

Notes on
1 Thessalonians
2001 Edition
Dr. Thomas L. Constable

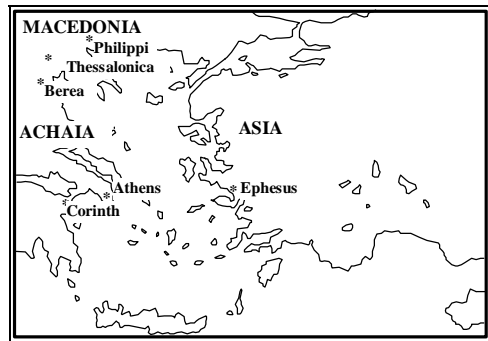
Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thessalonica was an important city. Cassander, the Macedonian king, founded it in 315 B.C. and named it for his wife, who was a half-sister of Alexander the Great. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and it stood on the Via Egnatia, the Roman highway to the East. It was a self-governing community with enough Jews in residence to warrant a synagogue (Acts 17:1).

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy. They had just left prison in Philippi and 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).¹

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).



"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."²

When the unbelieving Jews heard of the conversion of the proselytes, whom they were discipling, they stirred up a gang of roughnecks who attacked the house of Jason. Paul had been staying with him. Unable to find the missionaries the mob dragged Jason before the magistrates who simply charged him to keep the peace. Convinced of the danger for

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

²W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation*, pp. 98-99.

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). The Berean Christians sent Paul away to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14). 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 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 conditions in the Thessalonian church 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 had 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 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).

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, 12), about 51 A.D. If one follows the early dating of Galatians, as I have suggested, 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.³ However the first option seems more probable.⁴

A few scholars have suggested that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians before he wrote 1 Thessalonians.⁵ 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.⁶

³Thomas, p. 248; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. xi; et al., held that this was Paul's first epistle.

⁴For a fuller discussion of these matters, see Thomas L. Constable, "1 Thessalonians," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 687-89; and the New Testament Introductions. Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31:3 (July 1985):336-57, gave helpful background information on the religious and political background of Thessalonica.

⁵T. 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*, championed this view. Other scholars have followed his lead (e.g., Wanamaker, pp. 37-45). According to this theory 1 Thessalonians responds to issues alluded to in 2 Thessalonians.

⁶See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. xxxix-xliv, for a good discussion of the issue. Other scholars who believed Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians first include 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.

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).

"Far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles [1 and 2 Thessalonians] lies in what they say about eschatology."⁷

". . . 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."⁸

"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."⁹

MESSAGE¹⁰

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 simply clarified the events he had previously taught them. The new revelation is in a sense secondary to Paul's argument. Nevertheless it is obvious that the Lord's return was prominent in Paul's mind from beginning to end of this letter. He referred to it in every chapter.

Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, pp. 24-25; and most others.

⁷Thomas, p. 233.

⁸Wanamaker, p. 10.

⁹Bruce, p. xxxviii.

¹⁰Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:8-25.

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.).

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. His belief that Jesus would return for His own is obvious to anyone who reads this letter regardless of his or her eschatology. Paul believed in a real return of the same Jesus who had lived on the earth, died, was buried, arose from the dead, and ascended into heaven (cf. 4:16). First Thessalonians deals with when the Lord will return. 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 would come again (1:9-10). His converts 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. Christians trust in Christ's first coming and wait for His return. Without the hope of Christ's vindication the message of His death is incomplete. I do not mean that the return of Christ is part of the gospel message. 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 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 our 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. Furthermore we can be patient with God knowing that God will balance the scales of justice and vindicate Himself. One day Christ will return just as one day He was born. Both events are crises 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 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 understand how we should respond to the truth that Christ will return.

First, in our own life we should respond with godly behavior: 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 life (ch. 4).

Second, in the face of death there is a two-fold 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, but He will deliver us from it in all its manifestations.

Failure to accept the truth of the Lord's return results in unbelief and a return to idols.

It results in indolence that leads to strife.

Furthermore it results in impatience that 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 out into prominence again in the nineteenth century. We at Dallas Seminary follow in the train of those dispensational writers and teachers who through careful study of the whole Word of God have brought this doctrine back out into public view. 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). I pray that as a result of this study of 1 Thessalonians we may all live with a greater conscious awareness of Christ's return.

OUTLINE¹¹

- 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
 - 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

¹¹For an outline of the book based on rhetorical analysis, see Wanamaker, p. 49.

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 if this Silvanus is the same man whom Peter mentioned in 1 Peter 5:12. 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. 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 stable.¹²

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.

Paul accorded Jesus Christ equality with God the Father. 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." Paul used both words when he greeted the recipients of his epistles. God's grace is the basis for and leads to our peace.

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).

¹²D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 47.

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

A. THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS 1:2-10

Paul next reviewed several aspects of the Thessalonians' salvation and gave thanks to God for them to encourage his readers to persevere despite persecution.

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.¹³ 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 before them. 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).

"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."¹⁴

"The triad of faith, hope and love is the quintessence of the God-given life in Christ."¹⁵

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. Paul thanked God for choosing the Thessalonian believers for salvation.¹⁶ 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) of God through the Holy Spirit's convicting work had brought them to faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 1:16).¹⁷

¹³"Continually" is hyperbole meaning very often. Obviously Paul did not mean that he spent all his time praying for the Thessalonians.

¹⁴Thomas, p. 242. Cf. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, pp. 33-35.

¹⁵Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, p. 219.

¹⁶There 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.

¹⁷This 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."¹⁸

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 . . ."¹⁹

"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."²⁰

1:6-7 Paul was also grateful that his readers had demonstrated the fruit of their faith by becoming followers 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 of 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).

1:8 The Thessalonians had acted as relay runners by passing the gospel they had heard on to farther places. 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 . . ."²¹

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 they had not sent out missionaries.²²

¹⁸Bruce, p. 15.

¹⁹Martin, p. 59.

²⁰Ibid. Cf. A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, pp. 34-40.

²¹Thomas, p. 247.

²²Martin, p. 63.

1:9 Other people were telling Paul how effective his readers had become at spreading the gospel since they had heard it from him. They reported how the Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the only divine and true God. This was the evidence of their faith and love (v. 3).²³ 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 idolators 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, 13-15; 3:16)."²⁴

1:10 They were also awaiting the return of God's Son "out of the heavens" (Gr. *ek ton ouranon*).²⁵ This was the evidence of their hope (v. 3). Jesus' resurrection is indisputable proof of His deity and the prerequisite to His return.

"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."²⁶

"Believers live anticipating a coronation (2 Tim 4:8) rather than a condemnation."²⁷

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's outpouring His wrath at a particular time in history yet future? The commentators, regardless of their eschatological positions, take either position on this question.²⁸

²³For a good explanation of the relationship between repentance and faith, see Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, pp. 91-100.

²⁴Wanamaker, p. 16.

²⁵This is the only place in 1 and 2 Thessalonians where Paul called Jesus God's Son.

²⁶Wanamaker, p. 87.

²⁷Martin, p. 66.

²⁸For example, William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 57, an amillennialist, believed Paul was speaking generally. However, Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, pp. 40-41, and *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 64, also an amillennialist, wrote that Paul referred to a specific event, the judgment associated with the second coming of Christ. In the amillennial scheme of things this judgment will end the present age. Premillennialists also

"Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness."²⁹

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 that this is the first reference to that outpouring of wrath in the epistle (cf. 2:16; 5:9).³⁰

". . . 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."³¹

The outpouring of God's wrath occurs at many times in history. One of these judgments is the Great Tribulation (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).

"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)."³²

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.³³

disagree with one another on this point. John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 17, took Paul's words as a general reference. However, D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 71, also a premillennialist, believed Paul had in mind the Tribulation, which for a pretribulationist is the next great outpouring of God's wrath in history.

²⁹John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:35.

³⁰The biblical revelation about the relationship of church saints to the wrath of God strongly implies a pretribulation rapture of the church. See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 192-222; Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, pp. 25-50.

³¹James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 89.

³²Thomas, p. 248.

³³See 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.

How will God keep believers "away from" His wrath as He pours it out during the tribulation period? Pretribulationists say He will do so by taking us to heaven before the Tribulation begins.³⁴ 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.³⁵ Posttribulationists believe we will go through the entire Tribulation and God will protect us from the outpouring of His wrath during that time.³⁶

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 period. 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."³⁷

"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)."³⁸

"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."³⁹

³⁴John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 72. Cf. Rev. 3:10.

³⁵Harold John Ockenga, "Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation? Yes," *Christian Life* (February 1955), pp. 22, 66.

³⁶George 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; Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 226.

³⁷James Denney, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 59.

³⁸Bruce, p. 19.

³⁹Hiebert, 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. Imminent means likely,

B. REMINDERS FOR THE THESSALONIANS 2:1-16

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 questions that may have arisen in their minds and accusations that his critics may have directed against him (cf. Gal. 1:11—2:21).

2:1-2 Paul appealed to his readers to remember that his preaching had yielded positive results. It had borne fruit in their lives. He had come to them 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.⁴⁰ 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 had behaved in Thessalonica as he had elsewhere, as a faithful servant of God. He did not preach for the approval of men but God who scrutinizes motives.

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

"Flattery was a well-known and much despised practice in the ancient world."⁴¹

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. Itinerant philosophers and orators were common in the Roman Empire. Paul had little in common with them. He had come to Thessalonica to give, not to get. Furthermore he did not demand that the Thessalonians acquiesce to his message because of his apostolic authority.

not certain, to happen without delay, impending. Other passages that teach the imminency of the Lord's return include 1 Cor. 1:7; 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 2 Thess. 3:10-12; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; 1 John 2:28; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20. See Earl D. Radmacher, "The Imminent Return of the Lord," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 247-67; Showers, pp. 127-53.

⁴⁰*Parresia*, "boldness," is the opposite of *kolakeia*, "flattery" (v. 5).

⁴¹Wanamaker, p. 97. Cf. Bruce, p. 29.

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.

"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."⁴²

However, Paul gave himself, not just his message, to the Thessalonians out of love for them, not for personal gain. The measure of his love was the toil and trouble he expended as he worked constantly, probably making tents and other leather articles so he would not be a burden to them.⁴³ This is how he and his companions had heralded the gospel among them (cf. Phil. 4:16; 2 Cor. 11:7-11).

"A gospel messenger who stands detached from his audience has not yet been touched by the very gospel he proclaims."⁴⁴

2:10-12 Paul called on his readers to bear witness, as God could, how he had cared for them. He had done so as a father who has 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.⁴⁵

"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."⁴⁶

"The Christian minister is expected to give practical instruction to his fellow Christians, but not by way of dictation. Since he cannot rule by

⁴²Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 40.

⁴³See R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*, p. 21, for evidence that Paul was essentially a leather worker.

⁴⁴Martin, p. 81. Cf. Mal. 2:6-8.

⁴⁵The Old Testament used both the paternal and maternal figures to describe God (cf. Ps. 103:13; Isa. 66:13).

⁴⁶Thomas, p. 255.

decree if he is to be true to the spirit of Christ, he must guide by example."⁴⁷

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

Paul reminded his readers how they had welcomed the gospel message 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."⁴⁸

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. They sensed that it was a divine revelation rather than a human philosophy, and they believed it. Because they received that divine message, it had done 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 who, when they believed the truth, also found that they attracted enemies.

"Persecution inevitably arises from the outside when a Christian patterns his life after the Lord."⁴⁹

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 need to hear the gospel. By their opposition the enemies of the gospel added more transgressions on their own heads with the result that they hastened God's judgment of them (cf. Gen. 15:16). God had already focused His wrath on them for their serious sin.⁵⁰ They not only rejected the gospel themselves, but they also

⁴⁷Bruce, p. 39.

⁴⁸Martin, pp. 85-86. See also Wanamaker's discussion, pp. 109-10, of this digression.

⁴⁹Thomas, p. 258.

⁵⁰This 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 was responsible. Therefore, Paul was just identifying a segment of humanity that was responsible, not blaming the Jews in some special sense for Jesus' death. 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).

discouraged others from accepting it. It was only a matter of time before God would pour out His wrath in judgment. In view of the eschatological emphasis of the letter, Paul seems to be alluding primarily to the judgment coming on unbelievers during the Tribulation.⁵¹

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 and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience."⁵² The messianic kingdom was present in Jesus' day 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."⁵³

"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)."⁵⁴

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

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 to encourage them to reject any suggestion that his interest in them was selfish.

⁵¹Ernest 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, also took *telos*, "utmost," in a temporal sense.

⁵²Kenneth W. Clark, "Realized Eschatology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940):379.

⁵³Wanamaker, p. 115.

⁵⁴Bruce, pp. 50-51.

Paul's plan 2:17-20

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 (lit. orphaned). He felt torn from his spiritual children. However even though absent in body his readers were very present in his affections. 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.

". . . Paul . . . found his unbounded capacity for paternal affection amply employed in his relationship with his converts."⁵⁵

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. 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 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).⁵⁶

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, their glorification was what he rejoiced in, and their ultimate victory would be a crown of glory for him. 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.

"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."⁵⁷

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁶See also *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁷Thomas, p. 262. Cf. Earl Radmacher, "Believers and the Bema," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:3 (May-June 1995):1, 4; Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, pp. 129, 152-63.

"*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."⁵⁸

". . . 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."⁵⁹

Note that Paul fully 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 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 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

⁵⁸Thomas, p. 262.

⁵⁹Wanamaker, p. 125.

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 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).⁶⁰

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 before 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 expended on them would have been in vain in the sense that it would not have resulted in substantial growth and fruit.

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 to encourage them to persevere as their afflictions continued.

Timothy's report 3:6-10

3:6-7 Timothy had evidently 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. They continued to trust in God and to love others as well as to remember Paul fondly and to desire to see him again (cf. Phil. 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.⁶¹ 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 so they could minister to the continuing needs of their spiritual children. These Christians were doing well, but they needed to grow more. They were only baby Christians at this time. They lacked maturity.

⁶⁰Bruce, p. 64.

⁶¹The Greek word *steko*, "stand firm," is a frequently recurring call for continued perseverance (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 5:1; Phil. 4:1).

"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."⁶²

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 and the parenetic material in chapters 4—5.⁶³

3:11 Paul summarized the content of his prayer in the form of a wish to conclude this section of the epistle (1:2—3:13). He asked God his Father and Jesus his Lord to clear the way so he and his fellow missionaries could return to Thessalonica. He addressed two members of the godhead in prayer. He regarded both of these 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.

3:12-13 He also prayed that the Lord, not man, would cause the believers' love to increase and overflow even more among themselves and toward all people. Paul's love for them did so. He prayed for this so God would strengthen them spiritually to be free from any reasonable charge whenever Christ might return.⁶⁴ 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) as well as 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 a "coming" or what will follow it is in view.⁶⁵ 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. 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:10).

⁶²Wanamaker, p. 139.

⁶³Martin, pp. 110-11. Parenesis consists of exhortations to continue based on previous lessons learned and previous commitments made.

⁶⁴"Hearts" refers to what we might refer to as "personalities" today. The Greek word, *kardia*, "refers to the thinking, willing, and feeling dimensions of human existence" (Wanamaker, p. 144; cf. 2:4).

⁶⁵See Thomas, pp. 268-69.

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

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). They 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).

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 is 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 his or her body and its passions in sanctification and with honor. We should not behave lustfully as Gentiles who do not have special revelation of God and His will. The Greeks practiced sexual immorality commonly and even incorporated it into their religious practices.

"Chastity is not the whole of sanctification, but it is an important element in it . . ." ⁶⁶

Another less probable interpretation of "possess his own vessel" (v. 4) sees the vessel as the wife of the addressee.⁶⁷ This view takes *ktasthai* ("possess") as "acquire," its normal meaning, and *skeuos* ("vessel") as "wife."⁶⁸ Loosely interpreted Paul then meant that men were to live with their wives in a way that would not strain their marital relationship (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7). However, Paul used *skeuos* of one's own body elsewhere (Rom.

⁶⁶Bruce, p. 82.

⁶⁷Thomas, p. 271; footnote in NIV.

⁶⁸According to Martin, p. 125, 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."

9:22-23; 2 Cor. 4:7; cf. 1 Sam. 21:5), and *ktasthai* can refer to one's treatment of himself or herself as well as one's wife.

- 4:6 Sexual immorality is wrong not only because it transgresses the will of God, but because it injures the partner in sex. It brings God's judgment down on two people, not just one, and it defrauds the partner of God's blessing. Paul probably had the Lord's future judgement of believers in view 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. It is a life set apart from sin unto holiness.
- 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 us 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."⁶⁹

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 only encouragements to maintain the loving behavior that they had learned and had manifested already.⁷⁰ His readers demonstrated brotherly love by reaching out to other needy Christians who lived in their province. They did respond to this charge and reached out still farther. This is clear from 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.
- 4:11 Three aspects of behavior demonstrate love for others. First, a person who leads a restful rather than a frantic life avoids disturbing the lives of others. He or she also enjoys life more himself or herself. Second, one

⁶⁹Wanamaker, pp. 158-59.

⁷⁰The Greek text has 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).

who tends to his own affairs 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 family does not put a burden on others to support him or her. Greek culture degraded manual labor, but Christianity together with Judaism viewed it as an honorable pursuit.⁷¹

". . . 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."⁷²

4:12 Such behavior not only results in the Christian meeting his or her own needs, but it meets with the approval and admiration of non-believers 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 the relation of their dead brethren to Christ's return.

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? Because 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 are "probably the most important passages dealing with the Rapture"⁷³ I want to examine them carefully.

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

⁷¹Thomas, p. 274.

⁷²Martin, p. 138.

⁷³John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 94. Other key New Testament passages that deal with the Rapture are John 14:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.

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 in our day say that eschatology is unimportant. Those "asleep" are the dead in Christ (cf. Mark 5:39; John 11:11). The ancients commonly used "sleep" as a euphemism for "death" (e.g., 1 Kings 2:10).⁷⁴ Knowing the 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.

"The risen Lord robbed death of its sting and horror for the believer and has transformed it into sleep for those in Christ."⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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 with them that upset them. They apparently thought that one had to be alive to participate in the Rapture.⁷⁷

4:14 We could translate "If," "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.⁷⁸ 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 told his readers that God would bring the spirits of Christians who had died back with

⁷⁴Bruce, p. 95; Martin, p. 143; Wanamaker, p. 167.

⁷⁵Hiebert, p. 188. Cf. Phil. 1:23.

⁷⁶E.g., Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 101.

⁷⁷Wanamaker, 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.

⁷⁸A very good book that demonstrates that Jesus Christ arose bodily from the dead is Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?*

Jesus when He returned for the saints still living on earth. Notice that 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.⁷⁹

Pretribulationists identify this return of Christ with the Rapture that, we say, 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, not just his opinion. Paul expected to be in the company of the living when Christ returned. He believed in an imminent Rapture. The "coming" (Gr. *parousia*, lit. "appearing") of Christ is his appearing in the clouds (cf. Acts 1:11). It is not His second coming, the 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).

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 that they believe will follow the Rapture immediately.⁸⁰ 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 did Ladd⁸¹ and Gundry,⁸² both posttribulationists. In short, we cannot identify "the word of the Lord" certainly 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 and preparations for the second coming of Christ (Matt. 24; Rev. 4—18). Pretribulationists say there are no 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).

⁷⁹The terms "in Christ" and "in Jesus" when used of believers consistently describe believers who are members of the body of Christ, the church.

⁸⁰J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, p. 68; Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 140, cf. pp. 267-68.

⁸¹Ladd, pp. 72-73.

⁸²Gundry, p. 102.

The fact that the living will have no advantage over the dead when Christ returns makes excessive sorrow for dead Christians, beyond the sorrow connected with their dying, unjustified.

4:16 A supernatural announcement will precede the Lord Jesus' return for His own. People will hear a shout, an angelic voice, and a trumpet blast. Probably believers will hear them if not all people living on the earth. These may be three descriptions of one event or three separate events. It appears that these three events will take place literally (cf. Acts 1:9; 1 Cor. 15:52). In any case, God will herald the return of Christ from heaven. Note that only the dead "in Christ" experience resurrection. That is, God will reunite their resurrected, glorified bodies with their spirits (1 Cor. 15:35-58).

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 heralds judgments coming on 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.⁸³ One's interpretation of this event will rest on when he or she believes the Rapture will take place relative to the Tribulation.⁸⁴

4:17 Then God will catch up the saints alive on the earth into the air and unite us forever with Christ. The word in the Latin Vulgate translated "caught up" is *rapturo* from which the term "Rapture" comes.⁸⁵ Living saints will experience translation (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 we will remain never to experience separation from Him.⁸⁶ Old Testament believers will evidently experience resurrection at the end of the Tribulation (Dan. 12:1-13; Isa. 26:13-19).⁸⁷ 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 of all ages.⁸⁸

Why will God snatch Christians up into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air? Pretribulationists answer that we will go with Christ to heaven where

⁸³See Showers, pp. 259-67.

⁸⁴My reasons for believing in a pretribulation rapture will follow at the end of this section (4:13-18).

⁸⁵In Greek it is *harpazo* (cf. Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2-4).

⁸⁶Since we will always be with the Lord from then on we will 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 earth.

⁸⁷See John F. Walvoord, "The Resurrection of Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:493 (January-March 1967):3-15.

⁸⁸J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of Paul*, p. 67.

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). Posttribulationists respond that Christ never actually returns 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 as He proceeds to the earth to set up His kingdom.⁸⁹ 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."⁹⁰

Most amillennialists affirm that this catching up will result in Christians going to heaven, not 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."⁹¹

Posttribulationists reply that since the Scriptures elsewhere 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 what resurrection is in view. Some posttribulationists identify this resurrection with one that will take place at Christ's second coming.⁹² Some of them hold that this resurrection is "the first resurrection" (Rev. 20:5) and that no resurrection will precede this one,

⁸⁹Ladd, p. 78.

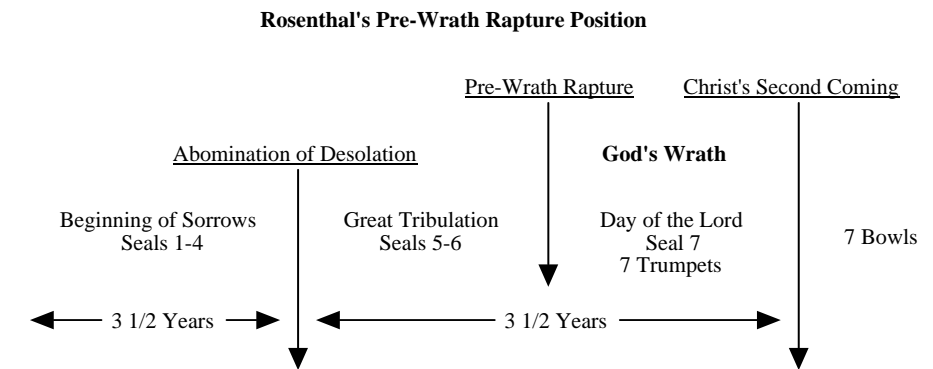
⁹⁰Thomas, p. 279. Cf. George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 61.

⁹¹Wanamaker, p. 175. 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.

⁹²Reese, pp. 214-15; Gundry, pp. 134-39.

specifically one before the Tribulation.⁹³ However, pretribulationists point out that there has already been at least one resurrection, namely Christ's. Consequently "first" must not mean the first ever but first in relation to others, probably the first of the two mentioned in Revelation 20:5-14. 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 opens the possibility for another resurrection of believers before the Tribulation.

Marvin Rosenthal offered a unique interpretation that he called the "pre-wrath Rapture."⁹⁴ 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 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).⁹⁵



Most premillennialists have understood the day of the Lord to describe the whole seventieth week (seven years) plus the messianic (millennial) kingdom.⁹⁶ We view the whole seven-year Tribulation as a period of the outpouring of divine wrath (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1).⁹⁷

"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

⁹³Ladd, p. 82.

⁹⁴Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*. For a very helpful account of the history of the Rapture debate, see Stanton, pp. 306-401.

⁹⁵The chart below is from John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):388.

⁹⁶See Showers, pp. 30-40, and Stanton, pp. 70-91, for excellent discussions of "the day of the Lord."

⁹⁷Gerald B. Stanton effectively showed the fallacy of Rosenthal's view in "A Review of *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):90-111; as did Paul Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* and Showers, *pass*.

(judgment) followed by a period of light (divine rule and blessing)."⁹⁸

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 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."⁹⁹

4:18 The hope 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."¹⁰⁰

Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the revelation Paul just gave 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 may 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. We may have to go through the Tribulation. Therefore the Rapture is not imminent.

"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]."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 33.

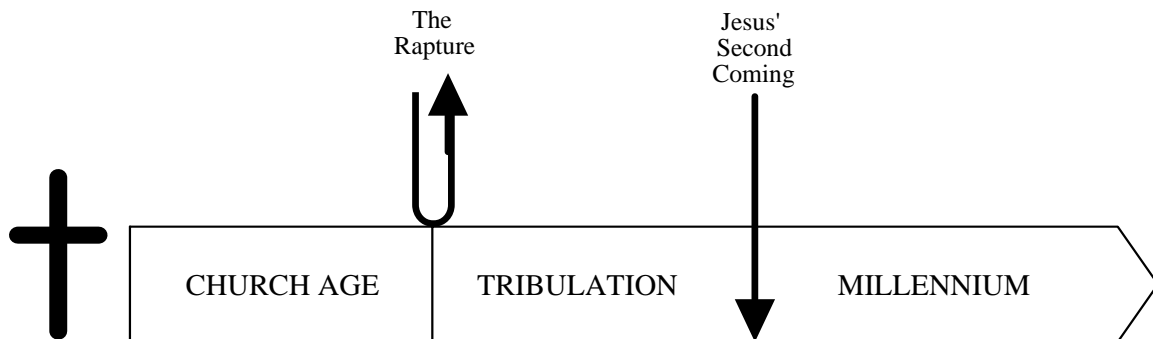
⁹⁹Wanamaker, p. 176.

¹⁰⁰Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, p. 204. 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.

¹⁰¹Walvoord, *The Blessed . . .*, p. 96.

". . . 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 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."¹⁰²

THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE



I prefer the pretribulational explanation of verses 13-18 for the following reasons. The passage pictures the Rapture as an imminent event, but it is not if the Tribulation must come first. Second, Christians are not destined to experience the outpouring of God's wrath (1:10; 5:9-10). Third, the prospect of an imminent Rapture is a much greater comfort than the prospect of a posttribulational Rapture, and Paul revealed this information to provide comfort. Fourth, there is no mention of the Tribulation in the passage, but that would be appropriate and reasonable if it will precede the Rapture.¹⁰³

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

¹⁰²James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁰³See Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (July-September 1995):306-17, for evidence that the pretribulation view existed in the church before John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) popularized it.

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.¹⁰⁴

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 prepare them 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."¹⁰⁵

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

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

¹⁰⁴Both comparisons are from J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 312.

¹⁰⁵Hiebert, p. 207.

5:1-2 Paul had previously taught this church about the day of the Lord (v. 2). Jesus had also taught His disciples about it (cf. Matt. 24:44; Mark 13; Luke 24). They had taught about the duration ("times," Gr. *chronos*) and the major features of the times ("epochs," Gr. *chairos*) that lay ahead in the future. These words may describe the end times from these two perspectives (cf. Acts 1:7; 3:19-21)¹⁰⁶, but probably they mean virtually the same thing (cf. Dan. 2:21; 7:12; Acts 1:7).¹⁰⁷

"... 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."¹⁰⁸

The day of the Lord yet future usually refers to the period in history characterized by God's working in the world in direct, dramatic ways.¹⁰⁹ This period 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 then (i.e., unbelievers, since Christians will be with the Lord in heaven immediately following the Rapture) will not expect it.

"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)."¹¹⁰

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). 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

¹⁰⁶G. G. Findlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, p. 107; Morris, pp. 149-50.

¹⁰⁷Wanamaker, p. 178.

¹⁰⁸Bruce, p. 108.

¹⁰⁹See *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹⁰Thomas, p. 281. Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 230; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 186-91.

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."¹¹¹

Some posttribulationists say the day of the Lord here refers specifically to the second coming of Christ.¹¹² 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).¹¹³ Gundry contended that the day of the Lord begins after the Tribulation but before Armageddon.¹¹⁴ However this means that none of the judgments before Armageddon are judgments of the day of the Lord, a conclusion that few interpreters, posttribulationist as well as pretribulationist, can accept.¹¹⁵

"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 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)."¹¹⁶

5:3 Evidently the occasion for the false sense of security felt then will be the Antichrist's signing of a covenant with Israel (cf. Dan. 9:27).¹¹⁷ That signing will set the stage for a period of unprecedented destruction even though it will be the signing of a peace treaty. Bible students living on

¹¹¹Showers, p. 35.

¹¹²Ladd, pp. 92-94.

¹¹³Reese, pp. 172-73.

¹¹⁴Gundry, p. 95.

¹¹⁵For a critique of Gundry's view, see Paul D. Feinberg, "Dispensational Theology and the Rapture," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 225-45. Feinberg also critiqued the views of posttribulationists Douglas J. Moo and William E. Bell, and the view of midtribulationist Gleason F. Archer, in this essay.

¹¹⁶Thomas, p. 281. Cf. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian . . .*, p. 54.

¹¹⁷Thus the beginning of the day of the Lord and the beginning of Daniel's seventy week are coincident. See Showers, pp. 58-63.

earth then will be able to anticipate this period of persecution since God has revealed it in Scripture. It will be much like a pregnant woman's delivery which observers can anticipate by her appearance (cf. Matt. 24:8). 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 delivering 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.

- 5:4-6 The Thessalonians were not ignorant of these events since Jesus and Paul had revealed them (cf. 4:13-17). 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).¹¹⁸ Paul exhorted them therefore to remain alert (watchful) and sober (self-possessed), not asleep (insensible) to things that God has revealed.

If the church must pass through the Tribulation (Daniel's seventieth week) before the Rapture, it is useless to watch for Christ daily.¹¹⁹

- 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 with trust in God and love for others (cf. 1:3, 3:5; Isa. 59:17; Eph. 6:14-17). They also needed to protect their thinking from attack by keeping their sure hope of deliverance at Christ's appearing in mind (i.e., the Rapture).

- 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 His children to wrath in any form or at any time (cf. 1:10). In the context, the wrath of the day of the Lord is in view specifically. Rather He has appointed us to full salvation (4:15-17).

"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 posttribulation 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 (pretribulationism). The

¹¹⁸"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).

¹¹⁹See James H. Brookes, "Kept Out of the Hour," *Our Hope* 6 (November 1899):154; Brindle, pp. 144-46.

believer's hope is the Rapture. We are not watching for wrath, but for the Lord."¹²⁰

"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."¹²¹

This deliverance is certain because Jesus Christ died as our substitute. He took all of 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 one translated "sleep" in verse 6 where the reference is to spiritual lethargy. It is a different one from the word translated "asleep" in 4:13, 14, and 15 where the reference is to physical death.¹²² God will snatch away all Christians whether watchful or unwatchful at the Rapture.¹²³ 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 time when God will pour out His wrath on those dwelling on the earth (cf. 1:10).

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."¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵

¹²⁰Edgar, pp. 206-7.

¹²¹Thomas, p. 285.

¹²²Constable, p. 707.

¹²³See Thomas R. Edgar, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22:4 (December 1979):345-49.

¹²⁴Zane 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. Stanton, *Kept from . . .*, pp. 88-91, refuted the posttribulation view of this passage.

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) for their labors. Their duties, as listed here, are representative, not exhaustive. He charged the believers also to esteem their leaders very highly in love. While some individuals naturally elicit more affection than others, the Thessalonians were deliberately to demonstrate self-sacrificing love to all their leaders. They were to do so, not because they were personally lovable 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. 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."¹²⁶

"I have discovered that lack of respect for spiritual leadership is the main cause of church fights and splits."¹²⁷

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 or tended to become discouraged and despondent more easily than most 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 were worthy of special support. Above all, the Thessalonians were to be patient with one another and with all people. They were not to retaliate 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."¹²⁸

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

¹²⁵Paul'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). Wanamaker, p. 191.

¹²⁶Thomas, p. 288.

¹²⁷Wiersbe, p. 16.

¹²⁸Thomas, p. 290.

E. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR 5:16-24

The preceding exhortations led Paul naturally to focus on other individual responsibilities to enable his readers to perceive their personal Christian duty clearly (cf. Gal. 6). However all these things are the duties of Christians corporately (the church assembled) as well as 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.

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 but to continue praying whenever possible.

"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)."¹²⁹

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. 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.

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). Paul warned against regarding these words from God as only words from men. However, he also counseled that his readers should test these utterances. They could do this by comparing what the speaker said with the standard of previously given divine revelation (cf. Deut.

¹²⁹Wanamaker, p. 200.

13:1-5; 18:20; 1 John 4:1-3). They should retain everything that passed the test. What did not they should reject along with all other kinds of evil.¹³⁰

5:22 They should also avoid 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 that which 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 man. 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."¹³¹

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 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 assumed the Lord's return would precede their deaths.

Since the Lord did not return before Paul died was he wrong to view the Lord's return as he did, namely as imminent? No, because imminent means 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 . . .

¹³⁰The problem was discerning true prophecies and true prophets from false prophecies and false prophets (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-3, 15), not discerning the true elements from the false elements in a true prophet's prophecy. See R. Fowler White, "Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, p. 85.

¹³¹Bruce, p. 130.

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)."¹³²

- 5:24 Paul was confident God would do this work in the Thessalonians through the Holy Spirit 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.¹³³

IV. CONCLUSION 5:25-28

Paul added this final postscript to encourage three more 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."¹³⁴

- 5:26 The man to man and woman to woman kiss of brotherly affection in Christ was and is a customary greeting in many parts of the world. In North American culture an embrace or handshake more often communicates the same sentiments.

- 5:27 Paul recognized the edifying value of this letter and perhaps its divine inspiration, so he firmly charged that someone read it aloud to all the congregation of saints.

"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 . . ."¹³⁵

¹³²Martin, p. 188.

¹³³Lightfoot, p. 90.

¹³⁴D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working with God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, p. 44.

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

5:28

Finally, he expressed his longing that the unmerited favor of God would continue to be his readers' experience and source of joy. Paul typically mentioned God's grace in his farewells. It was one of his favorite themes. This benediction is identical to the ones in Romans 16:20 and 1 Corinthians 16:23.

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