

Notes on 1 Thessalonians

2015 Edition

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thessalonica was originally an ancient town named *Thermaí*, meaning "Hot Springs." The town gave its name to the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea, on the shore of which it stood. In time it became an important city because of its strategic location. Cassander, the Macedonian king, founded the more modern city in 315 B.C., and named it for his wife, who was a half-sister of Alexander the Great. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and it stood on the *Via Egnatia*, the Roman highway to the East. In Paul's day it was a self-governing community, with enough Jews in residence to warrant a synagogue (Acts 17:1).



"Under the Romans it was the capital of the second of the four divisions of Macedonia, and when these were united to form one single province in 146 B.C. it became the capital, as well as the largest city of the province."¹

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey—with Silas, Timothy, and perhaps others. They had just been released from prison in Philippi, and had made their way southward to Thessalonica. For at least three Sabbath days, Paul reasoned in the synagogue with those present, and many believed the gospel (Acts 17:2). However, he probably ministered in Thessalonica for a longer time than just three weeks, in view of what he wrote that he had done there (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:9; cf. Phil. 4:15-16).²

¹Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 11. See also George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pp. xxi-xxv; Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, pp. 337-41.

²Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 230; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 7.

Those who responded to the message of Christ's sufferings and resurrection (Acts 17:3, 7) were Jews (Acts 17:4) and God-fearing proselytes to Judaism. There were also some leading women of the city, and many idol-worshipping pagans (Acts 17:4-5).³

"If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men's counterparts; they played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions from them for their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged mercenaries, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion as regents or even co-rulers."⁴

When the unbelieving Jews heard of the conversion of the proselytes, whom the missionaries were discipling, they stirred up a gang of roughnecks, who attacked the house of Jason. Paul and his friends had been staying with him. Unable to find the missionaries, the mob dragged Jason before the magistrates, who simply commanded him to keep the peace. Convinced of the danger to Paul and Jason, the Christians sent Paul and Silas away from the city, by night, to Berea (Acts 17:10).

Paul and his party began their evangelistic work in Berea in the synagogue, as was their custom. However, when many Jews there believed, the Thessalonian Jews came down to Berea—and stirred up more trouble (Acts 17:10-13)! At this point the Berean Christians sent Paul away to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14). Then, having been sent for by Paul, Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens, but he soon sent Silas back to Philippi and or Berea, and sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-3; Acts 17:15). Later, both men returned to Paul while he was practicing his trade in Corinth (Acts 18:3, 5), with a gift from the Christians in those Macedonian towns (2 Cor. 11:9; cf. Phil. 4:15).

Timothy's report of the conditions in the Thessalonian church was what led Paul to write this epistle. Some of the Thessalonians apparently believed that Jesus Christ was about to return momentarily, and had consequently given up their jobs and become disorderly (cf. 1 Thess. 4:11; 5:14). Some worried about what had happened to their loved ones who had died before the Lord had returned (4:13, 18). Persecution from the Gentiles—as well as the Jews—still oppressed the believers (2:17—3:10), who were nevertheless holding fast to the truth, and eager to see Paul again (3:6-8). Some of those outside the church, however, remained hostile to Paul (2:1-12). There appears to have been some misuse of spiritual gifts in the assembly, as well as an unfortunate tendency on the part of some to return to their former habits involving sexual impurity (4:1-8; 5:19-21).

³See Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31:3 (July 1985):336-57, for more information on the religious and political background of Thessalonica.

⁴W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation*, pp. 98-99.

Internal evidence suggests that Paul had several purposes for writing this epistle. He wanted to express thanks and give encouragement to the Thessalonian believers. He also wanted to defend himself against attacks by his enemies, specifically his Jewish opponents. He exhorted his readers to stand firm in persecution—and to not return to paganism! He clarified the matter of the perceived "fate" of Christians who die before the Lord's return. Finally, he dealt with some aspects of church life.⁵

It seems clear that Paul wrote this epistle shortly after he arrived in Corinth (1:7-9; 2:17; 3:1, 6; Acts 18:5, 11), about A.D. 51.⁶ If one follows the early dating of Galatians before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which I do, this epistle would have been Paul's second inspired writing. If Paul penned Galatians after the second missionary journey, 1 Thessalonians could have been his first inspired epistle.⁷ However, the first option seems more probable.⁸

A few scholars have suggested that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians before he wrote 1 Thessalonians.⁹ According to this theory, 1 Thessalonians responds to issues alluded to in 2 Thessalonians. This is not as improbable as may appear at first, since the traditional sequence of Pauline letters to churches rests on length rather than date. Nonetheless, this theory has not convinced most scholars.¹⁰

PURPOSE

In view of this epistle's contents, Paul had at least three purposes in mind when he wrote it. First, he wanted to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica who were making good progress in their new faith (1:2-10). Second, he desired to correct misinformation about himself—and his fellow missionaries—that some of his critics in Thessalonica were circulating (2:1—3:13). Third, he wrote to give additional instruction that would contribute to the Thessalonians' spiritual growth (4:1—5:24). Whereas we regard 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are every bit as pastoral and personal, as is 2 Corinthians. They reveal much about "Paul's pastoral zeal and his intense interest in the spiritual well-being of his converts."¹¹ As such they are an invaluable resource for people in pastoral ministry.

⁵Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 13-14.

⁶See Milligan, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

⁷Thomas, p. 248; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. xi; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:3; J. S. Howson, in *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 298; Milligan, pp. xxxvi-xxxviii; et al., held that this was Paul's first epistle.

⁸For a fuller discussion, see Thomas L. Constable, "1 Thessalonians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 687-89; and the New Testament Introductions.

⁹E.g., T. W. Manson, "St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952-53):438-46; *ibid.*, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*; and Wanamaker, pp. 37-45.

¹⁰E.g., E. A. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1977 ed.), pp. 43-44; I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 26; R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, pp. 24-25; Morris, pp. 27-30; and most others. See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. xxxix-xliv; or Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 543-44; for good discussions of the issue.

¹¹Morris, p. 19.

"Far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles [1 and 2 Thessalonians] lies in what they say about eschatology."¹²

". . . over a quarter of 1 Thessalonians and nearly half of 2 Thessalonians deal with problems and issues regarding the parousia or coming of Christ from heaven."¹³

"The Thessalonian letters present the first literary evidence for the use of *parousia* . . . in the sense of the future Advent of Christ: it occurs in this sense six times in the two letters. The event is depicted repeatedly in language borrowed from portrayals of OT theophanies. But it is the ethical implications that are chiefly stressed: the writers look forward to the Parousia especially as the time when their service will be reviewed and rewarded by the Lord who commissioned them, and they will be content, they say, to have it assessed by the quality of their converts."¹⁴

OUTLINE¹⁵

- I. Salutation and greeting 1:1
- II. Personal commendations and explanations 1:2—3:13
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians 1:2-10
 - 1. Summary statement 1:2-3
 - 2. Specific reasons 1:4-10
 - B. Reminders for the Thessalonians 2:1-16
 - 1. How the gospel was delivered 2:1-12
 - 2. How the gospel was received 2:13-16
 - C. Concerns for the Thessalonians 2:17—3:13
 - 1. Desires to see them again 2:17—3:5
 - 2. Joy on hearing about them 3:6-13
- III. Practical instructions and exhortations 4:1—5:24
 - A. Christian living 4:1-12
 - 1. Continued growth 4:1-2
 - 2. Sexual purity 4:3-8
 - 3. Brotherly love 4:9-12
 - B. The Rapture 4:13-18
 - C. Personal watchfulness 5:1-11
 - D. Church life 5:12-15

¹²Thomas, p. 233.

¹³Wanamaker, p. 10.

¹⁴Bruce, p. xxxviii.

¹⁵For an outline of the book based on rhetorical analysis, see Wanamaker, p. 49.

1. Attitudes toward leaders 5:12-13
 2. Relationships among themselves 5:14-15
- E. Individual behavior 5:16-24
1. Personal actions and attitudes 5:16-18
 2. Actions and attitudes in corporate living 5:19-22
 3. Divine enablement 5:23-24
- IV. Conclusion 5:25-28

MESSAGE

In this epistle, there is evidence that Paul had conflicting emotions regarding the new church in Thessalonica. On the one hand, he was joyful and satisfied with what God had accomplished. On the other hand, he felt concern about the perils in which the new Christians lived.

This letter differs from most of Paul's others, in that it does not deal primarily with a doctrinal issue or a departure in belief or behavior. While the teaching on the Rapture of the church is definitely a doctrinal contribution, Paul did not write primarily to expound that truth or to defend it. He was simply clarifying the events he had previously taught them. This new revelation was, in a sense, secondary to Paul's argument. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Lord's return was prominent in Paul's mind, from the beginning to the end of this letter. He referred to it in every chapter.

Paul wrote this epistle primarily to comfort and to encourage those who were suffering for their Lord. Their hope was an essential emphasis in view of this purpose (cf. 1 Pet.). Both Thessalonian epistles are very pastoral. The epistle deals with the hope of the Lord's return as this relates to Christian experience.

Paul took the fact of the Lord's return for granted. He did not feel compelled to try to prove it. The apostle's belief that Jesus would return for His own is obvious to anyone who reads this letter, regardless of his or her eschatological convictions. Paul believed in a real return of the *same* "Jesus" who had lived on the earth, died, was buried, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven (cf. 4:16). First Thessalonians deals with *when* the Lord will return, but the larger emphasis in 1 Thessalonians, however, is that *He will* return.

In relation to Christian experience, the return of Christ is the *final argument that produces faith*. When Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica, he proclaimed that the Christ who had come to earth the first time would come again (1:9-10). His converts in this town were to wait for Him. They had turned from belief in visible idols to an invisible God. Paul urged them to wait, with the assurance that they would see their God—*visibly*—soon. They turned from disorder to the hope of divine rule, from spiritual anarchy to the hope of an orderly kingdom. As Christians we trust (believe) in Christ's first coming, and therefore we wait for His return. Without the *hope* of Christ's vindication, the message of His death is incomplete. I do not mean to suggest that the return of Christ is part of the gospel message itself. However, without the hope of Christ's

return, the gospel message is harder to accept. The return of Christ is the final argument that produces faith in this sense. It is an apologetic for Christianity.

In relation to Christian experience, the return of Christ is, second, the *abiding confidence that inspires labor* (1:9). The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living God. Their reward ("hope or joy or crown of exultation") for service would come at His return. That would be their payday. Paul referred to his readers as his own reward for service at Christ's return (2:19-20). A little of the Christian's reward comes to us here and now, but the great bulk of it awaits the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58). When those we have led to Christ and disciplined experience glorification, our reward will be full. This prospect is what so forcefully motivated Paul in his tireless missionary service.

Third, in relation to Christian experience, the return of Christ is the *ultimate victory that creates patience* (3:13). The conviction that we will experience ultimate victory at the Rapture produces patience in the believer (cf. 5:14b). We can be patient about our own slow growth, knowing that eventual glorification will take place. And we can be patient with God, knowing that He will balance the scales of justice and vindicate Himself. One day, Christ will return, just as one day He was born. Both events are momentous occurrences in history. They are high points, not built up to gradually, but introduced as cataclysms.

Thus the return of Christ is the final argument, producing: faith, the abiding confidence inspiring labor, and the ultimate victory creating patience. In the introduction to this epistle, Paul said that he remembered his readers' work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope (1:3). "Faith, hope, and love" are the three greatest attributes of the Christian life, and they are possible because Christ will return.

This epistle also helps us to understand how we should respond to the truth that Christ shall return.

First, in our own life we should respond with godly behavior, namely: personal purity, love for the brethren, and honesty in the world. Christ's return should have a purifying effect in every one of these areas of our lives (ch. 4).

Second, in the face of death, there is a twofold response. There is comfort for the bereaved in particular (4:14). Also there is comfort for all the living (4:18).

Third, in view of judgment to come, our response should be confidence. We will not experience God's *wrath*, because He will deliver us from it in all its manifestations (1:10).

Failure to accept the truth of the Lord's return results in unbelief and a return to idols. It results in indolence, that in turn leads to strife. Furthermore it results in impatience, that in turn leads to sin. These are the very opposite of the work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope.

The light of this great doctrine underwent an eclipse during the history of the church. It only came into prominence again in the nineteenth century. I follow in the train of those writers and teachers, who, through careful study of the whole Word of God, have brought this doctrine back out into public view.¹⁶

Satan would like to silence this emphasis, because the hope of Christ's return is one of the greatest motivations for Christian service and sacrifice. The sanctification of the whole person (spirit, soul, and body) consists in active waiting for Jesus to return (5:23; cf. Rev. 22:20).¹⁷

¹⁶E.g., Darby, Feinberg, Gaebelien, Heibert, Hodges, Ironside, Pentecost, Radmacher, Ryrie, Showers, Stanton, Thomas, Walvoord, and Wiersbe, listed in the bibliography of these notes.

¹⁷Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:9-25.

Exposition

I. SALUTATION AND GREETING 1:1

Paul wrote this first sentence to identify himself, his companions, and his addressees, and to convey a formal word of greeting.

At the time he wrote this epistle, Silas and Timothy were with Paul. "Silvanus" was the Roman form of his name, which Paul preferred over "Silas." Luke used "Silas" (Acts 15:22; et al.). No one knows for sure if this Silvanus is the same man whom Peter mentioned in 1 Peter 5:12, but "he is generally identified with" him by the commentators.¹⁸ Silas and Timothy were Paul's primary associates on his second missionary journey, during which the church at Thessalonica came into existence (Acts 15:40). We know more about Timothy's background than we do about Silas'. Paul may have led Timothy to faith in Christ on the first missionary journey (1 Tim. 1:2; Acts 13-14). Timothy had recently returned to Paul in Corinth when Paul wrote this letter. He had come from Thessalonica bearing news of conditions in the church there (3:1-2, 6). The Thessalonians knew all three men personally.

First and 2 Thessalonians are the only Pauline Epistles in which Paul did not elaborate on his name or the names of his fellow writers. This probably implies that his relationship with the Thessalonians was good and stable.¹⁹ Timothy's name appears in 10 of Paul's 13 epistles, all except for Galatians, Colossians, and Titus. It also appears in Hebrews.

The "church" (Greek *ekklesia*) is a group of people, Jews and Gentiles equally, whom God has called out of the mass of humanity for a life separated unto Himself. The Greek word refers to many different types of assemblies (social, political, and religious), and in the Septuagint it is a synonym for "synagogue." This term became useful to Paul in gaining access to the Gentile world, as well as in separating from the Jewish world.

"The church of the Thessalonians" is an unusual phrase for Paul, who more frequently addressed his epistles to "the church in such-and-such a place." Perhaps his address here was designed to emphasize his personal interest in each member of this church.²⁰

Paul accorded Jesus Christ equality with God the Father. By calling Jesus Christ "Lord," Paul conveyed the idea, to both Jews and Gentiles, that Jesus is God; both groups would have understood this implication.²¹ God is not only the strong, loving, security-bestowing Father, but He is also the sovereign Lord His people must obey.

"Grace" was a common Greek salutation that meant "greeting" or "rejoice." "Peace" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "shalom" meaning "favor," "well-being," and "prosperity in the widest sense," especially prosperity in spiritual matters. Paul used both words when he greeted the recipients of his epistles. God's grace is the basis for and leads to our peace.

¹⁸Milligan, p. 3.

¹⁹D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 47.

²⁰Ryrie, p. 22.

²¹Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 48.

The absence of any reference to Paul's apostleship in any of his inspired writings to the Macedonian churches, namely, those in Thessalonica and Philippi, is noteworthy. He mentioned his apostleship in all his other epistles and sometimes had to defend it vigorously (e.g., in 2 Corinthians). Evidently the Macedonian churches never questioned Paul's apostleship, as did the churches elsewhere (e.g., in Galatia and Corinth).

II. PERSONAL COMMENDATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS 1:2—3:13

This extended personal section of the epistle contains thanksgivings for the Thessalonian Christians, reminders for them, and concerns that Paul had regarding them.

A. THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS 1:2-10

Paul began the first main section of his epistle by reviewing several aspects of the Thessalonians' salvation, and giving thanks to God for them, in order to encourage his readers to persevere despite persecution.

". . . both letters name Paul, Silas, and Timothy as the authors of the letters. Yet the letters are traditionally ascribed to Paul alone. Is this fair? Many scholars answer no. They note the way the first-person plural dominates both letters, even in the thanksgiving section, which does not happen in most of the other Pauline letters, including three of them that name someone else in the salutation (1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon). The inclusion of more than one person in the salutation of a letter was most unusual in antiquity; readers would probably have read the plural 'we' as a genuine indication of authorship. However, there is reason to pause before drawing this conclusion. . . . Paul is the primary author [cf. 2 Thess. 3:17]."²²

"Paul, like a good psychologist, and with true Christian tact, begins with praise even when he meant to move on to rebuke."²³

1. Summary statement 1:2-3

The Thessalonians' response to the gospel and their continuance in the faith caused Paul and his companions to thank God for them continually. "Continually" or "constantly" is hyperbole meaning very often. Obviously Paul did not mean that he spent *all* his time praying for the Thessalonians. He prayed for them continually, rather than continuously.²⁴ Three characteristics of these Christians stood out to Paul: First, they had turned to Christ in "faith." Second, they had served Him out of "love." Third, they had borne up under tribulation patiently, because of the "hope" that lay before them. Paul identified the source of each virtue. Each virtue found its object in Jesus Christ as they lived before God. They had exercised faith in the past when they first trusted Christ. They were loving Him in the present, and they were hoping for His return in the future (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13).

²²Carson and Moo, pp. 534-44.

²³William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, p. 217.

²⁴Marshall, p. 51.

"Here we have *first* faith, the source of all Christian virtues, *secondly* love, the sustaining principle of Christian life, *lastly* hope, the beacon-star guiding us to the life to come."²⁵

"These three Christian virtues—faith, love, and hope—occupied a large place in early analyses of Christian responsibility. The expectation was that in every life faith would work (Gal 5:6; James 2:18), love would labor (Rev 2:2, 4), and hope would endure (Rom 5:2-4; 8:24, 25). This threefold balance probably arose even before Paul's doctrinal stance had matured and perhaps came from the teachings of Christ himself."²⁶

"The triad of faith, hope and love is the quintessence of the God-given life in Christ."²⁷

2. Specific reasons 1:4-10

1:4-5 Paul's favorite appellation for the Thessalonians was "brothers." He used it 15 times in this epistle, and seven times in 2 Thessalonians. It emphasizes the equality of Christians in the family of God, Jews and Gentiles alike, and it reveals Paul's strong affection for his Thessalonian converts.

"The phrase *beloved by God* was a phrase which the Jews applied only to supremely great men like Moses and Solomon, and to the nation of Israel itself. Now the greatest privilege of the greatest men of God's chosen people has been extended to the humblest of the Gentiles."²⁸

Paul thanked God for choosing the Thessalonian believers for salvation. There are three participial clauses that modify the main verb *eucharistoumen* ("we give thanks," v. 2). Verse 2b gives the manner of giving thanks, verse 3 the occasion, and verse 4 the ultimate cause. Their response to the gospel proved God's choice of them. Paul had not persuaded them by clever oratory, but the power (Gr. *dynamei*, dative case) of God through the Holy Spirit's convicting work had brought them to faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 1:16). This Greek word stresses inward power that possessed the missionaries, not necessarily that supernatural manifestations accompanied their preaching, which *dynameis* ("miracles," 1 Cor. 12:10; Gal. 3:5) would have emphasized.

"The spiritual power and conviction with which the message was received matched the spiritual power and conviction with which it was delivered."²⁹

²⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of Paul*, p. 10.

²⁶Thomas, p. 242. Cf. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, pp. 33-35.

²⁷Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, p. 219.

²⁸Barclay, p. 218.

²⁹Bruce, p. 15.

The *lives* of the preachers, who had behaved consistently with what they taught in Thessalonica, had backed up their message.

"Conviction is invisible without action. Paul's conviction as well as that of the Thessalonians (seen in their respective actions) testified to the genuine relationship that each had with the God who chose them . . ." ³⁰

"Persons in both the religious and philosophical communities of the first century felt that the only teachers worth a moment's attention were those who taught with their lives as well as with their words." ³¹

1:6-7 Paul was also grateful that his readers had demonstrated the fruit of their faith by becoming followers ("imitators") of their teachers and their Lord. They had welcomed the gospel message, even though it had meant much suffering for them because of the persecution from unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. Most of the New Testament writers took for granted that tribulation is the normal experience of Christians (cf. John 16:33; Acts 14:22). Nevertheless, with "tribulation," "joy" had also come to them, the joy of sins forgiven. News of their good example had circulated within their own province of "Macedonia," but had also reached their neighboring province to the south, "Achaia." This excellent example included generously giving to other Christians in need (2 Cor. 8:1-8).

"This is high praise, for in the first place Paul calls no other church a pattern, and in the second he thinks of them as examples, not only to the heathen, but to Christians throughout Greece." ³²

1:8 The Thessalonians had acted as relay runners, by passing the gospel ("the word of [concerning] the Lord") they had heard ("your faith . . . has gone forth") on to farther places ("in every place"). They were a missionary church.

"The figure is of an echo that continues indefinitely (perfect tense, *eksechetai*, 'rang out') and implies the persistence of the testimony over an ever-increasing expanse . . ." ³³

They were so effective at this that Paul felt his ministry of pioneer evangelism was no longer necessary in that area. Possibly only the news of the Thessalonians' faith had circulated widely, but maybe they had not actually sent out missionaries. ³⁴

³⁰Martin, p. 59.

³¹Ibid. Cf. A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, pp. 34-40.

³²Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 38.

³³Thomas, p. 247.

³⁴Martin, p. 63.

1:9 Other people were now telling Paul how effective his readers had become at spreading the gospel ever since they had heard it from him. They reported how the Thessalonians had turned "from idols to serve" the only divine, "living and true God" (cf. Titus 2:11-13). This was the evidence of their faith and love (v. 3).³⁵ This reference indicates a sizable Gentile population in the church, since idolatry was a Gentile vice. There were evidently two types of Gentiles in the Thessalonian church: pagan Gentiles who had been idolaters and God-fearing Gentiles (cf. Acts 17:4).

"The language of separation occurs with regularity in the Thessalonian correspondence (1 Thes. 1:9; 4:5, 7, 12, 13; 5:5f.; 2 Thes. 1:7f.; 2:11f.; 3:6, 14f.) and serves in a negative way to mark the boundary between those who belong to the Christian community and those who do not, thereby encouraging the new Christian identity. Similarly, the language of belonging is also prominent in the Thessalonian correspondence (1 Thes. 1:4; 2:12; 5:5; 2 Thes. 1:11-12; 2:6 [*sic*], 13-15; 3:16)."³⁶

Paul's description of God as "living" does not simply mean that He is alive; it means that He is also active. He is the "true" (genuine, Gr. *alethinos*) God as opposed to false, unreal gods.

1:10 They were also awaiting the return of God's Son "out of the heavens" (Gr. *ek ton ouranon*). This is the only place in 1 and 2 Thessalonians where Paul called Jesus God's "Son." Their action (active waiting) was the evidence of their *hope* (v. 3). Jesus' resurrection was the indisputable proof of His deity, and the prerequisite to His return.

"This appeal well illustrates the doctrinal teaching of this Epistle. It is thus, 'Live a holy life, that you may be prepared to meet your Lord.'"³⁷

"To the extent that the Thessalonians accepted the resurrection as an act of God, it would give them confidence in the prospect of Christ's coming in power."³⁸

"Believers live anticipating a coronation (2 Tim 4:8) rather than a condemnation."³⁹

³⁵For a good explanation of the relationship between repentance and faith, see Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, pp. 91-100.

³⁶Wanamaker, p. 16.

³⁷Lightfoot, p. 16.

³⁸Wanamaker, p. 87.

³⁹Martin, p. 66.

"Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness."⁴⁰

When Paul spoke of "the wrath to come"—did he have in mind the general outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers in eternal damnation? Or did he mean a specific instance of God outpouring His wrath at a particular time in history yet future? The commentators, regardless of their eschatological positions, take both positions on this question. For example, some amillennialists believe Paul was speaking generally.⁴¹

However, other amillennialists believe Paul referred to a specific event, namely, the *judgment* associated with the Second Coming of Christ.⁴² In the amillennial scheme of things, this judgment will end the present age. Premillennialists also disagree with one another on this point. For example, some take Paul's words as a general reference.⁴³ Others believe Paul had in mind the Tribulation, which for a pretribulationist is the next great outpouring of God's wrath in history.⁴⁴

If this was the only reference to "the wrath to come" in this epistle, we might conclude that Paul was probably referring to the outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers generally. There is no specific reference to a particular judgment here. However, later he spent considerable space writing about the outpouring of God's wrath in the Tribulation (4:13-18; 5:1-11). Therefore it seems to me that this is the first reference to that outpouring of wrath in the epistle (cf. 2:16; 5:9). The biblical revelation about the relationship of church saints to the wrath of God strongly implies a *pretribulation* rapture of the church.⁴⁵

". . . the choice of *erchomene* ['come'] rather than *mellousa* ['come'] . . . may have been determined by the fact that Paul purposes to express not so much the certainty . . . as the nearness of the judgment. Nearness involves certainty but certainty does not necessarily involve nearness."⁴⁶

The outpouring of God's wrath occurs at many times in history. One of these judgments is the Tribulation (Matt. 24:21; Rev. 7:14) that will come upon the whole earth in the future (Rev. 3:10). Another is the Great White Throne judgment at the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:11-15).

⁴⁰John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:35.

⁴¹E.g., William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 57.

⁴²E.g., Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, pp. 40-41, and idem, *The First . . .*, p. 64.

⁴³E.g., John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 17; and David A. Hubbard, "The First Epistle to the Thessalonians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1350, who was a premillennial posttribulationist.

⁴⁴E.g., D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 71.

⁴⁵See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 192-222; and Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, pp. 25-50.

⁴⁶James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 89.

"Used technically, as it so frequently is in the NT, 'wrath' (*orges*) is a title for the period just before Messiah's kingdom on earth, when God will afflict earth's inhabitants with an unparalleled series of physical torments because of their rejection of His will [i.e., the Tribulation] (Matt 3:7; 24:21; Luke 21:23; Rev 6:16, 17)."⁴⁷

The Greek preposition *ek*, translated "from," can mean either "away from" or "out of." Other passages teach that believers will not experience any of God's wrath (e.g., John 3:36; 5:24; Rom. 5:1; 8:1, 34; et al.). Consequently "away from" seems to be the idea Paul intended here.⁴⁸

How will God keep believers "away from" His wrath as He pours it out during the Tribulation? Pretribulationists say He will do so by taking us to heaven before the Tribulation begins.⁴⁹ Midtribulationists say we will enter the Tribulation, but God will take us to heaven before the outpouring of His wrath that will occur only during the second half of the Tribulation.⁵⁰ Posttribulationists believe we will go through the entire Tribulation and God will protect us from the outpouring of His wrath during that time.⁵¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:10 does not state exactly *how* God will deliver us "away from" His wrath when He will pour it out in the Tribulation. Other passages in 1 Thessalonians, however, point to a pretribulational deliverance (e.g., 4:13-18; 5:4-10).

Preservation from the wrath of God is part of the believer's *hope*. This chapter, like all the others in this epistle, closes with a reference to Jesus Christ's return (cf. 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23).

"That attitude of expectation is the bloom, as it were, of the Christian character. Without it there is something lacking; the Christian who does not look upward and onward wants one mark of perfection."⁵²

"To wait for him has ethical implications; those who wait are bound to live holy lives so as to be ready to meet him (cf. 5:6-8, 23)."⁵³

⁴⁷Thomas, p. 248.

⁴⁸See Daniel B. Wallace, "A Textual Problem in 1 Thessalonians 1:10: '*Ek tes 'Orges* vs '*Apo tes 'Orges*,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:588 (October-December 1990):470-79.

⁴⁹John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 72. Cf. Rev. 3:10.

⁵⁰Harold John Ockenga, "Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation? Yes," *Christian Life* (February 1955), pp. 22, 66.

⁵¹George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 121-22; J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, p. 143; Arthur D. Katterjohn, *The Tribulation People*, p. 98; William R. Kimball, *The Rapture: A Question of Timing*, p. 70; and Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 226.

⁵²James Denney, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 59.

⁵³Bruce, p. 19.

"In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 the Thessalonian believers are pictured as waiting for the return of Christ. The clear implication is that they had a hope of His imminent return. If they had been taught that the great tribulation, in whole or in part, must first run its course, it is difficult to see how they could be described as expectantly awaiting Christ's return. Then they should rather have been described as bracing themselves for the great tribulation and the painful events connected with it."⁵⁴

Imminent means likely, not certain, to happen without delay: impending. We sometimes hear in the news that a terrorist attack is imminent. That means that it *could* happen very soon, not that it *will* happen soon. Other passages that teach the imminency of the Lord's return include 1 Corinthians 1:7; 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; 1 John 2:28; and Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20.⁵⁵

"The hope (1:3) of the coming of Jesus was an integral part of the Thessalonians' religion; it was something that they anticipated as a real possibility in their own lifetimes (4:15, 17; 5:4)."⁵⁶

B. REMINDERS FOR THE THESSALONIANS 2:1-16

Paul next reminded his readers of how the apostles delivered the gospel to them, and how they had received it, in order to encourage them not to abandon it.

1. How the gospel was delivered 2:1-12

Paul proceeded to rehearse the events of his ministry among his readers, summarizing his motivation and actions. He did so to strengthen their confidence in him, in view of certain questions that may have arisen in their minds, and any accusations that his critics may have directed against him (cf. Gal. 1:11—2:21; 2 Cor. 4:1-6).

2:1-2 Paul appealed to his readers to remember that his preaching had yielded positive results (cf. 1:9). It had borne fruit in their lives. He had come to them, just having been persecuted for his preaching in Philippi, and he had received the same treatment in Thessalonica. Nevertheless he continued preaching boldly (Gr. *parresiazomai*), even though his message was not popular and might result in public abuse. *Parresia*, "boldness," is the

⁵⁴Hiebert, p. 205. Cf. Bruce, p. 18; Stanton, pp. 108-37; Wayne A. Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:630 (April-June 2001):142-44.

⁵⁵See Earl D. Radmacher, "The Imminent Return of the Lord," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 247-67; and Showers, pp. 127-53.

⁵⁶Marshall, p. 58.

opposite of *kolakeia*, "flattery" (v. 5). This is not the reaction of someone who seeks personal recognition or money. Such a person would move on quickly to a more profitable audience.

2:3-4 Paul claimed that his message was true, his motives were pure, and his methods were straightforward. He and his companions had behaved in Thessalonica as they had elsewhere, as faithful servants of God. They did not preach for the *approval* of "men," but of "God," who scrutinizes motives. When Paul wrote "we," he customarily meant himself and his companions.⁵⁷

"Few temptations assail the preacher more strongly than this one to please men, even if God is not pleased, though with the dim hope that God will after all condone or overlook. Nothing but experience will convince some preachers how fickle is popular favour and how often it is at the cost of failure to please God."⁵⁸

2:5-6 Paul abhorred the use of speech that would assure him a positive reception regardless of what he preached.

". . . what the Apostles [i.e., Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy; v. 1] disclaim is the *desire* of popularity."⁵⁹

"Flattery was a well-known and much despised practice in the ancient world."⁶⁰

Paul also denied any desire to get rich from his preaching. "Greed" (Gr. *pleonexia*) is self-seeking in all its forms. Paul's readers could testify to the truth of the first of these convictions. Since they could not do so to the second, Paul claimed God could ("God is witness"). Itinerant philosophers and orators were common in the Roman Empire. Paul had little in common with their motivation ("glory from men"). He had come to Thessalonica to give, not to get. Furthermore Paul had not demanded that the Thessalonians acquiesce to his message on the basis of his apostolic "authority."

Having explained his ministry in negative terms so far (vv. 1-6), Paul proceeded to describe it in positive terms (vv. 7-12).

2:7-9 Instead, he was "gentle" and unselfish, more like a "nursing *mother*" than an apostle.

⁵⁷Lightfoot, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁸Robertson, 4:17.

⁵⁹Milligan, p. 20.

⁶⁰Wanamaker, p. 97. Cf. Bruce, p. 29.

"A nursing child can become ill through reaction to something the mother has eaten. The Christian who is feeding others must be careful not to feed on the wrong things himself."⁶¹

However, Paul gave himself ("our own lives"), not just his message, to the Thessalonians out of love for them ("you had become very dear to us"), not for personal gain. In this way, Paul followed the tradition of Jewish rabbis, for whom receiving money for teaching the Law was considered shameful.⁶² The measure of his love was the toil and trouble he expended as he worked constantly ("night and day"), probably making tents and other leather articles, so he would not be a burden to them. Paul was by trade a leather-worker.⁶³ This is how he and his companions had heralded the gospel among them (cf. Phil. 4:16; 2 Cor. 11:7-11).

"This is the secret of Paul's success—the continual and selfless giving of his all to people whom he loved dearly."⁶⁴

"A gospel messenger who stands detached from his audience has not yet been touched by the very gospel he proclaims."⁶⁵

2:10-12 Paul called on his readers to bear witness ("you are witnesses"), as "God" could as well, how he had cared for them. He had done so "as a father," who has the responsibility to prepare his children for the events that lie ahead of them. The figure of the nursing mother (v. 7) emphasizes tender, loving self-sacrifice, and that of the father (v. 11), preparation for maturity. The Old Testament used both the paternal and maternal figures to describe God (cf. Ps. 103:13; Isa. 66:13).

"In one sense God's kingdom is already present (Matt 12:28; 13:1-52; Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; Col 1:13), but ultimate realization of the messianic kingdom with its future glory is in view here (cf. Acts 17:7). As frequently in the Thessalonian literature, those Paul is addressing are pointed to the bliss ahead as incentive to godly living now."⁶⁶

"The language here is similar to other passages where believers are said to be called unto (*eis*) things not yet

⁶¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 40.

⁶²Morris, *The First . . .*, pp.80-81.

⁶³R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*, p. 21.

⁶⁴Ryrie, *First and . . .*, p. 38.

⁶⁵Martin, p. 81. Cf. Mal. 2:6-8.

⁶⁶Thomas, p. 255. Cf. Marshall, p. 75.

realized in Christian experience. Compare I Peter 5:10—
'God . . . hath called us unto his eternal glory.'"⁶⁷

Another view is that Paul was referring to the spiritual kingdom, of which the Thessalonian Christians were already members, which also has a future aspect in the messianic kingdom.⁶⁸

"There is an idea prevalent in some modern circles that we should work to establish the kingdom of God on earth. That is a noble ideal, but it is not the Biblical idea of the kingdom. In the Scriptures it is clear that God and no other establishes the kingdom."⁶⁹

"The Christian minister is expected to give practical instruction to his fellow Christians, but not by way of dictation. Since he cannot rule by decree if he is to be true to the spirit of Christ, he must guide by example."⁷⁰

2. How the gospel was received 2:13-16

Paul reminded his readers how they had welcomed the gospel message—in order to vindicate further his own ministry, and to emphasize the importance of proclaiming this message. He did this so the Thessalonians would continue to herald it abroad as they had been doing.

"This section of the letter begins with the second thanksgiving in a series of three (1:2-5; 2:13; 3:9-13) that dominate the tone of the first three chapters."⁷¹

2:13 Previously Paul thanked God for the way these believers were bearing the fruit of righteousness in their own lives (1:3). Now he thanked God for the way they responded when he had preached the gospel to them the first time ("when you received the word of God"). They sensed that it was a divine revelation ("word of God") rather than a human philosophy ("word of men"), and they believed it. Because they received that divine message, it had done (performed) a mighty "work" of transformation in their lives as God's Holy Spirit used it.

2:14 By believing the gospel, the Thessalonians had followed in the train of many others ("became imitators of the churches") who, when they believed the truth, also found that they attracted enemies. The reference to "the Jews," here, is probably to the unbelieving Jews who opposed the Christians in Thessalonica, rather than a general reference to all Jews.

⁶⁷Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 436.

⁶⁸E.g., Lightfoot, p. 30.

⁶⁹Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 85.

⁷⁰Bruce, p. 39.

⁷¹Martin, pp. 85-86. See also Wanamaker's discussion of this digression, pp. 109-10.

". . . this is the only passage in the Pauline writings in which the designation 'the Jews' is used in direct contrast to Christian believers in the sense which St John afterwards made so familiar in his Gospel (i. 19, ii. 18 &c.)."⁷²

"Persecution inevitably arises from the outside when a Christian patterns his life after the Lord."⁷³

2:15-16 The Thessalonians' opponents seem to have been mainly Jews (v. 14). Paul desperately wanted unbelieving Jews to come to faith in Christ (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1). Yet they were some of his most antagonistic persecutors (cf. 2 Cor. 11:24, 26). Their actions were "not pleasing to God," and were not in the best interests of *all* men who needed to hear the gospel. By their opposition, these enemies of the gospel added more transgressions on their own heads ("always fill up the measure of their sins"), with the result that they hastened God's judgment ("wrath") of them (cf. Gen. 15:16). God had already, in advance, focused "His wrath" on them (has come upon them") for their serious sin (cf. 1:10).⁷⁴ They not only rejected the gospel themselves, but they also discouraged others from accepting it. It was only a matter of time before God would pour out His wrath in judgment.⁷⁵ In view of the eschatological emphasis of the letter, Paul seems to be alluding primarily to the judgment coming on unbelievers during the Tribulation. We should probably understand "utmost" (Gr. *telos*) in a temporal sense.⁷⁶

This is the only place in his inspired writings where Paul charged "the Jews" with the death of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). Elsewhere in the New Testament it is the sins of all people that were responsible. Therefore, Paul was just identifying a segment of humanity that was responsible. He was not blaming the Jews in some special sense for Jesus' death.⁷⁷ The Apostle John frequently used the term "the Jews" to describe those Jews who actively opposed the Lord and the gospel (cf. John 5:18; 7:1; 18:14, 31; cf. 11:45, 54).

Why did Paul describe this outpouring of divine "wrath" as past ("has come," aorist tense *ephthasen*) if it was future? Jesus spoke of the arrival of His kingdom in comparable terminology (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). The verb connotes "arrival upon the threshold of fulfilment [*sic*] and

⁷²Milligan, p. 30.

⁷³Thomas, p. 258.

⁷⁴Cf. Milligan, p. 32.

⁷⁵See Marshall, pp. 81-83.

⁷⁶Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1972 ed.), p. 119; Reginald H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, p. 26; Thomas, pp. 259-60. Martin, p. 95.

⁷⁷See Michael A. Rydelnik, "Was Paul Anti-Semitic? Revisiting 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165:657 (January-March 2008):58-67.

accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience."⁷⁸ The messianic kingdom was present in Jesus' day only in that the King had arrived and could have established it then, but the Jews did not enter into it because they rejected Him. Likewise, God's "wrath" had come on the Jews "to the utmost" in Paul's day, for their rejection of Messiah, but they had not entered into its *full manifestation* yet, namely: the Tribulation.

"This indictment implies that Paul saw a continuity in the pattern of Jewish rejection of God's agents from OT times to his own."⁷⁹

"The Thessalonians' persecution lasted a long time, and so did their steadfastness. Some six years later Paul can still speak of the churches of Macedonia (not least, the church of Thessalonica) as enduring 'a severe test of affliction' and continuing to give evidence of the reality of their faith in that 'their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality' (2 Cor 8:1, 2). The 'extreme poverty' might well have been the result of mob violence and looting; elsewhere in the NT members of another Christian group are reminded how, in the early days of their faith, they 'joyfully accepted' the plundering of their property in addition to other forms of brutal maltreatment (Heb 10:32-34)."⁸⁰

C. CONCERNS FOR THE THESSALONIANS 2:17—3:13

Paul's heart of love blossoms in this section, in which he first expressed his great desire to see the Thessalonians again, and then explained how news of their continuing steadfastness gladdened his heart. He said these things to encourage them further to persevere in their faith and service.

1. Desire to see them again 2:17—3:5

In this pericope, Paul expressed his sincere desire to return to Thessalonica. He did so to help his readers appreciate how much they meant to him, so as to encourage them to reject any suggestion that his interest in them was selfish.

Paul's plan 2:17-20

"First Thessalonians has been called 'a classic of friendship,' and here is a passage where Paul's deep affection for his friends breathes through his words."⁸¹

⁷⁸Kenneth W. Clark, "Realized Eschatology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940):379.

⁷⁹Wanamaker, p. 115.

⁸⁰Bruce, pp. 50-51.

⁸¹Barclay, p. 224.

2:17-18 Paul and his companions had to leave Thessalonica prematurely, and for Paul the separation was an especially sorrowful one. He compared it to being bereft ("taken away from"; lit. "orphaned"). He felt torn from them. However, even though absent "in body (person)," his readers were very present in his affections ("in spirit"). Moreover, Paul eagerly anticipated the opportunity to return to Thessalonica "to see" them again. He had attempted such a visit "more than once," but "Satan," the adversary who had interfered and had made the apostle's ministry in person impossible for the present, had "hindered" him. The Greek word *enkopto* ("thwarted," lit. "cut into") was used originally of breaking up a road to make it impassable, but it later came to mean "hinder" generally (cf. Acts 24:4; Rom. 15:22; Gal. 5:7; 1 Pet. 3:7).⁸²

". . . Paul . . . found his unbounded capacity for paternal affection amply employed in his relationship with his converts."⁸³

In Acts 16:6-7, Luke wrote that the Holy Spirit forbade Paul to preach in Asia and Bithynia. Here Paul said that Satan thwarted his efforts to return to Thessalonica. So how can we tell if Satan is opposing us or if the Spirit is directing us? It seems to me that the New Testament writers viewed God's sovereign control of all things on different levels at different times. Sometimes, as in Acts, they spoke of the One who is in ultimate charge, and thus they focused on His direction. At other times, as here, they spoke of the instruments that God uses. God permitted Satan to oppose Paul's return to Thessalonica, but this was all part of God's sovereign will. In Acts the emphasis is on the One responsible for the expansion of the church, but here the emphasis is on the instrument God used in this situation. Satan can only oppose us as God gives him permission to do so (Job 1—2).⁸⁴

2:19-20 Paul's words for his converts here are especially affectionate. His love for the Thessalonians was unusually strong. Their development was what he hoped for ("our hope"), their glorification was what he rejoiced in ("our . . . joy"), and their ultimate victory would be "a crown of glory (exultation)" for him. The Lord's commendation for Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians would, on the one hand, be as a "crown" to him that would make him justifiably proud when the Lord returned. But it was the Thessalonians themselves ("you") that seem to be the "crown" in view.⁸⁵ Paul was talking like a father again (cf. v. 11). Looking at the end of his ministry, Paul said he would take the greatest pride in those believers. They would be his "crowning glory."

⁸²Milligan, p. 34.

⁸³Bruce, p. 54.

⁸⁴See *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸⁵Marshall, p. 87.

BELIEVERS' CROWNS		
TITLE	REASON	REFERENCE
An Imperishable Crown	For leading a disciplined life	1 Cor. 9:25
A Crown of Rejoicing	For evangelism and discipleship	1 Thess. 2:19
A Crown of Righteousness	For loving the Lord's appearing	2 Tim. 4:8
A Crown of Life	For enduring trials	James 1:12; Rev. 2:10
A Crown of Glory	For shepherding God's flock faithfully	1 Pet. 5:4

"The glory of any teacher lies in his scholars and students; and should the day come when they have left him far behind the glory is still greater. A man's greatest glory lies in those whom he has set or helped on the path to Christ."⁸⁶

"The future event Paul is looking toward is identical with the appearance of every Christian before the *bema* ('judgment seat') of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), where the works of every Christian will be evaluated. Because of his converts' evident spiritual attainments, Paul feels that this will be an occasion of joy and victory."⁸⁷

"*Parousia* ["coming"] comes from two words: 'to be' and 'present.' It may point to the moment of arrival to initiate a visit or it may focus on the stay initiated by the arrival. In the NT the word applies to the return of Jesus Christ. The various facets of this future visit are defined by the contexts in which *parousia* appears. In this instance it is Jesus' examination of his servants subsequent to his coming for them (4:15-17) that is in view."⁸⁸

". . . the formerly pagan Thessalonians probably understood the *parousia* of Christ in terms of the visits of the imperial rulers of Rome. These rulers were increasingly being thought of as the manifestations of deities who required elaborate ceremonies and honors when they visited the various cities of the Empire."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Barclay, p. 225.

⁸⁷Thomas, p. 262. Cf. Earl Radmacher, "Believers and the Bema," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:3 (May-June 1995):1, 4; and Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, pp. 129, 152-63.

⁸⁸Thomas, p. 262.

⁸⁹Wanamaker, p. 125.

Paul at this time evidently expected his ministry to end with the return of Christ rather than by his own death (v. 19). This is one of many evidences that Paul and the other early Christians believed in the imminent return of Christ. Nothing had to occur before His return. This perspective strongly suggests that Paul believed in the pretribulational rapture of the church.

How could Christ's return at the Rapture be imminent in view of the Lord's statement that Peter would grow old (John 21:18) and His promise to Paul that he would visit Rome (Acts 23:11)? Concerning God's promise to Peter, "when you grow old" (John 21:18) is a very general description of what lay ahead for Peter. Peter could have undergone confinement and died at any time after Christ's ascension and one could say he had grown old. About the promise Paul received, the assumed condition of its fulfillment was probably if the Lord did not return before then. This would have been true for what Jesus prophesied concerning Peter's death as well. We often speak this way today. We say something will happen, but we mean—and do not say—"unless the Lord comes first."

Timothy's visit 3:1-5

3:1-2 Paul returned to the report of his plans (2:17-18). He explained that by the time he, Silas, and Timothy had reached Athens, they felt they could not stay away from their young converts in Thessalonica any longer. They decided that Timothy should return. Silas evidently went back to Philippi and or Berea (Acts 18:5). Paul may have described Timothy, as he did here ("God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ"), to give this young brother more stature in the eyes of the Thessalonians. Timothy's mission was "to strengthen and encourage" the new Christians in their "faith," so the persecution they were experiencing would not discourage them excessively.

Paul may have chosen to send Timothy rather than to return personally for any number of reasons. Timothy was the junior member of the missionary team, and Paul and Silvanus were the senior members. Timothy had a Greek father and probably looked somewhat Greek. He would, therefore, have attracted no special interest in a Greek city, whereas Paul was immediately recognizable as a Jew (cf. Acts 16:20).⁹⁰

3:3-5 Often new believers, and even older believers, interpret difficulty as a sign that they need to change something. Timothy reminded them that persecution is a normal experience for the Christian (cf. Matt. 5:11-12; 10:16-28; 20:22-23; 24:9-10; et al.), just as Paul had previously instructed them. Had the Thessalonians fallen to this temptation, they would have been in danger of becoming like rocky soil, in which the seed of the gospel does not root firmly. Thus the ministry ("labor") expended on them

⁹⁰Bruce, p. 64.

would have been "in vain," in the sense that it would not have resulted in substantial growth and fruit.

"If a person knows that something unpleasant is part of his destiny, something that is inevitable, then he will brace himself to meet it and will not think that it is a sign that he is on the wrong track or being taken by surprise by it."⁹¹

"The Christian pastor needs to have a real concern for his flock lest they should fall away from the faith, even though he also trusts firmly in the gracious power of God to keep them faithful to himself."⁹²

2. Joy on hearing about them 3:6-13

Paul rejoiced when he heard that the Thessalonians were withstanding persecution. He shared his reaction to this news with them, in order to encourage them to persevere as their afflictions continued.

Timothy's report 3:6-10

3:6-7 By this time, evidently Timothy had rejoined Paul in Corinth (v. 16; cf. Acts 18:1). He brought "good news" that the Thessalonians were holding up well against the winds of persecution. This is the only place in the New Testament where the word *euangelion* (gospel, "good news") is used of any good news other than that of Christ's saving work.⁹³ They continued to trust in God ("your faith") and to "love" others—as well as to remember Paul fondly with a desire "to see" him again (cf. Phile. 5). This news "comforted" Paul, who felt distress because of his concern for all the churches and because of other external afflictions.

3:8-10 Things could not have been better for Paul, however, so long as his readers were standing their ground. God was enabling them to "stand firm," and for this Paul gave "thanks." The Greek word *steko*, "stand firm," is a frequently recurring call for continued perseverance (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 5:1; Phil. 4:1). The apostle and his companions "kept praying . . . earnestly," by "night" and by "day," that God would give them the opportunity to return to Thessalonica. They desired to return ("see your face") so they could minister to the continuing needs of their spiritual children ("complete what is lacking in your faith"). These Christians were doing well, but they needed to grow more. They were only baby Christians at this time. They lacked maturity.

⁹¹Marshall, p. 92.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 93-94.

⁹³Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 65.

"The prayer thus serves as a reminder to the Thessalonians of their need for further spiritual growth and prepares them for the remaining part of the letter."⁹⁴

"Contemporary Christians can learn from Paul's missionary practice by recognizing that meaningful evangelism must aim for more than acceptance of Christian beliefs by converts. Evangelical Christianity needs to strive to create a social context or community in which converts may be resocialized into a new and distinctively Christian pattern of behavior and practice."⁹⁵

Paul's prayer 3:11-13

This prayer illustrates Paul's genuine concern for the Thessalonians, and it bridges the narrative material in chapters 1—3 with the parenetic material in chapters 4—5.⁹⁶ *Parenesis* consists of exhortations to continue, that are based on previous lessons learned and previous commitments made.

". . . the whole point of the passage requires that Christ should be regarded as the sole author of the spiritual advancement of the Thessalonians."⁹⁷

3:11 Paul summarized the content of his prayer in the form of a wish ("Now may . . ."), to conclude this section of the epistle (1:2—3:13).

"It is characteristic of Paul's letters that he frequently slips into some short prayer."⁹⁸

The apostle asked "God" his ("our") "Father" and "Jesus" his ("our") "Lord" to clear the ("direct our") "way," so that he and his fellow missionaries could return to Thessalonica. He addressed two members of the Godhead in prayer. He regarded both of these members as God, as is clear from his use of a singular verb ("direct") with a plural subject. "Himself" emphasizes Paul's dependence on God to grant his request.

"We often wonder why the Christian life is so difficult to live, especially in the ordinary everyday relationships of life. The answer may very well be that we are trying to live it by ourselves. The man who goes out in the morning without prayer is, in effect, saying, 'I can quite well tackle to-day myself.' . . . John Buchan once described an atheist as 'a man who has no invisible means of support.'"⁹⁹

⁹⁴Marshall, p. 99.

⁹⁵Wanamaker, p. 139.

⁹⁶Martin, pp. 110-11.

⁹⁷Lightfoot, p. 49.

⁹⁸Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 110.

⁹⁹Barclay, p. 229.

3:12-13 Paul also prayed that the Lord, not man, would cause the believers' "love" to "increase" and overflow even more ("abound") among themselves ("one another") and "toward (for) all people." Paul's love for them did so. He prayed for this so that God would strengthen them spiritually ("establish your hearts . . . in holiness") to be free from any reasonable charge ("without blame") whenever Christ might return ("at the coming of our Lord Jesus"). "Hearts" refers to what we might refer to as "personalities" (or "souls," as differentiated from *spirits*) today. The Greek word, *kardia*, "refers to the thinking, willing, and feeling dimensions of human existence."¹⁰⁰ Again, Paul anticipated the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2:19; 5:23).

As mentioned earlier (cf. 2:19), "coming" (Gr. *parousia*) is a term that Paul used to describe a person's extended visit (cf. 1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:12), not just his or her arrival for that visit. Consequently, it may refer to the Rapture, the actual arrival of Christ for Christians, or what will follow that arrival. The context determines whether the "coming" itself, or what will follow it, is in view.¹⁰¹ Here Paul's concern was that the Thessalonians would be ready to give a good account of themselves to the Lord, not just that they would be ready for His arrival.

The "saints" who will join the Thessalonians before the judgment seat of Christ include "all" *other Christians* (cf. 4:14; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:10), and perhaps angels (cf. Mark 8:38).¹⁰²

III. PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS AND EXHORTATIONS 4:1—5:24

In the first main part of this epistle, Paul explained what prevented him from returning to Thessalonica to encourage and instruct the Christians. The second major part contains those instructions and exhortations: about Christian living in general, the Rapture, personal watchfulness, church life, and individual behavior. All of this is vital for believers who are undergoing opposition for their faith.

A. CHRISTIAN LIVING 4:1-12

Paul used the opportunity this epistle afforded him to give his readers basic instruction concerning Christian living. He did this to promote their maturation in Christ and to guard them from error (cf. 3:10).

1. Continued growth 4:1-2

In this last major section of the epistle, introduced by "Finally," Paul urged his readers to continue walking (behaving day by day) as the missionaries had instructed them (cf. Gal. 5:25).

¹⁰⁰Wanamaker, p. 144. Cf. 2:4.

¹⁰¹See Thomas, pp. 268-69.

¹⁰²See Milligan, p. 45.

". . . there is evidence that the word ["finally"] (Gk. *loipon*) was used in Hellenistic Greek simply as a transitional particle with the meaning 'therefore', to introduce practical instruction . . ."103

The Thessalonian Christians needed to "excel still more." The highest motive is to "please God" by a life of obedience to His "commandments." These express His will and chart a safe course for the Christian by leading him or her safely to the goal of spiritual maturity. "To walk and please God" means "to walk *so as to* please God" (cf. 2:4, 15).

"When a man is saved by the work of Christ for him it does not lie open before him as a matter for his completely free decision whether he will serve God or not. He has been bought with a price (I Cor. 6:20). He has become the slave of Christ. Christian service is not an optional extra for those who like that kind of thing. It is a compelling obligation which lies upon each one of the redeemed."104

This does not mean, however, that every Christian should serve God in the same particular vocation.

2. Sexual purity 4:3-8

This section opens and closes with explicit references to *the will of God*.

4:3-5 "The will of God" for the Christian is clear. Positively, it is sanctification, namely, a life set apart from sin unto God. Negatively, it involves abstinence (self-denial) from all kinds of sexual behavior that are outside the prescribed will of God, including adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, etc. Rather than participating in these acts, the believer should learn how to control ("possess") "his" (or her) body ("vessel") and its passions, "in sanctification and [with] honor."105 We should not behave lustfully, "like the Gentiles," who do not have special revelation of God and His will ("do not know God"). The Greeks practiced sexual immorality commonly, and even incorporated it into their religious practices.

"Pagan religion did not demand sexual purity of its devotees, the gods and goddesses being grossly immoral. Priestesses were in the temples for the service of the men who came."106

"Long ago Demosthenes had written: 'We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and

103Marshall, p. 104.

104Morris, *The First . . .*, pp. 118-19.

105See Milligan, p. 49.

106Robertson, 4:28.

for the faithful guardianship of our homes.' So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame whatsoever in extra-marital relationships."¹⁰⁷

"Chastity is not the whole of sanctification, but it is an important element in it . . ."¹⁰⁸

Another, less probable interpretation of "possess his own vessel" (v. 4), sees the vessel as *the wife* of the addressee.¹⁰⁹ This view takes *ktasthai* ("possess") as "acquire," its normal meaning, and *skeuos* ("vessel") as "wife." The use of *skeuos*, "vessel," to describe one's body is more common in Greek writings, and its use to describe a woman or wife is more common in Jewish writings. Elsewhere Paul never used *skeuos* to describe a wife but *gune*, "woman."¹¹⁰ He used *skeuos* of one's own body elsewhere (Rom. 9:22-23; 2 Cor. 4:7; cf. 1 Sam. 21:5). *Ktasthai* can either refer to the husband's treatment of himself ("his own body") or "his wife."

- 4:6 Sexual immorality (the "matter" in view¹¹¹) is wrong, not only because it transgresses the will of God, but because it injures and defrauds the sexual partner. It brings God's judgment down on two people, not just one, and it defrauds the partner of God's blessing. Paul possibly had the Lord's future judgment of believers ("the Lord is the avenger") in view here, rather than His present discipline (cf. 2:19; 3:13; 1 Cor. 3:10-17).
- 4:7 The general principle the Thessalonians were to keep in mind was that God's purpose for all Christians is "not . . . impurity," but purity ("sanctification"). It is a life set apart from sin unto holiness (cf. Eph. 2:10).
- 4:8 To reject these exhortations amounted to rejecting "God," not just the Apostle Paul. Lest someone think that this standard is impossibly high, Paul reminded his readers that God has given "His Holy Spirit" to all believers to enable them to do God's will (cf. Gal. 5:22-23).

"While Paul deals with sexual immorality in other letters, most notably 1 Cor. 6:12-20, nowhere does he employ such coercive language to enforce proper Christian conduct. The serious and even threatening tone of vv. 6-8 suggests very strongly that Paul was dealing with a problem that had actually emerged in the community at Thessalonica and that he viewed with considerable concern."¹¹²

¹⁰⁷Barclay, p. 231.

¹⁰⁸Bruce, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹Thomas, p. 271; footnote in NIV.

¹¹⁰Martin, p. 125.

¹¹¹Milligan, p. 50.

¹¹²Wanamaker, pp. 158-59.

3. Brotherly love 4:9-12

4:9 Whereas the previous exhortation to avoid sexual immorality is a negative prohibition, this one is a positive encouragement. The Thessalonians needed instruction from Paul concerning their sexual behavior. However, God Himself had "taught" them by His Spirit "to love one another" (cf. Gal. 5:22).

4:10 Paul's words were essentially *encouragements* to maintain the loving behavior that they had learned and had manifested already. The Greek text has only one command, "we urge," an object, "you," followed by four infinitives (vv. 10b, 11), and a final clause that gives the intended outcome (v. 12). Paul's readers were already demonstrating brotherly love, by reaching out to other needy Christians who lived in their province ("in all Macedonia"). They *did* respond to Paul's charge ("excel still more"), and they reached out still farther. This is clear from 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

"Christianity sprang up in a land and culture where clan ties were strong and society was more corporate than individualistic. Not so the Greco-Roman culture; hence, Paul's constant emphasis on love."¹¹³

4:11 Three aspects of behavior demonstrate love for others: First, a person who leads a restful, "quiet life," rather than a restless, frantic one, avoids disturbing the lives of others. He himself or she herself also enjoys life more. Second, one who tends to his "own affairs (business)" does not meddle in the business of others. Third, the person who *works* to provide for his or her own needs, and the needs of his or her family, does not put a burden on others to support him or her. Greek culture degraded manual labor, but Christianity—as well as Judaism—viewed it as an honorable pursuit (cf. Eph. 4:28; Col. 3:17).¹¹⁴

". . . it was not Paul's intent that the church disrupt society or overthrow governments. Rather, he encouraged Christians to be good citizens and exemplary members of their families and of their society but to do so in a manner consistent with the teachings of Christ. Only in this sense was the Pauline gospel intended to change society. It set out to change the individuals who made up society while awaiting that climactic event when the power of God would truly change the world forever."¹¹⁵

¹¹³Hubbard, p. 1354.

¹¹⁴Thomas, p. 274.

¹¹⁵Martin, p. 138.

4:12 Such behavior not only results in the Christian meeting his or her own needs ("behave properly . . . and not be in any need"), but it meets with the approval and admiration of non-believers ("outsiders") who observe him or her.

B. THE RAPTURE 4:13-18

Paul next turned to another subject on which his readers needed instruction—in view of their newness in Christ (cf. 3:10). He outlined the immediate *hope* of his readers. He did this to explain that those of their number who had died, or would die in Christ, would share in His glory with those who were living when He returned. This pericope deals with how their dead brethren are connected to Christ's return.

"The restlessness which agitated the Church of Thessalonica, and led to a neglect of the occupations of daily life, was doubtless due to their feverish anticipations of the immediate coming of Christ . . ."116

"It would seem that some, at least, of the Thessalonians had understood him to say that all who believed would see the Parousia; but now some believers had died and they had begun to wonder about them."117

The time of the Rapture has been a matter of disagreement among conservative interpreters. Some believe it will take place before the Tribulation (pretribulationists). Others believe that it will take place after the Tribulation (posttribulationists). Others conclude that it will take place during the Tribulation (midtribulationists). Still others hold that the Lord will catch away only some Christians, not all (partial rapturists). What does 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 reveal about the time of the Rapture? How do advocates of the various schools of interpretation cited interpret these verses? First Thessalonians 4 and 5 are "probably the most important passages dealing with the Rapture."118 Other key New Testament passages that deal with the Rapture are John 14:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.

I believe it is fair to say that more pretribulationists base their belief that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation on 1 Thessalonians 4 than on any other one passage of Scripture. This passage also contains more detail about the Rapture than any other one. It has major significance. All conservative interpreters agree that the translation of living Christians and the resurrection of dead Christians will take place at the same time. On this issue there is agreement, regardless of when the Rapture will occur in relation to the Tribulation.

4:13 Paul wrote that to be "uninformed" about the future *as a Christian* is not good, even though some believers today say that eschatology is unimportant. Those "asleep" are the dead in Christ (cf. Mark 5:39; John

¹¹⁶Lightfoot, p. 62.

¹¹⁷Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 83.

¹¹⁸John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 94.

11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30). "Cemetery" (*koimeterion*) comes from the word used here (*koimao*) and means "a place of sleep." The ancients commonly used "sleep" as a euphemism for "death" (e.g., Gen. 47:30; Deut. 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; 22:40).¹¹⁹ However, this figure is particularly appropriate in view of the fact that God will resurrect everyone some day.

"The object of the metaphor is to suggest that as the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist despite his absence from the region in which those who remain can communicate with him, and that, as sleep is known to be temporary, so the death of the body will be found to be. Sleep has its waking, death will have its resurrection."¹²⁰

Knowing the bright future of believers who have died gives hope in the midst of grief. Paul did not deny that the death of a believer brings grief to his or her loved ones (cf. John 11:35). Nevertheless he insisted that Christians need "not grieve" as those "who have no hope" grieve.

"Aeschylus wrote, 'Once a man dies there is no resurrection.' Theocritus wrote, 'There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.' Catullus wrote, 'When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep.'"¹²¹

"The risen Lord robbed death of its sting and horror for the believer and has transformed it into sleep for those in Christ."¹²²

Pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the Thessalonian believers were grieving for two reasons: They grieved because their loved ones had died and because they thought the resurrection of dead Christians would take place after the Rapture. Pretribulationists believe the Thessalonians erroneously thought this resurrection would follow the Tribulation. Some posttribulationists believe the Thessalonians incorrectly thought that this resurrection would take place at the end of the Millennium.¹²³ Both of these conclusions rest on the interpretation of other passages that indicate the time of the Rapture. It was not the resurrection as such that disturbed the Thessalonians, but the fact that they might not see their departed brethren for a long time, that did. Specifically, it was the fact that their dead fellow Christians might not participate in the Rapture

¹¹⁹Bruce, p. 95; Martin, p. 143; Wanamaker, p. 167.

¹²⁰C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, p. 128.

¹²¹Barclay, p. 235.

¹²²Hiebert, p. 188. Cf. Phil. 1:23.

¹²³E.g., Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 101.

with them that upset them. They apparently thought that one had to be alive to participate in the Rapture.¹²⁴

- 4:14 We could translate "If" as "Since." This word introduces a first class condition in the Greek text, which in this case is a condition true to reality. The death and resurrection of Christ are among the best attested facts of history.¹²⁵ Furthermore the Scriptures predicted these events before they occurred. Therefore we can be equally certain that the events of the Rapture, which Paul predicted here, will also happen. Paul here told his readers that God "would (will) bring" the *spirits* of Christians who have died ("those who have fallen asleep") back "with Jesus (Him)" when He returns for the saints still living on earth. It is only those who have died "in Jesus" (saints "in Christ," i.e., Christians as contrasted with all the saved of all ages) who will accompany our Lord. The terms "in Christ" and "in Jesus," when used of believers, consistently describe believers who are members of the body of Christ, the church.

Pretribulationists identify this return of Christ with the Rapture that, we believe, will occur before the Tribulation. Posttribulationists contend that this return of Christ (the Rapture) will occur at the end of the Tribulation—just before the Second Coming of Christ.

- 4:15 Paul further stressed the truth of his teaching (cf. v. 14a) by explaining that it was a revelation from the Lord ("say to you by the word of the Lord"), not just his opinion. It could have been an otherwise unrecorded saying of Christ (cf. Acts 20:35). Or it could have come to Paul by direct revelation (cf. Acts 16:6; 18:9; 1 Cor. 2:10; 2 Cor. 12:1-4; Gal. 1:12, 16; Eph. 3:3).¹²⁶

Paul expected to be in the company of the living when Christ returned (cf. Phil. 4:5; Titus 2:13).¹²⁷ He believed in an imminent Rapture, one preceding the Tribulation. Even some amillennialists acknowledge this.¹²⁸ (Amillennialists and postmillennialists are typically also posttribulationists, though not all posttribulationists are amillennialists or postmillennialists. Some are premillennialists.) This "coming" (Gr. *parousia*, lit. "appearing") of Christ is the same as His *appearing in the clouds* (cf. Acts 1:11). It is not His Second Coming, following the Tribulation, a separate "coming"—at which time He will remain on the earth, set up His earthly kingdom, and reign for 1,000 years (cf. Rev. 19:11-21). The differences in the descriptions of these comings present them as separate events (cf. Matt. 24:30-31 and 1 Thess. 4:15-17).

¹²⁴Wanamaker, pp. 169, 172. See also Joseph Plevnik, "The Taking Up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984):281.

¹²⁵See Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*

¹²⁶Milligan, p. 58.

¹²⁷See Lightfoot, pp. 65-67; Milligan, pp. 58-59.

¹²⁸E.g., Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 136.

Some posttribulationists have asserted that the "word of the Lord" referred to in this verse is what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:30-31; Luke 17:34-35). That was His revelation concerning His Second Coming, which they believe will follow the Rapture immediately.¹²⁹ Pretribulationists, on the other hand, believe "the word of the Lord" is not a reference to what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse. Most pretribulationists see no reference to the Rapture in the Olivet Discourse. We take "the word of the Lord" as referring to revelation Jesus gave Paul that the Gospels do not record, as do some posttribulationists.¹³⁰ In short, we cannot identify "the word of the Lord" conclusively with Jesus' teaching concerning His Second Coming recorded in the Gospels.

This leads to another question: Are there any prophesied events that must take place before the Rapture occurs? Posttribulationists say there are, namely: the events of the Tribulation (Daniel's seventieth week) and preparations for the Second Coming of Christ (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24; Rev. 4—18). Pretribulationists say there are no specific events that God predicted would take place before the *translation* of the saints, in the passages that speak of that "translation" (i.e., the Rapture).

The fact that the living will have no advantage (preferential treatment; the first to be transformed) over the dead when Christ returns shows that excessive sorrow for dead Christians, beyond the sorrow connected with their dying, is unjustified.

"He [Paul] thus deliberately contradicts a view which was current in Judaism that those who were alive at the end of the world would fare better than the dead (Dan. 12:12; Ps. Sol. 17:50; 2 Esd. 13:24)."¹³¹

4:16 A supernatural announcement will precede the Lord Jesus' return for His own. God will announce the event "with a shout," with an angelic "voice (of the archangel)," and a trumpet blast ("the trumpet of God"). Probably believers, at least, will hear these announcement calls, if not all people living on the earth. These may be three descriptions of one event.¹³² Or they may be three separate events. Milligan believed that Paul chose these three announcements "with special reference to the awakening of those who were asleep."¹³³ Referring to the "shout," Ryrie wrote the following:

"It is a word of command used in classical Greek for the shout with which an officer gives the order to his troops or

¹²⁹E.g., J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, p. 68; and Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 140, cf. pp. 267-68.

¹³⁰E.g., Ladd, pp. 72-73; and Gundry, p. 102.

¹³¹Marshall, p. 127.

¹³²Milligan, p. 59.

¹³³Ibid.

his crew. There is in the word a ring of authority and a note of urgency."¹³⁴

It appears that these three events will take place *literally* (cf. Acts 1:9; 1 Cor. 15:52). However, some interpreters believe that they will not (cf. Zech. 9:14).¹³⁵ In any case, God will herald the return of Christ from heaven. Note that only the dead "in Christ"—for this event—experience resurrection. That is, God will reunite their resurrected, glorified bodies with their spirits (1 Cor. 15:35-58).

"The resurrection of *all* men does not here come into view, if indeed it is ever taught by St Paul All that the Apostles [who wrote this epistle; 1:1] desire to emphasize, in answer to the Thessalonians' fears, is that the resurrection of 'the dead in Christ' will be the first act in the great drama at the Parousia, to be followed by the rapture of the 'living' saints . . ." ¹³⁶

Many posttribulationists identify this trumpet blast with the one that will announce Christ's Second Coming (Matt. 24:31), or with one of the trumpet blasts that herald judgments coming upon the world in the Tribulation (Rev. 8:2, 7, 8, 10, 12; 9:1, 13; 11:15). Pretribulationists believe this must be a different trumpet blast, since the Rapture will precede the Tribulation.¹³⁷ One's interpretation of this event depends on one's personal chronology of the Rapture relative to the Tribulation.

4:17 Then God will *catch up* the saints who are alive on the earth *at that moment*—"in the air"—and unite them *forever* ("be always [or] ever") with Christ. The word in the Latin Vulgate translated "caught up" is *rapturo*, from which the term "Rapture" comes. In Greek it is *harpazo* (cf. Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2, 4; Rev. 12:5).

"It would appear from these other occurrences [*sic*] of the word that Paul had in mind being taken into heaven and not just into the mid-air to turn around suddenly and return to the earth."¹³⁸

"The thought is that the 'raptured' saints will be carried up into 'air,' as the interspace between heaven and earth, where they will meet the descending Lord, and then either escort Him down to the earth in accordance with O.T. prophecy,

¹³⁴Ryrie, *First and . . .*, p. 65.

¹³⁵E.g., Milligan, p. 60.

¹³⁶Ibid.

¹³⁷See Showers, pp. 259-67.

¹³⁸Ryrie, *First and . . .*, p. 66.

or more probably in keeping with the general context accompany Him back to heaven."¹³⁹

Living saints will experience translation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-53; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Phil. 3:20-21)—their bodies will become immortal—and saints who have died will experience resurrection with immortal bodies. Both kinds of Christians will meet (Gr. *apantesis*, cf. Matt. 25:6; Acts 28:15) "in the air" with Christ, with whom they will remain—never to experience separation from Him. Since "we will always be with the Lord" from then on, we will therefore: return to earth with Him at His Second Coming, participate in His earthly millennial kingdom with Him, and finally dwell with Him in the new heavens and new earth. Old Testament believers will evidently experience resurrection at the end of the Tribulation (Dan. 12:1-13; Isa. 26:13-19).¹⁴⁰ Probably Paul included himself in the living group because he believed that the Lord's return was imminent. He set an example of expectancy for the church—for the entire Church Age.¹⁴¹

Why will God snatch Christians up into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air?¹⁴² Pretribulationists answer that we will go with Christ to heaven, where we will abide with Him in the place He has prepared for us there (John 14:1-3). We will receive our rewards at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), and await our return with Him at His Second Coming (Rev. 19:14). Thus we will spend the seven-year Tribulation with the Lord in heaven, not on the earth. Posttribulationists respond that Christ does not actually return to the earth in such a view. He has to change direction and return to heaven immediately. This seems unnatural to them. Pretribulationists say this is not unusual, in view of what Jesus said about His coming to take His bride, the church, to His Father's house (John 14:3).

Posttribulationists say God will snatch Christians up to meet Christ in the air to join Him, whereupon He proceeds to the earth to set up His kingdom.¹⁴³ Pretribulationists point out that it is even more unnatural for Christians to change direction—and return to earth immediately—than it is for Christ to change direction and return to heaven (cf. John 14:1-3).

"A meeting in the air is pointless unless the saints continue on to heaven with the Lord who has come out to meet them."¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹Milligan, p. 61.

¹⁴⁰See John F. Walvoord, "The Resurrection of Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:493 (January-March 1967):3-15.

¹⁴¹Lightfoot, p. 67.

¹⁴²See J. Gregory Sheryl, "Can the Date of Jesus' Return Be Known?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:673 (January-March 2012):20-32, for a review of date-setters through history.

¹⁴³E.g., Ladd, p. 78; Marshall, p. 131.

¹⁴⁴Thomas, p. 279. Cf. Milligan, p. 61.

Most amillennialists affirm that this *catching up* will result in Christians going to heaven—and not ever returning to the earth, as the following quotation shows:

"Those who meet the Lord in the air (the space between the earth and the heavens in Jewish cosmology) are caught up in a heavenly ascent by the clouds without any indication that they then return to earth."¹⁴⁵

Most amillennialists, of course, do not believe that there will be an earthly messianic (millennial) reign for Christians—or Christ—to return to the earth to participate in. Barclay took this section as poetry, a seer's vision that the reader should not take literally.¹⁴⁶

Posttribulationists believe that since the Scriptures elsewhere, they say, present the Rapture as taking place at the end of the Tribulation, it must be *Christians* who change direction in mid-air rather than Christ.

Are there any other passages of Scripture that clarify when this translation of living saints will occur? Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that this event will happen at the same time as a resurrection of believers from the dead (vv. 14-17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52). However, we disagree about which resurrection is in view. Some posttribulationists identify this resurrection with one that will take place at Christ's Second Coming.¹⁴⁷ Some of them hold that this resurrection is "the first resurrection" (Rev. 20:4-5), and that no resurrection will precede this one, specifically one before the Tribulation.¹⁴⁸ However, pretribulationists point out that there has already been at least one resurrection, namely, Christ's. The "resurrections" of Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus were technically only *resuscitations*, since these people died again. Consequently "first" must not mean the first *ever*, but first in relation to others, probably the first of the two mentioned in Revelation 20:4-5. This "first resurrection" evidently refers to a resurrection of believers that will take place at the end of the Tribulation. The second resurrection, the resurrection of unbelievers, will occur at the end of the Millennium. This interpretation allows the possibility for another resurrection of believers before the Tribulation.¹⁴⁹

Marvin Rosenthal offered a unique interpretation that he called the "pre-wrath Rapture."¹⁵⁰ He believed that the only time when God will pour out His wrath on the world will be the last quarter, rather than the last half, of

¹⁴⁵Wanamaker, p. 175.

¹⁴⁶Barclay, p. 236.

¹⁴⁷E.g., Reese, pp. 214-15; Gundry, pp. 134-39.

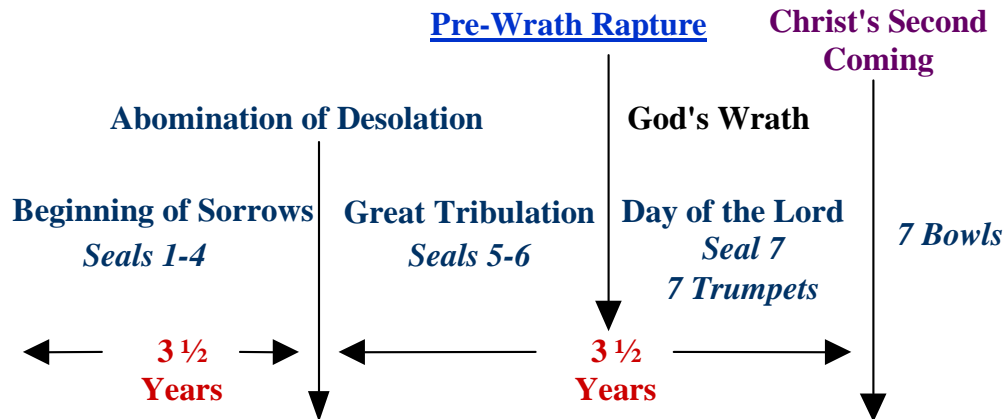
¹⁴⁸E.g., Ladd, p. 82.

¹⁴⁹For a very helpful account of the history of the Rapture debate, see Stanton, pp. 306-401.

¹⁵⁰Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*.

Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:24-27). He equated this 21-month long period with "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1-2).¹⁵¹

Rosenthal's Pre-Wrath Rapture Position



Most premillennialists have understood "the day of the Lord" to describe the whole seventieth week (seven years) *plus* the messianic (millennial) kingdom.¹⁵² We view the whole seven-year Tribulation as a period of the outpouring of divine wrath (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1).¹⁵³

"Just as each day of creation and the Jewish day consisted of two phases—a time of darkness ('evening') followed by a time of light ('day') [Gen. 1:4-6]—so the future Day of the Lord will consist of two phases, a period of darkness (judgment) followed by a period of light (divine rule and blessing)."¹⁵⁴

A representative amillennial explanation of this passage is as follows:

"Although an attempt has been made here [in his commentary] to organize the details of vv. 16f. into a reasonably coherent picture of the events of the end, it must be acknowledged that Paul was probably not interested in giving us a literal description. His goal was to reassure the

¹⁵¹The chart below is from John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):388.

¹⁵²See Showers, pp. 30-40, and Stanton, pp. 70-91, for excellent discussions of "the day of the Lord."

¹⁵³For refutations of Rosenthal's view, see Gerald B. Stanton, "A Review of *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):90-111; Paul Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* and Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique*.

¹⁵⁴Idem, *Maranatha . . .*, p. 33.

Thessalonians that their fellow Christians who had died would participate on equal terms with them in the salvation experience accompanying the parousia of the Lord."¹⁵⁵

Yet there are no clues in the passage that we should take what Paul said as anything other than a literal description.

4:18 The expectation of being reunited with saints who have died and, what is more important, with Christ, gives believers a *hope* that we can and should use to "comfort one another" when loved ones die.

"Paul's central point [in vv. 13-18] is that Christians who have died are in no way behind those who are alive at the Lord's coming, since the dead will actually rise first; then, we will all go together to meet the Lord in the air."¹⁵⁶

Note that it is not the Lord's return *by itself* that Paul offered as encouragement here (cf. Titus 2:13), but the reunion of dead and living saints and their shared glory in His presence.

Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the revelation Paul presented in this passage is a "comfort" to believers. The hope of translation *before* death, that Paul revealed, is greater than the hope of resurrection *after* death, that the Thessalonians had held. Will this translation occur before the Tribulation or after it? Pretribulationists say it will occur before. Consequently we have a very comforting hope. Not only might our translation precede our death, but it will also precede the Tribulation. Furthermore it may take place at any moment. Posttribulationists say our hope consists only in the possibility of our being translated before we die. According to them, we might have to go through the Tribulation. Therefore the Rapture is not imminent in their view.

"The hope of a rapture occurring after a literal great tribulation would be small comfort to those in this situation [i.e., in mourning for loved ones who have died]."¹⁵⁷

". . . although the church has gone through periods of great persecution in the past and undoubtedly may go through greater and even more intense persecutions before Christ returns, nevertheless, the view of a posttribulational rapture is impossible for the simple reason that it makes

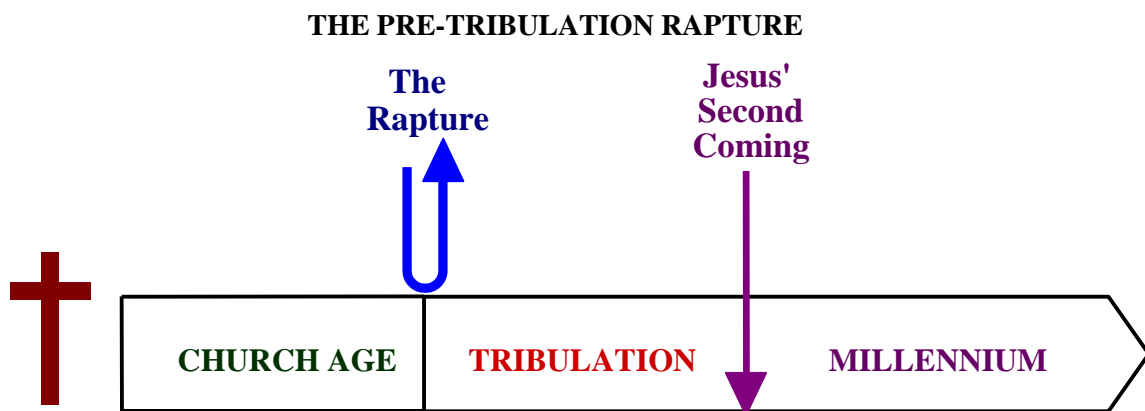
¹⁵⁵Wanamaker, p. 176.

¹⁵⁶Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, p. 204.

¹⁵⁷Walvoord, *The Blessed . . .*, p. 96.

meaningless the very argument that Paul was presenting in the Thessalonian letters. Paul was arguing for the imminence of Christ's return. This is to be the major source of comfort for suffering believers. If Christ will not come until after the great tribulation (that is, a special period of unusual and intense suffering still in the future), then the return of the Lord is not imminent and tribulation rather than deliverance is what we must anticipate."¹⁵⁸

I prefer the pretribulation explanation of verses 13-18 for the following reasons: First, the passage pictures the Rapture as an imminent event, but it is not *imminent* if the Tribulation—which will be a recognizable and specific time period starting with Antichrist's signing of a seven-year peace treaty with Israel—must come first. Second, Christians are not destined to experience the outpouring of God's wrath (1:10; 5:9-10; cf. Titus 2:13), which the Tribulation will include. Third, the prospect of an imminent Rapture is a much greater comfort than the prospect of a posttribulation Rapture, and Paul revealed this information to provide comfort (4:18). Fourth, there is no mention of the Tribulation in the passage, but that would be appropriate and reasonable if it will precede the Rapture. Fifth, the biblical descriptions of the Rapture and Second Coming are quite different, which precludes their happening together. Sixth, the pretribulation view existed in the church long before John Nelson Darby (A.D. 1800-1882) popularized it.¹⁵⁹



A comparison of verses 13-18 with John 14:1-3 shows that they refer to the same event.

¹⁵⁸James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁵⁹See Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (July-September 1995):306-17.

JOHN 14:1-3		1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18	
trouble	verse 1	sorrow	verse 13
believe	verse 1	believe	verse 14
God, me	verse 1	Jesus, God	verse 14
told you	verse 2	say to you	verse 15
come again	verse 3	coming of the Lord	verse 15
receive you	verse 3	caught up	verse 17
to myself	verse 3	to meet the Lord	verse 17
be where I am	verse 3	ever be with the Lord	verse 17

A similar comparison of 1 Thessalonians 4 and Revelation 19, which describes the Second Coming of Christ, reveals that these two chapters must describe different events.¹⁶⁰

1 THESSALONIANS 4	REVELATION 19
Only the righteous are in the picture.	Only the wicked.
The dead are raised to life.	The living go to death.
The saints ascend to meet the Lord.	Saints descend with the Lord.
They are the guests at the marriage supper of the Lamb.	They constitute the supper of the great God.
They are forever with the Lord.	The leaders and all their followers are cast into the lake of fire.

C. PERSONAL WATCHFULNESS 5:1-11

In view of the imminency of Christ's return, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to be ready to meet the Lord at any time.

"The former [paragraph, i.e., 4:13-18] offered instruction concerning the dead in Christ; this [paragraph] gives a word of needed exhortation to the living."¹⁶¹

". . . though the principal ground of their disquiet had now been removed (iv. 13-17), the prevailing restlessness and excitement were such . . . , that the Apostles were led to remind their converts of what they had already laid down so clearly in their oral teaching, that 'the day of the Lord' would

¹⁶⁰Both comparisons are from J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 312.

¹⁶¹Hiebert, p. 207.

come as a surprise (vv. 1—5), and consequently that continued watchfulness and self-restraint were necessary on the part of all who would be found ready for it (vv. 6—11)."¹⁶²

Other contrasts between these passages are: the Rapture versus the day of the Lord, and resurrection versus judgment.

This pericope deals with the time of Christ's return and the consequent need for watchfulness.

5:1-2 Paul had previously taught this church about "the day of the Lord" (v. 2), and the Old Testament prophets had much to say about it. Jesus had also taught His disciples about it (cf. Matt. 24:4—25:46; Mark 13:5-37; Luke 12:39-40; 21:8-36). They had taught about the chronological periods ("times," Gr. *chronos*, an extended period) and the major features of those periods ("epochs," Gr. *chairos*, a definite period) that lay ahead in the future.¹⁶³ These words may describe the end times from these two perspectives (cf. Acts 1:7; 3:19-21).¹⁶⁴ But probably they mean virtually the same thing (cf. Dan. 2:21; 7:12; Acts 1:7).¹⁶⁵

" . . . the phrase may have been a conventional doublet, like our own 'times and seasons,' with no particular emphasis on a difference between the two nouns."¹⁶⁶

"The day of the Lord" usually refers in Scripture to a time in history characterized by God's working in the world in direct, dramatic ways.¹⁶⁷ It contrasts with "the day of man," in which affairs appear to be proceeding without divine intervention. The *eschatological* "day of the Lord," prophesied in the Old Testament, begins with the Tribulation and continues through the Millennium (cf. Isa. 13:9-11; Joel 2:28-32; Zeph. 1:14-18; 3:14-15; et al.). It contains both judgment (in the Tribulation) and blessing (in the Millennium). People living on the earth when it begins (i.e., unbelievers, since Christians will be with the Lord in heaven immediately following the Rapture) will not expect it. Paul did not discuss the *entire* "day of the Lord" here, only its coming. That is why he dealt only with the judgment aspect of that day.

"The meaning [of "like a thief"] would be not that the Day will come as unheralded as a thief, but that it will surprise people . . ."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶²Milligan, p. 63.

¹⁶³Cf. Lightfoot, p. 71.

¹⁶⁴G. G. Findlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, p. 107; Morris, *The First . . .*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁶⁵Wanamaker, p. 178.

¹⁶⁶Bruce, p. 108.

¹⁶⁷See *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁶⁸Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 155.

"By using 'day of the Lord' terminology to describe the great tribulation, Christ included the tribulation within the day of the Lord (cf. Matt 24:21 with Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1; Joel 2:2). This time of trial at the outset of the earthly day of the Lord will thus not be brief, but comparable to a woman's labor before giving birth to a child (Isa. 13:8; 26:17-19; 66:7ff.; Jer 30:7, 8; Micah 4:9, 10; Matt 24:8; 1 Thess 5:3)."¹⁶⁹

The phrase "the day of the Lord" also refers to the Second Coming of Christ (cf. Joel 3:9-16; Zech. 14:1-5; Rev. 16:12-16; 19:11-21); it includes that momentous prophetic event, which occurs between the Tribulation and the Millennium. Thus Scripture uses the term in a broad sense (the Tribulation and the Millennium) and a narrow sense (the return of Christ).

"Just as the word 'day' in Genesis 1:5 has both a broad sense (a 24-hour day—'And the evening and the morning were the first day') and a narrow sense (the light part of a 24-hour day in contrast with the darkness part—'And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night')—so the expression 'the Day of the Lord' has both a broad and a narrow sense in relationship to the future."¹⁷⁰

Some posttribulationists say "the day of the Lord" here refers only to the Second Coming of Christ.¹⁷¹ However, in the context, this "day" will be a time when God will pour out His wrath on unbelievers (vv. 3-9). While this could refer to the judgments that will take place at Christ's Second Coming, it seems more likely to refer to the judgments of the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:5-28; Rev. 6:16-18).¹⁷² Gundry contended that "the day of the Lord" begins after the Tribulation, but before Armageddon.¹⁷³ However, this means that none of the judgments before Armageddon are judgments of "the day of the Lord," a conclusion that few interpreters, posttribulationist or pretribulationist, have accepted.¹⁷⁴

"The only way to hold that this meeting with Christ in the air is an imminent prospect is to see it as simultaneous with the beginning of the divine judgment against earth. Only if the rapture coincides with the beginning of the day of the

¹⁶⁹Thomas, p. 281. Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 230; and McClain, pp. 186-91.

¹⁷⁰Showers, *Maranatha . . .*, p. 35.

¹⁷¹Ladd, pp. 92-94.

¹⁷²Reese, pp. 172-73. Cf. Craig A. Blaising, "The Day of the Lord and the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):259-70.

¹⁷³Gundry, p. 95.

¹⁷⁴See Paul D. Feinberg, "Dispensational Theology and the Rapture," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 225-45, for a critique of Gundry's view, the views of posttribulationists Douglas J. Moo and William E. Bell, and the view of midtribulationist Gleason F. Archer.

Lord can both be imminent and the salvation of those in Christ coincide with the coming of wrath to the rest (v. 9)

...

"Were either the rapture or the day of the Lord to precede the other, one or the other would cease to be an imminent prospect to which the 'thief in the night' and related expressions (1:10; 4:15, 17) are inappropriate. That both are any-moment possibilities is why Paul can talk about these two in successive paragraphs. This is how the Lord's personal coming as well as the 'day's' coming can be compared to a thief ([Matt. 24. 36-43; Luke 12:35-40;] 2 Peter 3:4, 10; Rev 3:3, 11; 16:15)."¹⁷⁵

5:3 Evidently the occasion for the false sense of security ("Peace and safety!") felt then, will be the Antichrist's signing of a covenant with Israel (cf. Dan. 9:27). Thus the beginning of "the day of the Lord" and the beginning of "Daniel's seventieth week" also coincide.¹⁷⁶ That signing will set the stage for a period of unprecedented "destruction," even though, ironically, it will be the signing of a *peace* treaty. Unbelievers living on earth then will be able to anticipate this period of persecution—and divine judgments—since God has revealed it in Scripture. It will be much like a pregnant woman's pre-delivery "labor pains," which observers can anticipate by her appearance (or "birth pangs"; cf. Matt. 24:8).

". . . the figure must not be pressed to denote more than the *suddenness* of the coming . . ."¹⁷⁷

No one living on the earth then will "in any way" (double negative for emphasis in the Greek text) "escape" the turmoil to follow. They cannot escape it any more than a pregnant woman can escape the "labor pains" leading to the delivering of her child. This seems to argue against midtribulationism. *No one* on earth, who is living in "peace and safety" during the first half of the Tribulation, will escape the "destruction" coming in the second half, except those who die.

"The dissimilarity which this verse presents to the ordinary style of St Paul is striking. We seem suddenly to have stumbled on a passage out of the Hebrew prophets. This phenomenon appears frequently in the New Testament writers where they are dealing with Apocalyptic questions and with denunciations of woe, and in fact explains anomalies of style which otherwise would create considerable difficulty. The writers fall naturally into the

¹⁷⁵Thomas, p. 281. Cf. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian . . .*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁶See Showers, *Maranatha . . .*, pp. 58-63.

¹⁷⁷Milligan, pp. 65-66.

imagery and the language. Such is the case in some degree with the second chapter of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (see also 2 Thess. i. 7); and to a still greater extent with a large portion of St Peter's Second Epistle, where the Apocalyptic portion is so different in style from the rest, that some have thought to settle the question of its genuineness by rejecting this portion and retaining the remainder. It explains also to a great extent the marked difference in style between the Revelation of St John and his other writings."¹⁷⁸

5:4-6 The Thessalonians were not ignorant ("in darkness") of these events, since Jesus and Paul had revealed them (cf. 4:13-17). In both Semitic and Greek thought, to be described as a "son" of something was to be characterized by that thing.¹⁷⁹ In this case, what characterized the Thessalonians was the "light" (in contrast to "darkness"), and "day" (in contrast to "night"). They were not walking in wickedness, either. God had removed the Thessalonians from Satan's kingdom of darkness and placed them into God's kingdom of light (cf. Col. 1:13).

"Darkness" was a common negative figure in antiquity. In the Old and New Testaments, it describes those who are ignorant of or opposed to the Lord (cf. Job 22:9-11; Ps. 82:5; Prov. 4:19; Isa. 60:1-3; Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; 6:14; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). Paul exhorted the Thessalonians, therefore, to remain "alert" (watchful) and "sober" (self-possessed), *not asleep* (insensible) to things that God has revealed, "as others" are (cf. Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35; Luke 21:34). This is a *moral* exhortation that goes beyond simple *mental* alertness.¹⁸⁰

If the church must pass through the Tribulation (Daniel's seventieth week) before the Rapture, it is useless to watch for Christ daily.¹⁸¹ Rather, in that case, believers should be looking for the Antichrist!

5:7-8 Behavior consistent with their position in Christ required watchful preparation in view of the future. As soldiers engaged in spiritual warfare, they needed to protect their vital parts ("put on the breastplate") with trust in God ("of faith") "and love" for others (cf. 1:3, 3:5; Isa. 59:17; Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4; Eph. 6:14-17). They also needed to protect their thinking from attack (with "a helmet"), by keeping their sure hope of deliverance at Christ's appearing in mind ("the hope of salvation"; i.e., the Rapture). Note the recurrence of the triad of faith, hope, and love, as in 1:3.

¹⁷⁸Lightfoot, pp. 72-73.

¹⁷⁹Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 156.

¹⁸⁰Milligan, pp. 67-68.

¹⁸¹See James H. Brookes, "Kept Out of the Hour," *Our Hope* 6 (November 1899):154; Brindle, pp. 144-46.

"The hope of salvation which is the helmet . . . means the full realization of our salvation in the future. The assurance of this hope being fulfilled is the fact that God has appointed us not to wrath but to salvation."¹⁸²

5:9-10 *Deliverance* from the judgments of the day of the Lord (i.e., the outpouring of God's wrath in the Tribulation) is certain for Christians. It is certain because "God has not appointed (destined)" His children "to (for) wrath"—in any form or at any time (cf. 1:10). In the context, the "wrath" of "the day of the Lord" (in the Tribulation, not eternal wrath following the Great White Throne) is in view specifically. Rather, He has appointed us to *full* "salvation" (4:15-17). Whereas Christians *do* experience divine *discipline* (cf. Heb. 12), they will not experience divine "wrath" (cf. Rom. 8:1).

"First Thessalonians 5:9 is not a 'both/and' statement. The believer is not appointed to wrath and to salvation—to the Day of the Lord and the Rapture (the posttribulational view). The verse states 'not one, but the other.' The believer is appointed not to wrath, but to salvation; not to the Day of the Lord, but to the Rapture (pretribulationalism). The believer's hope is the Rapture. We are not watching for wrath, but for the Lord."¹⁸³

"When God vents his anger against earth dwellers (Rev. 6:16, 17), the body of Christ will be in heaven as the result of the series of happenings outlined in 4:14-17 (cf. 3:13). This is God's purpose."¹⁸⁴

This deliverance is *certain* because Jesus Christ died as our Substitute. He took *all* God's wrath against us *on Himself* (cf. Rom. 8:1). Consequently we can have confidence that we will live together with Christ after the Rapture, whether we are watchful or unwatchful at the time of His coming.

The Greek word translated "asleep" in verse 10, is from the same root as the word translated "sleep" in verse 6 (*katheudo*), where the reference is to *spiritual lethargy*. It is a different Greek word from the one translated "asleep" in 4:13, 14, and 15 (*koimao*), where the reference is to *physical death*. This would lead us to conclude that Paul was speaking of *spiritual lethargy* here in verse 10, not *physical death*.¹⁸⁵ However, Paul used *katheudo* to describe *physical death* in verse 7. Consequently some Greek

¹⁸²Ryrie, *First and . . .*, p. 73.

¹⁸³Edgar, pp. 206-7.

¹⁸⁴Thomas, p. 285.

¹⁸⁵Constable, p. 707.

scholars believe that Paul was referring to physical death here in verse 10.¹⁸⁶ Even though the interpretation is debatable, it is clear that God will snatch away *all* Christians, whether watchful or unwatchful, alive or dead, at the Rapture.¹⁸⁷ This statement refutes the *partial rapture* theory, the view that God will rapture only *watchful* Christians. Moreover, it is another indication that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation, since the Tribulation is a specific time when God will pour out His wrath on those dwelling on the earth (cf. 1:10; Rev. 3:10).

5:11 This sure hope is a sound basis for mutual encouragement and edification among believers. Not only can we comfort one another when believers die (4:18), but we can also strengthen one another while we live.

"For the truth that the church is destined for rescue from the woes of the Tribulation, no passage has more to offer to exegetical scrutiny than does 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11."¹⁸⁸

D. CHURCH LIFE 5:12-15

Paul also reminded his readers of their present duties. In doing so, he balanced his previous emphasis on their present hope in view of future blessings. He moved from dealing with hope to the subject of love (cf. v. 8). Paul's exhortation to the Romans is quite similar to what we begin to read here (cf. v. 13b and Rom. 12:18; v. 15 and Rom. 12:17a; v. 16 and Rom. 12:12a; v. 17 and Rom. 12:12c; v. 19 and Rom. 12:11b; vv. 21b-22 and Rom. 12:11b).¹⁸⁹

"Having charged his converts to edify one another, the Apostle is reminded of those on whom the office of instruction especially devolved, and is led to speak of the duty of the whole body of Christians towards these their teachers."¹⁹⁰

1. Attitudes toward leaders 5:12-13

The leaders in view were probably the elders in the Thessalonian church, and possibly the deacons and others in positions of leadership (cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17). His readers were to "appreciate" these leaders (plural, "those who") for their labors ("diligently labor"). Their duties, as listed here, are representative, not exhaustive. He charged the believers also to "esteem" their leaders "very highly in love." While some leaders naturally elicit

¹⁸⁶E.g., Milligan, p. 70.

¹⁸⁷See Thomas R. Edgar, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22:4 (December 1979):345-49.

¹⁸⁸Zane C. Hodges, "The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, pp. 67-68. For a good exegetical defense of the pretribulation rapture, see Showers, *Maranatha . . .*, and for refutation of the posttribulation view of this passage, see Stanton, *Kept from . . .*, pp. 88-91,

¹⁸⁹Wanamaker, p. 191.

¹⁹⁰Lightfoot, p. 78.

more affection than others, the Thessalonians were deliberately to demonstrate self-sacrificing "love" to *all* their leaders.

The Thessalonian believers were to demonstrate this special appreciation, not because their leaders were personally lovable necessarily, or even admirable, but because of the contribution they made to the other believers. Even if a leader made a small contribution, those profiting from his ministry should appreciate and respect him for his service: because of his personal activity, and because of the intrinsic importance of his work.¹⁹¹ Such an attitude would enable the Thessalonians to continue to experience "peace" in their church (v. 13).

"That Paul included such a command shows that relations were not all they could have been."¹⁹²

"I have discovered that lack of respect for spiritual leadership is the main cause of church fights and splits."¹⁹³

"Leaders can never do their best work when they are subject to carping criticism from those who should be their followers."¹⁹⁴

"In the New Testament honour is not given to people because of any qualities which they may possess due to birth or social status or natural gifts but only on the basis of the spiritual task to which they are called."¹⁹⁵

2. Relationships among themselves 5:14-15

Paul now gave stronger commands (cf. v. 12). Not only the leaders, but all the believers, were responsible to minister to one another. Those who neglected their daily duties needed stirring up to action. Those who were timid ("fainthearted")—or tended to become discouraged, despondent, worried, or sad more easily than most ("weak")—needed cheering up, stimulation to press on, and extra help. Those who had not yet learned to lean on the Lord for their needs as they should—the spiritually "weak"—were worthy of special support. Above all, the Thessalonians were to "be patient" with one another and with all people ("with everyone"). They were not to retaliate ("repay . . . with evil"), but to do positive "good" to "all" others (cf. Prov. 25:21; Matt. 5:38-42, 44-48; Luke 6:27-36; Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 2:19-23; 3:9).

"Nonretaliation for personal wrongs is perhaps the best evidence of personal Christian maturity."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹Milligan, p. 72.

¹⁹²Thomas, p. 288.

¹⁹³Wiersbe, p. 16.

¹⁹⁴Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁵Marshall, pp. 148-49.

¹⁹⁶Thomas, p. 290.

Verse 14 focuses on those who are hurting, and verse 15 on those who hurt others.

E. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR 5:16-24

The preceding exhortations led Paul naturally to focus on other individual responsibilities, thus to enable his readers to clearly perceive their personal Christian duty (cf. Gal. 6). However, all these things are the duties of Christians corporately (the church assembled), not just individually.

1. Personal actions and attitudes 5:16-18

- 5:16 This is one of approximately 70 New Testament commands to "Rejoice!" This volitional choice is extremely important for the Christian. We can "always" rejoice if we remember what God has given us in Christ. Incidentally, this is the shortest verse in the *Greek* New Testament, not John 11:35.
- 5:17 Greek writers used the adverb translated "without ceasing" to describe a hacking cough. Paul did not expect his readers to be in prayer every minute around the clock, but to continue praying frequently.

"Not surprisingly Paul wished his converts to be people of prayer. He himself was devoted to prayer as a fundamental activity in his life (cf. 1:2b; 2 Thes. 1:11; Rom. 1:10; Col. 1:3, 9). In several of his letters he instructs his readers to devote themselves to prayer (cf. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1; Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2, 3)."¹⁹⁷

"If we live in this way, conscious continually of our dependence on God, conscious of His presence with us always, conscious of His will to bless, then our general spirit of prayerfulness will in the most natural way overflow into uttered prayer. It is instructive to read again and again in Paul's letters the many prayers that he interjects. Prayer was as natural to Paul as breathing. At any time he was likely to break off his argument or to sum it up by some prayer of greater or less length. In the same way our lives can be lived in such an attitude of dependence on God that we will easily and naturally move into the words of prayer on all sorts of occasions, great and small, grave and gay. Prayer is to be constant."¹⁹⁸

"Luther was above all else a man of prayer, and yet of his prayers we have less than of his sermons and conversations

¹⁹⁷Wanamaker, p. 200.

¹⁹⁸Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 173.

because he succeeded in keeping his students out of the secret chamber."¹⁹⁹

5:18 We need to "give thanks" about everything, knowing that God is "working all things together for good" for His people who love Him (Rom. 8:28). Paul said all of these commands are definitely "God's will" for every believer.

2. Actions and attitudes in corporate living 5:19-22

5:19 *Quenching* "the Spirit" is a figurative expression used to illustrate the possibility of hindering the Spirit's work in and through the believer. The image is that of water thrown on a fire (cf. Mark 9:48; Heb. 11:34). The proper response is to follow the Spirit's direction and control without resistance (v. 18; cf. Gal. 5:16, 25). The next verse gives one way in which believers can "quench the Spirit."

"Evidently the situation at Thessalonica was the opposite from that in Corinth where Paul later had to warn the church against disorderliness in relation to the gifts of the Spirit. At Thessalonica some were frowning on any manifestation of the Spirit that was at all out of the ordinary. This might be expected from the Macedonians who were more advanced culturally than those who lived in the south of Greece. They would be more prone to want to stifle the exercise of the unusual gifts of the Spirit."²⁰⁰

5:20-21 There appears to have been a tendency in the Thessalonian church to "despise prophetic utterances" (i.e., the announcing of some word from God; cf. 1 Cor. 14:1), and thus to quench the Spirit. Paul warned against regarding these words from God as though they were only words from men. However, he also counseled that his readers should test ("examine") these utterances. They could do this by comparing what the speaker said with the standard of previously given divine revelation (cf. Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20; 1 John 4:1-3). Their neighbors, the Bereans, set them a good example in this respect (cf. Acts 17:11). They should retain ("hold fast to") everything that passed the test ("that which is good"). What did not, they should reject, along with all other kinds of evil (v. 22). The difficulty was in discerning true prophecies and true prophets from false prophecies and false prophets (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-3, 15), not in discerning the true elements from the false elements in a true prophet's prophecy.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 280.

²⁰⁰Ryrie, *First and . . .*, p. 81.

²⁰¹See R. Fowler White, "Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, p. 85.

"The chaff must be sifted from the wheat."²⁰²

5:22 They should also "avoid (abstain from) every form of evil" (Gr. *pantos eidous ponerou*). This seems to be the best meaning, in view of the contrast with verse 21. The alternative interpretation is that Paul wanted his readers not only to avoid evil itself, but what others might *perceive* as involving evil (cf. Rom. 14). It is not always possible, of course, to abstain from what *appears*—to extremely narrow-minded people—to be evil.

3. Divine enablement 5:23-24

5:23 "Peace" in the assembly was very important to Paul. The "spirit" is the part of us that enables us to communicate with God. The "soul" makes us conscious of ourselves. The "body" is the physical part that expresses the inner person. These are not the only elements that constitute humanity (cf. heart, mind, conscience, etc.), but they are the ones Paul chose here.

"It is precarious to try to construct a tripartite doctrine of human nature on the juxtaposition of the three nouns, *pneuma, psyche* and *soma*. . . . The distinction between the bodily and spiritual aspects of human nature is easily made, but to make a comparable distinction between 'spirit' and 'soul' is forced."²⁰³

". . . that man consists of a soul [immaterial part] and a body [material part] ought to be beyond controversy [cf. Isa. 10:18; Matt. 10:28]. Now I understand by the term 'soul' an immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part. Sometimes it is called 'spirit.'" For even when these terms are joined together, they differ from one another in meaning; yet when the word 'spirit' is used by itself, it means the same thing as soul . . . [e.g., Eccles. 12:7; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59]."²⁰⁴

Paul may have mentioned "spirit and soul and body" because these three aspects point to the believer's relationships to God, himself or herself, and other people. Together they picture wholeness. Paul's desire for his readers was that every part of them, involving all their relationships, would remain without fault and that they would continue to mature and live free from legitimate grounds for accusation until Christ's return. Note again that he believed the Lord's return could precede their deaths ("spirit and soul and body be preserved complete . . . at the coming of our Lord . . .").

²⁰²Findlay, p. 129.

²⁰³Bruce, p. 130. Cf. Milligan, p. 78.

²⁰⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:15:2. See also *ibid.*, 1:15:6 and 7.

Since the Lord did not return before Paul died, was Paul wrong therefore to view the Lord's return as he did, namely, as imminent? No, because imminent means that He *could* return *at any moment*, not that He *will* return *very soon*.

"In a prayer expressing Paul's wishes for the congregation, two of the basic themes of the letter are again highlighted. The prayer utilizes two optative verbs, asking that God 'may . . . sanctify' the Thessalonians and that they 'may . . . be kept blameless.' The prayer for sanctification reminds the readers of the exhortations in chaps. 4—5. In fact, the call for sanctification brackets these final two chapters. Chapter 4 begins with an exhortation to the people to lead sanctified lives (vv. 3-8), and chap. 5 ends with a prayer that God would sanctify his people (v. 23a). The prayer for the preservation of the saints until the coming of the Lord (v. 23b) reflects back on encouragements to persist in hope despite affliction (1:3, 10; 2:14-16; 3:5; 5:10-11)."²⁰⁵

5:24 Paul was confident God would do this work in the Thessalonians through the Holy Spirit ("faithful is He . . . He also will bring it to pass"), assuming their proper response to Him (v. 19). The antecedent of "it" seems to be the sanctification and preservation of the Thessalonians, not the return of Christ.²⁰⁶

IV. CONCLUSION 5:25-28

Paul added this final postscript to encourage three more loving actions and to stress one basic attitude.

5:25 Paul believed that intercessory prayer would move God to do things that He would not do otherwise (cf. James 4:2).

"The ministry of prayer is the most important service that the Church of Christ can engage in."²⁰⁷

5:26 The "holy kiss" of brotherly affection and unity in Christ was, and still is, a customary greeting in many parts of the world. In North American culture, an embrace or handshake often communicates the same sentiments.

"The practice may have arisen from the customary mode of saluting a Rabbi . . ."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵Martin, p. 188.

²⁰⁶Lightfoot, p. 90.

²⁰⁷D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working with God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, p. 44.

²⁰⁸Milligan, p. 80.

5:27 Paul recognized the edifying value of this letter and perhaps its divine inspiration, so he firmly charged that it be "read" aloud to the entire congregation of saints ("to all the brethren").

"The sudden switch from the plural to the singular of the first person is significant; the most probable explanation is that Paul took over the pen at this point and added the adjuration and the concluding benediction with his own hand . . ." ²⁰⁹

5:28 Finally, Paul expressed his longing that the unmerited favor of God ("grace of our Lord Jesus Christ") would continue to be his readers' experience and source of joy. His farewells typically included the mention of God's "grace." It was one of his favorite themes. This benediction is identical to the ones in Romans 16:20 and 1 Corinthians 16:23.

²⁰⁹Bruce, p. 135. See also E. H. Askwith, "'I' and 'We' in the Thessalonian Epistles," *Expositor*, series 8:1 (1911):149-59.

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