the Lord's return is to occur at a specific time, irresponsible behavior, it seems, is the inevitable result. People sell their property, give away their possessions, gather together at those places where they expect the Lord will come back, and then collectively despair when the Lord does not return as expected.<sup>317</sup> In 2 Peter 3:3-7, Peter warns that scoffers will come. When people set dates that do not come to pass, it only creates the scoffers Peter warned us about.

It is very difficult to get around Jesus's words in Matthew 24:36, "*but concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only,*" although this

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<sup>316</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 230.

<sup>317</sup> See the discussion in Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 142.

does not stop kooks, attention seekers, and sincere but wrong prognosticators from date-setting. One of the last things Jesus did was to warn his disciples when he ascended into heaven, “*It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority*” (cf. Acts 1:7). The expectation that Jesus could return at any moment was already present in the apostolic church and has continued down to this day. Yes, the imminent return of Jesus is an important element of Paul’s teaching, but as our Lord himself warns us, the date-setting often associated with the expectations of an immanent return is not. In chapter 5:1-11 of his first Thessalonian letter, Paul addresses the matter of *when* Jesus will return in response to this second question. He will speak to this again in his second Thessalonian letter.

The fact of Jesus’s resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost guarantees our Lord’s second coming. The Lord’s *parousia* also serves as the basis (the indicative) for the numerous imperatives that close out the balance of the letter in chapter 5:12-28. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended to the Father’s right hand, poured out his Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and will return on the day of the Lord, this should define how the Thessalonians are to live their Christian lives until they die or the Lord returns, whichever comes first. In verses 4:13–18, Paul addresses the fate of deceased Christians at Jesus’ return, while in verses 5:1–11, the apostle focuses upon the fate of living Christians when the Lord comes.<sup>318</sup> In verses 12-28 of chapter 5, Paul wraps up his first letter with a series of imperatives regarding the Christian life.

That a new question was on the table is evident in verse 1 of chapter five as Paul frames the discussion as “*concerning the times and the seasons, brothers.*” The phrase “times and seasons” is a stock expression used by Christians of the end times. In Acts 1:7, which we just cited, Jesus spoke of “*times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.*”<sup>319</sup> Specifically, Paul will address “times” (*chronos*—duration, or time viewed sequentially) and seasons” (*kairos*—which can mean something like “opportunity” or the “right moment”). This suggests that the Thessalonians were discussing time-tables, making predictions, and even setting dates for the Lord’s return.<sup>320</sup>

But the Thessalonians ought not to be preoccupied with such things. Paul reminds them “*you have no need to have anything written to you,*” which is a good indication that the apostle already had instructed them regarding the timing of our Lord’s return during his three weeks with them. The reason why he has no new instruction for them is spelled out in verse 2. “*For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*” There is a bit of word play here. We can paraphrase this sentence along the lines of “we do not need write you, for you know full well that you cannot know when the Lord will return.”<sup>321</sup> In a similar vein, Fee sees this as a form of apostolic scolding. “They already ‘know very well’ about ‘the day of the Lord,’ a clause that has all the earmarks of parental language, where a parent, not for the first time, is about to tell the child something they *should* know very well but in any case need

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<sup>318</sup> Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 881.

<sup>319</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 185.

<sup>320</sup> Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 142

<sup>321</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 150.

to be reminded.”<sup>322</sup>

Specifically, Paul has already taught them the meaning of the phrase, the “day of the Lord,” and that this day will come suddenly and unexpectedly as “a thief in the night.” We will take up the meaning of the “day of the Lord” first, and then address the use of the expression a “thief in the night.” To put it simply, the “day of the Lord” is the day of judgment, when our Lord suddenly and unexpectedly returns. Although his eschatological wrath is poured out on the earth and all its inhabitants, it is also that day when the people of God are delivered from final judgment. Green captures well the blessing/curse nature of this closing event in human history.

A “day” at times means something other than a twenty-four-hour period; it may even indicate the “day” when a judge decides to give his judgment (1 Cor. 4:3). Therefore, the *day of the Lord* becomes that eschatological event when the Lord comes to judge the inhabitants of the earth and to pour out his wrath because of sin (Isa. 13:6, 9; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Zech. 1:14; Mal. 4:5; Acts 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). However, for the people of God, the *day of the Lord* will be a day of salvation (Joel 2:21–32; 3:18; Obad. 15–21; Zech. 14:1–21). In the letters, this event is sometimes known as “the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; and see Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16), when he comes to execute the divine judgment (2 Thess. 1:6–10).<sup>323</sup>

For Christians, the day of the Lord is “the blessed hope.” It is that day for which Christians long—to be among those living when the Lord returns so we need never experience the sting of death.

The phrase that Paul uses, “the day of the Lord” has an important background as touched upon by Green. Morris addresses the Old Testament background in a bit more detail. According to Morris, “the day of the Lord” . . . is a very ancient expression, for it was well known in the time of Amos, who mentioned it for the express purpose of refuting erroneous ideas about it then current (Amos 5:18–20).” This indicates that “the idea was thus older than [Amos’s] day, and perhaps considerably older. The point that Amos made was that the day would be one of judgement on all people.”<sup>324</sup> This expectation of a coming day of wrath was mentioned in Amos, but is also found in Daniel’s expectation of a day of final judgment associated with the general resurrection.

*At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness*

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<sup>322</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 186.

<sup>323</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 230.

<sup>324</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 150.

*of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase (Daniel 12:1-4).*

Beyond Amos' prophecy, "the Israelites could expect to be punished then for their sins, just as they expected that other people would be punished. This is one of a number of places where the concepts used of Yahweh in the Old Testament are applied to Christ in the New, a revealing insight into the ways the first Christians viewed their Savior." Morris explains how this took place, as "the thought of final judgement carries over into the New Testament understanding of the Day, and one way of referring to it is to call it 'the day of judgement' (2 Pet. 2:9)." This is in line with Paul's designation as "the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5).<sup>325</sup> The day of the Lord then, is the day of judgment. It is the final day in human history. In the apocalyptic scene in Revelation 6:12-17, John speaks of this day as one of unmitigated fear and terror for those who are not Christ's.

*When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"*

Yet, if this is a day of judgment for unbelievers, it also is the day of the realization of all of God's promises for the elect in Christ. Continuing his explanation, Morris elaborates upon the blessings associated with the "day of the Lord." He writes,

By contrast it may be thought of as "the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). Again, its connection with the Deity may be stressed, for on that day God's action will be manifested as never before. Thus we find "the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12), "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:8). It may be simply "that day" (2 Thess. 1:10), or the last day (John 6:39-40), or the "great Day" (Jude 6). It is clear that the early church found a large place for the events of that Day, and that it was a major concept for them. Here the emphasis is on the Parousia, the great event of that great day. In view of the many-faceted character of that Day is it not surprising that it presented problems to the Thessalonians; later on this was to be in part the cause of the second letter (2 Thess. 2:2).<sup>326</sup>

If the day of the Lord is the final event in human history (and is a way of summarizing a number of concomitant events such as the Lord's *parousia*, the general resurrection, the final

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<sup>325</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 150-151.

<sup>326</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 150-151.

judgment, the manifestation of the kingdom of God in its fulness and the ushering in of the new creation), then the question naturally arises (as it does in Paul's second Thessalonian letter) as to what signs, if any, precede the Lord's return.

As for the timing of this day, Paul's describes it as "like a thief in the night." Given the parallels we've seen previously in chapter four between Paul's discussion of Jesus' *parousia* and our Lord's teaching in the Olivet Discourse (i.e., Matthew 24), it should not surprise us that Paul's appeal to the image of a thief mirrors Jesus's teaching. Professor Bruce explains the connection between Paul's words and the prior words of Jesus.

The figure of the thief by night occurs in Jesus' teaching about the coming of the Son of Man Matt 24:43 par. Luke 12:39, a Q logion) and in prophetic utterances made in his name in the Apocalypse (Rev. 3:3; 16:15); cf. 2 Pet 1:10. A similar figure occurs in Luke 21:34-36 and general teaching to the same effect in Luke 17:24-32. The point of the comparison is the call for vigilance: "if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would have been awake and would not have left his house to be broken into" (Luke 12:39). Similarly, the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly; it is important therefore to be on the alert and not be taken by surprise."<sup>327</sup>

Echoing the teaching of Jesus, Paul could not be any clearer. The day of the Lord (the day of judgment, the meting of out of final blessing/curse) will occur suddenly and unexpectedly. Although Paul does not say so, the obvious warning to the date-setters among them then, as well as now, is "knock it off."

Paul's understanding of the "day of the Lord" is yet another serious obstacle for dispensationalists. According to J. Dwight Pentecost, there are two interpretations of the "day of the Lord" within dispensational circles. The first interpretation (the classic interpretation of C. I. Scofield) contends that "the day of the Lord would cover that time period from the return of Christ to the earth to the new heaven and the new earth after the millennium."<sup>328</sup> The other is that of Harry A. Ironside (John Walvoord as well),<sup>329</sup> that the "Day of the Lord begins with the tribulation period so that the events of the tribulation, the second advent, and the millennium are all included within the scope of the Day of the Lord."<sup>330</sup> It should be rather obvious that apart from dispensational presuppositions, few could interpret Paul's understanding of the "day of the Lord" as a series of events separated by long periods of time adapted to fit dispensational time-line requirements.

The most significant issue raised by Paul then as well as now is the suddenness of our Lord's return. Paul uses the present tense rather than the future tense here, so as to stress the

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<sup>327</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 109.

<sup>328</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 229.

<sup>329</sup> John Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 273.

<sup>330</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 330.



certainty, if not the immediacy of the event.<sup>331</sup> Yes, our Lord's return is certain, but we do not know when it will occur. Given the propensity of folks to set dates, it is important to hear Jesus's words again on this; *"but concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"* (Mark 13:32). Paul tells us that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night when no one is expecting it. No one can calculate when the Lord will return. It is a fool's errand to attempt to figure this out.

Yet, elsewhere in the New Testament (especially in the Olivet Discourse, which is the source of much of Paul's teaching here), there is strong emphasis placed upon specific signs which do indeed precede the Lord's return. Here, in chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul does not mention any specific signs which precede the day of the Lord (he does tell us that people will not expect it), but he will go on to mention several quite specific signs in chapter 2 of his second Thessalonian letter: the appearance of the Man of Sin and the great apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:3). As I understand Paul's discussion of the future of Israel in Romans 9-11, a third sign of the end is that Paul expects a future mass conversion of Israel (large numbers of Jews become Christians) immediately before the Lord's return.<sup>332</sup>

One of the key features of New Testament eschatology is the pronounced tension between the sudden and unexpected nature of our Lord's return and the various signs which precede his coming. The tension is designed to prevent "date setting" since no one knows when Jesus will return. It also prevents idleness, since the Lord's coming is said to be sudden and unexpected. We do not want to be among those who are indifferent to the Lord's return. Martin Luther supposedly said, "if I believed the world were to end tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today," which is good advice, but something Luther very likely never said even if it sounds like something we expect Luther would say.

In verse 3, Paul speaks to the peril of those who are unprepared for our Lord's coming. Destruction will overtake them when God's wrath is revealed from heaven. *"While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."* Although Paul's Gentile readers/hearers would not know the source of his words, those who knew the Old Testament, or who are familiar with the words of Jesus from Luke 21:34-36, would immediately know that Paul's words contain a loud echo from the Noah story (Genesis 6:9-9:17) as interpreted by Jesus. F. F. Bruce draws the connection for us. "In Jesus' warning about the coming of the Son of Man, he reminds his hearers how the people of Noah's day and, later, the inhabitants of Sodom and the neighboring cities were engaged in the ordinary pursuits of peace, without any suspicion of danger, when sudden disaster overtook them."<sup>333</sup> This is a good example of Paul's "translating" the Old Testament and Jesus's teaching into "Gentile idiom."

A Greco-Roman audience was familiar with the language of peace and security mentioned by

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<sup>331</sup> Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 290.

<sup>332</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 207-221.

<sup>333</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 110.

Paul. The *pax Romana* (the “peace of Rome”) was a two hundred period of peace enjoyed by most of the empire and was established under the reign of Augustus, which dates from 27 B.C. The slogan was well-known to those who lived under Roman rule.<sup>334</sup> Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians reminds them that non-Christians live under the false notion of worldly peace and prosperity, but ignore the signs pointing to our Lord’s return and the final judgment. Non-Christians are largely indifferent to the fact that an eschatological tsunami is on the horizon and closing rapidly. The sudden destruction mentioned by Paul will come upon the entire unbelieving world as the final eschatological wrath of God. This is the curse element of the day of the Lord, the moment of final judgment from which there is no escape. There are no second chances.

In verses 4-5, Paul draws a sharp contrast between believers (who will not be caught off guard) and unbelievers (who will be taken by surprise). *“But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.”* Paul uses the word “darkness” (σκοτει) as a metaphor for those who are not believers and who are subject to the destruction that is coming upon the earth. Apart from the light of the gospel, people live in darkness. Yet, Morris contends that the connection of darkness to thieves is not what we would expect. He says that the meaning is not that “that Day will come unheralded as a thief, but that it will surprise people, just as thieves are surprised by the coming of dawn. Those who are not ready will be surprised by daybreak on the day of the Lord.”<sup>335</sup> Those who prefer darkness because their deeds are evil, will find the true character of their deeds exposed by the sudden and unexpected light.

Believers are characterized by Paul as “*sons of light*” and “*sons of day,*” (“children” in the ESV). All Christians are adopted sons or daughters of God. To be a son or daughter of the notable in the Greco-Roman world is to possess a particular character and to be entitled to certain privileges. In this case, all Christians are children of light and the corresponding “day,” reflecting the fact that Christians live in the light as Jesus taught in Luke 16:8, and in John 12:36 where we read, *“while you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”* The light guides the steps of the children “of the day,” while those in darkness trip, stumble, and fall into error.

But there is also an eschatological reference in Paul’s words. According to Professor Bruce,

“sons of day” [is] (a synonym of *υιοι φωτος*). The day had not yet arrived, but believers in Christ were children of day already, by a form of “realized eschatology.” The day, in fact, had cast its radiance ahead with the life and ministry of the historical Jesus and the accomplishment of his saving work; when it arrived in its full splendor, they would enter into their inheritance of glory and be manifested as children of day. Those, on the other hand, who have not come to the light but still live in darkness will be caught off

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<sup>334</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 233.

<sup>335</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 154.

guard by the day when it comes.<sup>336</sup>

Believers are said to be “sons of light” and “sons of the day,” the latter perhaps, a reference to receiving God’s promised blessings on the “day.” Therefore, we are not to be surprised like thieves, who when the light of our Lord’s coming suddenly shines upon the dark and sinful world, others can see what we were doing in secret. Even though all of the promised blessings are not yet fully realized, we are at home in the light, since we are children of the day yet to come. We will not be caught unawares, nor need we fear the wrath that is coming upon the world. But unbelievers are children of darkness, who will be rather unpleasantly surprised when the light of day arrives because the light exposes their conduct and identity, and they will be made aware of God’s charges against them when the Lord sends out his angels to gather them for judgment (cf. Matthew 13:41).

Beginning in verse 6, Paul shifts from the indicative mood (Jesus Christ has risen again from the dead, hence he will come again) to a series of imperatives (commands). Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, exalted to the Father’s right hand, and will come again, so says Paul, this is how we are to live our lives in the light of his coming. Paul has demonstrated that the day of the Lord is not something a Christian should fear. The apostle makes the point that a particular manner of living should be demonstrated in the lives of those who have this knowledge and comfort brought about by the light of day. Paul’s exhortation is simple and direct. *“So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.”*

As children of light and sons of the day, certain behavior should follow. Christians are to remain alert and not live like people in a drunken stupor—in both a literal and figurative sense. Christians are not to be characterized by the same kind of conduct as those who belong to darkness. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul used the term sleep (κοιμάω) as a metaphor for those who have died—they “sleep in Christ.” Here, a different word for sleep is used (καθεύδω), which is associated with darkness and those unprepared for the coming of Jesus.<sup>337</sup> The children of the night “sleep.” They are anything but vigilant. They are lax and careless. They hit the snooze button a dozen times when they need to get up and are indifferent to being late. But Paul’s exhortation to the Christian is to “be alert.” The same verb is used by our Lord in Mark 13:34-37.

*It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”*

When it comes to the Lord’s return, the Thessalonian Christians are to be alert and are not to be found sleeping. They are to be sober (“self-controlled”), which manifests itself in the Christian

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<sup>336</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 111.

<sup>337</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 183.

virtues mentioned in verse 8.<sup>338</sup> This particular term probably entails the notion of being wary of various spiritual dangers associated with the temptations of Greco-Roman cities like Thessalonica.<sup>339</sup> Paul reminds them in verse 7, “for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night.” Paul’s point is not so much a warning about drunkenness (which he does elsewhere, i.e., Galatians 5:21), but to emphasize the sobriety required of those who live at a time and place where those outside the church have a completely different way of thinking and doing. Day and night stand in sharp contrast as metaphors for Christians and non-Christians.<sup>340</sup>

In verse 8, Paul continues to contrast believers and unbelievers. “But since we belong to the day,” Christians are to walk in the light by doing as follows. “Let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” Again, Paul exhorts God’s people to be sober, i.e., self-controlled. The same word from verse 6 (νήφω – sober), is repeated here. This time Paul connects the idea of being self-controlled with the imagery of battle, possibly drawing upon Isaiah 59:17– “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.”<sup>341</sup> The Christian is to put on the appropriate armor for the kind of spiritual combat about which Paul is warning.

Spiritual warfare is a theme which appears throughout Paul’s letters (i.e., Ephesians 6:13-17; Romans 13:12; 2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:4). Christians must engage in spiritual combat with unbelief, and God has provided the means for us to do so. In Romans, Paul speaks of the armor of “light” (Romans 13:12). In 2 Corinthians 6:7 Paul speaks of these as the “weapons of righteousness.” Here, Paul again appeals to the classical Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, which he has previously mentioned in chapter 1:3. Morris is helpful in connecting spiritual warfare to these classic Christian virtues:

Paul refers again to the great triad of faith, hope and love, as in 1:3. These three virtues are of paramount importance to the Christian and may well be insisted on again and again. Something of the centrality of these virtues to the Christian life may be indicated by the particular pieces of armor that symbolize them. The breastplate and the helmet are probably the most important items in a suit of armor, and Paul may intend for us to infer that nothing in the Christian’s equipment surpasses faith, love and hope. He mentions only defensive armor, for his interest here is in defense, namely defense against surprise. It may also be relevant to notice that here, as in 1:3, hope comes last, following the logical order of Christian experience but also as a sort of climax. This is especially appropriate in this place where so much attention is being given to the second

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<sup>338</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 238.

<sup>339</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 194.

<sup>340</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 194.

<sup>341</sup> Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 298; Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 881.

coming with all that that means to the Christian in terms of hope's fulfillment.<sup>342</sup>

In verse 9, Paul fleshes out in more detail the meaning of his previous comment about the helmet of salvation. *"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Appealing to the doctrine of election (in Christ, God chooses to save a multitude so vast they cannot be counted, based upon God's sovereign will and eternal purpose—cf. Revelation 7:9; Ephesians 1:3-14; Romans 8:28-30), Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God did not appoint believers unto that wrath which is coming upon the whole earth in the final judgment. Rather, he has appointed them unto the promised salvation secured by the person and work of Jesus.<sup>343</sup>

As Paul has already made clear, when Jesus returns it is the day of final deliverance for the people of God when all the redemptive promises are fully realized. God's elect receive salvation (σωτηρία) to which we have been chosen, and which entails final deliverance from his wrath. Since we are called by God to be his through the preaching of the gospel, Christians will not experience the never-ending eschatological judgment commonly spoken of as "hell."<sup>344</sup> Because of Christ's redemptive work for us (recounted in 1:4-10; and again the next verse), we are saved by God from God—a decision grounded in the love and mercy of God, in which the Father satisfies his holy justice through the death of his beloved son because of his love for his elect.

The popular dispensational interpretation of this passage badly misses Paul's point. According to John Walvoord,

The important point to observe in 1 Thessalonians 5 is that the Rapture begins the day of the Lord and is not part of events leading up to the second coming of Christ. Accordingly, Christians do not have to fear the events of the Day of the Lord or the events of the Great Tribulation, because this is not their appointment. Their appointment is rather to meet the Lord in heaven.<sup>345</sup>

Paul's point throughout the letter so far has been that the return of Christ on the day of the Lord is the final judgment and the ultimate dispensing of the covenant blessings and curses. When the day of the Lord (which entails the final consummation) comes to pass, Paul says that those who are sleeping (unbelievers) will face the final judgment, while at the same time believers are delivered from God's eschatological wrath. If Walvoord is correct—the wrath in

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<sup>342</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 158-159.

<sup>343</sup> Green points out, "Occasionally in these letters, the apostle reminds the Thessalonians of their election by God (1:4; 4:7; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2:13-14), a point to which he returns in the present verse. In both this and other texts where it appears, the principal verb of the first clause means "to destine or appoint someone to or for something" (Acts 13:47; Rom. 4:17; 9:33; 1 Cor. 12:18, 28; 1 Tim. 1:12; 1 Pet. 2:6). Whenever the verb is used in this manner, the divine appointment is made so that God's purposes might be fulfilled." See Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 242.

<sup>344</sup> There are several images of this elsewhere in Scripture: Matthew 13:36 ff; Revelation 6:12-17; 20:7-15.

<sup>345</sup> Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies, 273.

view here is merely temporal (believers will not suffer at the hands of the Antichrist during the seven-year tribulation period)—this seriously undermines the force of Paul’s point. The final consummation is at hand (not a pre-tribulational rapture) when Jesus returns on the day of the Lord as a thief. Walvoord’s take on this presupposes the dispensational reading of the 70th week of Daniel as a future event, and not as a now fulfilled messianic prophecy.<sup>346</sup>

In verse 10, Paul ties the redemptive work of Jesus directly to our deliverance from the eschatological wrath of God. Paul speaks of Jesus “*who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.*” His expression “for us” certainly assumes a substitutionary atonement, in which by suffering and dying in the place of sinners, Jesus turns aside God’s wrath from all those chosen by the Father for salvation. Whether we are awake (that is, alive and anticipating his return when he comes) or asleep (Paul is again referring to his prior discussion of “sleep” as being absent from the body but at home with the Lord—1 Thessalonians 4:13), we will all live with Christ at his return. This is clearly a reference to those who are alive when Jesus returns—i.e., those who are awake. Calvin remarks that “I am not certain what [Paul] means by asleep and awake, perhaps ‘life’ and ‘death.’ Christ died to bestow on us his life, which is perpetual and has no end. It should not be thought strange, however, that he affirms that we now live . . . with him [Christ], inasmuch as, entering through faith into the kingdom of Christ, we have passed from death to life,”<sup>347</sup> an obvious appeal to John 5:24-27. Let us not miss the irony—those for whom Christ dies, “live.”

Those who are awake (alive when Jesus returns) will not suffer God’s wrath upon his return. So the dead in Christ—those who sleep in him—are raised when he returns. So too, those who are alive (awake) when Jesus returns will also be raised in bodies described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12-57. The Thessalonians have nothing to fear if one of their own dies before Christ returns. Those who are alive can hope that they will never taste death since the Lord can return at any time.

Paul ends his discussion of the Lord’s return by exhorting the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the sure and certain hope of our Lord’s return. He writes, “*therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*” Paul’s doctrine of our Lord’s return is not to become a point of speculation with date setting and attempts to calculate the timing of the Lord’s return. Rather, Paul’s proclamation of the resurrection and our Lord’s imminent return is to be a source of comfort and encouragement to Christians under all circumstances, but especially to those facing persecution. We would do well to get into the habit of encouraging each other with this great hope, just as Paul has said to the Thessalonians.

## F. The recognition of leaders (5:12-13)

**12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord**

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<sup>346</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “*The Covenant of the Seventieth Week*” in The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Oswald T. Allis, ed. by J.H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 452-469.

<sup>347</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 54-55.

**and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**

What follows and which brings Paul's first Thessalonian letter to its conclusion grows directly out of the preceding section (chapter 4:13-5:11) in which Paul contrasts those who are people of the day (believers) and those who are people of the night (non-Christians). Believers are awake and eager for the Lord's return, unbelievers are asleep and indifferent to the Lord's return. They will be caught unawares when the Lord returns on the day of wrath. Wanamaker summarizes the importance of this distinction quite well.

The behavior of the Thessalonian Christians must distinguish them from the rest of humanity who have no hope of salvation and therefore no reason to be prepared for what is to come. Because Christians have been appointed to salvation, they must behave in an appropriate manner, that is, with vigilance and self-control, as befits those who belong to the light and to the day rather than to the night and to darkness. In other words, Paul uses the notion of election to salvation, only to be actualized on the day of judgment, as a motivation to encourage proper religious and ethical conduct among his converts in the present.<sup>348</sup>

Paul's brief concluding remarks reflect a classical manner of making a request of his readers/hearers by asking that the conduct of God's people reflect to both insider and outsider who they are in Christ.<sup>349</sup> Proper conduct does not prove the truth of the gospel, but it does reduce the number of targets of criticism at which Jews and pagan Gentiles might aim. Having answered the questions raised regarding the Lord's return, in what follows, Paul moves on to wrap up the letter by addressing practical matters which would be important to a new congregation, especially one such as the Thessalonians who are trying to figure out how to live in the end times.<sup>350</sup>

In light of the fact that the Lord may return suddenly and unexpectedly, the series of exhortations which follow serve as instructions to the Thessalonian believers (and to us as well) as they await the Lord's return. Regardless of when Jesus will return, the church ought to go about its business. As Green points out, this is the purpose for the imperatives (commands) which follow.

What seems, then, to be simply a random collection of moral exhortations fired in a shotgun pattern is really part of a set outline of teaching. That outline touches on their social obligations toward church leadership (5:12-13), to various groups within the church (5:14), and to those outside the Christian community (5:15). The section then addresses the themes of proper Christian character before God (5:16-18) and the proper

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<sup>348</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 189.

<sup>349</sup> Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 118.

<sup>350</sup> Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 159.

function of prophecy in the church (5:19–22).<sup>351</sup>

Paul begins with instructions addressing how the Thessalonians are to view those who rule over them, presumably those who were in charge of teaching and preaching. Paul asks the Thessalonians “to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord, and who admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” Paul does not yet speak of those “over you” as pastors, elders (presbyters), bishops (overseers), or deacons, as these offices were still in the process of development as new churches were founded during the Gentile mission.<sup>352</sup> Formal church offices are clearly well-established by the time he composes his first letter to Timothy (chapter 3) about ten years later.

Paul does speak of those who are already working to serve and lead the church (προϊστῆμι). But here, he does not name these individuals, nor address his words to them. Some take this to mean these rulers were the patrons (leaders) of the households in which the congregations were likely meeting.<sup>353</sup> Early Christian congregations, like this one, may have been patterned after a synagogue. As a church is formed, those who enable God’s people to assemble in homes (patrons), those who might manifest gifts of teaching and exercising leadership (future elders and pastors), and who provide pastoral care, demonstrate this by “working hard” are to be held in high esteem. The Thessalonians are to respect those who function as proto elders, deacons, and ministers of word and sacrament, not because of the importance of the person, but because of the responsibility of shepherding this infant congregation. To these men are entrusted the mysteries of God as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:1. Those called to the work of the ministry and oversight are to be given respect due the office.

The next imperative coming from Paul— “be at peace among yourselves,” requires that the Thessalonians are to live in peace with one another, which is probably an echo from the Hebrew “shalom” as a blessing of peace given in YHWH’s name. The term is used by Paul throughout his letters in the sense that those who respect their leaders would also strive to keep the peace.<sup>354</sup> We probably should take this in the indicative sense of that peace which is the fruit of Christ’s cross (cf. Romans 5:1), serves as the basis for the command for Christians to get along with one another, especially as they respect their leaders.

This is a church facing external persecution from the Jews who drove Paul from the town, and those Gentiles who see Christianity as subversive. Many of its members may have been ostracized by their own families. The worst thing that can happen to such a church is the presence of those who seek to go their own way, do their own thing, and who will not follow those whom God raises up to lead them. Such people are often stubborn, quarrelsome, and refuse to get along with those with whom they disagree. Paul exhorts these Christians to get along with one another and to respect those who lead. Peace within the congregation is

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<sup>351</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 247.

<sup>352</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 227.

<sup>353</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 160.

<sup>354</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 119-120.



necessary for the church's survival under such difficult circumstances.

### G. On Christian duties (5:14-22)

**14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.**

As his series of imperatives unfolds, some commentators interpret what follows as general exhortations along the lines set out in Paul's letter to the Romans (for which there are direct parallels) as well as other Pauline epistles which come later and reflect these early commands which become a Pauline standard. But it is likely that Paul gives specific instructions here to correct some of the problems in the church which may have been brought about by confusion regarding our Lord's return. These imperatives are directed to the "brothers," who are already "in Christ." These new Christians are eagerly awaiting the Lord's return and can lose focus on the responsibilities of church life and how they are to govern themselves. To put it another way, the Thessalonians are to be characterized by the following conduct expected of those identified in 1 Thessalonians 5:5 as "children of the light." How are "children of light" to live in the midst of darkness?

For the third time, Paul says "*we urge you, brothers.*" The first in this series of imperatives is to "*admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*" "What follows is not simply a polite request but rather a strong exhortation concerning how the church should respond to its new leadership."<sup>355</sup> Paul is primarily speaking to any unruly among them to stop being unruly. "The term [ἄτακτος] appears in such places as the gymasiarchal law of Berea that prescribes the disciplinary measures that should be taken to correct the conduct of those of the gymnasium who do not follow the rules and who are therefore 'disorderly.'"<sup>356</sup> Paul urges those who seek to go their own way and do their own thing to put the well-being of the body of Christ first, not self-interest.

Admonishing—which is the responsibility of those to whom the Thessalonians are to submit—is not bullying nor is it lording it over others.<sup>357</sup> But those who need not work (the wealthy with slaves), or who are lazy (idle), or those content to give up because Jesus is coming back soon (those, of whom it can be said, are so heavenly-minded they are no earthly good) are to be "admonished" to carry their weight. From a different perspective, this might entail using their spiritual gifts for the well-being of Christ's body—the church. Given the difficulties this congregation is facing, Paul is essentially urging "all hands on deck."

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<sup>355</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 248.

<sup>356</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 253.

<sup>357</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 122.

There are also those among the Thessalonians who are weak and must be sheltered and protected so that they can grow in their faith to the point that they too can withstand the perils of the present evil age. Christians must be careful not to drive the weak out of the safety of the church where wolves may pick them off one at a time. The faint-hearted (literally, the “little-souled”)<sup>358</sup> are those who are discouraged (whom the KJV unfortunately describes as “feeble-minded”) and who might be on the verge of giving up on their commitment to Jesus Christ. This would be a very real problem in a church in which many were facing persecution or ostracization for turning from idols to Jesus and leaving their previous lives and perhaps their families behind.<sup>359</sup> Of course, the temptation would be strong to go back to idolatry so as to escape from the situation. These folks need encouragement.

In light of his previous exhortation to live in peace, in verse 15, Paul urges “*that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*” Paul does not affirm a *lex talionis* ethic—“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”—which some in the church may have felt justified in doing because of the gravity of the persecution they were facing.

Instead, the apostles’ exhortation echoes our Lord’s words about how to treat others (Matthew 5:38-42, turning the other cheek; Matthew 18:21-35, forgiving your brother of a debt; Luke 6:35, love your enemies, etc.) and is directed to those who are tempted to respond to persecution by retaliating in kind. As Paul will go on to point out in his second letter to the Thessalonians, “*God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.*” Vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us (Romans 12:19). Jesus will punish the wicked and vindicate his saints when he returns.

Meanwhile, until the day of judgment, Christians must strive to love their pagan neighbor, as well as get along with each other in circumstances like those facing the Thessalonian church. As justified sinners, we can no longer stand in judgment over each other since we are all equally sinful and our righteousness (Christ’s) is imputed to us and is not our own! A *lex talionis* sort of revenge is improper—the sense of getting even with those who have wronged you. Christians must realize that Jesus will take care of evil doers with pure justice—without sin or improper motives. Our frustration stems from the fact that Jesus will deal with such evil at the end of the age, not immediately, nor necessarily in our sight. We have to wait and be patient—the last thing we want to hear regarding those who have wronged us. All of these

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<sup>358</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 162.

<sup>359</sup> “Philosophers of many schools referred to people who found it hard to live virtuously as weak. The notion of weakness became part of the Stoic theory of cognition as early as Chrysippus (third century B.C.), who spoke of souls as weak or strong, diseased or healthy, just as bodies are (*SVF* 3.471). Stoics held that because of our weakness, we give assent to false judgments (*SVF* 1.67; 3.177; Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1122C; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.15), and wrong conduct, they said, is due to slackness and weakness of the soul (*SVF* 3.471, 473). Weakness is the inability of the rational faculty to bear virtue’s hardships (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.34; 5.3) and is the condition or disposition of the self-indulgent (Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.115; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.29, 42). The weak, knowing that their own judgment could be perverted by the crowd (Seneca, *Epistles* 7.1; 44.1), should avoid the crowd and not expose themselves to things by which they might be seduced (Seneca, *Epistle* 116.5). It was not only Stoics who described people as weak, but it was they who analyzed the human condition in infinite detail and drew out its moral implications. For example, weakness was described as a moral illness, exemplified by a fond imagining of something seemingly desirable, such as fame, love of pleasure, and the like (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.29, 42; Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.115);” Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 318-319.

exhortations are grounded in the love of neighbor as spelled out in the second table of the law and applied by Paul to this specific situation in terms Gentiles can understand.

Next, Paul spells out to the congregation a triad of specific actions which are the duties of Christians in all the churches of the Gentile mission. He moves on from our obligations to each other, to address the general Christian attitude of gratitude. *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (vv. 16-18). Rejoicing is one of the chief differences between Christianity and much of ancient religion. Most religions of the ancient world are focused upon self-improvement, contemplation and altered-consciousness. They tend to value subjective inner experience over objective truth and external facts. Introspection and personal discovery is key—not a hope in the resurrection of the body and life eternal.

But stoicism (a popular religion/philosophy of Paul’s day) is grounded in virtue and rigid logic, and whose adherents thought “rejoicing” in difficult circumstances was to be done from a sense of duty—more like resignation to endure a bad situation.<sup>360</sup> Weakness was despised by Stoics as a moral failure. Stoics sought to face death by banishing fear and striving for brave resignation.<sup>361</sup> Stoics would not connect “rejoicing” to any sort of religious practices since they do not have the Christian hope of Christ’s return.<sup>362</sup>

Therefore, Paul’s exhortation to rejoice may be an anti-Stoic polemic. You may recall this exhortation to rejoice is a repetition of 1 Thessalonians 1:6, when Paul tied joy and rejoicing to the presence of the indwelling Spirit. *“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”* It is because of Christ’s resurrection and the promise of his return that Paul can repeat this exhortation to rejoice in Philippians 4:4, *“rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”* No Stoic can say this.

Furthermore, the exhortation to “rejoice” or to be joyful has nothing to do with an outward countenance—always smiling or exuding a phony piety as is common in some Christian circles. As Ben Witherington points out, Paul . . .

is not asking his converts to rejoice because of their circumstances but rather to rejoice in

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<sup>360</sup> Justin Reid Allison, “*Therapy Session*,” in Joseph R. Dodson and David E. Briones, Paul and the Giants of Philosophy: Reading the Apostle in Greco-Roman Context (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 131-132.

<sup>361</sup> James P. Ware, “*What No Other God Could Do*,” in Dodson and Briones, Paul and the Giants of Philosophy, 131-132.

<sup>362</sup> In contrast, joy was not a characteristic of other religions of the era. The church was unique in its proclamation that joy was at the heart of its faith (see Rom. 14:17). Only Stoicism, with its dispassionate indifference, somewhat approached this Christian ideal. Epictetus (2.19.24) exclaimed, “Show me a man who though sick is happy, though in danger is happy, though dying is happy, though condemned to exile is happy, though in disrepute is happy. Show him! By the gods, I would fain see a Stoic!” The joy of the Stoic was not rooted in religion nor based on hope but arose out of the separation of people from their passions and the belief in the uncontrollable nature of fate. “*Qué será, será, so why get ruffled?*” The source of Christian joy was different. Christian joy, rooted in the gospel, is infused with hope, and grows in relationship with the Lord. The pessimism and lack of hope that generally characterized ancient society (see 4:13 and comments) found its answer in the salvation God offered through Jesus Christ. See Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 258.

the Lord (see Phil. 4:4; Rom. 14:17). Joy is not caused by circumstances but has to do with one's relationship with God and the adoration and praise and sheer joy that arises out of that communion with God. It is no accident that the exhortation to rejoice is coupled with the one to pray. Adoration results in joy in the Lord and prompts further prayer.<sup>363</sup>

Christians are not to base their piety upon external circumstances, but are to live as people who have joy because they have hope that Jesus may soon appear. This explains why it is that even in the midst of suffering and persecution, nevertheless, there can be a certain zest for life, and a confidence on the part of those who live out their faith knowing that this is their Father's world even though it is currently a fallen place. Like a Stoic, a Christian can "keep calm and carry on." But the Stoic does so by sheer resignation, not from the perspective of the Christian hope of a resurrection, eternal life, and a final judgment. To the stoic, weakness is a mortal sin. Yet, a Christian can also be a fearful and emotional mess at times, and still possess the kind of hope Paul describes. Paul has made it clear to the Thessalonians that they are "in Christ," whether living or dead. Christ's people will participate the great resurrection at the end of the age and be raised imperishable. There is remarkable irony here. We may think the worst thing that can happen to us is death, but that is not the case, is it?

It is not accidental, therefore, that in verses 17-18, Paul speaks of "praying continually," i.e., "without ceasing." This echoes Luke 18:1, when Jesus instructs his disciples to pray always and not lose heart. Jesus taught us that the Lord's Prayer is to be the pattern for all Christian prayer (Matthew 6:6-15). Most Christians know it from memory and ought to recite it often. In Romans 12:12, Paul exhorts Christians to "*rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*" Likewise in Ephesians 6:18, he informs us, to be "*praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.*" A wise saint (my grandmother) taught me that this meant keeping God in my thoughts and constantly talking to him. In more contemporary terms, she meant focusing my inner dialogue upon communicating and communing with God throughout the course of the day, not limited to set times of prayer. It was great advice, and thoroughly Pauline, especially in light of Romans 8:14-15. "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"*"

Reformed piety has long taught that prayer is the chief exercise of thanksgiving.<sup>364</sup> Since Christians depend upon God as their source of life, they are to continually pray for God's wisdom and strength. In the *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

The best stimulus which the saints have to prayer is when, in consequence of their own necessities, they feel the greatest disquietude, and are all but driven to despair, until faith seasonably comes to their aid; because in such straits the goodness of God so

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<sup>363</sup> Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 166.

<sup>364</sup> In Q & A 116 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we read, "Why do Christians need to pray? A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us. And also because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who continually and with heartfelt longing ask God for these gifts and thank him for them."

shines upon them, that while they groan, burdened by the weight of present calamities, and tormented with the fear of greater, they yet trust to this goodness, and in this way both lighten the difficulty of endurance, and take comfort in the hope of final deliverance.<sup>365</sup>

A Christian who does not pray is one who cuts themselves off from the gracious God who is very willing to give them everything they need and more according to his will. To quote Calvin yet again,

However, our minds are so easily depressed, so that they give in to impatience, we must follow the advice the apostle gives next. Upon being cast down or laid low we can be lifted up again by prayer as we transfer our burdens to God. As, however, there are every day, if not every moment, many things that may disturb our peace and mar our joy, the apostle tells us to pray continually.<sup>366</sup>

In several other places in his Thessalonian letters, Paul assumes that prayer is an essential part of the Christian life. He does so here, in 1 Thessalonians 5:25, and again in 2 Thessalonians 3:1.

Next, in verse 19, Paul exhorts the congregation, “*do not quench the Spirit,*” which is followed in verse 20-21 by three additional imperatives, “*do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.*” There is a great deal of debate about what Paul means here, especially in regard to charismatic gifts. Gordon Fee contends that “this series of imperatives is the earliest record in the New Testament of the basically charismatic nature of these early communities.”<sup>367</sup> He sees Paul’s reference as pointing to the exercise of charismatic gifts and a warning about restricting them.<sup>368</sup>

Not all commentators follow Fee’s line of thinking. Bruce sees this closely as tied to the context, noting that, “as the context goes on to make plain, the activity chiefly in view here is prophecy. In this respect the Spirit may be quenched when the prophet refuses to utter the message he has been given, or when others try to prevent him from uttering it.”<sup>369</sup> Morris points out that the mention of the despising of prophecy could point in the direction of “second advent speculations.” Given the speculative nature of “prophecies” about the second advent, some in Thessalonica were arguing that such prophetic activity should cease. But, as Morris cautions, Paul says otherwise (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:1– “*pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts,*

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<sup>365</sup> Calvin, Institutes, 3.20.11

<sup>366</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 59.

<sup>367</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 216.

<sup>368</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 219.

<sup>369</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 125.

*especially that you may prophesy*").<sup>370</sup> Morris concludes that Christians are to be receptive to true prophecy, but only after proper testing.

Calvin's take is that . . .

this metaphor is taken from the power and nature of the Spirit. It is the Spirit's work to illumine our understanding, and it is therefore called our light; it is likewise right to say that we quench him and put out his fire when we make his grace to be without fruit. . . . Although treating prophecies with contempt is a way of putting out the Spirit's fire, people are also guilty of quenching the Spirit when, instead of fanning the flames of their spiritual life more and more as they should, they make God's gifts void through neglect. This warning not to quench the Spirit therefore has a wider application than just despising prophecy. Do not put out the Spirit's fire means "be enlightened by the Spirit of God, and see that you do not lose that light through your ingratitude." This is an exceedingly useful admonition. We see that those who have "shared in the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews 6:4), when they reject such a precious gift from God or allow themselves to be swept along with the vanity of this world, are struck down blind, so they will be an example to others. Therefore, we must be on our guard against laziness, by which God's light is choked in us.<sup>371</sup>

Beale (in basic agreement with Calvin) concludes that Paul is . . .

generally referring to the need not to stifle the Spirit in all the ways it manifests itself. In particular, the apostle wants the readers to be careful not to suppress the working of the Spirit through prophets, which is suggested by the fact that one of the three occurrences of *Spirit* up to this point in the letter refers to prophetic revelation through Paul (1:5) and another refers to the Spirit in genuine saints, which should cause them to accept and not reject God and his revelatory instruction through the apostle (4:8).<sup>372</sup>

He concludes,

It is possible Paul is confronting a contempt of the content of prophecy and not the activity itself, since he mentions *prophecies* and not "prophets." This is supported by noticing that 5:21-22 focus on evaluating *everything* (*panta*, a neuter plural referring not to people but to the substance of prophecies), holding *on to the good* (*to kalon*, a neuter substantive) prophecies and rejecting the false. If so, the main application of this verse to the contemporary church is that it should hold to the truth of God's revelation in prophetic Scripture and abstain from erroneous teachings supposedly based on this revelation.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 177.

<sup>371</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 59-60.

<sup>372</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 172.

<sup>373</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 172-173

Another helpful take is given by Malherbe.

Paul is not reflecting on the phenomenon of prophecy but focuses on certain prophetic utterances. The Spirit in v 19 is the prophetic Spirit, but the complementary parallel in v 20 shows that Paul's real interest is in prophetic utterances, as the plural *propheteias* also makes clear. Furthermore, the parallels show how quenching is to be understood, as despising prophetic utterances. This naturally means utterances spoken by someone else, which is in keeping with the communal interest Paul has shown throughout.<sup>374</sup>

Malhebre adds something significant. I take Paul to be warning the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit by despising certain prophecies coming to them from lesser known prophets (i.e., not from Paul). This may well be tied to end-times speculation as Morris suggests. Regardless, Paul stresses that all prophecies are to be tested, and that those deemed genuine are to be accepted. Remember, few of the New Testament letters had been composed by the time Paul composes this letter—James and Galatians, and none of the gospels. “Prophecy” was in many cases Spirit-enabled preaching of Christ from the Old Testament.

Beale contends that there is also evidence that prophecy here is the Spirit-enabled utterance that we know today as preaching. Morris adds, “It is often thought today that prophecy in the early church was more or less like preaching today. There is something to be said for this.”<sup>375</sup> The contemporary application would be that putting out the fire of the Spirit is, in a sense, contempt for preaching (prophecies). We are not to neglect the preaching of the word, by not giving it our proper attention—either by not attending church where prophecy takes place, or by otherwise avoiding the public proclamation of God's word. We should expect God to speak to us through his word when it is proclaimed. This supports the sufficiency of Scripture as the only sure and certain source of tested prophecy.

Those who understand Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians as instruction to the contemporary church as well (i.e., allow the exercise of all charismatic gifts), stumble over the reality of the close of the apostolic age. The majority of charismatic manifestations (especially miracles) are tied to the apostolic office. Add to this the fact that the prophecies of which Paul is speaking have given way to the canonical epistles which became the normative source of Spirit-inspired post-apostolic preaching.<sup>376</sup> Christians are to maintain a healthy skepticism about on-going “revelations,” since we are reminded in Psalm 116:11 that “all men are liars.” We are to test everything by the Word of God. We hold fast to that which is good, that is, that which squares with what is taught in Holy Scripture.

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<sup>374</sup> Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 336.

<sup>375</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 177.

<sup>376</sup> Beale puts it this way, “The likelihood is that prophecy in the New Testament is the same as in the Old (a direct, infallible revelation from God) and that the discernment of prophecy throughout the New Testament is a matter of distinguishing between true and false prophets . . . . If the gift of apostleship ceased by the end of the first century, then it is possible that the gift of prophet likewise came to an end. If this were the case, which is greatly debated, then it would emphasize all the more that the point of 5:19–22 for the modern church is that it guard the truth of prophetic scriptural revelation and reject false teachings purportedly grounded on this revelation. See Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 173.

## H. Additional prayers (5:23-24)

**23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**

Paul concludes his letter with a blessing and several further exhortations. The apostle prays for his readers in v. 23-24. He reminds them that our God is a God of peace, a Hebraism which sums up the blessings of the gospel—being at peace with God.<sup>377</sup> Paul prays that God will sanctify his people (ἀγιάζω), which points us in the direction that sanctification is God’s work not ours. Wanamaker adds that “for Paul divine peace ultimately refers to eschatological salvation, as is indicated by such passages as Rom. 2:10; 5:1; 8:6; 14:17; Phil. 4:7.”<sup>378</sup> Paul has spoken of the importance of sanctification some four times in chapter four (4:3, 4, 7, 8). Since the Thessalonians were still new and maturing Christians, Paul’s prayer for them is that God will bring their sanctification to its completion.<sup>379</sup>

The word translated by the ESV as “completely” is ὀλοτελής (*holotelēs*). In one ancient source, the word was used to refer to a fully developed fetus.<sup>380</sup> In another ancient source, it referred to Nero’s complete or full exemption from taxation for all who attended the Isthmian games (in Corinth).<sup>381</sup> Paul prays that God will bring these new Christians to the fulness of the sanctification he’s been insisting upon throughout the letter (especially in regard to sexual sin). This reminds us that from beginning (election) to end (blamelessness), our salvation (deliverance from the wrath of God) is the work of God.

The goal of sanctification (i.e., its completion) is that the whole person (spirit, soul, and body) be kept blameless until our Lord returns. Some have used Paul’s list of spirit, soul, and body to argue for trichotomy—the view that human nature has three constituent parts (or elements). But as Bruce points out,

It is precarious to try to construct a tripartite doctrine of human nature on the juxtaposition of the three nouns, πνευμα, ψυχή and σώμα. The three together give further emphasis to the completeness of sanctification for which the writers pray, but the three together add but little to the sense of ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας (“your hearts”) in 3:13. The distinction between the bodily and spiritual aspects of human nature is easily made,

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<sup>377</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 129.

<sup>378</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 205.

<sup>379</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 63.

<sup>380</sup> Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 338.

<sup>381</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 129.



but to make a comparable distinction between “spirit” and “soul” is forced.<sup>382</sup>

Trichotomy has been rejected by virtually all Christian theologians as a speculative Greek philosophical notion rather than a biblical conception.<sup>383</sup> A problem faced by many theological traditions is that there are oftentimes fundamental differences at critical points between the “official doctrine” affirmed by the theologians of that tradition, and those doctrines actually believed and practiced by the rank and file. The widespread acceptance of trichotomy among American Christians is a case in point.

Admittedly, a doctrine is not necessarily false simply because it has a dubious pedigree, but it is important to remember that a doctrine’s pedigree is often a good clue as to its source and ultimate consequences. When viewed from the perspective of Christian reflection across time, trichotomy has strong ties to platonic philosophy. With its roots in Plato’s distinction between body and soul, and Aristotle’s further division of soul into “animal” and “rational” elements, the trichotomist notion of human nature as tripartite is unmistakably pagan rather than biblical.

Several early Christian writers, such as Origen, found confirmation of trichotomy in the words of Paul, recorded in 1 Thessalonians 5:23; “*may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Trichotomists point to Paul’s assertion as supposedly affirming the tripartite distinction of body, soul, and spirit.

Yet, when viewed in the light of the cumulative biblical data, which teaches otherwise, there is another intention on Paul’s part. The apostle is not cataloging the constituent elements of human nature any more than Jesus was doing so in Luke 10:27 when he says, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.*” As does Jesus, Paul uses multiple terms (body, soul, and spirit) not as a list of constituent parts of human nature, but for the sake of emphasis.

## VII. Closing Remarks (5:25-28)

**25 Brothers, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

As he wraps up his letter in verse 25, Paul bids the Thessalonians, “*Brothers, pray for us.*” As Paul has prayed for his readers/hearers, so now he implores them to pray for him and his co-senders, Timothy and Silvanus (Silas). Paul does the same in several of his letters (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2; Romans 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:19, 20; Philippians 1:19; Colossians 4:3-4; and Philemon 22). He also asks them to greet the brothers with a “holy kiss,”

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<sup>382</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 130.

<sup>383</sup> Horton, The Christian Faith, 377-379. See my essay on this topic: <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2022/09/man-as-a-body-soul-composite/>

as a sign of the deep fellowship believers have with each other, something Paul also does in other letters (e.g. Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12). A kiss on the mouth was seen as an erotic gesture, but a kiss on the cheek or forehead was a sign of love, honor, and respect. A kiss on the cheek was a common “good-bye” gesture in the ancient world, and served as a powerful symbol of Christian unity, especially, for example, if a slave-owner was to show such brotherhood via such a kiss to an enslaved person.<sup>384</sup>

In verse 27, Paul adjures those receiving this letter to make sure that it was read aloud in the church. Paul is, in effect, putting those responsible for doing so under oath, so that all in the church heard Paul’s instruction and admonitions. Since the misunderstanding in the church over the details of the Lord’s return had the potential for creating strife and division, Paul stresses the importance that his answers to their questions be made public. This was also to be done to ensure that Paul’s instructions about Christian living be made clear to all—the fearful, the idle, the weak, and any who were focused upon self-interest, not the good of the body.

The Thessalonians are to live as “children of the light,” not as they once lived, as those who were asleep. By reading this letter aloud, this would answer their questions about the fate of those who died before our Lord’s return (although a second letter reveals yet another question was still pressing), as well as remind the congregation of their duty to, “*rejoice always, pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*”

In verse 28, Paul closes the letter with the standard Greco-Roman benediction, but now “Christianized.”<sup>385</sup> Closing benedictions were usually blessings extended along the lines of the Stoic practice, “be strong,” or “prosper,” but Paul modifies this to focus upon giving them a blessing of great need to any Christian congregation struggling with issues such as those in Thessalonica truly needs, “*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*” Paul opened his First Thessalonian letter with such a blessing and it is only fitting that he close with the same.

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<sup>384</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 270-271.

<sup>385</sup> Fee notes, that “it is hardly surprising, given how Paul ‘Christianizes’ the common greeting in contemporary letters, that he does the same with the concluding matters. Although it is true that, in many examples from Greco-Roman antiquity, writers of letters have shown themselves somewhat reluctant to “sign off,” nonetheless there are few, if any, examples of what Paul does here—thoroughly modify standard stuff both by elaborating and by ‘Christianizing’ it.” See, Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 233.

## The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

### Introduction

We have already addressed the circumstances of Paul's arrival in Thessalonica, his short stay in the city, the establishment of the church there, and the subsequent questions put to him by the Thessalonians via Timothy about the fate of those who die before our Lord's return. We concluded that Paul and his two co-senders, Timothy and Silvanus (Silas) composed the first Thessalonian Letter in 50-51 CE, while together in Corinth. We noted at the time, there are a number of challenges to Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, largely due to supposed conflicts with the Book of Acts. But as Porter and Wanamaker conclude,<sup>386</sup> "no contemporary scholars of repute seem to doubt the authentic Pauline character of the [first] letter." Yet, Wanamaker notes that, "the same, however, is certainly not true of 2 Thessalonians, and in fact in the last two decades the balance of expressed opinion has tilted decisively against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians."<sup>387</sup> In the introduction to Paul's first Thessalonian letter, I mentioned that we would address these objections when we take up Paul's second letter. Here we are.

The basis for most objections to Pauline authorship is that Paul seems to know little about the actual circumstances in the Thessalonian church other than what he has heard from Timothy. However, by the time the second letter is composed by Paul with the names of his companions attached yet again, the apostle seems to be aware that the church was facing increasing persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:4-6). He is concerned about confusion in their midst regarding the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). And he feels compelled to address the behavior of some in the congregation (3:6-15).<sup>388</sup> If the author is lacking more precise information and is not more specific about the situation in Thessalonica, it is *possible* Paul is not the author of this letter.

But these objections are easily answered. Paul expresses his desire to get back to Thessalonica because of what he has heard from Timothy, but was unable to do so (1 Thessalonians 2:17). His information may be second hand (through Timothy), but that doesn't mean that Paul is out of touch, or that his knowledge of the circumstances on the ground in Thessalonica is incorrect.

Other arguments raised against Pauline authorship by critical scholars arise from a hermeneutic of suspicion, not from compelling historical and/or theological inconsistencies. In many critical circles, anyone who professes to believe in miracles, who accepts the veracity of Scripture, etc., is dismissed as a unustworthy interpreter (because of their biases) and their acceptance of traditional notions of Pauline authorship which should be challenged as a matter of principle—"guilty until proven innocent." But in disciplines other than biblical studies which deal with ancient texts, it is customary to give the document the benefit of doubt unless there is

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<sup>386</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 208.

<sup>387</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 17.

<sup>388</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 58.

substantial evidence of tampering, a questionable manner of transmission, and other background circumstances.<sup>389</sup> None of these things are in play with Paul's second Thessalonian letter.

A list of reasons upon which Pauline authorship is doubted by critical scholars bears out the nit-picky, nature of these arguments.

- 1). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul does not attach his signature, but he does in this second letter
- 2). The second letter makes no reference to the first
- 3). The first letter is warm and friendly, the second is more "frigid" in tone
- 4). The first letter is clearly written to a Gentile audience, the second seems to reflect a more Jewish situation
- 5). The Thessalonians seem to not to have taken, or appear unaware of the theological instruction offered in the second letter (as though they had never received a prior letter)
- 6). The two letters are very similar in language and content—why are the letters so similar if written so closely together in time by the same author? Should there not be more substantial differences if different questions are being addressed?
- 7). Paul seems to teach an expectancy of the Lord's imminent return in his first letter, while the second letter he emphasizes the signs which precede the coming of the Lord
- 8). Paul's discussion of the "man of sin" assumes facts which come from elsewhere in the New Testament. Why would Paul use and reply upon information gleaned from others?
- 9). Paul speaks more about the Holy Spirit in the first letter than in the second. The same can be said of Christ's death and resurrection<sup>390</sup>
- 10). Based upon its contents, 2 Thessalonians appears to be written prior to 1 Thessalonians<sup>391</sup>
- 11). The one "objective" argument raised against Pauline authorship (which was never widely accepted) is that according to statistical analysis, the author of the Thessalonian

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<sup>389</sup> According to nycourts.gov, sec 807, "Ancient Documents." "A statement in a document is admissible if it is proved to be in existence for more than thirty years, and its authenticity is supported by its proper custody or otherwise accounted for, and it is free from any indication of fraud or invalidity."

<sup>390</sup> These are summarized from Porter's discussion, in The Apostle Paul, 229-232.

<sup>391</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, xli-xlii.

letters did not write Romans, the Corinthian letters, and Galatians<sup>392</sup>

In response to this catalogue of “flimsy” reasons, Stanley Porter remarks,

these are the . . . major internal arguments, along with a few other factors, that are often presented regarding the authorship of 2 Thessalonians. As I attempted to show, none of them is decisive to overcome the overwhelming and clear external evidence for Pauline authorship. In fact, many of the internal arguments provide little compelling evidence to doubt Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, but instead provide confirmatory evidence for Paul as the author.<sup>393</sup>

To my mind, Porter’s assessment carries the day. Gordon Fee’s evaluation of these arguments nicely dovetails with Porter’s and exposes the chief weakness of critical method—its utter subjectivity. Fee writes,

When one reads the literature by those who argue that Paul is not the author of this letter, one is struck by the “thinness” of the argumentation as such, especially since there is hardly a single argument that does not take some form of subjectivity on the part of its proponent(s). And at the end of the day, it becomes quite clear that had this letter not contained the material in 2:1–12, this view would not have arisen at all. Indeed, the most often-recurring argument against Pauline authorship is a very subjective one, that this letter lacks the “warmth” of the first one. But one may rightly wonder how this is an objective argument at all.<sup>394</sup>

The traditional dating of Second Thessalonians therefore stands. If Paul’s first letter was written shortly after Thessalonica was evangelized (51 CE), then the second Thessalonian letter was sent “not long afterward,”<sup>395</sup> likely within the year.<sup>396</sup>

### **The Situation in Thessalonica**

Paul’s brief introduction is quite similar to his first letter. The opening of this second letter reflects Paul’s knowledge of the situation, and reveals his pastoral pride in the congregation, given that they are doing well in spite of difficult circumstances.

The critical matter which prompts a second letter is that yet another misunderstanding has

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<sup>392</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, xxxiv.

<sup>393</sup> Porter, The Apostle Paul, 232.

<sup>394</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 238.

<sup>395</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, xxxv.

<sup>396</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 15.

arisen in Thessalonica, the news of which has reached Paul shortly after composing his first letter. Someone in the church (or who exercised influence upon it) was teaching that the day of the Lord, and all of the events associated with it (such as the return of Jesus to judge the world and raise the dead) had already occurred. There is the possibility that some in the congregation took Paul's comments about the timing of the Lord's return, "like a thief in the night," to mean that it already had taken place. Paul responds to this mistaken notion by telling the Thessalonians not to be alarmed because the day of the Lord cannot come until two very specific signs are present. The first is the appearance of a mysterious figure Paul whom identifies as the "man of sin," which is coupled to a time of significant apostasy, both of which have been prevented from coming to pass by some sort of divine restraint.<sup>397</sup>

Yet another reason for composing this letter is that Paul is aware of an increasing threat of the persecution of Christians in the city. Paul informs the congregation that they should be thankful despite their difficulties because God's eternal purposes are being worked out and will be realized in the final judgment when God's people are delivered from his wrath which is coming upon the whole world. God is not indifferent to the suffering of his people despite their on-going trials.<sup>398</sup>

It may also be the case that Paul is still dealing with the "idle" and those causing contention in the church. Paul deals with such people quite firmly in his second letter—a matter which he addresses at the end, perhaps for the sake of greater emphasis (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13).

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<sup>397</sup> Weima, "1-2 Thessalonians," 881; Porter, The Apostle Paul, 238.

<sup>398</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 240-241.

**Outline**<sup>399</sup>**I. PRESCRIPT (1:1-2)****II. THANKSGIVING, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND PRAYER (1:3-12)****A. Thanksgiving (1:3-4)****B. Encouragement (1:5-10)****C. Prayer Report (1:11-12)****III. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MAN OF SIN (2:1-12)****Excursus on The Doctrine of "Antichrist" - A Composite Photograph?****IV. FURTHER THANKSGIVING. ENCOURAGEMENT AND PRAYER (2:13-17)****A. Thanksgiving (2:13-14)****B. Encouragement (2:15)****C. First Wish-Prayer (2:16-17)****V. FURTHER PRAYER (3:1-5)****A. Prayer Request (3:1-2)****B. Expression of Confidence (3:3-4)****C. Second Wish-Prayer (3:5)****VI. EXHORTATION (3:6-16)****A. On Idleness (3:6-13)****B. On Discipline (3:14-15)****C. Third Wish-Prayer (3:16)****VII. LETTER CLOSING (3:17-18)**

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<sup>399</sup> Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 139.

## I. Prescript (1:1-2)<sup>400</sup>

**1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Almost identical to the greeting found in 1 Thessalonians, the same three names are listed (Paul and his co-senders Timothy and Silvanus). Paul speaks of God as “our Father,” which may be an echo from Jesus’s instructions in “the Lord’s Prayer” (Cf. Matthew 6:9-15). One writer points out that “Paul is thinking of what God has come to be to the believers in Thessalonica and of the bond that unites them with the apostles.”<sup>401</sup> We need to keep in mind that those reading or hearing these letters were pagans only months before, and they knew nothing of such an intimate relationship with the Creator-Redeemer prior to Paul’s coming to the city. This is all new to them.

Paul extends the “fatherhood” of God beyond the scope of Jesus Christ as his Son. God is the Father not only of our Lord, but of all believers, who become his adopted children with all the rights and privileges thereof. It is also interesting to note that, “the source of grace and peace is named, as in all other Pauline epistles except 1 Thessalonians. Whereas grace is particularly associated with Christ (2 C. 13:14) and peace with God (Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4:7), here God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are named together as the one source of both grace and peace.”<sup>402</sup> The trinitarian implications of this should not be overlooked, which as B. B. Warfield perceptively notes, “bears on its face the evidence of long and familiar use.”<sup>403</sup>

Such circumstances indicate that this epistle was written shortly after the first letter, with a short interval of months, not years.

## II. Thanksgiving, Encouragement and Prayer (1:3-12)

### A. Thanksgiving (1:3-4)

**3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. 4 Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.**

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<sup>400</sup> The outline is taken from, Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 139.

<sup>401</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 191.

<sup>402</sup> I. Howard Marshall, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 168.

<sup>403</sup> B. B. Warfield, “*God Our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*,” in Biblical Doctrines, 213.



In the original language, verses 3-10 are one sentence,<sup>404</sup> though Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians begins with a thanksgiving (in verses 3-4). It was common to begin such formal letters with these types of greetings. But Paul feels compelled to give thanks to God for his wonderful work in the midst of the Thessalonian congregation, because their faith in God and love for each other was growing despite being in the midst of the persecution that they were experiencing. Their growth in faith and love are the fruit of God's saving work, not something for which the Thessalonians could take credit. While no one wants to be persecuted, faith often thrives in the midst of trials and suffering. As Paul sees it, it was their love for each other that bound all of them together, so they could endure difficult times. The Thessalonians are not merely hanging on, but were making significant progress in their faith in God's promise and in their love for their brothers and sisters, a matter of great encouragement to other congregations.

The word rendered "therefore," (*hostē*) in verse 4, is a term which indicates that what follows is a consequence of the preceding. Because of the increasing faith and love amongst the Thessalonian Christians in the face of persecution, Paul can "*boast about you in the churches of God,*" since this is a result of God's grace, a fact increasingly known throughout the region.<sup>405</sup> Paul will say much the same thing in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. According to Calvin, this perseverance should be seen as a fruit of faith:

The apostle begins by commending the Thessalonians so he could have the opportunity to pass on an exhortation to them. Using such an approach we will have more success among those who have already started the course. Their previous progress is not passed over in silence, but we can remind them how much farther they still have to travel and urge them to make progress. The apostle had in his previous letter commended their faith and love, and he now declares that they were increasing in both of these: because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Unquestionably, this course of action should be followed by all godly people – to examine themselves every day and see how far they have progressed. This, therefore, is the true commendation of believers – their growing daily in faith and love.<sup>406</sup>

As we have seen in Paul's first letter, the strong faith and love found in the Thessalonian church was already common knowledge (1 Thessalonians 1:7-10) throughout the region (i.e., "the churches"), which indicates that even in the first phase of the Gentile mission, a number of new congregations have been founded throughout Achaia. Paul is especially thankful for their perseverance, which is an active and courageous quality, rather than a kind of passive resignation typical of Stoicism.<sup>407</sup> The Thessalonian congregation has become an example to other congregations founded during this phase of Paul's missionary activity.

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<sup>404</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 246.

<sup>405</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 218.

<sup>406</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 73-74.

<sup>407</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 195.

## B. Encouragement (1:5-10)

**5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—6 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.**

This remarkable summation of biblical teaching on eschatology set out in verses 5-10 (specifically, Paul's doctrine of Christ's *parousia*) is Paul's theological explanation to the Thessalonians for their suffering.<sup>408</sup> The key point of this section is that God has a purpose in the persecution they are enduring and they should not read into their difficult circumstances the fear that God has abandoned them. He has not. If Paul exhorts the Thessalonians not to repay evil for evil, it is because at least one element of Christ's return is the meting out of final judgment upon all those who have persecuted the people of God, not only in Thessalonica, but in all times and places.<sup>409</sup>

Dispensationalists, like John MacArthur, cite this passage as proof that God will avenge the unjust persecution of the righteous, but affirm that this occurs at the end of a thousand year millennial reign of Christ on the earth.<sup>410</sup> Matt Waymeyer contends that Paul is affirming that divine retribution upon unbelievers commences at our Lord's second advent, but culminates in the eternal state which begins with the final judgment at the conclusion of the millennial age.<sup>411</sup> This requires that a millennial age exist between Christ's second advent and the final judgment, something foreign to Paul's comments here which ties to Christ's return directly to the final judgment. J. Dwight Pentecost, whose dispensational standard *Things to Come*, makes scant reference to this passage, and that only in connection with Christ's second advent.<sup>412</sup> Given the

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<sup>408</sup> Bruce contends that "we might suppose it to be part of an early confession of faith (the part dealing with the last things), but it is much more satisfactory to think of it as belonging to an early 'testimony' collection. . . . [I]n 2 Thess 1:5-10 we are not dealing with distinctively Pauline doctrine; the eschatological teaching here is, so far as can be judged, that generally held throughout the early church, and the testimony collection by means of which it is set forth originated in pre-Pauline Christianity and continued to be developed as a growing tradition which is abundantly attested in Justin Martyr and especially in Cyprian's *Testimonia aduersus Iudaeos*." I'm not convinced Bruce is right about this teaching being "pre-Pauline," because Paul is here addressing a specific situation in Thessalonica. But his teaching about the *parousia* is the same that taught throughout the New Testament. See Bruce, *I & II Thessalonians*, 148.

<sup>409</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 283-284.

<sup>410</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, 16, 202.

<sup>411</sup> Matt Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come* (NP: Kress Biblical Resources, 2016), 124-127.

<sup>412</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, e.g., 157, 210, 392-394, 471,

challenge this passage presents to dispensationalism, one would think Pentecost would address the matter in more detail.

Perhaps the preeminent dispensationalist theologian, John Walvoord offers a rather bizarre explanation of this passage. Discussing the matter in the context of the debate between “pre” and “post” tribulationists, Walvoord writes,

. . . the Thessalonians are being told that God in His own time will destroy their persecutors. Indeed the persecutors of the Thessalonians will not be present at the second coming of Christ, for their resurrection is delayed until the end of the thousand years of the millennial kingdom. At that time they will be raised from the dead and cast into the Lake of Fire. . . . Pretribulationists agree that when Christ comes in His second coming, He will punish unbelievers and deliver believers; yet they also hold that these believers will be, not members of the church, but those who have come to Christ subsequent to the Rapture.<sup>413</sup>

This is yet another instance of dispensationalists painting themselves into an interpretive corner because their complicated presuppositions prevent them from embracing Paul’s rather uncomplicated point, namely that when Jesus returns he will mete out his vengeance in the form of eternal punishment upon those who persecute God’s people.

Jeffrey Weima points out that in verses 5-10, “a number of terms and theological themes . . . appear to have been influenced by the OT. Particularly striking are the several parallels with Isa. 66, the final chapter of that important prophetic book, which describes what the Lord will do in the final days to prosper his chosen people and to punish the wicked.”<sup>414</sup> What follows then is filled with loud echoes from the Old Testament—something we have come to expect of the apostle. When contemplating the fact of the Lord’s *parousia*, Paul’s mind naturally recalls those Old Testament texts which deal with the day of the Lord and final judgment.

In verse 5, Paul explains that the persecution they are facing “*is evidence of the righteous judgment of God.*” The context seems to indicate that the “all this,” (i.e., the growth of the Thessalonian’s faith and love) is evidence of God’s righteous judgment. This was especially the case in difficult times such as those which the Thessalonians were then enduring. Despite all appearances to the contrary, God vindicates his people. The key idea is that the outcome of God’s righteous judgment means that his people will escape the wrath which is to come upon the whole world, including those who are currently persecuting them. As Beale puts it,

Explicitly in mind is that a person’s enduring faith in Christ’s death and resurrection and the accompanying fruits of such faith are *evidence* that God’s righteous judgment has been passed in one’s favor. Though God has commenced passing this judgment already, the focus of this context is on the completion of the juridical decision in the

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<sup>413</sup> Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 236-237.

<sup>414</sup> Weima, “*1-2 Thessalonians*,” 883.

future to vindicate saints from the final punishment to be suffered by unbelievers.<sup>415</sup>

For believers, their judgment has already come, in and through the verdict already rendered about them through their faith in Jesus which results in their justification—they have been declared “righteous.” Yet, God’s vindication of his saving purposes will come on the last day. Paul offers an explanation of this in the second half of the verse (5b), “*that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.*” God uses our suffering at the hands of the world as a means of bringing about his purposes, namely that believers “should be considered worthy,” or as Morris nicely puts it, “be shown to be worthy.”<sup>416</sup>

Paul is not telling the Thessalonians “if you suffer sufficiently,” then you will be worthy of the kingdom. Rather, suffering prepares us for the life in the kingdom into which we have already been called. Paul is, in effect, exhorting the Thessalonians to see their current situation from God’s perspective. From our vantage point, we might take present suffering as a sign that God is withholding his blessings from us, or that he is punishing us for our sins. But as Paul explains, this is not true. The suffering the Thessalonians were experiencing does not earn for them, nor make them worthy of deliverance. On the contrary, God’s righteous judgment does that—his legal verdict has already pronounced upon them through faith in Jesus, and this will exempt them from the fate of unbelievers in the final judgment described in the next verses, 6-9.<sup>417</sup>

Yet their current sufferings do play an important role in the development of their growing faith and love.

Morris provides a helpful perspective here,

The New Testament does not look on suffering in quite the same way as do most modern people. To us suffering is an evil in itself, something to be avoided at all costs. Now while the New Testament does not gloss over this aspect of suffering it does not lose sight of the fact that in the good providence of God suffering is often the means of working out God’s eternal purpose. It develops in the sufferer qualities of character. It teaches valuable lessons. Suffering is not thought of as something that may be possibly avoided by the Christian. For believers it is inevitable. They are appointed to it (1 Thess. 3:3). They must live out their lives and develop their Christian character in a world dominated by non-Christian ideas. Their faith is accordingly not some fragile thing, to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool insulated from all shocks. It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble and in the furnace of affliction. Furthermore, not only is it to be manifested there, but, in part at any rate, it is to be fashioned in such places. The very troubles and afflictions the world heaps upon on believers, become, under God, the means of making those believers what they ought to be. When we have come to regard suffering in this light, it is not to be thought of as evidence that God has

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<sup>415</sup> Beale, 1–2 Thessalonians, 183-184.

<sup>416</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 197.

<sup>417</sup> Contra Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 223.

forsaken his people, but as evidence that God is with them.<sup>418</sup>

This is an important perspective, and flies in the face of much of the contemporary prosperity gospel's stress upon "winning," "attaining," and "acquiring," while avoiding any and all hardship. God will allow his people to suffer as a testimony to the world that he is with his people in the midst of their sufferings.

John Calvin offers additional insight into the nature of such affliction:

No persecutions can make us worthy of the kingdom of God, nor does Paul here argue about the basis for being worthy of God's kingdom. He is simply applying the normal teaching of Scripture – that God destroys in us the things of the world, that he may replace them with a better life. In addition to this, God shows us the value of eternal life through our afflictions. In short, Paul simply points out the way in which believers are prepared and, as it were, polished under God's anvil, inasmuch as through afflictions they are taught to renounce the world and aim for God's heavenly kingdom. Further, they are strengthened in the hope of eternal life as they fight for Christ. This is the entrance Christ taught his disciples about: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Matthew 7:13). "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (Luke 13:24).<sup>419</sup>

Believers who have been called into Christ's kingdom through the gospel are to demonstrate that their lives reflect the prior call of God. Again, this does not mean that those who suffer worthily will be called into God's kingdom. But it does mean that God's prior work in us, election, calling, justification, and sanctification will be manifest in the lives of God's people, especially in their struggle with sin and in their new godly affections. Our struggle with sin and new way of thinking equips us for the inevitable struggle ahead. When we do as the Thessalonians did, and turn from the idols of our culture to embrace the Savior, it soon becomes evident that those who reject Christ will hate us too.

Having addressed the judicial event (God's righteous judgment) which delivers believers from final judgment (justification), Paul's focus turns to what will happen when God's vengeance is poured out upon unbelievers and that world system which persecutes Christ's own. Witherington asserts that, "Paul paints a picture of a courtroom with God as the judge. What is implied as well is that God's judgment is redemptive, that in the same act in which he judges the tormentors he also vindicates the tormented. There are two sides to this coin of judgment."<sup>420</sup> Malherbe too points out that this image points to a divine tribunal,<sup>421</sup> which I take as a reference to final judgment.

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<sup>418</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 197.

<sup>419</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 76.

<sup>420</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 193.

<sup>421</sup> Malherbe, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 397.

The covenantal promise of blessing and threatened curse will become reality when Jesus returns. God is just—he is holy in all his ways and his laws reflect his will for his creatures. He will act as the holy and righteous avenger against all those who mock his laws and persecute his church. Paul is emphatic that God will judge those who persecute his people. Although evil often appears to triumph in this life, there is a time coming when God will avenge his redeemed saints and pour out his wrath upon those who reject the Savior. This day will come to pass even though it seems to us that it never will.

In verse 6, Paul addresses the fate of those upon whom God's eschatological wrath will fall, declaring that *"since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,"* reminding his readers that although they are not to repay evil for evil because such human judgments are always tainted by sin, God will execute his holy justice (a pure form of *lex talionis*). This is an important point for a persecuted people to hear from the apostle. If they are not to take revenge upon those who wrong them, they need to know that God will bring to pass his holy and righteous judgment upon his enemies, including those who are persecuting them. On the last day, God will right all wrongs. The Thessalonians are to endure in the present because they know what is yet to come in the end.

When Paul takes up the matter of God's judgment upon those who persecute his people, we should not be surprised that there are a number of Old Testament echoes found here,<sup>422</sup> such as Deuteronomy 32:35; *"Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly,"* as well as Isaiah 66:1-6, which is worth reciting in its entirety.

*Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. "He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight." Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word: "Your brothers who hate you and cast you out for my name's sake have said, 'Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy'; but it is they who shall be put to shame. "The sound of an uproar from the city! A sound from the temple! The sound of the LORD, rendering recompense to his enemies!"*

Isaiah 66:15-16, is also in view throughout what follows. *"For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD*

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<sup>422</sup> Green points out that "over and over biblical and extrabiblical literature declares that God's judgment is in accordance with his justice (Gen. 18:25; 1 Kings 8:31-32; 2 Chr. 6:22-23; Pss. 7:8-9, 11 [7:9-10, 12]; 9:4, 8 [9:5, 9]; 35:24 [34:24]; Tob. 3:2; 2 Macc. 12:6; Sir. 35:18; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 18:6-7; 19:1-2). See, Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 286.

*shall be many."*

Jesus spoke openly about the coming eschatological judgement. In Mark 9:47-48, he declares "*if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*" Similarly, in Luke 13:3, Jesus says, "*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" Paul will later speak of this as beginning in the present through the preaching of the cross (Romans 1:18 ff), and culminating in the eschatological judgment spoken of here. Recall the apostle's words in 1 Thessalonians 5:9; "*for God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

God will repay those who have done evil while at the same time granting relief to those who are his.<sup>423</sup> In this case, the relief is not only a deliverance from persecution, but as Paul has already reminded them, God has called them into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5). As Paul writes later on in 2 Corinthians, 4:16-18,

*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

Christian believers, especially those in Thessalonica, can take heart knowing that God is aware of their plight, will grant them relief, and avenge them on the day of the Lord.

In verse 7, Paul lays out the time frame as to when this will come to pass; "*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*" When Paul speaks of Jesus being "revealed" he uses a term (*apocalypses*), which stresses the idea of uncovering what was hidden,<sup>424</sup> and often connected to the revelation of God's glory.<sup>425</sup> Green adds that the term "means 'the removal of the veil' and is frequently employed in those contexts where the biblical author wishes to talk of some kind of 'divine revelation,' such as the unveiling of truths previously hidden."<sup>426</sup> Wanamaker describes the significance of this for the Thessalonians reading and/or hearing this letter.

The parousia or coming of Christ is revelatory in that the Lord Jesus is currently hidden in heaven, and therefore those who persecute the readers are in (willful) ignorance about him (cf. v. 9). As a result they have no idea about the danger confronting them in the impending judgment (see vv. 9f.). The parousia of the Lord Jesus will come as an

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<sup>423</sup> Green puts it well: "God is not capricious but rather judges justly. Hence those who mount the opposition against the church will suffer for their opposition, while the community of God will receive its rightful recompense." See Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 286.

<sup>424</sup> cf. Vos's discussion of this in Pauline Eschatology, 77-79.

<sup>425</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 150.

<sup>426</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 288.

unexpected and frightening turn of events for them. On the other hand, for the oppressed it will vindicate their steadfastness.<sup>427</sup>

The sequence of events is significant and gives us additional details regarding those things which occur when Jesus returns. We can summarize them as follows. First, our Lord returns from heaven. Second, Jesus will return with his angels. Third, he will return in flaming fire.

As to the first point, when Jesus returns from heaven, we harken back to the words given to the disciples, as recorded in Acts 1:11, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*" Jesus is presently in heaven in that glory which is his in the presence of the Father. Since Jesus returns "from heaven," he will judge with the authority of heaven, that is with God's authority to judge the world. The glory which is his is also revealed. This is a loud echo of the theophanic glory of YHWH found throughout the Old Testament.<sup>428</sup> Isaiah 40:5 is also in view. "*And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*"

Second, when our Lord returns, he will come with his powerful angels, literally, "his mighty angels." This harkens us back to the fact that when our Lord appears, he will do so with the angelic host. There is a loud echo here from Psalm 103:20, "*Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!*" Paul said much the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 3:13– "*so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*" As I. Howard Marshall puts it, this is a "reference to the angels who attend God in his heavenly dwelling, accompany him at his coming (Zech. 14:5), and who also accompany God's agent, the Son of man, so as to contribute to the glory and majesty of his coming in judgement."<sup>429</sup>

Third, commentators are divided about Paul's reference to flaming fire. Bruce summarizes the vast Old Testament imagery invoked by Paul's words.

"in fire of flame," . . . [appears] in Exod 3:2, in the account of the theophany at the burning bush; cf. Acts 7:30, "an angel appeared to him [Moses] in a flame of fire . . . in a bush." . . . Yahweh descended on Mount Sinai "in fire" at the giving of the law (Exod 19:18); cf. the presence of fire in the theophanies of Deut 33:2; Ps 18:8; Ezek 1:13, 27; Hab 3:4. Fire figures especially in depictions of divine judgment; in Dan 7:9, 10, where the Ancient of Days takes his seat, "his throne was fiery flames . . . its wheels were burning fire . . . a stream of fire (ποταμὸς πυρός) issued and came forth from before him." Cf. Isa 66:15, 16, where Yahweh comes "in fire (ἐν πυρὶ) to execute vengeance (ἐκδίκησις) . . . flames of fire (ἐν φλογὶ πυρός)" — perhaps the OT text which more than any other

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<sup>427</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 225-226.

<sup>428</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 150.

<sup>429</sup> I. Howard Marshall, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 176.



underlies the present wording.<sup>430</sup>

While it is possible to take the reference to “flaming fire” as a reference to God’s presence in judgment (as does Bruce as cited above, so too does Green)<sup>431</sup> Wanamaker sees in this . . .

the frightening experience awaiting the enemies of God when God inflicts vengeance on the Thessalonians’ oppressors . . . but the context makes it clear that it connotes retributory punishment or vengeance directed toward those afflicting the Thessalonians . . . Not only the persecutors of the Thessalonians will be subject to divine vengeance at the day of judgment. They belong to a much larger group that will be punished.<sup>432</sup>

Leon Morris contends that Paul most likely has in mind the fact that fire is symbolic of God’s eschatological glory, and the apostle is not making a reference to fire as the instrument of judgment, instead, depicting the “flaming fire as the robe of the returning Lord.” Morris points out that this is a common theme through both the Old and New Testament, appealing to Exodus 3:2; Isaiah 66:15 and Revelation 1:13-14. “On outstanding occasions, like the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, fire is the symbol of the divine presence.”<sup>433</sup>

That the imagery of “flaming fire” in verse 8 is a reference to God’s eschatological judgment becomes clear when Paul writes (alluding again to Isaiah 66:15), that Jesus returns, “*inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*” Whether flames are the instrument of vengeance (as in burning up his enemies), or an image of the glory of the Holy God pouring out his wrath, neither view negates the finality of the verdict here depicted. Paul speaks of the purpose of our Lord’s coming (v. 7), as “exposing that which was hidden.” In this case, God will punish those who do not know Christ (i.e., unbelievers), and who do not obey the gospel (through faith in Jesus Christ). The verdict has already been given, but the sentence (punishment) has not yet been executed. The language here straightforward. Jesus Christ will return in “righteous judgment” to deliver his own, and complete that which was left unresolved in terms of the execution of an existing sentence upon a guilty criminal. The verdict conveys no notion of petty vindictiveness associated with it.<sup>434</sup> Those facing the righteous judge will pay the penalty which their actions deserve, namely eternal punishment.<sup>435</sup>

As noted previously, there is a loud Old Testament echo here from Deuteronomy 32:35, where

<sup>430</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 150-151.

<sup>431</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 289.

<sup>432</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 227.

<sup>433</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 202.

<sup>434</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 202-203.

<sup>435</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 228.

the judge is YHWH. Yet here, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ in this role. Those who do not know God (and who therefore are not known by God) are the objects of the sentence of judgment, justly administered. Our thoughts immediately turn to our Lord's words in Matthew 7:21 ff., where those who do not know God will recount their good works as though that might pacify the holy God, but such are cast away as evil doers because God never knew them. This is probably related to Paul's warning in Romans 1:28 aimed at those who do not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God.

What about those who are described as not "obeying the gospel." What does Paul mean since the gospel is not obeyed, but believed? The gospel is the announcement of the saving work of Christ—his life of obedience, his death for sin, and his resurrection from the dead. Obedience to the gospel is be connected to the command to believe it given by Christ to unbelievers through those who preach and proclaim his gospel. Our Lord answered this very question in John's gospel (6;28-29). The crowd approached Jesus and asked, "*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*" Jesus answered them, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*"

Whenever the gospel (in the form of good news about the saving work of Jesus Christ) is preached, it demands a response—faith, and its fruit, repentance. In this case, Paul is referring to those who decisively reject the offer that Christ makes to them of forgiveness of sin and an imputed righteousness—they do not "obey" when they do not believe the gospel. Since such people reject salvation from the coming eschatological wrath, which has been freely offered to them in Christ, they will pay for the consequences of their sin for all eternity.

As Paul says in verse 9, those who do not believe the gospel (who are asleep and caught unawares when the Lord returns) "*will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*" Paul's declaration of everlasting punishment (literally, "eternal destruction") is very is problematic for those who argue that unbelievers are annihilated at the judgment (so-called annihilationism).<sup>436</sup> While believers are delivered from God's eschatological wrath and receive "life eternal," unbelievers can only expect eternal punishment as the "just consequence" for failing to acknowledge God and embrace the gospel of his son, Jesus.<sup>437</sup> They are cast from the presence of the Lord, which I take to mean that there is no mediation of Jesus Christ for them and that they face the eternal wrath of God, not his merciful presence in Christ. Away from the presence of God ("outer darkness") there is no relief from the consequences of their sin, only wrath.

While those apart from Christ receive the supreme punishment ("eternal destruction"), Paul turns his attention to those who are Christ's. This great event occurs, "*when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.*" There is likely another echo here, this time from Psalm 96:13; which reads "*before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.*" This is also the point of Romans 8:17, where Paul speaks of us as children, "*and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also*

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<sup>436</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 229.

<sup>437</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 258.

*be glorified with him.*" Paul refers to the blessings and curses of God's covenant of works made with Adam in Eden (cf. Genesis 2:16-17), now fully realized (Romans 5:12-19).<sup>438</sup> The glory of the Lord will be seen in his people, as they are raised from the dead and glorified. As Calvin puts it, "Paul declares that our Lord in no sense reserves His glory to Himself but possesses it only in order to radiate it to all the members of his body"<sup>439</sup> i.e., his church.

Paul comforts the Thessalonians with the words found in the closing portion of verse 10, "*when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*" Paul's words echo Isaiah 2:11, 17, which speak of the Lord as high and exalted on his holy mountain in which YHWH dwells in glory. Paul assigns this role to Jesus who will come to his saints just as YHWH came to Israel, reflecting the sense of Colossians 3:4. "*When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*" How can God's people not but "marvel" at what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, who will return to deliver his people from the wrath to come, manifest the glory of God, be gloried in and among his saints, and bring about the final consummation of all things?

### C. Prayer Report (1:11-12)

**11 To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

In a new sentence, Paul asks his readers and hearers to be mindful of the fact that he, Timothy, and Silas have been praying for them for two specific blessings. The first blessing is that God may count them worthy (*ἀξιόω*) of their calling. The second is that God may fulfill every good purpose in them, leading to their inevitable glorification in Christ on the day of his return.

Ben Witherington identifies a possible pastoral motive in composing his prayer in the manner in which Paul does.

One of the more effective ways of changing behavior is to let people overhear one's prayers for them. Like the parent who prays "dear Lord, if only my child would live up to his potential" while the child can overhear it, Paul here offers a public wish prayer to be read out before the congregation. Its rhetorical function is not just to convey information about Paul's prayers but also to instigate transformation. One "states in prayer what one hopes will happen as a result of the prayer."

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<sup>438</sup> The Reformed understanding of the covenant of works is detailed in J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2021), and Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2024).

<sup>439</sup> Calvin on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 8.392.

Calling, as we have seen, is an important theme in Paul's writings.<sup>440</sup> Calling is God's act in and through the preaching of the gospel, when God calls his elect to faith in Jesus. Paul is not saying that if someone behaves in a certain manner (worthily), they will be called by God. Rather, the apostle is stating that in light of prior calling (now realized through faith in Jesus Christ), the Thessalonians possess certain knowledge in the face of persecution—Jesus will come to punish his enemies and vindicate his people. This creates a resolve (εὐδοκία) grounded in the hope of the believer's resurrection and the certainty of our Lord's return. Until Jesus returns, the Thessalonians are to live lives worthy of the calling they have already received through the gospel. Paul will put this in a different way in a subsequent letter to the Philippians; *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"* (Philippians 2:13).

Paul takes this occasion to pray that God's purposes will be accomplished in their lives. This is not a conditional sentence, *if* certain things happen, *then* God's purposes will come to pass, though the language does not forbid this. Rather, the idea seems to be that the Thessalonians will be fully aware of God's purpose in the midst of their own suffering and that through faith, they will act accordingly.

In verse 12, Paul's expressed desire is *"that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."* His words to the Thessalonians are once again set against the backdrop of Isaiah 66:5. According to Jeffrey Weima,

The words of Isa. 66:5 were originally addressed to those in Israel who were being despised and mocked for their faith in God: "Speak, our brothers, to those who hate you and detest you, so that the name of the Lord may be glorified, and may be seen in gladness; but they shall be put to shame" (LXX). Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian Christians, who are similarly suffering opposition and ridicule for their newly found faith, is that they may fulfill every good desire and work of faith (1:11) such that "the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified."

Paul expresses his petition to the Thessalonians that Jesus Christ be glorified in the midst of the Thessalonian congregation. In all of their doings and activities, may glory be brought to Jesus Christ, the Lord of his church. It is to this end that Paul prays and we should do as he instructs the Thessalonians to do, pray that Jesus be glorified in our midst, especially in times of suffering.

### III. The Man of Sin (2:1-12)

**1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has**

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<sup>440</sup> C. G. Kruse, "Call, Calling," in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 84-85; Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 236-236; 332-333. For dogmatic definition, see Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 454-479.

come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 6 And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Paul composes his second letter to the Thessalonians due to growing consternation within the congregation that had arisen because someone among them was claiming that the day of the Lord had already come. Paul considers this an out and out falsehood. He responds by pointing out that the Thessalonians ought not be alarmed by this report because the day of the Lord had not yet come. He tells them that there are two significant and closely related events which must precede that day: a “rebellion” (a time of great apostasy), and the appearance of a “man of sin” (or more precisely, the man of “lawlessness”). Therefore, it “is impossible for the day of the Lord to have already arrived,”<sup>441</sup> because the Lord is presently restraining the Satanic forces behind these two events so that neither of them have come to pass (and indeed cannot come to pass), until the Lord lifts his restraint at the time of the end.

The first twelve verses of chapter two constitute the main body of Paul’s second letter which directly addresses the additional question coming to Paul from Thessalonica via Timothy. Paul’s opening comments (chapter one) lead up to this section (chapter two) from which the concluding chapter (three) flows.<sup>442</sup> An interesting feature of this letter is that Paul’s concern is to refute erroneous teaching rather than provide additional instruction.<sup>443</sup>

In his first letter he dealt with concerns about the fate of those who died before the Lord’s return,

. . . not only because some of their fellow believers had died but also because, in view of their ongoing suffering, they had begun to question whether they had been left out or left behind, the glory train already passing them by. In the face of this deteriorating situation, Paul feels he must strike at the root of the problem – a false claim about the

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<sup>441</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 300.

<sup>442</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 162.

<sup>443</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 205.

timing of the day of the Lord.<sup>444</sup>

Paul has already spoken in some detail regarding our Lord's return (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13-5:11), but in the second letter it becomes apparent that there were still difficulties in Thessalonica in fully understanding Paul's teaching about the Lord's *parousia* and its implications. This is likely due to Paul's forced and rapid departure from the city after a mere three weeks, preventing him from finishing his instruction, or personally answering the questions that his teaching on the Lord's return might have raised.

Paul addresses the matter head-on in the opening verses of chapter two (vv. 1-2). *"Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come."* Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he has already taught them regarding the Lord's second advent. But when he speaks of believers "being gathered together" we find yet another loud echo from Israel's history. According to Wanamaker,

The concept of an eschatological gathering goes back to the OT. The exilic prophets looked forward to God reassembling the nation of Israel after the exile in Babylon (cf. Is. 43:4-7; 52:12; 56:8; Je. 31:8; Ezk. 28:9; Ps. 106 [LXX 105]:47, all of which use either ἐπισυνάγειν or its uncompounded cognate and synonym συνάγειν). They also warned of the assembling of the nations in judgment (cf. Joel 3:2). Since the followers of Jesus were a scattered group who could not come together as one single community, it became part of the eschatological hope of the early Christians that at the coming of the Lord they would be gathered together from the four corners of the earth to enter into their inheritance in God's dominion.<sup>445</sup>

When Paul speaks of "being gathered together," he uses a sort of "Gentile" shorthand, speaking to the largely Gentile church in terms which avoid direct reference to the Old Testament and events which the Gentile Thessalonians knew nothing about, but which are obviously in the background of his two main points of correction.

According to Paul, there was someone in the congregation (who is not identified) teaching that the "day of the Lord" had already come. This greatly alarmed and unsettled a number of their number. It is not hard to understand why. If the day of the Lord had indeed come and gone, then those "left behind" had missed out upon their deliverance from the day of wrath as Paul had promised. But as Morris explains, Paul does not engage these folks by "pontificating, but by making a request of his friends."<sup>446</sup> Speaking to brothers, he respectfully cautions them, "do not be shaken or alarmed," or confused in their understanding (vous) arising from any report

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<sup>444</sup> Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 205.

<sup>445</sup> Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 238.

<sup>446</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 213.

you hear which is supposedly comes from us (Paul and his co-senders).<sup>447</sup>

What might this report be? It certainly did not come from Paul. He indicates that it might have come in the form of a prophecy, which is significant in light of his prior instructions to the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit nor despise prophecies (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). But Paul added that it was necessary to test such prophecies which points us in the direction that this had not been done in this instance as he had instructed them. The prophecy might have been false, or otherwise misinterpreted. Bruce points out that, “discrimination was necessary . . . and nowhere more so than with prophecies relating to future events.”<sup>448</sup> The situation in Thessalonica is not that different from our own. As Green alerts us, “we might caution modern Christians to understand that the message of every radio or television preacher, or even every person who stands behind a pulpit, needs to be examined through the lens of apostolic teaching as contained in Scripture.”<sup>449</sup> Amen to that!

Paul speaks of the possibility that it was a “spoken word” or a letter purporting to have come from him, of the “did you hear what Paul said?” variety. Perhaps the prophecy causing so much trouble was transcribed into the form of a written epistle claiming to be from Paul (or approved by Paul or his co-senders), but which, as a matter of fact, did not come from him. This might explain why Paul adds his signature at the end of this letter as a “sign of authenticity.”<sup>450</sup> The bottom line is we do not know who the speaker of the prophecy was, or the author of the offending epistle. All we can say is that it did not come from Paul, and the “word” was incorrect in its assertion that the day of the Lord had already come. That day had not come for reasons Paul is about to spell out.

In verses 3-4, Paul cautions the Thessalonians about accepting untested prophecies which might be filled with error. He urges them,

*Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.*

There are a number of important issues raised by the apostle and we will address them in

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<sup>447</sup> According to Green, “Philo, for example, said that the wise person or the one with understanding was firm in his opinion and would not be moved (*asauleuton*); therefore, his understanding did not waver. The apostle similarly exhorts the Thessalonian believers not to be moved in their “understanding” (*noos*), that is, that they should not change their opinion so quickly (*tacheōs*), leaving to one side the teaching they had previously received from the apostles (vv. 5, 15). This false teaching, which they had swallowed in the short lapse of time since the exit of the Christian heralds from the city and the present, had come to replace the apostolic instruction and had also caused great emotional anguish for the Thessalonians, as the following exhortation suggests. Paul calls the church not to be *alarmed* or frightened (cf. Matt. 24:6; Mark 13:7; Luke 24:37) by this theological novelty, which had brought not only doctrinal confusion but also emotional instability to the congregation.” See Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 303.

<sup>448</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 164.

<sup>449</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 305.

<sup>450</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 164.

order. But as we do let us not miss the obvious point Paul is making in answer to the confusion among the Thessalonians—the day of the Lord has not yet come.

First, Paul’s discussion of this mysterious figure resounds with echoes from the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Daniel. As Vos puts it, “no clearly traceable and safe road leads back into the past to discover the Man-of-Sin except that via the prophecy of Daniel.”<sup>451</sup> Second, Paul is emphatic that the day of the Lord cannot come until the rebellion (apostasy) occurs and the “man of sin” is revealed. This “man of sin” (ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, the man “of lawlessness”) is the son of destruction, who opposes God, and who exalts himself against all other proper objects of worship. This figure will take his seat in the temple (a matter of some debate) and proclaims himself to be God.

This indicates that the supreme manifestation of evil is an individual and the ultimate threat to the people of God and to the fulfillment of the Lord’s redemptive purposes. The man of lawlessness is yet to come, because he is presently restrained. When this restraint is lifted, he will appear only to be destroyed by Jesus at his parousia. This evil figure is often associated with a final end-times antichrist as the personification of evil, the supreme agent of Satan.

We begin by considering the Old Testament background which is significant and provides the biblical context and categories for what Paul is now disclosing in this chapter. J. E. H. Thomson’s summary of the Old Testament data is a good place to begin:

As in the O.T. the doctrine concerning Christ was only suggested, not developed, so it is with the doctrine of the antichrist. That the Messiah should be the divine Logos, the only adequate expression of God, was merely hinted at, not stated: so the antichrist was exhibited as the opponent of God rather than of His anointed. In the historical books of the O.T. “Belial” is used as of a personal opponent of the Lord: thus the shamefully wicked are called in the AV “sons of Belial” (1 S. 1:16), etc. Modern versions translate the expression in an abstract sense, e.g., “base fellows,” “scoundrels,” “wicked men.” In Dnl 7:7 f. there is the description of a great heathen empire, represented by a beast with ten horns; its full antagonism to God is expressed in a little eleventh horn which had a “mouth speaking great things” and “made war with the saints” (vv 8, 21). He was to be destroyed by the “Ancient of Days,” and his kingdom was to be given to a “son of man” (vv. 9-14). Similar yet differing in many points is the description of Antiochus Epiphanes in 8:9-12, 23-25.<sup>452</sup>

Another important treatment of the biblical and historic background to the notion of an end-times personification of evil is found in Wilhelm Bousset’s noted study, The Antichrist Legend published in 1896.<sup>453</sup> Bruce capably summarizes Bousset’s lengthy study as follows . . .

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<sup>451</sup> Vos, “The Man of Sin,” 104-05.

<sup>452</sup> J. E. H. Thomson, “Antichrist,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), I.139.

<sup>453</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore, trans., A. H. Keane (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1896).



Antichrist would appear among the Jews after the fall of Rome, proclaiming his divine status and installing his cult in the Jerusalem temple. He would himself be a Jew, born of the tribe of Dan (an idea based on Gen 49:17; Deut 33:22; Jer 8:16). Elijah would appear and denounce him, and would be put to death for his pains. Antichrist would reign for three and a half years. True believers, refusing to give him the worship which he demanded, would seek refuge in the wilderness and be pursued by him there, but when they are on the point of being wiped out, he is destroyed by the intervention of God (who may use an agent such as Michael the archangel or the Messiah of David's line).<sup>454</sup>

According to Bousset, among the Jews of Paul's day there was a vague but popular notion that some type of evil figure would appear at a yet future period, very possibly at the beginning of the messianic age. Such expectations centered upon a coming Messiah and his foe, the personification of evil in a single individual (who would himself be an apostate Jew). Little is made of Daniel 9:24-27 by Bousset, a standard biblical text used by dispensationalists to support their doctrine of Antichrist, the expectation of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, and then tying him to a future 70<sup>th</sup> week, the so-called "seven year tribulation."

Jewish expectation does form the background for the New Testament revelation which is in many ways the amplification of the limited Old Testament data regarding this final foe of YHWH and his Messiah. There is evidence that the New Testament teaching regarding this figure involves in part the correction of misguided popular notions concerning this evil personage as seen, for example, in the Book of Jude (vv. 14-15, 17-19). New Testament writers, especially Paul, allude to Daniel's vision, leading Bruce to conclude, "Antichrist expectation was held among Jews and Christians alike."<sup>455</sup>

Moving on to address Paul's warning about the possibility of deception among the Thessalonians, it seems that Paul does not know the source of this erroneous teaching. His assertion, "*let no one deceive you in any way,*" does not specify who this might be, only that it was an willful act of deception. It seems reasonable to conclude that if Paul knew who it was, he would identify the party by name, as he does on occasion in his later epistles (i.e., 2 Timothy 2:17-18, where Paul speaks of "Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection [a future event] has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some," and Alexander the coppersmith in 2 Timothy 4:14 who has given Paul much grief). But the source was likely credible, or else the Thessalonians would not have been taken in by it.<sup>456</sup>

Paul corrects the deceptive error when he affirms "*for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first.*" This statement clears up any confusion in Thessalonica about whether or not the day of the Lord had already come. It had not. The day cannot come until the first of two related signs come to pass—the rebellion (or the apostasy). This rebellion comes "first," i.e.,

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<sup>454</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 179.

<sup>455</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 179.

<sup>456</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 305.

before the day of the Lord and is connected to a second event, “the man of sin,” about whom we will have more to say shortly. Paul will go into some detail about this lawless one, but he does not say much about the rebellion. Green does point out, however, “part of the Jewish eschatological expectation was that before the end there would be apostasy against God (1 Enoch 93:9; 90:26; 4 Ezra 5:1–13; 2 Bar. 41:3; 42:4), a perspective that appears again in the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 24:11–13).”<sup>457</sup>

One reason for the scant info about this in his second letter is that the apostle may be referring back to his previous teaching regarding a coming rebellion. As Morris notes,

The term rendered “rebellion” is sometimes used of political or military rebellions. The characteristic thought of the bible is that God rules. Thus the word is appropriate for a rebellion against this rule. In part, “rebellion,” points to this sort of thing; it includes the idea of forsaking one’s former allegiance. But it is not so much forsaking one’s first love and drifting into apathy that is meant, as setting oneself actively in opposition to God . . . It is the supreme effort of Satan and his minions to which the word directs us. Paul does not speak of “a” rebellion, as though introducing the topic for the first time, but of “the” rebellion, that is, the well-known rebellion, that one about which he had already instructed them.<sup>458</sup>

The word translated as “rebellion” in the ESV (ἀποστασία), appears in only one other place in the New Testament, Acts 21:21, where we read, “and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.” For a Jew to “apostatize” was to forsake Moses and Jewish custom. A similar idea (if not the word) also appears in 1 Timothy 4:1; “now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart [ἀφίστημι] from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” Paul tells Timothy to expect an end-times defection from among the faithful who embrace false doctrines of satanic origin. Yet another caution regarding apostasy is given by the author of Hebrews. “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3:12).

An end times rebellion was also part of Jewish expectation, and both Jesus and Paul expect that there will be deserters from the ranks of those who profess to follow Jesus. As Beale points out, “such a meaning is apparent because of the immediate context of false teaching (vv.1-2 and vv. 9-12) and the clear allusions to Daniel’s prediction of an end-time opponent who will bring about a large-scale compromise of faith among God’s people.”<sup>459</sup> In Paul’s warning to the Thessalonians regarding this coming rebellion, the actions of the rebels in deserting Christ is of

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<sup>457</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 307.

<sup>458</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 218-219. F. F. Bruce argues that this rebellion “is a general abandonment of the basis of civil order” and “is a large-scale revolt against public order, and since public order is maintained by ‘governing authorities’ who ‘have been instituted by God,’ any assault on it is an assault on a divine ordinance (Rom 13:1, 2).” Cf. 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 167. Calvin sees the fulfillment of this in the Roman church; Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 89.

<sup>459</sup> G. K. Beale, The Temple and the Church’s Mission, (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 271-272; Beale, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 204; Milligan, Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians, 98; Ridderbos, Paul, 526.

such magnitude and scope that it is a clear sign that the end (i.e, the *parousia*) is near. Paul issues his warning with a two-fold purpose. The first is that the Thessalonians will be put at ease by learning that the day of the Lord had not come. The second is that they will be watchful regarding the warning to be on guard for such a “rebellion.” It is Jesus who reminds us that God’s elect will persevere to the end and be saved (Matthew 24:13).

As to Paul’s next point, *first* comes the rebellion, *then* comes the revelation of the “man of lawlessness.” The one is directly connected to the other either as preparation for the man of sin’s coming or as a consequence of the apostasy. Paul’s “man of sin” is clearly an eschatological personification of evil of some sorts, since as the apostle repeatedly asserts, “he will appear.” According to Vos:

But, however striking these prophetic antecedents and literary dependencies may seem, the chief question remains how Paul for himself conceived of this mysterious power [that of lawlessness]. First of all its personality, while not explicitly confirmed, is throughout assumed. It is true, the collective, abstract movement connected with his appearance, teaches that more than a single person is involved. But most assuredly a *personal* leader of the movement, and that a human personality is involved . . . We may take for granted, then, that *the Antichrist will be a human person*.<sup>460</sup>

Not only will there be a personification of evil at some point, but the specific nature of his evil actions is also spelled out by Paul. Vos summarizes,

Thus as “apokalypsis” is ascribed to the Man-of-Sin, vs. 6: “to the end that he may be revealed in his own season”; vs. 8: “and then shall be revealed `the Lawless One’”; in vs. 9 we read of his “parousia”: “whose parousia is according to the working of Satan with all powers and lying wonders.” His whole manner of working is described in terms that compel us to think of something parallel to the Gospel propaganda carried on by the servants of the true Christ . . . The Man-of-Sin is the irreligious and anti-religious and anti-Messianic subject par excellence.<sup>461</sup>

As Christ is said to be “revealed” at his second advent, so too the man of sin is “revealed” at his own “appearing.” This connects the man of lawlessness’ appearance to Christ’s return as the end of the age. The use of *apokalypsis* for the revelation of both Jesus and the man of sin, demonstrates that his actions are a parody of Jesus’ redemptive work. The connection is hardly accidental. Paul’s image of the man of sin is a messianic imitator, and should be seen in light of John’s “Antichrist” motif as found in his epistles, when John declares that anyone who denies that Jesus has come in the flesh is an antichrist (2 John 1:7). However, Paul’s “man of sin” refers to a yet future “revelation,” while John’s antichrists were a present reality in the first century. Yet, there is a common theme in both instances—religious opposition to the redemptive purposes of God, rather than the imposition of political power.

The threat depicted by both Paul and John is internal (heresy and deception), not external as

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<sup>460</sup> Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 112-13.

<sup>461</sup> Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 117-18.

would be the case with coercive police and economic power associated with state sponsored opposition to Christ's church (as is the case with the beast of the Book of Revelation). Bruce, whose essay on Antichrist,<sup>462</sup> is considered definitive on the topic, does draw a direct connection between Paul's remarks here, John's antichrists, and the beast of Revelation, which when taken together, to use Warfield's term, form a composite photograph of an individual we commonly speak of as the Antichrist.<sup>463</sup> Bruce writes,

Antichrist appears again in the NT in the Apocalypse, although he is not called by that name there. The beast from the abyss which kills the two witnesses of God<sup>464</sup> in Rev 11:7 is introduced more formally in Rev 13. In the first ten verses of that chapter we can hardly fail to recognize a more detailed description of the man of lawlessness of 2 Thess 2, although in Revelation there is some oscillation between the antichristian power and the individual in whom that power is vested for the time being. *But for John of Patmos the antichristian power is unambiguously the Roman Empire* which, with Nero's assault on the Christians of Rome in the aftermath of the great fire of A.D. 64, had embarked on the intermittent course of persecution of the church which was to last two and a half centuries.<sup>465</sup>

There is no question that Rome and its imperial cult (emperor worship) serves as the background for the evil portrayed by John in the imagery he uses of the beast. This is also likely the case for Paul's "man of sin." Although, political motifs are indeed present in connection to the two beasts of Revelation 13 (one from the land and one from the sea), the composite photograph is of a primarily religious foe, but who may direct state power against Christ's church and God's people if his attempts to deceive fail. This end-times foe seeks to thwart the preaching of the gospel and may utilize police/ military power to do so.

When the man of lawlessness appears, he reveals himself to be the arch-enemy of Jesus Christ and his people—which confirms the rather obvious connection between this individual and the end times figure who we commonly identify as the Antichrist. Paul identifies him as the son of destruction, who opposes God, who exalts himself over against all other objects of worship. Paul says he will take his seat in the temple and proclaim himself to be God. When the rebellion occurs, he shows himself to be the chief rebel.

In verse 4, Paul lays out a list of the man of lawlessness' offences. He opposes the proper worship of God by exalting himself and seeking the homage which rightly belongs to God. The Old Testament echoes are loud and obvious. His activities are empowered by Satan (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:9), whom Paul describes as "the adversary" in 1 Timothy 5:14. But there can be

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<sup>462</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 179-188.

<sup>463</sup> B. B. Warfield, "Antichrist" in Selected Shorter Writings, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 356.

<sup>464</sup> Hendriksen argues that these two witnesses represent the true church, the church militant, who continually suffers persecution at the hand of God's enemies. See William Hendriksen, More Than Conquerors (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 129 ff.

<sup>465</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 181.

little doubt that Paul has in mind Daniel 11:36–37, a prophetic vision in which Daniel foretells of the coming of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (circa 167 BCE), who, in his persecution of the Jews and desecration of the Jerusalem temple, serves as a type of the future Antichrist. In Daniel’s vision, the prophet speaks of this evil personage in the following terms.

*And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done. He shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women. He shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all (Daniel 11:36–37).*

This figure is the blasphemer supreme, exalting himself over all others. As Morris puts it, he makes an “explicit claim to Deity.”<sup>466</sup> He places himself above all false gods, idols, and anyone who dares challenge him. He even claims for himself the authority of the true and living God, seeking to receive the worship of the earth’s inhabitants. It may very well be that Paul has in mind the recently deceased Roman emperor Caligula (Gaius), who claimed to be divine, and who ordered that his image be erected in the Jerusalem temple in 40 CE, but which never came to pass since Caligula died shortly after in 41 CE, and his order was then countermanded.<sup>467</sup> When Paul was in the city there was a temple in Thessalonica dedicated to the imperial cult.<sup>468</sup> It is hard to imagine that Paul does not have the imperial cult in mind when warning the Thessalonians of this coming individual.

Bruce sees yet another important theological connection between Paul’s words here and John’s epistles. He writes, “this suggests that he is in some sense a rival Messiah, the ἀντιχριστος of 1 John 2:18 (“you have heard that Antichrist is coming”).<sup>469</sup> His messianic parody (as “anti”-Christ) could very well be in the background of Paul’s prediction that “*he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.*” Ernest Best simply identifies him as “the Rebel.”<sup>470</sup> The claim to deity would make perfect sense to Paul’s Thessalonian audience who lived under the thumb of a series of Caesars and who now find themselves persecuted for turning from idols, which included images of and a temple dedicated to self-deified Roman rulers. The blasphemies of the man of sin, as depicted by Paul, reflects a number of predictions found in Daniel’s prophecy. Vos writes,

“The mouth speaking great things” Dan. vii. 8, 20, is a striking pre-analogy to all the blasphemy which the Apostle in advance charges the Man-of-Sin. 2 Thess. ii.4 “He that opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or is worshiped; so as to sit in

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<sup>466</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 222.

<sup>467</sup> F. F. Bruce, Paul: The Apostle of the Hear Set Free (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 232; Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 311-312; Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 218-220.

<sup>468</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 310.

<sup>469</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 167.

<sup>470</sup> Best, The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistles to the Thessalonians, 302 ff.

the temple of God setting himself forth as `God'" reminds of vs. 24 in the same chapter of Daniel. The "doing according to his will" and "magnifying himself" Dan. viii. 4 finds its echo in the trait of anti-divine overbearing, which has so vividly set its impress upon Pauline description. The "little horn," that came out of the four "notable horns," into which the "great horn" of the goat was broken. Likewise proceeds to blasphemous acts, so far even as to take away from the Prince of the Host the most sacred religious apparatus, and to cast down the place of the sanctuary (Dan. viii. 14), and bears a striking likeness to the Apostles' description in Thessalonians. "The abomination that makes desolate" above commented upon (Dan. xi. 31), is entirely in line with the features named."<sup>471</sup>

Like Bruce, Vos too sees a direct relationship between Paul's man of sin and the antichrists described by John in his epistles, as well as in the prophecies of Daniel previously mentioned. Says Vos,

There may be no exact resemblance in the behavior of pagan tyrants to Antichrist's setting himself up in the temple of God as a self-deifier, but as between type, and antitype the correspondence is close enough . . . . What is taught in literal terms about the Antichrist in the N. T. thus acquires a direct continuity with the O. T. predictions.<sup>472</sup>

There is significant debate among interpreters about what Paul means when he speaks of the blasphemous behavior of this man of sin taking place in the "temple of God." Is Paul referring to the second temple in Jerusalem, which was still standing when Paul wrote both of his epistles to the Thessalonians? This is the majority interpretation.<sup>473</sup> Or is Paul referring to the church as the temple of God in an eschatological sense, composed of living stones and indwelt by God's Spirit?<sup>474</sup>

I find Beale's case compelling when he contends that 2 Thessalonians "2:3 is about a massive apostate movement toward the end of history in the church and not in Israel is apparent from the phrase *God's temple* in 2:4."<sup>475</sup> If Paul is speaking about an end-times event, then he cannot be speaking of the Jerusalem temple which was destroyed in 70 CE.

As mentioned, there are a number of competing interpretations of what Paul means when he speaks of the "temple," and it is a good idea to briefly describe them here. Preterists tie Paul's

<sup>471</sup> Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 104-05.

<sup>472</sup> Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 104-05. Note Vos' difference of opinion with his friend and colleague, B. B. Warfield.

<sup>473</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 169; Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 283; Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians, 247; Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 220.

<sup>474</sup> Beale, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 207. Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 223-234; Green, on the other hand, sees this as "unlikely." Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 310.

<sup>475</sup> Beale, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 207.

man of sin to events associated with the Jewish rejection of the gospel and the desecration of the Jewish temple in 70 CE.<sup>476</sup> Futurists (which includes many dispensationalists) see this as a prophecy of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem at the time of the end.<sup>477</sup> Historicists understand Paul's reference to the temple as a reference to the church.<sup>478</sup> This identification explains why historicists have often connected the man of sin directly to the papacy.

Although Beale's view is the minority report, he makes a compelling case that Paul's mention of the temple refers to the church. According to Beale, the word temple (*naon*) is found nine other times in the New Testament outside of 2 Thessalonians, where it is almost always used of Christ or the church.<sup>479</sup> In the five other times Paul uses the word elsewhere, it does not refer to a literal temple in Israel, past or future (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21, 2 Thessalonians 2:4). In both Matthew's and John's gospels, the word *naon* is used of the temple which will be destroyed before Christ raises it up, or of the true temple, which is his body (cf. Matthew 26:61; John 2:21). Paul refers to believers as constituting the temple of God because they are in union with Christ, through faith (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-21).<sup>480</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, Paul depicts Christians in a manner which parallels the passage in 1 Corinthians 6:18-19, when he speaks of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul's point is that the people of God constitute the dwelling place of God's Spirit. In Revelation 11:1-7, the saints are pictured as a sanctuary,<sup>481</sup> and in Revelation 13:6, the beast attacks the people of God, described as the "tabernacle." Taken together, this is strong evidence in favor of the view that Paul is not referring to the Jerusalem temple of 70 CE, but to the church.<sup>482</sup>

Furthermore, there are a number of other important redemptive-historical shifts which have taken place with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, followed by Pentecost, which

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<sup>476</sup> See, for example, Kenneth L. Gentry, The Beast of Revelation (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), and his, He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology 3rd Edition (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 2009).

<sup>477</sup> Popular dispensational writers predict that the temple in Jerusalem indeed will be rebuilt about the time of the rapture and the appearance of the Antichrist. See, for example, Thomas S. McCall & Zola Levit, Satan in the Sanctuary (Chicago: Moody press, 1979). John Walvoord hints at this as well. John F. Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 154. A number of contemporary "end-times" ministries promote the idea as well.

<sup>478</sup> Fairbairn, The Interpretation of Prophecy, Reprint (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1993), 361. Fairbairn writes, "Paul knows of no other temple but the church itself."

<sup>479</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 207-208.

<sup>480</sup> Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission, 245-268.

<sup>481</sup> G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 557-571; G. B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John, (Peabody MA: Hendricksen Publishers, 1999), 130-132; Dennis E. Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 165-169; J. P. M. Sweet, Revelation (London: SCM Press, 1979), 183-184.

<sup>482</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 207-208.

provide grounds for Paul's two-age eschatology.<sup>483</sup> A broad redemptive-historical perspective supports the interpretation that the temple spoken of here by Paul is the church at the end of the age. This is yet another indication that Paul is not referring to the temple in Jerusalem which was destroyed in 70 CE.

We can enumerate these points briefly. First, after Christ's death and resurrection, true Israel is Christ and his people (cf. Galatians 6:16). Second, Christ's people are now his temple, indwelt by his Spirit. This can be seen on the day of Pentecost—the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2:14-41 is the reality foreshadowed by the Spirit filling the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34-38. Third, both national Israel as the covenant community, along with the temple as the place of sacrifice, have come to an end (Luke 21:6, Hebrews 7:11-10:22).<sup>484</sup> When Christ died upon the cross, the veil in the Jerusalem temple was torn from top to bottom. The temple is now *ichabod*—its glory has departed. No believers remain present there. Neither is God's Spirit present as he had been before.

The preterist position, on the other hand, has a significant weakness. In order to fall away, the people who commit apostasy must be part of the believing covenant community into which the lawless one will make his entrance and so deceive and blaspheme. In defending the preterist interpretation of this text, Kenneth Gentry asserts that those who fall away are Jews, who rebel [*apostasia*] against Roman political authority, which led to Rome's military intervention and subsequent devastation of Israel in 70 CE. Gentry sees in this apostasy a religious element as well, Israel's rejection of the Messiah.<sup>485</sup> But this does not fit with Paul's depiction of an eschatological temple (the "church") at the end of the age when the man of sin is revealed unto destruction at Christ's return. How can an apostate people (the Jews) fall from the Christian faith when they are already apostate? Such apostasy implies professing believers falling away from Christ's church in massive numbers, not Jews who have already rejected their Messiah.

The scene depicted by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 is one in which the man of lawlessness (who mimics Christ) deceives people within the believing community (the church) through satanically empowered signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12). Nowhere does Paul say the man of sin does this in the old covenant community (Israel), with its temple—although that was part of Jewish expectation which Paul now reinterprets in light of Christ's messianic mission. Jesus too spoke of such apostasy as one of the signs of the impending judgment upon Israel, now certain. In Matthew 24:10-12, Jesus warns of a time when "*many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.*" Such signs were not only warnings to the apostles, since the apostles are representatives of the church, they are spoken to us as well. This is not only a warning to the Thessalonians, it is a warning to all Christians about what must happen before the Lord Jesus returns—there must be a rebellion first and then

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<sup>483</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 208-209.

<sup>484</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians,, 208-209.

<sup>485</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil (Texarkana AR: Covenant Media Foundation 1999), 103-104.



revelation of the man of sin.<sup>486</sup>

Therefore, when Paul warns the Thessalonians in verse 4 of someone to come who “*opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God,*” he is referring to an end-times individual who will commit this heinous act in Christ’s church, not in the Jerusalem temple past (in 70 CE) or future (in a rebuilt temple). This despicable act is, in some way, connected to a final apostasy which immediately precedes the final judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10; 2:8).

While the events of Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C., and Titus’ subsequent onslaught against Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE fulfill, in part, the various prophecies in Daniel 11, Paul projects these provisional fulfillments of Daniel’s prophecy into the future. Ridderbos speaks of “a proleptic-prophetic” character of such prophecies,<sup>487</sup> because they point ahead to what will happen in Christ’s church immediately before the end of the age. A great apostasy will occur in Christ’s church in connection with the revelation of the lawless one, who will exalt himself over God and demand to be worshiped. This seems to indicate that the series of wannabe antichrists described by John in his epistles, will give way to a final antichrist once God’s restraint is lifted.<sup>488</sup> Paul is clear that this occurs at the time of the end. In verse 5, he asks the Thessalonians, “*do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?*” The obvious answer to this question is, apparently not. Somewhere along the line the Thessalonians let a false report about the day of the Lord obscure what the apostle had told them about this matter previously.

This brings us to verses 6-7, and Paul’s assertion that “*you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.*” Two issues arise here. The first is found in verse 7. The mystery of lawlessness—whatever it was—was already at work when Paul composed this letter.<sup>489</sup> Any focus upon a future antichrist might cause us to miss an important point being made by Paul. As Berkhouwer points out, “Paul is talking about something that was very real for him too. Paul was certainly acquainted with this particular ‘already,’: the mystery of lawlessness was already at work.”<sup>490</sup> And not just for Paul, since, “Christians in Thessalonica were confronted from ‘day one’ with a conflict of loyalty over whether they could render

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<sup>486</sup> In Romans 11, Paul also speaks of the conversion of Israel after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25-26). Cf. Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 180-194. Hodge believes the specific signs which precede the end of the age are the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth, the conversion of Israel and the coming of Antichrist. See Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology 3 Vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), III.792-836.

<sup>487</sup> Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 527.

<sup>488</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 209-210.

<sup>489</sup> According to Bruce Winter, “the language used to describe this man of lawlessness who sought to exalt himself over all other gods resonates not only prophetically with Daniel 11, but also with that in some official inscriptions where the terms ‘the most divine’ and ‘the greatest’ are used of the last two Roman emperors of the Julio-Claudians, i.e., Claudius and Nero.” See Winter, Divine Honours for the Caesars, 264.

<sup>490</sup> G. C. Berkhouwer, The Return of Christ (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 270.

divine honours to the Caesars now that they were followers of Jesus Christ.”<sup>491</sup>

The sense is that this “mystery” was a satanic counterpart (or parody) to the revelation of God’s work revealed in the mystery of the gospel of his son (Jesus). It works secretly in the shadows, or “below the surface” as Bruce puts it,<sup>492</sup> until it comes to full flower when the man of sin is revealed at the time of the end, after the restrainer ceases to restrain the lawless one’s appearance. John too sees a satanic force as a present reality, when he refers to the spirit of antichrist as already present in the churches of Asia Minor (1 John 4:3).

The second question has to do with the identity of the “what [which] is restraining him now” (v. 6.) literally, the one who restrains [ὁ κατέχων], is variously and problematically identified. There has been much ink spilled discussing this topic.

J. Dwight Pentecost, and other dispensationalists who see the end of restraint as exclusively future, identify this restrainer as the Holy Spirit who ceases his ordinary work during the seven year tribulation period, yet still conducts his “saving work,” now defined along the lines of John the Baptist’s preaching about the kingdom of God centered in “cleansing and repentance.”<sup>493</sup> John Walvoord agrees.<sup>494</sup> Pentecost candidly admits that the dispensationalist notion marks a return to an Old Testament redemptive economy, since Pentecost concedes that the Holy Spirit can be taken out of the way, and just as in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit can again operate “without an indwelling ministry.”<sup>495</sup> But are we really to believe that the Holy Spirit is “taken out of the way?” or that he returns to an Old Testament manner of relating to the people of God? Once again, the dispensationalists insist upon a reversal of redemptive history by advocating a future return to Old Testament types and shadows as the climatic act in redemptive history.

In light of his preterist sympathies, B. B. Warfield sees this as entirely fulfilled with the events of 70 CE. Warfield argues that the restrainer is the Jewish state itself (the second commonwealth), which in effect restrains the evil principle (the Roman empire and its evil emperors), thereby giving the infant church the time to develop in relative safety. Warfield argues that, “the restraining power . . . appears to be the Jewish state. For the continued existence of the Jewish state was both graciously and naturally a protection to Christianity, and hence a restraint on the revelation of the persecuting power.”<sup>496</sup> I do not find this convincing. Morris agrees, “Warfield was a great exegete and all his opinions must be carefully weighed,

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<sup>491</sup> Winter, Divine Honours for the Caesars, 265.

<sup>492</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 170.

<sup>493</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 270-71.

<sup>494</sup> Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, 252.

<sup>495</sup> Pentecost, Things to Come, 271.

<sup>496</sup> B. B. Warfield, “*The Prophecies of St. Paul*,” in Biblical and Theological Studies (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 473.

but this is one in which few have been able to follow him.”<sup>497</sup>

The difficulty in interpreting this passage is due, in great measure, to the ambiguous terms that Paul uses here. As F. F. Bruce points out,

Any one undertaking to identify the restraining agency must reckon with the fact that it may be viewed either personally (ὁ κατέχων - the one who restrains) or impersonally (κατέχων - the restrainer). It is plain moreover, that both the mystery of iniquity and the restraining agency are at work at the time of the writing of the epistle; the restrainer has not yet been removed, therefore the man of lawlessness has not appeared, and . . . the day of the Lord has not yet arrived.<sup>498</sup>

Although the language is ambiguous to some degree, Bruce argues, “since the force being restrained is evil, the restrainer might be thought to be good. [Yet] God himself is not the restrainer,” contra the dispensationalists, “for the restrainer is to be taken out of the way.”<sup>499</sup> But who or what exactly is the “restrainer” then? Bruce, who also fails to convince me, argues that it is the Roman empire which is in view. Seen from this perspective, the Roman empire restrained the rise of a great persecutor of the church, the Antichrist, or the man of sin. As Bruce contends, “Paul viewed the established government as imposing a salutary restraint on evil (Rom 13:3, 4) and in his mission field established government meant effectively the Roman empire (τὸ κατέχων), personally embodied in the emperor (ὁ κατέχων).”<sup>500</sup> But this makes little sense given the nature of Paul’s warning (which is eschatological and focused upon the day of the Lord) and the tremendous persecution of the early church by the Roman empire. Tell one of those Christians turned into a human torch by Nero, or one of those killed in Jerusalem in 70 AD, or taken to Rome as a captive during Titus’s destruction of the city, that Rome was the restrainer of the man of sin!

I remain convinced that the best explanation of the restrainer’s identity is given by contemporary Reformed amillennarians, who connect this “restraint” to supernatural power perhaps manifest in the angel of Revelation 20, or to the providential power of God in exercising the restraint until the time of the end (as with Adams,<sup>501</sup> Venema,<sup>502</sup> and Ridderbos). Ridderbos sees the restrainer as a “supernatural power or ruler ordained by God (in Revelation 20, ‘A strong angel’) who checks the final revelation of the power of Satan, until the time set for

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<sup>497</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 226.

<sup>498</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 171.

<sup>499</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 188.

<sup>500</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 171-172.

<sup>501</sup> Jay Adams, The Time Is at Hand (A Press: Greenville, SC, 1987), 22-24.

<sup>502</sup> Cornelis P. Venema, The Promise of the Future (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2000), 177, n1.

the Man of Sin has come.”<sup>503</sup> Calvin’s view is similar, when he writes that the gospel was to go to the ends of the earth before the Lord’s return but “there was a delay until the work of the Gospel had been completed, a gracious invitation to accept the Gospel first of all being offered. Hence Paul added, at the proper time; the right time for vengeance was after grace had been rejected.”<sup>504</sup> Like Ridderbos, Geerhardus Vos concludes, “Paul likewise understood the *katekon* [restraint] and the *katekone* [restrainer] something supernatural and far superior to the might of Rome. . . . The fact remains that it is impossible for us to form concrete conceptions of how the restraint of the mystery takes place.”<sup>505</sup>

Vos and Ridderbos are very likely on the right track about this power being supernatural, especially in light of Beale’s contention that the angel’s restraint of Satan (as recounted in Revelation 20, a remarkably similar passage) is likely tied to the preaching of the gospel.<sup>506</sup> Not only was Paul’s preaching already having an impact upon the forces of darkness—which explains why Satan was trying to hinder him by driving him out of Thessalonica—but this also fits with our Lord’s words that the gospel must first be preached to all nations before his return (Mark 13:10). Our Lord himself promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18), implying that Satan would do his best to keep the gospel from spreading.<sup>507</sup> Perhaps, it is the preaching of the gospel which is already restraining the power of lawlessness, keeping it from prevailing. If Paul’s restrainer/restraint is in any way connected to the angel of Revelation 20 and the present binding of Satan, then the case becomes all the stronger that Paul is speaking of the preaching of the gospel as that which is presently holding back the power of evil, preventing the “revealing” of the man of sin. When light shines in the darkness evil is exposed.

Beale contends that Revelation 20:1-10 is a parallel passage which fits very closely with 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

This is further in line with Revelation 20:1-9, where during the church age an angel restrains (literally “binds”) Satan’s power to decimate the church. Then, at the end of the age, the restraining power is removed, so that Satan unleashes against the church his antichrist who will deceive and cause apostasy on a worldwide scale. When he is on the verge of destroying the covenant community, he himself will be destroyed at Christ’s final coming. . . . Consistent with this perspective is the Apocalypse’s repeated allusion to evil figures being “given power” by God to carry out wicked actions (Rev. 6:4; 7:2);

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<sup>503</sup> Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, 527.

<sup>504</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 91.

<sup>505</sup> Vos, Pauline Eschatology, 131-135.

<sup>506</sup> Bruce, “*Excursus on Antichrist*” in 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 179, in summarizing Bousset’s volume.

<sup>507</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 216.

9:13-15; 13:5, 7, 14-15).<sup>508</sup>

This, it seems to me, makes the best sense of Paul's point expressed in verse 7, that even though the powers of evil were already at work in the first century, they are also presently being restrained until God's appointed time. As Leon Morris wisely reminds us, all the speculation about Paul's language ends up obscuring the obvious point, whatever the restrainer is, or is not . . .

Some power was in operation, and that the Man of Lawlessness could not possibly put in his appearance until this power was removed. The Thessalonians knew this. Therefore they should have known that speculations about the presence of the day of the Lord were necessarily false. Necessary preconditions had yet to be fulfilled.<sup>509</sup>

The "mystery" of lawlessness was already being restrained so that the "man" of lawlessness could not appear. Therefore, the day of the Lord had not yet come and the report that it had was false.

According to Paul, at some point in the future,<sup>510</sup> the restraint will be removed, and then as we read in verse 8, "*and then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.*" While the principle of lawlessness is already at work in 50 CE, it is currently being restrained when Paul writes this letter. But at some point in the future the restraint will be lifted. Only then will the man of lawlessness be revealed, and that for a very specific purpose, his destruction, when Jesus returns to bring about the final judgment.

The verb "to reveal" (*apocalypsis*) is clearly tied to the second coming of Christ to raise the dead, judge the world and make all things new. This passage is no exception.<sup>511</sup> As Beale puts it, "the end-time enemy will be revealed so that his followers are further deceived and judged along with him."<sup>512</sup> This means that the lifting of the restraint has for its goal the final judgment upon all the forces of evil—the ultimate reason why this will come to pass in accordance with God's redemptive purposes. This, too, is very strong evidence that the events of 70 CE do not fulfill this prophecy. The scope of eschatological judgment mentioned by Paul is the visible revelation of something previously invisible, namely the glory and splendor of Christ himself

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<sup>508</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 216. Beale directs the reader to his Commentary on Revelation, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), specifically pages 973-1028) for additional parallels between Revelation 20:1-20 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

<sup>509</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 228.

<sup>510</sup> Whether that be 70 CE or at the end of the age—both events are still future when Paul wrote this epistle.

<sup>511</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 221-222.

<sup>512</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 222.

which brings the man of sin to his end.<sup>513</sup>

The passage has an air of finality about it. It is quite improbable that Paul would be speaking of something localized to judgment upon unbelieving Israel or limited to the destruction of Nero. This air of finality becomes even stronger when we realize that Paul is appealing to Isaiah 11:4, a text in which YHWH, the mighty warrior, is said to judge the whole earth. *“But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”* As Weima notes,

Paul cannot refer to the revelation of the man of lawlessness without immediately mentioning in the same sentence this evil one’s defeat . . . . The apostle employs language reminiscent of Isa. 11:4 LXX, . . . Paul has combined the two phrases from the Isaiah text (“with the word of his mouth and with the breath of his lips”) into one (“with the breath of his mouth”) . . . there are a number of biblical and intertestamental passages that similarly refer to the destruction of the wicked by means of breath or the force of the mouth (Job 4:9; Isa. 30:27–28; 1 En. 14:2; 62:2; 84:1; 4 Ezra 13:10–11; Pss. Sol [Psalms of Solomon], 17:24, 25; Rev. 19:15). . . . The “breath” of God is always depicted as something powerful and mighty . . . . The image that Paul presents with this OT allusion, therefore, is not one whereby the man of lawlessness will be easily blown over by the mere breath of the Lord Jesus . . . but rather one whereby breath is a potent and fearful weapon used by the returning Christ to destroy this eschatological enemy.<sup>514</sup>

The man of lawlessness will be killed (ἀναιρέω) by the word, or “breath of the Lord” at Jesus’s appearing, an event which Paul did not think to be localized to Jerusalem. As God spoke and all things were created, so too his breath will bring destruction upon his enemies. The apostle’s previous appeal to a shout, a trumpet, and a loud command in connection with the bodily resurrection from the dead at our Lord’s second advent (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16), unmistakably points to the day of the Lord. Jesus is that mighty warrior of whom Isaiah had spoken, and when his glory is revealed to all, he will put an end to the man of sin, slaying him with his mighty word. We think of that wonderful line from Martin Luther’s famed hymn *A Mighty Fortress*, “one little word shall fell him.”

Once the restraint is lifted, then Satan’s power is fully manifest through this individual, about whom Paul warns in verses 9-10, *“the coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”* The lawless one is that individual empowered by Satan and whose miracles mimic those of Christ himself. This is the means by which the devil deceives his followers and then brings about the final rebellion, certifying his claims of divinity. He is the deceiver and usurper *par excellence*. The man of sin may indeed be the final antichrist to which the series of antichrists mentioned by John have pointed us. No longer restrained, he deceives almost without measure. But his fate is sealed when Jesus returns, slain by Jesus’s word of judgment.

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<sup>513</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 230-231.

<sup>514</sup> Weima, “*1-2 Thessalonians*,” 887-888.

That this event is tied to our Lord's second advent is also clear from verses 11-12. Paul writes, "therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Having embraced this eschatological enemy of God, God's judgment (κριθουσιν) comes upon all those deceived through the form of powerful delusion, so that all who are taken in by this man, are therefore objects of final judgment. This is one of the most terrifying images in all the New Testament—God sends a powerful delusion upon those who turn to the lies of the devil. If they want lies, God will give them lies. Calvin writes of this,

As God enlightens us inwardly by his Spirit, so that his teaching may be effective in us and so the eyes of our understanding may be opened, through a righteous judgment he gives those who reject him "over to a depraved mind" (Romans 1:28). God has appointed these people for destruction. They have closed eyes and senseless minds and act as if they have been bewitched as they hand themselves over to Satan and his followers to be deceived.<sup>515</sup>

Paul's point is picked up by the Lutheran and Reformed traditions and applied to the papacy as an office, or even to a particular pope, since the pope is the supposed vicar of Christ on earth, as well as the self-professed head of the visible church.<sup>516</sup> I agree with Berkhof, who concludes . . .

Since the time of the Reformation many, among whom also Reformed scholars, looked upon papal Rome, and in some cases even on some particular Pope, as Antichrist. And the papacy indeed reveals several traits of Antichrist as he is pictured in Scripture. Yet it will hardly do to identify it with Antichrist. It is better to say that there are elements of Antichrist in the papacy.<sup>517</sup>

Since divine condemnation is the ultimate fate of those who are already perishing (v. 10, cf. Revelation 20:1-10), Beale asks the salient question, "How can God be good and just and still send them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie? The answer is that as a matter of divine justice, God sends such a delusion as the beginning movement in a sequence of events which culminates in the final judgment. As is clear elsewhere in Scripture, God punishes sin by sin."<sup>518</sup> What is revealed is in many ways the fulfillment of Paul's description of humanity's decline in Romans 1:18-32, when God gives people over to the full consequences of their sin.

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<sup>515</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 95. Calvin identifies the source of deception as the papacy.

<sup>516</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, "There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God (XXV.6). In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* it is affirmed, "If our opponents defend the notion that these human rites merit justification, grace and the forgiveness of sins, they are simply establishing the kingdom of Antichrist. The kingdom of Antichrist is a new kind of worship of God, devised by human authority in opposition to Christ....So the papacy will also be a part of the kingdom of Antichrist if it maintains that human rites justify (XV.18).

<sup>517</sup> Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 702.

<sup>518</sup> Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians, 222.

We also gain additional perspective on this by cross-referencing Revelation 20 (assuming for the moment that the passage there, is in fact, a description of a present millennium and not a future one) with 2 Thessalonians 2. Notice the striking parallels: In Rev. 20:1-3, the angel comes down out of heaven, having the key to the abyss, seizes the dragon, Satan, and binds him for the thousand years. Some have identified this figure as Michael, the archangel. In 2 Thessalonians 2:6, Paul tells his readers that they know what is presently holding back the man of sin; and that “the one who now holds it back will continue to do so until he is taken out of the way” (v. 7). Only then will the man of sin be revealed. Could the restrainer of Paul and the angel of John be one and the same?<sup>519</sup>

In Revelation 20:7-10, we are told that at the end of the thousand years, Satan is released, deceives the nations and organizes an eschatological rebellion which culminates in the return of Christ. In 2 Thessalonians, 2:3, Paul speaks of a great rebellion (or apostasy) coming before the day of the Lord. There is a striking similarity between Paul’s restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and the binding of Satan in Revelation 20. According to Paul, when the restraint is lifted, the great apostasy occurs, and the revelation of the personified evil of the man of sin comes to pass. In Revelation 20, John sees a time when Satan is released from his prison immediately before going out and deceiving the nations. This is a significant parallel. This, I believe, is determinative when attempting to identify the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7.

Yet, when all is said and done, Geerhardus Vos offers us wise counsel when he concludes that,

2 Thess. belongs among the many prophecies, whose best and final exegete will be the eschatological fulfillment, and in regard to which it behooves the saints to exercise a peculiar kind of eschatological patience. The idea of Antichrist in general and that of the apostasy in particular ought to warn us, although this may not have been the proximate purpose of Paul, not to take for granted an uninterrupted progress of the cause of Christ through all ages on toward the end. The making all things right and new in the world depend not on gradual amelioration but on the final interposition of God.<sup>520</sup>

Morris agrees, cautioning us that all previous attempts to identify this person have failed since Paul is speaking of someone yet to be revealed at the end of the age. He further cautions, that many conjectures have been put forth, some with great ingenuity, one of which may even be proved correct in the end, but given how this figure has baffled so many commentators, he concludes that we should “maintain a reserve in what we claim for our own particular interpretation.”<sup>521</sup>

Therefore, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Paul describes the nature of the man of lawlessness’ blasphemous activity. This end-times figure opposes God and exalts himself, seeks the worship of God’s people and proclaims himself to be God. His appearance is in accord with the work of

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<sup>519</sup> See the discussion in Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 215-218.

<sup>520</sup> Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 133-35.

<sup>521</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 221, 224-225.



Satan (v. 9), displayed in all kinds of miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil (i.e. the rebellion described above) which then deceives those who are perishing. In Revelation 20:7-10, John also speaks of a massive Satanic deception after his release from the abyss at the end of the thousand years (the present millennial age).

The man of sin will be destroyed by the Lord Jesus with the breath of his mouth at the splendor of his coming. In Revelation 20:7-10, John informs us that Satan and his followers will be destroyed by fire that comes down out of heaven. All this is compelling evidence that both John and Paul are speaking of the same period of time—the inter-advental age. This confirms that the so-called millennial reign of Christ is coterminous with the period John and Paul are describing. Therefore, the millennial age is a present reality, rather than a future hope, and the final revelation of the Antichrist is yet to come.

### **Excursus on the Doctrine of “Antichrist” – A Composite Photograph?<sup>522</sup>**

This is a good place to summarize our discussion of the man of sin. I think this is one of the most interesting sub-plots in the whole of Scripture, and one, unfortunately, about which there has been far more speculation than sound biblical exegesis. A great deal of contemporary discussion of the Bible prophecy industry centers upon the identification of the Antichrist, commonly parodied in terms of a Christian parlor game—“pin the tail on the Antichrist.”

The biblical background is often overlooked when people speculate about the Antichrist and the timing of his appearance. We can say with some degree of certainty, the Antichrist will not be named Nicolae Carpathia as in the Left Behind novels fame. Nor will he be named Damien, with a mysterious 666 appearing on his scalp.

The word “antichrist” appears in four places in John’s epistles (I John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7) and is not mentioned at all in the Book of Revelation. In the narrow (and biblical) sense of the term, “antichrist” is the heresy mentioned by John in his epistles—the denial that Jesus has come in the flesh. This was a threat the churches of Asia Minor were already facing near the close of the apostolic age. There is also a likely connection to the “false” Christs mentioned by Jesus in the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24:5).

But the term “antichrist” also has a broader, or theological use as well. The “antichrists” of John’s epistles likely culminate in the figure known in 2 Thessalonians as the “man of sin,” “the lawless one,” or the “son of perdition” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).<sup>523</sup> This antichrist figure also bears direct relationship to the “beast” of John’s apocalypse. In both Paul’s and John’s

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<sup>522</sup> Bruce’s “*Excursus on Antichrist*” in *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 179-88 lays out much of this background.

Recommended or interesting studies of Antichrist include, B. B. Warfield, “Antichrist” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 356-362; and Geerhardus Vos, “The Man of Sin” in *Pauline Eschatology*, 94-135.

<sup>523</sup> “In the New Testament ἀπόλεια commonly means eschatological perdition, damnation (Matt. 7:13; Acts 8:20; Romans 9:22; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Tim. 6:9; Heb. 10:39; 2 Pet. 2:1; 3:7; Rev. 17:8; 11) . . . The identical phrase is used to describe the ‘man of sin’ (2 Thess. 2:3).” See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1972), 424.

discussion the issue is primarily a religious theat-satanic opposition to the preaching of the gospel. When the beast of Revelation is included in the composite photo, the element of state sponsored persecution is added to the picture.

Therefore, the context for Paul's warning to the Thessalonians about a future rebellion and revelation of a "man of sin" arises from the Old Testament background, popular belief about a personification of evil, and the deification of the Roman emperor and the imperial cult. Although we do have some evidence, the popular expectations of the apostolic age are not completely clear to us, therefore we need to keep in mind Vos's reminder that the only "traceable and safe road" to understand Paul "leads back into the past to discover the Man-of-Sin . . . via the prophecy of Daniel."<sup>524</sup>

Paul's prediction of this coming foe is an amplification of Jewish expectation as well as a divinely given interpretation of Daniel's earlier prophecy. His warning to the Thessalonians very likely serves as a kind of cross-reference to our Lord's warning in the Olivet Discourse to be on our guard for false Christs and false prophets who converge in a final antichrist figure.

The terms "antichrist," "beast," and "man of sin," are very likely referring to the same thing (a composite photograph), certainly a principle of evil already present in Paul's day yet presently restrained, which points ahead to a final personification of evil, variously associated with Nero, other Roman emperors, and to an eschatological man of sin, or *the* Antichrist, who will yet appear at the end of time.

The images in question, which were already present in the apostolic church, find their interpretive point of reference in the first century. The key question is whether or not the imagery is to be understood as a purely historic fulfillment (preterist), or as a type/anti-type prophecy which may have a double fulfillment. It is clear however, that the principle of lawlessness was *already* at work when Paul wrote his epistle. Many *antichrists* had already come. The Roman empire was already putting Christians to death, and persecuting others in regions of the empire. There is much in these images that is already present in the apostolic era. It is possible, therefore, to argue that all of these events have already been fulfilled in the lives of the hearers, *except* for the return of Jesus Christ. However, it is much more likely that if the prophetic pattern holds (type-antitype), the fulfillment of these events in the lives of the apostles, in turn, becomes a prophetic picture of a yet future eruption of cataclysmic evil immediately before Christ returns. Since our Lord's return is said to be the immediate cause of the destruction of the evil personages in view, this is likely the case. This is what I take Paul to be saying in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

If the preceding is correct, then it follows that the localized persecutions of Rome, the localized mark of the beast, the localized temple (Jerusalem or Rome), in turn become a pattern of periodic eruptions of evil, throughout this present age, which finally culminate in a personification of this evil at the end with a universal fulfillment of these images in a world-wide system of religious evil. There will be "wannabe" "men of sin," and a multitude of antichrists until Christ comes back. This makes any attempt to identify the principals as futile, since the universalizing of these localized images given us by Paul and John expands first

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<sup>524</sup> Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, 104-05.

century expectations and mutates the all-pervasive character of those past evil Antichrist candidates.

The primary image given in all of these texts is that the evil in view is characterized by false worship and heresy. The thrust is primarily religious, and secondarily political. Heretics are antichrists. They possess the spirit of antichrist and exemplify the principle of lawlessness. Persecuting empires and governments will rise as well, activities ascribed to the two beasts of Revelation 13, thereby fulfilling the beast motif. Economic deprivation and physical persecutions are also in view, but even these are energized by the heretical, antichrist principle of false worship. This fits with the image of martyrs in Revelation 20 coming out of the millennial period of the present age. Although confessional Protestants and Lutherans have been unambiguous as to the identity of this figure (a particular pope or the papacy as an institution), Paul seems to be speaking of something else—an end-times figure.

The identification of the “restrainer” as the angel who locks up Satan in the abyss until the thousand years are over in Revelation 20:1-7, is not a far-fetched one. This dovetails perfectly with all of the images that we have just discussed. Evil is already present, and that evil will attempt to gain the upper hand, but that this evil is restrained in some sense (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). Satan is presently bound, we are told in Revelation 20:1-10, so that he cannot deceive the nations. This is a very clear parallel to Paul’s restrainer, who does not remove all Satanic activity, yet does restrain it. Once the restrainer ceases this activity, which certainly could refer to the unbinding of Satan in Revelation 20, then all hell breaks loose. There will be a tremendous revival of satanically motivated evil in the form of false worship and persecution of the church, leading to an end-times apostasy and the appearance of the final antichrist. But for the sake of the elect, Jesus says, these days are shortened, a “restraint” of sorts (cf. Matthew 24:22), but then Jesus will return to destroy all evil in final judgment on the day of the Lord (properly understood).

This is a very strong argument for a present millennium (the interadvental age) and the amillennial system (as a non-millennarian eschatology), as well as for the appearance of a final antichrist who is destroyed by Jesus Christ at his *parousia*.

#### IV. Further Thanksgiving, Encouragement, and Prayer (2:13-17)

##### A. Thanksgiving (2:13-14)

**13 But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. 14 To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Paul returns to discuss God’s faithfulness and the importance of being thankful in verses 13-14, repeating the point he made in 1 Thessalonians 1:3—the reason for which was the Thessalonian’s growing faith and love,<sup>525</sup> which Paul ties to the doctrine of election and calling.

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<sup>525</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 325.

To Paul's way of thinking, Christians are to always give thanks to God, *because* they are loved by God as seen in the fact that God chose them from the beginning to be saved, *through* the sanctifying work of the Spirit, *through* belief in the truth. There are a number of important theological points raised here even if set out by the apostle in a sort of theological shorthand at the conclusion of his letter.

For starters, Christians owe an unpayable debt to God, so they "*ought always to give thanks to God.*" This is grounded in the work that God has done among the members of the Thessalonian congregation in calling so many pagan Gentiles to faith in Jesus, when God could have simply left them in paganism and unbelief. God was not obligated to save any of the Thessalonians who were as guilty as all their neighboring contemporaries. But the fact of the matter is that God did this saving work for them, therefore, believers are obligated to give thanks. Grounding the Christian life in thanksgiving instead of fear and uncertainty, is reflected in the guilt, grace, gratitude structure of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, Christians are to live lives characterized by thanksgiving.

Paul's treatment of election is picked up by various Reformed writers in regard to the focus the apostle places upon election through his letters.<sup>526</sup> Paul is a predestinarian. He does not present election as an object for debate and speculation ("why did God choose one and not another?" "How is this fair?" etc.). Rather, Paul presents election to the Thessalonians as a matter of the believer's comfort. God has chosen you, therefore he will not "un-choose you" should persecution continue or circumstances if get worse. You have been chosen unto a particular end—to be the firstfruits of a great harvest yet to come. This is how you will be saved, through the means of sanctification and faith in the truth (i.e., the gospel). This should stir within us a profound sense of thanksgiving in response to all that God has done for us.

In light of Paul's prior assertion regarding the coming revelation of Antichrist and the related apostasy, and given that these events are currently restrained from coming to pass through God's sovereign restraining power, Paul returns to God's sovereignty as a way of encouraging believers who are currently facing persecution. Since God is sovereign, Christians are not left on their own to fend for themselves in difficult times. Paul uses this opportunity to make it clear that God has chosen to save his elect among the Thessalonians based upon his own purposes, and not because he sees something good in specific individuals which then serves as the basis for his choice. As Calvin reminds his readers, in light of God's election of sinners to be saved, "Satan has no power over anyone who has been chosen by God. Satan cannot stop them from being saved, even if heaven and earth should disappear."<sup>527</sup>

Since our salvation depends upon God's choice, not anything we do, we owe him our gratitude (thanks). Although Paul presents the doctrine of election as a source of comfort, the apostle also uses this occasion to make the point that God will not begin a good work in us, and then cease his work in us if our personal circumstances become difficult. But if your starting point is that you are currently in Christ because of something that you have done—i.e., "asking Jesus

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<sup>526</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, II.337-404; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 109-125; Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 309-323.

<sup>527</sup> Calvin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 96.

into your heart,” or “accepting Jesus as your personal Savior,” then, the motivation to be thankful is not nearly as strong because God is thought to be giving to us what we have earned or accomplished.

Paul is absolutely clear when discussing election—it is God who has chosen us. The middle voice of the verb indicates that God has chosen us for himself to be firstfruits of the great eschatological harvest at the end of the age. According to Bruce, “‘The first fruits’ is a concept deeply embedded in the Old Testament cultus as the portion dedicated to God and that which sanctifies the whole . . . . [The] Thessalonian brothers . . . are the consecrated first-born who, like the Levites, are set apart for the work of God.’ But the church as a whole is the ἀπαρχὴ of mankind to God.”<sup>528</sup> Richard Gaffin notes that there is much in view in Paul’s use of “firstfruits.”

Christ’s resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection in the sense that his resurrection is nothing less than the ‘actual beginning’ of the ‘general epochal event.’ The general event of resurrection which includes believers . . . . His resurrection . . . is not, as it might be viewed, a more or less isolated miracle there in the distant past. Rather, we may say . . . an event has taken place in the past, the resurrection of Christ in fact belongs to the future. It is the initial part of the eschatological harvest of the resurrection at the the end of history and from there has entered into history.<sup>529</sup>

In verses 13-14, we find that Paul sets out a fairly complete *ordo salutis*, or “order of salvation.”<sup>530</sup> God has made his choice of certain individuals before time, based upon reasons known only to himself, and we only know who these people are in connection with their calling which Paul connects to the preaching of the gospel. The elect confirm that they have been chosen in Christ when they come to faith in Jesus. We cannot concern ourselves with the mysterious will of God which remains hidden and unknown to us until it is realized in history. But we are to concern ourselves with how these things work out in history. The order of these divine actions is set before us by Paul as follows:

- 1). God loved us—this is rooted in the eternal covenant of redemption.<sup>531</sup>
- 2). He chose us from the beginning to be saved, that is, to be delivered from the wrath that is coming upon unbelievers, as well as upon those who follow the man of sin, when he is revealed.
- 3). God does this in Jesus Christ through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, i.e., in our being set apart from unbelief, idolatry, and paganism unto God for his purpose and

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<sup>528</sup> Bruce, *I & II Thessalonians*, 190.

<sup>529</sup> Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time*, 306.

<sup>530</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 415-422.

<sup>531</sup> For a thorough treatment of the subject, see J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2016).

glory. In our sanctification, we are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

- 4). This is accomplished through belief in the truth, i.e., through faith in Jesus Christ.
- 5). Those whom God has chosen are called through the gospel when it is preached to them. God determines the end (the salvation of his elect) and the means (the preaching of the gospel).
- 6). The result is that those chosen (in this case the Thessalonian Christians) will share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they were chosen.

The Reformed often strive to organize their *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) along the lines laid out by Paul here, and in Romans 8:28-30, and 1 Corinthians 6:11. Though Paul omits the doctrine of justification in his “ordo” here (since there appears to be no controversy in Thessalonica about it, which was not the case in Galatia due to the threat posed by the Judaizers), Paul does speak in terms of God choosing to save his people in eternity past, and then working out his eternal decree in ordinary history in the person of his Son—a point Paul explains in much more detail in Ephesians 1:3-14. Paul is clear that it is God who has determined who will be saved and who will be lost in light of the fall of our race into sin and death. But God has assigned to us the task of preaching the gospel to everyone in our sphere of influence, knowing that it is through the message of Christ crucified, God will call his elect to faith in Jesus Christ, save them as “firstfruits,” through sanctification by the Holy Spirit. There is no better reason for us to give thanks!

### **B. Encouragement (2:15)**

**15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.**

In verse 15, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to hold fast to the “traditions,” which are passed along to these Christians, whether by letter (written) or by word of mouth (oral). Having warned the recipients of this letter about verifying both the content and source of any letter or word they receive, the tradition of which Paul speaks here is, no doubt, that which he had taught them on his previous visit to the city (and which was reinforced by the visits from Timothy).

This is a biblical text which Roman Catholic apologists often use to demonstrate the supposed implausibility of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The argument runs like this: The bible itself does not speak of *sola scriptura*, in fact, in a text such as this one, the apostle speaks of two sources of authority, one written and one oral. Since there is an oral tradition and a written source, how can we embrace *sola scriptura*?

Protestants have responded—quite correctly—that the oral tradition of which Paul speaks was subsequently inscripturated in the gospels and epistles of the New Testament. Once this process occurs and after the apostles die off, all of the church fathers in the post apostolic age

appeal to known apostolic writings and not to any form of oral tradition.<sup>532</sup> It is the various proto-Gnostic sects, which arise early in the second century, that begin to contend that there is an independent (i.e. “Secret”) oral tradition supposedly containing the secret teachings of Jesus which exist apart from Scripture.<sup>533</sup> Why is it that these revelations are not called the “Book of Fred,” or the book of “Sam,” but are instead passed off as the “secret” writings of the apostles, i.e., the “Acts of Thomas”?

The only possible answer is because there was no authoritative oral tradition existing to which one could make an appeal. Even those with proto-Gnostic leaning were forced to make an appeal to apostolic authority to even gain a hearing. The only way to do this was to pass off their teachings not as oral tradition, but as secret teaching, coming from the apostles, now written down, and therefore authoritative. This is very similar to what happened in Thessalonica when many were taken by a letter with a false report supposedly coming from Paul, and was not sufficiently “tested.”

This, of course, does not pacify many Roman apologists. According to Scott Hahn (a former Presbyterian), this explanation is . . .

plausible, but there is no doctrine of *sola scriptura* given in Scripture. It might be a plausible perspective, but there is no probable argument establishing that (this idea that oral tradition is ‘self-retiring,’ as soon as the last apostle dies. It is very interesting, very possible, but is totally ungrounded and unfounded in Scripture. There is nothing in Scripture to lead us to that.<sup>534</sup>

Hahn then goes on to say, “I throw these passages out as indications of where we go to find the authority of the church and its Magisterium, and the tradition of the church.”<sup>535</sup> In other words, since Paul speaks of an oral tradition, this is proof that he is speaking of what is now the Roman Magisterium.

There are a couple of questions which need to be asked of those who favor a Roman Magisterium: “What teachings does the Roman church hold that come from this oral tradition of which Paul speaks?” “Where are they published?” In practice, Romanists appeal to this tradition when they cannot justify their teachings from Scripture.

Protestants do not reject tradition, but we do not consider church tradition infallible unless and

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<sup>532</sup> Kruger, Christianity at the Crossroads, 167-201.

<sup>533</sup> Michael Kruger, Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 260-287.

<sup>534</sup> Scott Hahn, “Summary of Argument Against *Sola Scriptura*,” transcribed from undated audio-tape source.

<sup>535</sup> Scott Hahn, “Summary of Argument Against *Sola Scriptura*,” transcribed from undated audio-tape source.

until it is inscripturated.<sup>536</sup> When Hahn asserts that this oral tradition mentioned by Paul is the basis for the Roman Magisterium, he is making a leap of gigantic and implausible proportions. Because Hahn makes such an assertion does not make it so. He ignores the process of canonization as well as the fact that the apostolic church constantly appeals to the authority of those writings (not oral tradition) known to come from the apostolic circle, especially in response to gnostic teaching grounded in “secret teaching.”<sup>537</sup>

Since Scripture itself does not give us a list of books to be included in the canon, the process of canonization is a necessarily historical process.<sup>538</sup> As Hahn himself admits, the Reformed argument is at the very least plausible. Here is where the assertion that all “Scripture is God breathed” (2 Timothy 3:15-16) enters in, because Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness because it is given by God. In his Thessalonian letters (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:2), Paul exhorts the Thessalonians that all oral and written teaching is to be tested to see if those giving these words and teachings are from God! But appeals to this “oral tradition” as authoritative disappear among the orthodox once the canon is completed.

### C. Paul’s prayer (2:16-17)

**16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.**

In verses 16-17, Paul prays for the Thessalonians using the “wish-prayer” formula.<sup>539</sup> The way Paul constructs this exhortation is significant, but easy to overlook. According to Green,

The prayer begins, *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father*, making both *God our Father* and *our Lord Jesus Christ* the objects of the petition and so placing them on the same plane. The christological implications are evident. But unlike the majority of the verses where both the *Father* and *Jesus Christ* appear together, the name of the *Lord Jesus Christ* is placed in first position (see Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Phlm. 3; and cf. Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 13:13, where the order is the same as in the present text).<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Michael J. Kruger, Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 175-194.

<sup>537</sup> Kruger, Canon Revisited, 195-232.

<sup>538</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, ed., John J. Hughes (P & R Publishing: Phillipsburg, 2023), 467-474.

<sup>539</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 195.

<sup>540</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 330.



Morris makes several additional points which supplement Green's observations.

This prayer is notable, for the place that it assigns to Jesus Christ. He is given the full title 'Lord Jesus Christ,' where each word has its full weight . . . Ever since he got on to the subject of the Man of Lawlessness Paul has used every opportunity to insist on the superlative worth and might of the Savior. He is linked with the Father, and, what is unusual, he is placed before the Father. This sometimes happens elsewhere (Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 13:14), but the more usual practice is to place the Father first. Although the subject is in this way a double one, the two verbs 'encourage' and 'strengthen' are singular. We have seen Paul do this in the earlier letter (1 Thess. 3:11). All this combines to give the highest place imaginable to Christ. Paul is not giving a formal account of his understanding of the nature of deity, but this incidental allusion in an informal act of prayer is all the more revealing for that reason. It is clear that he made no sharp distinction between the Son and the Father.<sup>541</sup>

Calvin reminds us, "Paul ascribed to Christ a totally divine work and presented Christ, along with the Father, as the Author of the best divine blessings. This gives us a clear view of Christ's divinity, and in this way we are taught that we cannot receive anything from God unless we seek it in Christ himself."<sup>542</sup>

## V. Further Prayer (3:1-5)

### A. Prayer Request (3:1-2)

**1 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, 2 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.**

In the final chapter of this letter, Paul changes gears and wraps up. Once again, Paul prays for the Thessalonians, while asking the Thessalonians to pray for him (as he did in 1 Thessalonians 5:25). In light of the sentence's structure, it is clear that Paul is emphatic when making his appeal.<sup>543</sup> He says, "continually pray for us," so that the message of the Lord—that is the preaching of Christ crucified—may spread rapidly, (literally may "run swiftly"). Paul is drawing upon the language of Psalm 147:15— "*He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.*" His prayer is that God's people will glorify Christ as a consequence of what God accomplishes through the preached word. This is the end to which Paul asks the Thessalonians for their prayers—the success of the gospel. We should also follow this pattern, and self-consciously pray that God's word would spread and that this process would bring glory to Jesus Christ.

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<sup>541</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 242-243.

<sup>542</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 99.

<sup>543</sup> Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 245-246.

According to Green,

The verb “may be delivered” (*rhyomai*) is used in many ancient texts, both Greek and Jewish, to describe the way a deity preserves someone from danger. Paul and his companions recognize that God is the only hope in the face of such overwhelming opposition to their message and persons. The ones from whom they need divine protection are described as *wicked and evil men*.<sup>544</sup>

The opposition the Thessalonians are facing arises for a simple reason—the fellows of the baser sort who drove Paul from the city, those Jews who oppose Paul’s Gentile mission, and those Greco-Roman pagans who resent their friends and family turning from idols—oppose the preaching of the gospel. Bruce puts it nicely when he points out that . . .

The writers have in mind here those opponents of the gospel who tried to stop its progress by stirring up attacks on those who preached it, like their enemies in Thessalonica who incited the rabble against them (Acts 17:5). The reference here is not restricted to Jews or Gentiles, to those in authority or the “rascal multitude”; it applies to all whose policy or activity hindered the spread of the saving message and worked to the detriment of the messengers.<sup>545</sup>

The “rascal multitude” do not believe the gospel and it is they who did the work of Satan in hindering the preaching of the gospel.

#### **B. Paul’s confidence (3:3-4)**

**3 But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. 4 And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.**

The second petition in Paul’s prayer is for his own deliverance from evil men. He is certainly thinking of those who have forced him to leave Thessalonica and then followed him all the way to Berea. Green reminds us that this is something about which Paul and his companions had a great deal of personal experience. He writes,

We learn from Acts and the Pauline letters that in city after city Paul and his associates met with great opposition, and from the depth of these experiences Paul solicits this request for the Thessalonians’ prayers. This message and its messengers had been dishonored by the tumult and riots that frequently ensued when it was proclaimed, as in the case of Thessalonica. On other occasions the gospel was simply rejected as so much foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23), or mocked as it was in Athens (Acts 17:32). In light of the dishonor the gospel received, Paul asks this church to pray that the gospel would *be honored, just as it was with you*, that is, by being received as the message of God. The

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<sup>544</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 336.

<sup>545</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 198.

Thessalonians were reminded of the exemplary manner in which they received the message as the word of God (1 Thess. 1:6, 9-10; 2:13). The optimism expressed in this petition does not arise out of the apostle's present experience of rejection and opposition but rather out of confidence in the power of God who sends his word running.<sup>546</sup>

Paul is confident when he prays, for as he reminds the congregation, "*the Lord is faithful,*" which implies that God has been faithful to the terms of the covenant of grace which he has made with his people. Since God always keeps his promises the Thessalonians can be confident that as the Lord has protected Paul, so too, "*he will establish you and guard you against the evil one.*" As Paul explained earlier in the letter, the Lord will return on that day to mete out his holy judgment while delivering his people. Satan energizes and empowers the coming man of lawlessness who will perform lying signs and wonders to deceive the elect if that were possible (cf. Matthew 24:24). Believers are warned to be aware of his tactics when he attempts to deceive.

In verse 4, the apostle expresses much the same sentiment. "*We have confidence in the Lord about you,*" namely that you (i.e., the Thessalonians) are doing well and will do take heed to the things Paul has instructed them, and exhorted them. Paul expresses great confidence that the Thessalonians will indeed hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

### C. Second prayer (3:5)

#### **5 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.**

In verse 5, Paul goes on to ask that, "*may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*" The basis for Paul's confidence is not the believer's ability to gut it out under all adverse circumstances—no Christian stoicism here. Rather, Paul's confidence is in Jesus Christ—always steadfast—who is now at the right hand of God, who preserves us when we are weak, faithless, and struggling. What a wonderful blessing for the Thessalonians to know that Jesus is strong, Jesus is faithful, and Jesus has overcome the world. Jesus will stir in them a love for God and give them confidence in the ability of Jesus to keep his promises, even as the Thessalonians face many difficulties.

## VI. Exhortation (3:6-16)

### A. Warning about idleness (3:6-13)

**6 Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. 9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to**

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<sup>546</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 335.

**imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.**

As he did in his first letter, Paul closes his second letter with a series of imperatives (exhortations). In this case, Paul's imperatives are concerned with warning the Thessalonians to be on guard for those who are consumers, or who are lazy, and will not obey the instructions that the apostle has given. Paul opens with an emphatic command to keep away from *"every brother who is idle and does not live according to the tradition you received from us."*

The word translated as "idle" can mean "disorderly." In this context, it probably refers to those who do not live up to reasonable expectations—people who disappoint us by making promises and never following through on them.<sup>547</sup> In light of the questions about the *parousia* put to Paul by the Thessalonians, it is possible that these folk cause chaos in the church because they do not obey the teaching, and were refusing to do any work to support their brothers and sisters because they were convinced that the second coming was at hand. But in light of what Paul says in verse 10, we cannot remove laziness (the dreaded "sweat allergy") as the root cause.

When Paul reminds the congregation in verse 7 of the fact that they ought to follow his example, his point becomes clear. *"For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you."* Paul may have worked at his own trade, tent making. Nor did he eat anyone's food without paying for it. In verse 8, he can speak with a clear conscience, *"nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you."* Paul was no freeloader nor a "couch surfer," taking advantage of the hospitality offered him by the Thessalonians. He paid his own way, worked hard, and was more of a contributor than a burden. Yet, because of his apostolic office, Paul was entitled to be supported by the church. *"It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate."* But Paul felt it better not to invoke his legitimate claims so as to set an example to Christians to be self-supporting insofar as that is possible.

Paul is not condemning the acceptance of charity, nor is he condemning those who find themselves in material need and are willing ask for help. He is, however, condemning laziness and selfishness, and the kind of entitled consumer mentality which so often characterizes churches today as it, apparently did then. Previously, Paul left them with a simple rule of which he now reminds them—*"For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."* This rule should still be applied in Christian ministries of mercy today, such as the mercy and charity extended by a church's deacons to those with genuine need. Christian charity is not a handout, but to be an aid to get people back on their feet. Those who show themselves to be lazy and irresponsible are best served by being denied such aid.

In verse 12, Paul cautions, *"now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living."* The Puritans understood this full well and

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<sup>547</sup> Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 281.

several of them are quoted as affirming, “idleness is the devil’s workshop.” Paul sees those who have too much time on their hands—because they are not willing to work, or busy waiting for the Lord’s return—as a potential source of trouble in the congregation. Such people often become busybodies and can be more preoccupied with the lives and the level of sanctification of others, all the while neglecting their own sins and foibles. Paul commands them (using strong language) to stop being disorderly and get to work. He tells them in verse 13, what he expects from them, “*as for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.*” The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint.

### B. On discipline (3:14-15)

**14 If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**

Paul has just warned believers to hold fast to the traditions—i.e., apostolic teaching (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:15). Paul tells the Thessalonians how to deal with those people who do not. Given the questions in the Thessalonian congregation about the Lord’s return, Paul warns that since he has answered these questions definitively (from his apostolic office), those who ignore Paul’s words of correction, or who continue to pass along words or letters offering false teaching, Paul’s instructions are clear. Identify such people, Paul says, and have nothing to do with them, with the goal of causing them to be embarrassed because of their actions. This, Paul hopes, will lead to repentance. He instructs the Thessalonians not to treat such a person as an enemy, but as someone who is sincere, but wrong. Paul hopes for their repentance. His warning to have nothing to do with such a person may mean barring them from the communal meal during which the Lord’s Supper was celebrated.<sup>548</sup>

This is a good indication that from the beginning, Paul teaches and encourages churches to practice church discipline—especially when it comes to doctrine. The apostle’s instructions here are implemented in Reformed churches today with the so-called first step of discipline, which is “silent censure.”<sup>549</sup> In chapter 5 of his 1 Corinthian letter, Paul extends such discipline to conduct (the man sleeping with his father’s wife). Paul’s charge here and in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 indicate that church discipline is not an option, but ought to be considered a mark of a true church.<sup>550</sup> An undisciplined church is a church which often embraces false doctrine, encourages rebellion, allows cliques to form, and tolerates sinful behavior—which is the situation described in his subsequent letters to the church in Corinth.

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<sup>548</sup> Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians, 354-355.

<sup>549</sup> Article 55 of the URCNA church order reads as follows: “Anyone whose sin is properly made known to the Consistory, and who then obstinately rejects the Scriptural admonitions of the Consistory, shall be suspended from all privileges of church membership, including the use of the sacraments.”

<sup>550</sup> According to article 29 of the Belgic Confession, “the true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.

### C. A final prayer (3:16)

**16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.**

Gordon Fee points out that in many way, this is the most "Jewish" of all of Paul's benedictions. According to Fee,

As Paul neared the end of his first letter, he prayed, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you in every way." But in the present letter, "holy living" as such has not been in focus at any point. Rather, what has been in focus is the coming day of the Lord and *shalom* within the believing community. Thus the prayer-wish in this case calls on "the Lord of peace" to grant them peace. In many ways this is the most "Jewish" of all the Pauline benedictions; but that is surely not the reason for it. In light of the preceding content (God's coming judgment on their enemies; the timing of the day of the Lord; and unrest caused by the disruptive-idle), this prayer is precisely what is needed. So quite in keeping with what will become his lifelong habit, the "grace" at the end of the letter focuses altogether on their *shalom*. And quite in keeping with the overall christological focus in this letter, the prayer is for "the Lord of peace" to give them peace.<sup>551</sup>

Bruce, however, sees Paul making a Christological point.

In praying for the blessing of peace on their converts, the writers ask that it may be bestowed by "the Lord of peace." The repetition of "peace" adds emphasis to their prayer. The substitution of "the Lord of peace" for the more frequent "the God of peace" may suggest that the risen Christ shares with God the prerogative of being "the author of peace and lover of concord." Elsewhere in the Pauline writings we are told that Christ has "made peace" (Col 1:20); more than that, "he is our peace" (Eph 2:14).<sup>552</sup>

Both emphases (Fee and Bruce) are mutually exclusive.

## VII. Letter Closing (3:17-18)

**17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.**

Paul concludes with a formal benediction, and as he notes, this letter was written in his own hand, which was perhaps a way to demonstrate that this letter comes from Paul and his co-writers, not from the parties causing disruption in the churches.

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<sup>551</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 340.

<sup>552</sup> Bruce, I & II Thessalonians, 212.

He closes the letter with his usual blessing, “*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all*” which places Jesus on par with YHWH, the God of all grace. Fee points out something easy for us to miss—Paul’s custom of Christianizing his greetings, and benedictions.

It is noteworthy that the standard “good-bye” in ancient letters was *errōso* (lit. “be strong”), which occurs in the New Testament only in the letter of James recorded in Acts 15:29. As with the salutation with which our letter began, this standard conclusion has been Christianized. It was “grace,” God’s own favor that is theirs through “the Lord, Jesus Christ,” with which he greeted them at the beginning; and now that same “grace” is what he wishes for them in conclusion. It is the one word in Paul’s vocabulary that embraces all that God has done, and that he desires that God will do, for his Thessalonian friends through Christ Jesus.<sup>553</sup>

This is the same benediction (with very minor changes) Paul extended in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 5:28) and is virtually identical to his benediction in Romans 16:24.

I give to John Calvin the last word as we close out our exposition of Paul’s Thessalonian letters. Says Calvin, Paul’s “concluding prayer explains how God helps his believing people – by the presence of Christ’s grace.”<sup>554</sup>

That many former pagans (and likely a few Jews) were now believers in Jesus Christ in the midst of a thoroughly pagan Greco-Roman city like Thessalonica is surely a testimony to the grace of God in calling his elect to faith as the first fruits, sanctifying them through the truth of the gospel.

So let each of us affirm with Paul, “Maranatha, Lord come!”

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<sup>553</sup> Fee, The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, 342.

<sup>554</sup> Calvin, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 110.