

Notes on 1 Thessalonians

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Introduction

DESTINATION

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

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

Today Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece.

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

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

happened since he left (cf. Acts 17:4; 1 Thess. 1:8; 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8; Phil. 4:15-16).¹



"Probably as at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:46), at Corinth (Acts 18:6, 7), and at Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 9), having preached the Gospel to the Jews, when they rejected it, he turned to the Gentiles."²

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

"If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men's counterparts; they played a large part in affairs,

¹See Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 230; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 7; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospels to Glory*, pp. 313-14.

²Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 1329.

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

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."¹

When the unbelieving Jews heard of the conversion of the proselytes, whom the missionaries were discipling, they stirred up a gang of roughnecks who attacked the house of Jason (Acts 17:5). Paul and his friends had been staying with him. Unable to find the missionaries, the mob dragged Jason before the magistrates who commanded him to keep the peace (Acts 17:6-9). Convinced of the danger to Paul and Jason, the Christians sent Paul and his companions 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 gospel, the Thessalonian Jews came down to Berea and stirred up more trouble (Acts 17:10-13). At this point the Berean Christians sent Paul away to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14). Then, having been sent for by Paul, Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens. But Paul soon sent Silas back to Philippi and/or Berea, and he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-2; Acts 17:15). Later both men returned to Paul while he was practicing his trade of tent-making in Corinth (Acts 18:3, 5; 1 Thess. 3:6). They came with a gift from the Christians in those Macedonian towns (2 Cor. 11:8-9; cf. Phil. 4:15-16).

DATE

It seems clear that Paul wrote this epistle shortly after he arrived in Corinth (1:7-9; 2:17; 3:1, 6; Acts 18:5, 11): about A.D. 51.² If one follows the early dating of Galatians before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which I do, this epistle would have been Paul's second inspired writing.³ If Paul penned Galatians after the second missionary journey, 1 Thessalonians

¹W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation*, pp. 98-99.

²See Milligan, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

³See Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, pp. 212-13.

could have been his first inspired epistle.¹ However the first option seems more probable.²

A few scholars have suggested that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians before he wrote 1 Thessalonians.³ According to this theory 1 Thessalonians responds to issues alluded to in 2 Thessalonians. This is not as improbable as may appear at first, since the traditional sequence of Pauline letters to churches rests on length rather than date. Nonetheless this theory has not convinced most scholars.⁴

OCCASION

Timothy's report of the conditions in the Thessalonian church was what led Paul to write this epistle (1 Thess. 3:6-8). Some of the Thessalonians apparently believed that Jesus Christ was about to return momentarily. Consequently they had given up their jobs and become disorderly (cf. 4:11; 5:14). Some worried about what had happened to their loved ones who had died before the Lord had returned (4:13, 18). Persecution from the Gentiles as well as the Jews still oppressed the believers (2:17—3:10) who were nevertheless holding fast to the truth and eager to see Paul again (3:6-8). Some of those outside the church, however, remained hostile to

¹Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3:2:249; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 4:1:90; J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:213; Thomas, p. 248; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. xi; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:3; J. S. Howson, in *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 298; Milligan, pp. xxxvi-xxxviii; Harry A. Ironside, *Addresses on the First and Second Epistles of Thessalonians*, p. 9; Charles B. Williams, *A Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, p. 16; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:367; and John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 11; held that this was Paul's first epistle.

²For a fuller discussion of which epistle was written first, see Thomas L. Constable, "1 Thessalonians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 687-89; and the New Testament Introductions.

³E.g., T. W. Manson, "St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952-53):438-46; *ibid.*, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*; and Wanamaker, pp. 37-45.

⁴E.g., E. A. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1977 ed.), pp. 43-44; I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 26; R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, pp. 24-25; Morris, pp. 27-30; and most others. See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. xxxix-xliv; or Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 543-44; for good discussions of the issue.

Paul (2:1-12). There appears to have been some misuse of spiritual by the Thessalonian believers as well as an unfortunate tendency on the part of some to return to their former habits that involved sexual impurity (4:1-8; 5:19-21).

Paul had several co-workers who were Thessalonians during the course of his ministry: Aristarchus (Acts 20:4; 27:2 Col. 4:10; Phile. 24), Secundus (Acts 20:4), Demas (Col. 4:14; Phile. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10), and perhaps others.

In neither 1 Thessalonians nor 2 Thessalonians did Paul quote from the Old Testament.

PURPOSE

In view of this epistle's contents, Paul had at least eight purposes in mind when he wrote it: First, he wanted to express his thanks and praise for the Thessalonian believers (1:2-10). Second, he wanted to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica who were making good progress in their new faith (2:1-16). Third, he wanted to defend himself against attacks by his enemies, specifically his Jewish opponents (2:1-16). Fourth, He exhorted his readers to stand firm in persecution and not to return to paganism (2:17—3:13). Fifth, he encouraged his readers to continue growing in Christ (4:1-12; 5:16-24). Sixth, he wanted to clarify the destiny of Christians who die before the Lord calls His own to Himself (4:13-18). Seventh, he wanted to urge his readers to watch for the Lord (5:1-11). And eighth, he wanted to deal with certain aspects of church life (5:12-15).

J. Vernon McGee saw a threefold purpose, which he put this way:

"(1) To *confirm* young converts in the elementary truth of the gospel; (2) to *condition* them to go on unto holy living; and (3) to *comfort* them regarding the return of Christ."¹

Whereas we regard 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are every bit as pastoral and personal as these letters, as is 2 Corinthians. They reveal much about "Paul's pastoral zeal and his

¹McGee, 5:368.

intense interest in the spiritual well-being of his converts."¹ As such they are an invaluable resource for people who are engaged in pastoral ministry.

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

"... 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."³

"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."⁴

OUTLINE⁵

- 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

¹Morris, p. 19.

²Thomas, p. 233. Italics mine.

³Wanamaker, p. 10.

⁴Bruce, p. xxxviii.

⁵For an outline of the book based on rhetorical analysis, see Wanamaker, p. 49.

2. How the gospel was received 2:13-16
- C. Concerns for the Thessalonians 2:17—3:13
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- III. Practical instructions and exhortations 4:1—5:24
 - A. Christian living 4:1-12
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 - D. Church life 5:12-15
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 - E. Individual behavior 5:16-24
 1. Personal actions and attitudes 5:16-18
 2. Actions and attitudes in corporate living 5:19-22
 3. Divine enablement 5:23-24
- IV. Conclusion 5:25-28

MESSAGE

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

This letter differs from most of Paul's others in that it does not deal primarily with a doctrinal issue or a departure in belief or behavior. While the teaching on the Rapture of the church is definitely a doctrinal contribution, Paul did not write primarily to expound that truth or to defend it. He was simply clarifying the events that he had previously taught the

Thessalonians. This new revelation was, in a sense, secondary to Paul's argument. Nevertheless it is obvious that the Lord's return was prominent in Paul's mind from the beginning to the end of this letter. He referred to it in every chapter.

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

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

First, in relation to Christian experience the return of Christ is the final argument that produces faith. When Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica he proclaimed that the Christ who had come to earth the first time would come again (1:9-10). His converts in this town were to wait for Him. They had turned from belief in visible idols to belief in an invisible God. Paul urged them to wait with the assurance that they would see their God visibly, and they might see Him soon. They turned from disorder to the hope of divine rule and from spiritual anarchy to the hope of an orderly kingdom.

As Christians we believe in Christ's first coming, and we wait for His return. Without the hope of Christ's vindication the message of His death is incomplete. I do not mean to suggest that the return of Christ is part of the gospel message itself. However without the hope of Christ's return the gospel message is harder to accept. The return of Christ is the final argument that produces faith in this sense. It is an apologetic (defense) for Christianity.

Second, in relation to Christian experience the return of Christ is the abiding confidence that inspires labor (1:9). The Thessalonian believers had turned from dead 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 the Christian's reward comes to us here and now, but the great bulk of it awaits the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58). When those we have led to Christ and disciplined experience glorification our reward will be full. This prospect is what so forcefully motivated Paul in his tireless missionary service.

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

Thus the return of Christ is the final argument that produces faith, the abiding confidence that inspires labor, and the ultimate victory that creates patience. In the introduction to this epistle Paul said that he remembered his readers' "work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope" (1:3).¹ Faith, hope, and love are the three greatest characteristics of the Christian life (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13), and they are possible because Christ will return.

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

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

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

¹Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Third, in view of judgment to come our response should be confidence. We will not experience God's wrath, because He will deliver us from it in all of its manifestations (1:10; 2:16; 5:9).

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

The light of the great doctrine of eschatology underwent somewhat of an eclipse during the history of the church. It came into prominence again in the nineteenth century.¹ I follow in the train of those writers and teachers who, through careful study of the whole Word of God, have brought this doctrine back out into public view.²

Satan would like to silence this doctrine, because the hope of Christ's return is one of the greatest motivations for Christian service and sacrifice. The sanctification of the whole person (spirit, soul, and body) consists in active waiting for Jesus to return (5:23; cf. Rev. 22:20).³

¹See John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 29, 303-37.

²E.g., Darby, C. L. Feinberg, Gaebelien, Hiebert, Hodges, Ironside, Pentecost, Radmacher, Ryrie, Showers, Stanton, Thomas, Walvoord, and Wiersbe, whose writings are listed in the bibliography of these notes.

³Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:9-25.

Exposition

I. SALUTATION AND GREETING 1:1

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

At the time he wrote this epistle, "Silvanus" and "Timothy" were with Paul. Silvanus was the Roman (Latin) form of Silas' name, which Paul preferred over Silas, which was its Jewish (Aramaic) form.¹ Luke used the name Silas (Acts 15:22; et al.). No one knows for sure if this Silvanus is the same man whom Peter mentioned in 1 Peter 5:12, but he is generally identified with him by the commentators.² 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 Silvanus'. Paul may have led Timothy to faith in Christ on the first missionary journey (1 Tim. 1:2; Acts 13-14). Paul and Silas (Silvanus) revisited the towns of Derbe and Lystra on their second journey, circumcised Timothy, who evidently lived there, and took him with them as they proceeded west (Acts 16:1-3). When Paul was in Athens he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the new converts there (1 Thess. 3:1-3). Timothy had recently returned from Thessalonica to Paul in Corinth when Paul wrote this letter. He had come 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—by calling them apostle, brother, bond-servant, prisoner, or fellow prisoner. This probably implies that their relationship with the Thessalonians was good and stable.³ Timothy's name appears in 10 of Paul's 13 epistles—all except Galatians, Colossians, and Titus. It also appears in the Book of Hebrews.

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

¹ *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Silas," by R. E. Nixon, p. 1186.

² Milligan, p. 3.

³ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 47.

and sometimes had to defend it vigorously, especially in 2 Corinthians. Evidently the Macedonian churches never questioned Paul's apostleship as did some of the churches elsewhere (e.g., in Galatia and Corinth).

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.¹ The word "church" became useful to Paul in gaining access to the Gentile world as well as in separating from the Jewish world.

"The church of the Thessalonians" (lit. the church of Thessalonians) is an unusual phrase for Paul who more frequently addressed his epistles to: the church in such-and-such a place. Perhaps his address here was designed to emphasize his personal interest in each member of this church.²

Paul accorded Jesus Christ equality with God the Father. By calling Jesus Christ "Lord," Paul conveyed the idea, to both Jews and Gentiles, that Jesus is God. Both groups would have understood this implication.³ God is not only the strong, loving, security-bestowing Father, but He is also the sovereign Lord that His people must obey.

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

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

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

¹The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was made in the third century B.C.

²Ryrie, p. 22.

³Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 48.

A. THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS 1:2-10

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

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

"Paul, like a good psychologist, and with true Christian tact, begins with praise even when he meant to move on to rebuke."²

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. "Constantly" (v. 3) is hyperbole (overstatement not meant to be taken literally) meaning very often. Obviously Paul did not mean that he spent all of his time praying for the Thessalonians. He prayed for them continually rather than continuously.³

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. And third, they had borne up under tribulation patiently because of the hope that lay before them. Paul identified the source of each virtue, and each

¹Carson and Moo, pp. 534-44.

²William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, p. 217.

³Marshall, p. 51.

virtue found its object in Jesus Christ as the Thessalonians lived before God ("in the presence of our God and Father"). 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).

"Here we have *first* faith, the source of all Christian virtues, *secondly* love, the sustaining principle of Christian life, *lastly* hope, the beacon-star guiding us to the life to come."¹

"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."²

"The triad of faith, hope and love is the quintessence of the God-given life in Christ."³

2. Specific reasons 1:4-10

1:4-5 Paul's favorite designation for the Thessalonians was "brothers." The NASB translators added "and sisters" because Paul was addressing both the males and females in the church, not just the males. Paul used this form of address 15 times in this epistle, and seven times in 2 Thessalonians. It emphasizes the equality of Christians in the family of God, Jews and Gentiles alike, and it reveals Paul's strong affection for his Thessalonian converts.

"The phrase *beloved by God* was a phrase which the Jews applied only to supremely great men like Moses and Solomon, and to the nation of Israel itself. Now the greatest privilege of the greatest

¹J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of Paul*, p. 10.

²Thomas, p. 242. Cf. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, pp. 33-35.

³Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, p. 219.

men of God's chosen people has been extended to the humblest of the Gentiles."¹

Paul thanked God for choosing the Thessalonian believers for salvation.

"It was amazing that the Thessalonian Christians had been instructed in this doctrine of election, considering the short time that Paul and the others had ministered to them. Many Christians who have gone to church all their lives in our modern day know very little about the doctrine of election."²

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

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

¹Barclay, p. 218.

²Walvoord, pp. 14-15.

³Bruce, p. 15.

(seen in their respective actions) testified to the genuine relationship that each had with the God who chose them ..."1

"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."2

1:6-7 Paul was also grateful that his readers had demonstrated the fruit of their faith by becoming "imitators" of their teachers and their Lord. They had welcomed the gospel message, even though it had meant much suffering for them because of the persecution that had come from unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament writers took for granted that tribulation is the normal experience of Christians (cf. John 16:33; Acts 14:22; et al.).

Nevertheless with "affliction" "joy" had also come to them, the joy of sins forgiven. This is one of the oxymorons (apparent contradictions) of the Christian life. News of the Thessalonians' good "example" had circulated within their own province of Macedonia, but it had also reached their neighboring province of Achaia to the south. This excellent example included generously giving to other Christians in need (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

"This is high praise, for in the first place Paul calls no other church a pattern, and in the second he thinks of them as examples, not only to the heathen, but to Christians throughout Greece."3

1:8 The Thessalonians had acted like relay runners by passing the gospel on to people in many distant places. They were a missionary church.

"The figure is of an echo that continues indefinitely (perfect tense, *eksechetai*, 'rang out')

¹Martin, p. 59.

²Ibid. Cf. A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, pp. 34-40.

³Morris, *The Epistles ...*, p. 38.

and implies the persistence of the testimony over an ever-increasing expanse ..."1

These Christians were so effective at this that Paul felt his ministry of pioneer evangelism was no longer necessary in that area. Not only had the Thessalonians spread the gospel, but their reputation as an evangelizing church had become widely known. Another interpretation is that only the news of the Thessalonians' faith had circulated widely, so perhaps they had not actually sent out missionaries.²

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

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

Paul's description of God as "living" does not simply mean that He is alive. It means that He is also active. He is the "true"

¹Thomas, p. 247.

²Martin, p. 63.

³Wanamaker, p. 16.

(genuine, Gr. *alethinos*) God as opposed to false, unreal gods: idols.

"It was not reformation first and faith in Christ second, but it was faith in Christ first with the result that idols were forsaken."¹

"We hear today that repentance is essential to salvation. Repentance and believing are presented as two steps in a process. Actually, they are both wrapped up in the same package, and you have them both right here. ... The repentance followed the turning to God. It didn't precede it. When they turned to God, they automatically turned from idols."²

"Take your hand and hold it so the palm of your hand is facing toward you. Now turn your hand around. When you turned your hand around, the back side of your hand now faces you, and the palm of your hand automatically turned away from you. Just so, you cannot turn to Christ Jesus without turning from something, my friend. That turning from something is repentance."³

"Today it seems that the church is telling everyone outside the church to repent. The Bible teaches that it is the people *in* the church who need to repent [cf. Rev. 2—3]. We need to get down on our faces before God and repent. That is not the message for us to give to the unsaved man down the street. He needs to know that he has a Savior."⁴

1:10 The Thessalonians were also awaiting the return of God's "Son" out of the heavens (Gr. *ek ton ouranon*). This is the only place

¹Walvoord, p. 16.

²McGee, 5:377.

³Ibid. For a good explanation of the relationship between repentance and faith, see Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, pp. 91-100.

⁴McGee, 5:378.

in 1 and 2 Thessalonians where Paul called Jesus God's Son. Their action (active waiting) was the evidence of their hope (v. 3). Jesus' resurrection was the indisputable proof of His deity and the prerequisite for His return.

"True believers do not wait for the end of the world, or for judgment, or even for the Rapture of the Church with all the glorious advantages which it will bring to them. The object of their hope is the Saviour Himself—whom Paul calls in characteristic terms, 'Jesus Christ our hope' (1 Tim. 1:1)."¹

"In the last two verses [vv. 9 and 10] we have two words which cover the whole Christian life—'serve' and 'wait.'"²

"This appeal well illustrates the doctrinal teaching of this Epistle. It is thus, 'Live a holy life, that you may be prepared to meet your Lord.'"³

"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."⁴

"The outlook of the Christian is always to be the second advent of our Lord. If you are trying to find out when it will be, you are not looking for it. It is a great mistake, a persistent peril. We are not intended to know. We are intended to live ready always in the light of the second advent [cf. Matt. 25:1-30]."⁵

¹René Pache, *The Return of Jesus Christ*, p. 39.

²Ironside, p. 18.

³Lightfoot, p. 16.

⁴Wanamaker, p. 87.

⁵G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 356.

"Believers live anticipating a coronation (2 Tim 4:8) rather than a condemnation."¹

When Paul spoke of "the wrath to come" did he have in mind the general outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers in eternal damnation? Or did he mean a specific instance of God outpouring His wrath at a particular time in history yet future?

"Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness."²

The commentators, regardless of their eschatological persuasions, take both positions on this question. For example, some amillennialists believe that Paul was speaking generally of eternal condemnation.³ However other amillennialists believe that Paul referred to a specific event, namely, the judgment associated with the Second Coming of Christ.⁴ In the amillennial scheme of things this judgment will end the present age. Premillennialists also disagree with one another on this point. Some take Paul's words as a general reference to coming judgment.⁵ Others believe that Paul had in mind the Tribulation, which for a pretribulationist is the coming great outpouring of God's wrath on the entire earth.⁶

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 (cf. Col. 3:6). There is no specific reference to a particular judgment here. However later he spent considerable space writing about

¹Martin, p. 66.

²John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:35.

³E.g., William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 57.

⁴E.g., Morris, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 40-41, and idem, *The First ...*, p. 64.

⁵E.g., J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:81; Walvoord, p. 17; and David A. Hubbard, "The First Epistle to the Thessalonians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1350, who was a premillennial posttribulationist.

⁶E.g., D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 71; Paul D. Feinberg, "The Case for the Pretribulation Position," in *Three Views of the Rapture*, pp. 50-63; Robert N. Wilkin, "The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:932; Mal Couch, "The Forgotten Rapture Passages: 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 and 5:1-11," in *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 310-25.

the outpouring of God's wrath in the Tribulation (4:13-18; 5:1-11). Therefore it seems to me that this is the first reference to that outpouring of wrath in the epistle (cf. 2:16; 5:9). The biblical revelation about the relationship of church saints to the wrath of God strongly implies a pretribulation rapture of the church.¹

"... 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."²

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

"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)."³

The Greek preposition *ek*, translated "from," can mean either away from or out from (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 that Paul intended here.⁴

¹See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 192-222; and Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, pp. 25-50.

²James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 89.

³Thomas, p. 248.

⁴See 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? Pretribulationists say that He will do so by taking Christians to heaven before the Tribulation begins.¹ Midtribulationists say that Christians will enter the Tribulation, but God will take us to heaven before the outpouring of His wrath that will occur, they say, only during the second half of the Tribulation.² Posttribulationists believe that Christians will go through the entire Tribulation and that God will protect us from the outpouring of His wrath during that time.³ 1 Thessalonians 1:10 does not state exactly how God will deliver us away from His wrath when He pours it out in the Tribulation. But other passages in 1 Thessalonians 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 coming (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."⁴

"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)."⁵

"In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 the Thessalonian believers are pictured as waiting for the return of

¹John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 72; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 193-218.

²Gleason L. Archer Jr., "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position," in *Three views on the Rapture*, pp. 139-45; Harold John Ockenga, "Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation? Yes," *Christian Life* (February 1955), pp. 22, 66. See Pentecost, pp. 179-92.

³George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 121-22; J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, p. 143; Arthur D. Katterjohn, *The Tribulation People*, p. 98; William R. Kimball, *The Rapture: A Question of Timing*, p. 70; and Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 226. See Pentecost, pp. 164-78.

⁴James Denney, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 59.

⁵Bruce, p. 19.

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."¹

The word "imminent" means likely, not certain, to happen without delay, namely, impending. We sometimes hear in the news that a terrorist attack is imminent. That means that it *could* happen very soon, not that it *will* happen soon. Other passages that teach the imminence of the Lord's return include 1 Corinthians 1:7; 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; 1 John 2:28; and Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20.² Job was correct when he said, "The day of reckoning is no secret to the Almighty, though those who know him have not hint of its date" (Job 24:1 NEB).³

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

"We are sometimes told that occupation with the second coming of the Lord has a tendency to throttle Christian activities. People become dreamers, become taken up with prophetic questions, and they are interested no longer in living for God or seeking to win others for Christ. Frankly, my own experience teaches me the

¹Hiebert, 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.

²See Earl D. Radmacher, "The Imminent Return of the Lord," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 247-67; and Showers, pp. 127-53.

³NEB refers to *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*.

⁴Marshall, p. 58.

contrary to be true. The more this blessed truth grips the soul, the more one would be concerned not only about serving God by also winning others to Christ."¹

B. REMINDERS FOR THE THESSALONIANS 2:1-16

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

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

Paul proceeded to rehearse the events of his ministry among his readers by summarizing his motivation and activities. He did so in order to strengthen their confidence in him in view of certain questions that may have arisen in their minds and any accusations that his critics may have directed against him (cf. Gal. 1:11—2:21; 2 Cor. 4:1-6). This section provides the modern reader with many specific characteristics of God-approved ministry.

2:1-2 Paul appealed to his readers to remember that his preaching had yielded positive results (cf. 1:9). "Was not in vain" is a litotes, a figure of speech that states something negatively but intends it positively. Paul's point was that his ministry had borne fruit in the Thessalonians' lives. He had come to them just having been persecuted for preaching in Philippi (Acts 16:19-40), and he had received the same treatment in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9). Nevertheless he continued preaching boldly even though his message was not popular and resulted in public abuse. *Parresia*, "boldness," is the opposite of *kolakeia*, flattery (v. 5). Paul's was not the reaction of a person who seeks personal recognition or money. Such a person would move on quickly to a more friendly and profitable audience.

2:3-4 Paul claimed that his message was true, his motives were pure, and his methods were straightforward. He and his companions

¹Ironside, p. 19.

had behaved in Thessalonica as they had elsewhere: as faithful servants of God. They did not preach for the approval of people but for the approval of God, who scrutinizes motives. When Paul wrote "we," he customarily meant himself and his companions.¹

"Few temptations assail the preacher more strongly than this one to please men, even if God is not pleased, though with the dim hope that God will after all condone or overlook. Nothing but experience will convince some preachers how fickle is popular favour and how often it is at the cost of failure to please God."²

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

"... what the Apostles [i.e., Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy; v. 1] disclaim is the *desire* of popularity."³

"Flattery was a well-known and much despised practice in the ancient world."⁴

Paul also denied that he had 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 that God could ("God is our witness"). Itinerant philosophers and orators were common in the Roman Empire. Paul had little in common with their motivation ("honor from people"). He had come to Thessalonica to give, not to get. Furthermore Paul had not demanded that the Thessalonians submit to his message on the basis of his apostolic authority.

¹Lightfoot, pp. 22-23.

²Robertson, 4:17.

³Milligan, p. 20.

⁴Wanamaker, 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 Paul and his companions had been "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."¹

Paul and his fellow missionaries had given themselves, not just their message, to the Thessalonians out of love for them ("you had become very dear to us"), not for personal gain. In this respect Paul followed the tradition of Jewish rabbis for whom receiving money for teaching the Law was considered shameful.² The measure of his love was the toil and trouble that he expended as he worked constantly ("night and day"), probably making tents and other leather articles, so that he would not be a burden to them. Paul was by trade a leather-worker (acts 18:3).³ This is how he and his companions had heralded the gospel among the Thessalonians (cf. Phil. 4:16; 2 Cor. 11:7-11).

"Have you ever heard of a mother's union which insisted a mother would work only for eight hours of the day? Have you known any mothers who punch the clock and then turn away from their crying babies because they refuse to work anymore? Maybe some mothers will work out some kind of union agreement like that, but I don't think *real* mothers would want it. Mothers work a little differently—night and day."⁴

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 40; idem, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:165.

²Morris, *The First ...*, pp. 80-81.

³R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*, p. 21.

⁴McGee, 5:382.

"This is the secret of Paul's success—the continual and selfless giving of his all to people whom he loved dearly."¹

"A gospel messenger who stands detached from his audience has not yet been touched by the very gospel he proclaims."²

2:10-12 Paul called on his readers to bear witness, like God could, how he had cared for them: "devoutly" toward God, "rightly" towards others, and "blamelessly" toward himself—his conscience being clear.³ He had done so like "a father" who has the responsibility to prepare his children for the events that lie ahead of them. The figure of the "nursing mother" (v. 7) emphasizes tender loving self-sacrifice, and that of the "father" (v. 11) preparation for maturity. The Old Testament used both the paternal and maternal figures to describe God (cf. Ps. 103:13; Isa. 66:13). However Jesus taught His disciples to think of God primarily as their Father (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2).

What "kingdom" did Paul have in mind? The words "kingdom" and "glory," joined as they are by "and," probably indicates a hendiadys. This is a figure of speech that can be translated "glorious kingdom." The kingdom in view may be the kingdom that Christians enter when they place their faith in Christ (Col. 1:13). Or Paul may have meant the future earthly millennial kingdom of Christ.

"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

¹Ryrie, *First and ...*, p. 38.

²Martin, p. 81. Cf. Mal. 2:6-8.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 1332.

are pointed to the bliss ahead as incentive to godly living now."¹

"The language here is similar to other passages where believers are said to be called unto (*eis*) things not yet realized in Christian experience. Compare I Peter 5:10—'God ... hath called us unto his eternal glory.'"²

"There is an idea prevalent in some modern circles that we should work to establish the kingdom of God on earth. That is a noble ideal, but it is not the Biblical idea of the [earthly] kingdom. In the Scriptures it is clear that God and no other establishes the [earthly] kingdom."³

"The Christian minister is expected to give practical instruction to his fellow Christians, but not by way of dictation. Since he cannot rule by decree if he is to be true to the spirit of Christ, he must guide by example."⁴

Note 20 characteristics of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians in chapter 2 so far: He was bold in spite of opposition (v. 2), accurate with his message (v. 3), pure in his motives (v. 3), honest in his methods (v. 3), not a man-pleaser (v. 4), but a God-pleaser (v. 4), truthful (v. 5), not greedy (v. 5), not egotistical (v. 6), not authoritarian (v. 6), gentle (v. 7), unselfish (v. 7), affectionate (v. 8), transparent (v. 8), hardworking (v. 9), devoted to God (v. 10), upright toward others (v. 10), blameless in his own eyes (v. 10), earnest in his instruction (v. 11), and purposeful in his objective (v. 12). As such he is a model for all who deliver the gospel.

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

Paul reminded his readers of how they had welcomed the gospel message in order to vindicate further his own ministry and to emphasize the importance of proclaiming this message. He did this so that the

¹Thomas, p. 255. Cf. Marshall, p. 75; McGee, 5:383.

²Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 436.

³Morris, *The First ...*, p. 85.

⁴Bruce, p. 39.

Thessalonians would continue to herald it abroad as they had been doing. This section gives an example of how we today should respond to the Word of God when we hear it.

"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."¹

2:13 Previously Paul thanked God for the way that these believers were bearing the fruit of righteousness in their own lives (1:2-3). Now he thanked God for the way that they had 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 performed a mighty work of transformation in their lives as God's Holy Spirit had used it.

2:14 Paul had previously compared himself to the Thessalonians' spiritual mother (vv. 7-9) and father (vv. 10-13). Now he spoke to them as one of their siblings (cf. v. 17).

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 (cf. 1:6). The reference to "the Jews" here is probably to the unbelieving Jews who opposed the Christians in Thessalonica rather than a general reference to all Jews.

"... this is the only passage in the Pauline writings in which the designation 'the Jews' is used in direct contrast to Christian believers in the sense which St John afterwards made so familiar in his Gospel (i. 19, ii. 18 &c.)."²

"Persecution inevitably arises from the outside when a Christian patterns his life after the Lord."³

¹Martin, pp. 85-86. See also Wanamaker's discussion of this digression, pp. 109-10.

²Milligan, p. 30.

³Thomas, p. 258.

The concept of being "in Christ," which appears over 160 times in Paul's writings, was one of the most dominant themes in Paul's thinking and theology, if not the most dominant.¹

2:15-16 The Thessalonian believers' opponents seem to have been mainly Jews (v. 14; cf. Acts 17:5). 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" (an understatement), and they were not in the best interests of all men, who needed to hear the gospel.

This is the only place in his inspired writings where Paul charged the Jews with the death of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). Elsewhere in the New Testament it is the sins of all people that were responsible. Therefore Paul was just identifying a segment of humanity that was responsible. He was not blaming the Jews in some special sense for Jesus' death.² 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).

By their opposition these enemies of the gospel added more wrongdoings on their own heads with the result that they hastened God's judgment of them (cf. Gen. 15:16). God had already, in advance, focused His wrath on them for their serious sin (cf. 1:10).³ They not only rejected the gospel themselves, but they also discouraged others from accepting it.

"The worst feature of unbelief is not its own damnation but its effort to frustrate the salvation of others."⁴

¹See James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*.

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

³Cf. Milligan, p. 32.

⁴Lenski, p. 267.

It was only a matter of time before God would pour out His wrath in judgment on these enemies of the gospel.¹ This may refer to the eternal judgment that will come on all unbelievers (John 3:36). Or it may refer to the present spiritual blindness with which God has judged the Jews as a whole because of their rejection of Christ (Rom. 11:25). Or it could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which was not far off. In view of the eschatological emphasis of the letter, Paul may have been alluding to the judgment coming on Jewish unbelievers during the Tribulation, "the time of Jacob's distress" (Jer. 30:7).² We should probably understand "fully" (lit. to the end, Gr. *telos*) in a temporal sense.³

Why did Paul describe this outpouring of divine wrath as past ("has come," aorist tense *ephthasen*) if it was future? Jesus spoke of the arrival of His kingdom in comparable terminology (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). The verb connotes "arrival upon the threshold of fulfilment [*sic*] and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience."⁴ The messianic kingdom was present in Jesus' day because the King had arrived. But the earthly aspect of His reign did not begin then because the Jews rejected Him. Likewise God's wrath had come on the Jews fully in Paul's day for their rejection of Messiah, but they had not yet entered into the full realization of His wrath.

"This indictment implies that Paul saw a continuity in the pattern of Jewish rejection of God's agents from OT times to his own."⁵

"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

¹See Marshall, pp. 81-83; Frame, p. 114.

²Wilkin, 2:935.

³Ernest 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.

⁴Kenneth W. Clark, "Realized Eschatology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940):379.

⁵Wanamaker, p. 115.

'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)."¹

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

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

1. Desire to see them again 2:17—3:5

In this pericope (section of text) Paul expressed his sincere desire to return to Thessalonica. He did so in order to help his readers appreciate how much they meant to him and to encourage them to reject any suggestion that his interest in them was selfish.

Paul's plan 2:17-20

"First Thessalonians has been called 'a classic of friendship,' and here is a passage where Paul's deep affection for his friends breathes through his words."²

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 "orphaned." He felt torn from them. 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 these believers again. He had attempted

¹Bruce, pp. 50-51.

²Barclay, p. 224.

such a visit "more than once." But "Satan," the adversary who had interfered and had made the apostle's ministry in person impossible for the present, had "hindered" him. The Greek word *enkopto* ("hindered," lit. cut into) was used originally of breaking up a road to make it impassable. But it later came to mean hinder generally (cf. Acts 24:4; Rom. 15:22; Gal. 5:7; 1 Pet. 3:7).¹

"... Paul ... found his unbounded capacity for paternal affection amply employed in his relationship with his converts."²

In Acts 16:6-7 Luke wrote that "the Holy Spirit" forbade Paul to preach in Asia and Bithynia. Here Paul said that "Satan" hindered his efforts to return to Thessalonica. So how can we tell if Satan is opposing us or if the Spirit is directing us? It seems to me that the New Testament writers viewed God's sovereign control of all things on different levels at different times. Sometimes, as in Acts, they spoke of the One who is in ultimate control and thus focused on His direction. At other times, like 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 plan. In Acts the emphasis is on the One responsible for the expansion of the church, but here the emphasis is on the instrument that God permitted to oppose it. Satan can only oppose servants of the Lord as God gives him permission to do so (Job 1—2).³

"*We* cannot, in each case, define whence hindrances in good undertakings arise; *Paul* in this case, by inspiration, was enabled to say; the hindrance was from Satan."⁴

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

¹Milligan, p. 34.

²Bruce, p. 54.

³See *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴Jamieson, et al., p. 1334.

what he rejoiced in, and their ultimate victory would be "a crown of pride" for him. The Lord's commendation for Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians would, on the one hand, be like a crown that would make him justifiably proud when the Lord gave it to him. But it was the Thessalonians themselves that seem to be the crown in view.¹ Paul was talking like a father again (cf. v. 11). Looking at the end of his ministry Paul said that he would take the greatest pride in these believers. They would be his crowning glory.

BELIEVERS' CROWNS		
Title	Reason	Reference
An imperishable crown	For leading a disciplined life	1 Cor. 9:25
A crown of pride	For evangelism and discipleship	1 Thess. 2:19
A crown of righteousness	For loving the Lord's appearing	2 Tim. 4:8
A crown of life	For enduring trials	James 1:12; Rev. 2:10
A crown of glory	For shepherding God's flock faithfully	1 Pet. 5:4

"The glory of any teacher lies in his scholars and students; and should the day come when they have left him far behind the glory is still greater. A man's greatest glory lies in those whom he has set or helped on the path to Christ."²

"The future event Paul is looking toward is identical with the appearance of every Christian

¹Marshall, p. 87.

²Barclay, p. 225.

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."¹

"*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."²

"... 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."³

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

How could Christ's return at the Rapture be imminent in view of the Lord's statement that Peter would grow old (John 21:18) and His promise to Paul that he would visit Rome (Acts 23:11)? Concerning God's promise to Peter, "when you grow old" (John 21:18) is a very general description of what lay

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

²Thomas, p. 262.

³Wanamaker, p. 125.

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 that something will happen, but we mean, but do not always say, unless the Lord comes first.

Timothy's visit 3:1-5

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

Paul may have chosen to send Timothy, rather than to return personally, for any number of reasons. Timothy was the junior member of the missionary team, and Paul and Silvanus were the senior members. Timothy had a Greek father and probably looked somewhat Greek. He would, therefore, have attracted no special interest in a Greek city, whereas Paul was immediately recognizable as a Jew (cf. Acts 16:20).¹

3:3-5 Often new believers, and even older believers, interpret difficulty as a sign that they need to change something. Paul 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; 2 Tim. 3:12; et al.), just as he had previously taught them. Had

¹Bruce, p. 64.

the Thessalonians fallen before this temptation to become "disturbed," they would have been in danger of becoming like rocky soil in which the seed of the gospel does not root firmly. Thus the apostles' labor that they had expended on them would have been in vain. It would be in vain in the sense that it would not have resulted in substantial growth and fruit.

"If a person knows that something unpleasant is part of his destiny, something that is inevitable, then he will brace himself to meet it and will not think that it is a sign that he is on the wrong track or being taken by surprise by it."¹

"*Trouble* is the acid that tests the genuineness of the coin of belief."²

"The Christian pastor needs to have a real concern for his flock lest they should fall away from the faith, even though he also trusts firmly in the gracious power of God to keep them faithful to himself."³

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 his readers in order to encourage them to persevere in spite of their continuing afflictions.

Timothy's report 3:6-10

3:6-7 By the time that Paul wrote this epistle Timothy had rejoined him in Corinth (vv. 1-2; cf. Acts 18:1). He brought good news that the Thessalonians were holding up well against the winds of persecution. This is the only place in the New Testament where the word *euangelion* (gospel, "good news") is used of any good news other than that of Christ's saving work.⁴ The

¹Marshall, p. 92.

²McGee, 5:388.

³Marshall, pp. 93-94.

⁴Morris, *The Epistles ...*, p. 65.

Thessalonians continued to trust in God and to love others. They also remembered Paul fondly and desired 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 problems that he faced.

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.

"When we are most cheerful we should be most thankful."¹

The Greek word *steko* ("stand firm") is a frequently recurring call for continued perseverance in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 1:24; Gal. 5:1; Eph. 6:11, 13, 14; Phil. 1:27; 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:15; 1 Pet. 5:12).

"Though at death's door constantly (Rom. 8:36; 1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 6:9; 11:23), he [Paul] feels that he has a new lease of life ... if their faith stands unwavering in virtue of the indwelling power of Christ (Phil. 4:1), notwithstanding their persecutions (cf. 2 [Thess.] 1:4) and the beguilement of the Jews."²

Paul kept praying earnestly, "night and day," that God would give him the opportunity to return to Thessalonica. He desired to see the Thessalonians face to face so that he could minister to the continuing needs of his spiritual children and complete what was lacking in their faith.

"Answered petitions produce still more earnest petitions."³

These Christians were doing well, but they needed to grow more. They were only baby Christians at this time and lacked maturity. Paul prayed that he might return to the

¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1879.

²Frame, p. 133.

³Lenski, p. 293.

Thessalonians so that he could equip them to become more completely mature believers.¹

"The prayer thus serves as a reminder to the Thessalonians of their need for further spiritual growth and prepares them for the remaining part of the letter."²

"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."³

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 through 3 with the parenetic material in chapters 4 through 5.⁴ Parenesis consists of exhortations to continue that are based on previous lessons learned and previous commitments made. Paul concluded several sections of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians with prayers (cf. 5:23; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2:16; 3:5, 16).

"... the whole point of the passage requires that Christ should be regarded as the sole author of the spiritual advancement of the Thessalonians."⁵

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

"It is characteristic of Paul's letters that he frequently slips into some short prayer."⁶

¹See Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 31.

²Marshall, p. 99.

³Wanamaker, p. 139.

⁴Martin, pp. 110-11.

⁵Lightfoot, p. 49.

⁶Morris, *The First ...*, p. 110.

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

"We often wonder why the Christian life is so difficult to live, especially in the ordinary everyday relationships of life. The answer may very well be that we are trying to live it by ourselves. The man who goes out in the morning without prayer is, in effect, saying, 'I can quite well tackle to-day myself.' ... John Buchan once described an atheist as 'a man who has no invisible means of support.'"¹

3:12-13 Paul also prayed that the Lord would cause the Thessalonians' 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 that God would strengthen them spiritually in "holiness" to be free from any reasonable criticism whenever Christ might return. Their "hearts" were what we might refer to as personalities today. The Greek word, *kardia*, (heart) "refers to the thinking, willing, and feeling dimensions of human existence."² Again, Paul anticipated the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2:19; 5:23).

"As Paul describes his prayers for the Thessalonian believers' maturity, he talks about the overflowing love he hopes they will show. We can apply this in four ways: L-O-V-E. When I think of *L*, I remember that to be a part of someone's life, I have to *listen*. I must respect them, accept them, and be gracious enough to hear what they have to say. *O* stands for *overlook*. When I listen

¹Barclay, p. 229.

²Wanamaker, p. 144. Cf. 2:4.

to people, I should overlook their flaws so that I can affirm them in other ways. Most of us are already well aware of our flaws. *V* stands for *value*. When two people value each other, it affects the way they think about and communicate criticisms or problems. There's a mutual respect. Finally, *E* reminds us to *express* our love. Love is demonstrative. It's a verb. Love is something we do."¹

As mentioned earlier (cf. 2:19), "coming" (Gr. *parousia*) is a term that Paul sometimes used to describe a person's extended visit (cf. 1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:12), not just his or her arrival for that visit. Consequently it may refer to the actual arrival of Christ or what will follow that arrival. The context determines whether the "coming" itself, or what will follow it, is in view.² 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 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). Is the "coming" in view here the Rapture or the Second Coming? In view of how Paul proceeded to describe this coming further, in 4:13-18, it appears to be the Rapture.

"According to Scripture, Christians are going to meet Christ in the air. We are going to be present with Him at that moment. After we meet Him in the air, He will take us home to glory to be in the presence of the Father and the holy angels. After that we are coming back to the earth with Christ. ... When the dead in Christ and living Christians are caught up to be with the Lord and arrive in heaven as the trophies of grace, the marvels of God's resurrection power, they will be presented as a spotless bride, as a holy people, as those who are the workmanship of Christ. At the coming of Christ with all His saints to heaven, we will be

¹Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 1509.

²See Thomas, pp. 268-69.

'unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father.'"¹

The "saints" (lit. holy ones) who will accompany Christ at the Rapture will be all other Christians who have previously died (cf. 4:14; 2 Thess. 1:10), and perhaps angels (cf. Mark 8:38).² These saints will probably not be only "those who, throughout the ages, have lived the life of Christian separation from the world and of devotion to God [in other words, only faithful believers]."³

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

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

A. CHRISTIAN LIVING 4:1-12

Paul used the opportunity that this epistle afforded him to give his readers basic instruction concerning Christian living. He did this in order 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 (4:1—5:24), introduced by "Finally," Paul urged his readers to continue walking (behaving day by day) as the missionaries had instructed them (cf. Gal. 5:25).

¹Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, pp. 33-34.

²See Milligan, p. 45.

³Hendriksen, p. 93.

"... there is evidence that the word ["Finally"] (Gk. *loipon*) was used in Hellenistic Greek simply as a transitional particle with the meaning 'therefore', to introduce practical instruction ..."¹

The Thessalonian Christians needed to excel even more than they had been excelling.

"We must not only persevere to the end, but we should grow better."²

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

"When a man is saved by the work of Christ for him it does not lie open before him as a matter for his completely free decision whether he will serve God or not. He has been bought with a price (I Cor. 6:20). He has become the slave of Christ. Christian service is not an optional extra for those who like that kind of thing. It is a compelling obligation which lies upon each one of the redeemed."³

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

"The one question for all followers of the Lord Jesus is: 'How must we walk and please God?'"⁴

2. Sexual purity 4:3-8

This section opens and closes with explicit references to the will of God (cf. 5:18).

¹Marshall, p. 104.

²Henry, p. 1879.

³Morris, *The First ...*, pp. 118-19.

⁴Lenski, p. 303.

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.

"Just what does it mean to be sanctified? Suppose one were living in the time of Christ and wanted to make a gift to the temple. He would bring his gift of gold coins and lay them on the altar. What happened to those gold coins? The moment they were given to God they became sanctified. They were set apart for holy use. The sanctification did not change the character of the gold coins, but it did change their use and the purpose for which they were directed. So, every true Christian has been set apart as holy to God, even though he falls short of perfection."¹

Negatively, sanctification involves abstinence (self-denial) from all kinds of sexual behavior that are outside the prescribed will of God including adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, and other forms of sexual conduct that are contrary to nature. Rather than participating in these acts, the believer should learn how to control his or her body (cf. 2 Tim. 2:21) and its passions in sanctification and with honor.² We should not behave lustfully like the Gentiles who do not have special revelation of God and His will and therefore do not know God. The Greeks practiced sexual immorality commonly and even incorporated it into their religious practices.

"Pagan religion did not demand sexual purity of its devotees, the gods and goddesses being grossly immoral. Priestesses were in the temples for the service of the men who came."³

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

¹Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, pp. 34-35.

²See Milligan, p. 49.

³Robertson, 4:28.

guardianship of our homes.' So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame whatsoever in extra-marital relationships."¹

"Chastity is not the whole of sanctification, but it is an important element in it ..."²

Another less probable interpretation of "possess his own vessel" (v. 4), sees the vessel as the wife of the addressee (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7).³ This view takes *ktasthai* ("possess") as meaning acquire, which is its normal meaning, and *skeuos* ("vessel") as wife. The use of *skeuos*, "vessel," to describe one's body is more common in Greek writings, and its use to describe a woman or wife is more common in Jewish writings. Elsewhere Paul never used *skeuos* to describe a wife, but he used *gune* ("woman").⁴ He used *skeuos* of one's own body elsewhere (Rom. 9:22-23; 2 Cor. 4:7; cf. 1 Sam. 21:5).

"A great and a genuine sanctification, you must know, is the slowest work in all the world."⁵

4:6 Sexual immorality, which is "the matter" in view,⁶ is wrong, not only because it transgresses the will of God, but because it injures and defrauds the sexual partner. It brings God's judgment down on two people, not just one, and it defrauds the partner of God's blessing. Paul possibly had the Lord's future judgment of believers in view here rather than His present discipline (cf. 2:19; 3:13; 1 Cor. 3:10-17). God does not always punish the sexually immoral in this life, but He will avenge the right of the person violated eventually.

4:7 The general principle that the Thessalonians were to keep in mind was that God's purpose for all Christians is not "impurity"

¹Barclay, p. 231.

²Bruce, p. 82.

³Frame, p. 149; James Moffatt, "The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 4:34; Lenski, p. 310; Jamieson, et al., p. 1335; Thomas, p. 271.

⁴Martin, p. 125.

⁵Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters*, 2:334.

⁶Milligan, p. 50.

but purity. It is a life set apart from sin unto holiness ("sanctification"; cf. Eph. 2:10).

4:8 To reject these exhortations amounted to rejecting God, not just the Apostle Paul. Lest someone think that this standard is impossibly high, Paul reminded his readers that God has given His Holy Spirit to all believers to enable them to live holy lives (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."¹

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 a strong reminder from Paul concerning their sexual behavior (v. 6). But God Himself had taught them by His Spirit to love one another (cf. Gal. 5:22).

4:10 Paul's words were essentially encouragements to maintain and to extend the loving behavior that they had learned and had manifested already. The Greek text has only one command, "we urge," an object, "you," followed by four infinitives (vv. 10b, 11), and a final clause that gives the intended outcome (v. 12). Paul's readers were already demonstrating love for their Christian brothers and sisters by reaching out to other needy believers who lived in their province of Macedonia. We know from 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 that they responded to Paul's charge to "excel even more" and to reach out still farther.

¹Wanamaker, pp. 158-59.

"Christianity sprang up in a land and culture where clan ties were strong and society was more corporate than individualistic. Not so the Greco-Roman culture; hence, Paul's constant emphasis on love."¹

4:11 Three aspects of behavior demonstrate love for others: First, a person who leads a restful "quiet life," rather than a restless frantic one, avoids disturbing the lives of others. He himself or she herself also enjoys life more. Second, a person who tends to his or her "own business" does not meddle in the affairs of others. Third, a person who works to provide for his or her own needs, and the needs of his or her family, does not put a burden on others to support them. Greek culture degraded manual labor, but Christianity, as well as Judaism, viewed it as an honorable pursuit (cf. Eph. 4:28; Col. 3:17).²

"... 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."³

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

¹Hubbard, p. 1354.

²Thomas, p. 274.

³Martin, p. 138.

hope of his readers (cf. their faith in 2:1—3:13, and their love in 4:1-12). He did this in order to explain that those of their number who had died, or would die in Christ, would share in His glory with those who were living when He returned. This pericope deals with how their dead brethren were connected to Christ's return.

"The restlessness which agitated the Church of Thessalonica, and led to a neglect of the occupations of daily life, was doubtless due to their feverish anticipations of the immediate coming of Christ ..."¹

"It would seem that some, at least, of the Thessalonians had understood him [Paul] to say that all who believed would see the Parousia; but now some believers had died and they had begun to wonder about them."²

The time of the Rapture has been a matter of disagreement among conservative interpreters because there is no passage in Scripture that states explicitly when it will occur. Some believe that 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 but not all of them (partial-rapturists).³ What does 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 reveal about the time of the Rapture? How do advocates of the various schools of interpretation cited interpret these verses? First Thessalonians 4 and 5 are "probably the most important passages dealing with the Rapture."⁴ Other key New Testament passages that deal with the Rapture are John 14:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.

I believe that it is fair to say that more pretribulationists base their belief that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 than on any other one passage of Scripture. This passage also contains more detail about the Rapture than any other one. Thus it is very significant. All conservative interpreters agree that the translation of living Christians and the resurrection of dead Christians will take place at the

¹Lightfoot, p. 62.

²Morris, *The Epistles ...*, p. 83.

³See Walvoord, *The Rapture ...*, pp. 105-25; Pentecost, pp. 156-63.

⁴John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 94. See also idem, "1 Thessalonians 4: A Central Rapture Passage," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 251-59.

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 for a Christian to be uninformed about the future is not good, even though some believers today say that eschatology (the study of future things) is unimportant. Those who are "asleep" are the dead in Christ (cf. v. 16; Mark 5:39; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30). The word cemetery, from *koimeterion*, comes from the word used here, *koimao*, and it means: a place of sleep. The ancients commonly used sleep as a euphemism for death (e.g., Gen. 47:30; Deut. 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; 22:40).¹ However this figure is particularly appropriate in view of the fact that God will resurrect everyone at some time in the future (cf. Dan. 12:2 for the figure of those who are asleep in death awakening to life).

"The object of the metaphor is to suggest that as the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist despite his absence from the region in which those who remain can communicate with him, and that, as sleep is known to be temporary, so the death of the body will be found to be. Sleep has its waking, death will have its resurrection."²

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

"Aeschylus wrote, 'Once a man dies there is no resurrection.' Theocritus wrote, 'There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.' Catullus wrote, 'When once our

¹Bruce, p. 95; Martin, p. 143; Wanamaker, p. 167.

²C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, p. 128.

brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep."¹

"The risen Lord robbed death of its sting and horror for the believer and has transformed it into sleep for those in Christ."²

Pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the Thessalonian believers were grieving for two reasons: (1) They grieved because their loved ones had died and (2) because they thought the resurrection of dead Christians would take place after the Rapture. These were legitimate reasons for grieving.

Pretribulationists believe the Thessalonians also erroneously thought that this resurrection would follow the Tribulation. Some posttribulationists believe that the Thessalonians incorrectly thought that this resurrection would take place at the end of the Millennium.³ Both of these beliefs were erroneous.

The Thessalonians' erroneous thinking rested on an incorrect interpretation of other information that indicates 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. 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.⁴

Another major passage that deals with what happens to Christians when we die is 1 Corinthians 15:51-53. There the revelation concerns the translation of the living saints, but

¹Barclay, p. 235.

²Hiebert, p. 188. Cf. Phil. 1:23.

³E.g., Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 101.

⁴Wanamaker, 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.

here in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 the revelation concerns the resurrection of dead saints.

4:14 We could translate "If" as Since. The Greek word introduces a first class condition, which in this case is a condition that is true to reality. Christ *did* rise from the dead. The death and resurrection of Christ are among the best attested facts of history.¹ 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.

"In other words, the precious truth concerning the coming of Christ for His own is as certain as the central doctrine of the death and resurrection of Christ."²

Paul here told his readers that God will bring the Christians who have died back with Jesus when He returns for the saints who are still living on the earth. The Greek preposition *dia* before "Jesus" means "through." Paul may have meant that when a Christian dies, his hope of being in God's presence is made possible because of the person and work of Jesus. Or he could have meant that those whom God will bring with Jesus will return because of the person and work of Jesus. Both things are true. Therefore the point of verse 14 is not that only Christians (believers living between Pentecost and the Rapture) will be resurrected—though that is taught in verse 16—but that the spirits of believers who have died will accompany Jesus when He returns and catches up living believers.

Pretribulationists identify this return of Christ with the Rapture, which, we believe, will occur before the Tribulation. Posttribulationists contend that this return of Christ (the

¹See Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, chs. 8-10.

²Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 40.

Rapture) will occur at the end of the Tribulation just before the Second Coming of Christ.¹

4:15 Paul further stressed the truthfulness of his teaching (cf. v. 14a) by explaining that it was a revelation from the Lord, not just his personal opinion (cf. "Thus says the LORD"). "This" information could have been an otherwise unrecorded saying of Christ (cf. Acts 20:35), or it could have come to Paul by direct revelation (cf. Acts 16:6; 18:9; 1 Cor. 2:10; 2 Cor. 12:1-4; Gal. 1:12, 16; Eph. 3:3).²

Paul expected to be in the company of the living when Christ returned (cf. Phil. 4:5; Titus 2:13).³ He believed in an imminent Rapture, namely, one preceding the Tribulation. Even some amillennialists acknowledge this.⁴ (Amillennialists and postmillennialists are typically also posttribulationists, though not all posttribulationists are amillennialists or postmillennialists. Some posttribulationists are premillennialists.) There is not one passage or verse that tells Christians to look for something to happen before the Rapture.⁵ It is the next event on God's revealed timetable of things to come.

This "coming" (Gr. *parousia*, lit. appearing) of Christ is the same as His appearing in the clouds (cf. Acts 1:11). It is not His Second Coming, which will occur at the end of the Tribulation. That is a separate coming at which time He will remain on the earth, set up His earthly kingdom, and reign for 1,000 years (cf. Rev. 19:11-21). The differences in the descriptions of these comings present them as separate events (cf. Matt. 24:30-31 and 1 Thess. 4:15-17).⁶

¹E.g., George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 556.

²Milligan, p. 58.

³See Alford, 3:2:274; Lightfoot, pp. 65-67; Milligan, pp. 58-59; Frame, p. 172.

⁴E.g., Morris, *The First ...*, p. 136.

⁵John F. Walvoord, "The Rapture: The Next Event on God's Calendar," in *The Road to Armageddon*, p. 30.

⁶See P. D. Feinberg, "The Case ...," pp. 80-86; Mal Couch, "Major Rapture Terms and Passages," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 25-56.

Some posttribulationists have asserted that "the word of the Lord" referred to in this verse is what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:30-31; Luke 17:34-35). That was His revelation concerning His Second Coming, which they believe will follow the Rapture immediately.¹ Pretribulationists, on the other hand, believe that this "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 that Jesus gave Paul that the Gospels do not record, as do some posttribulationists.² In short, we cannot identify "the word of the Lord" conclusively with Jesus' teaching concerning His Second Coming that is recorded in the Gospels.

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

The fact that the living will have no advantage over the dead when Christ returns shows that excessive sorrow for dead Christians, beyond the sorrow that is appropriate in view of their dying, is unjustified.

"He [Paul] thus deliberately contradicts a view which was current in Judaism that those who were alive at the end of the world would fare better than the dead (Dan. 12:12; Ps. Sol. 17:50; 2 Esd. 13:24)."³

4:16 A supernatural announcement will precede the Lord Jesus' return for His own. God will announce the event from heaven with a shout of command (cf. John 11:43), with an angelic voice, and with a trumpet blast. Probably believers at least will

¹E.g., J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, p. 68; and Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 140, cf. pp. 267-68.

²E.g., Ladd, *The Blessed ...*, pp. 72-73; and Gundry, p. 102.

³Marshall, p. 127.

hear these announcement calls, if not all people living on the earth. These may be three descriptions of one event.¹ Or they may be three separate events. Milligan believed that Paul chose these three announcements "with special reference to the awakening of those who were asleep."² Referring to the "shout," Ryrie wrote the following:

"It is a word of command used in classical Greek for the shout with which an officer gives the order to his troops or his crew. There is in the word a ring of authority and a note of urgency [cf. John 11:43]."³

It appears that these three events will take place literally (cf. Acts 1:9; 1 Cor. 15:52). However some interpreters believe that they will not (cf. Zech. 9:14). They believe that these three details simply describe the Lord's return using figures drawn from the Old Testament and other Jewish writings.⁴ In any case God will announce the return of Christ from heaven. Note that only the dead "in Christ" will experience resurrection, not Old Testament saints, as some believe.⁵ As Paul used the phrase "in Christ" it means Christians, members of the body of Christ, the church. God will reunite their resurrected glorified bodies with their spirits (1 Cor. 15:35-58).

"The resurrection of *all* men does not here come into view, if indeed it is ever taught by St Paul. ... All that the Apostles [Paul and his companions, 1:1] desire to emphasize, in answer to the Thessalonians' fears, is that the resurrection of 'the dead in Christ' will be the first act in the great drama at the Parousia, to be followed by the rapture of the 'living' saints ..."⁶

¹Milligan, p. 59.

²Ibid.

³Ryrie, *First and ...*, p. 65.

⁴E.g., Milligan, p. 60; Gaebelein, 4:1:112.

⁵E.g., *ibid.*

⁶Milligan, p. 60.

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

"... as the trumpet was used to convene God's people to their solemn convocations (Num. 10:2, 10; 31:6), so here to summon God's elect together, preparatory to their glorification with Christ (Ps. 50:1-5; Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52)."³

"Is this trump of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 the same as the seventh trump of the Revelation? What do the seven trumpets of Revelation do? Every one of them is a judgment of God upon a Christ-rejecting world. They assemble no one; they are not symbols of salvation; they are not symbols of deliverance; there are no resurrections, they are symbols of judgment upon men living in the world who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. By contrast, what is the significance of the trump of 1 Thessalonians 4? It is a call addressed to the saved, to those who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a trumpet of deliverance, of grace, and of mercy. God is dealing with His saints only in this trump and there is absolutely no connection with judgment upon unbelievers. The only similarity is that in both cases there are trumps."⁴

¹See Baxter, 6:219.

²See Showers, pp. 259-67.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 1337.

⁴Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 44. Paragraph division omitted.

4:17 After the Lord descends from heaven with a shout God will catch up the saints who are alive on the earth at that moment into the air, where Christ is, and unite them forever with Him.¹ The word in the Latin Vulgate translated "caught up" is *rapturo*, from which the term Rapture comes. In Greek it is *harpazo* (cf. Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2, 4; Rev. 12:5).

"It would appear from these other occurrences [*sic*] of the word that Paul had in mind being taken into heaven and not just into the mid-air to turn around suddenly and return to the earth."²

"The thought is that the 'raptured' saints will be carried up into 'air,' as the interspace between heaven and earth, where they will meet the descending Lord, and then either escort Him down to the earth in accordance with O.T. prophecy, or more probably in keeping with the general context accompany Him back to heaven."³

The Greek text says *en nephelais* (lit. in clouds), which has led some to conclude that Christians will be caught up in huge masses like clouds, not into the clouds above the earth.⁴ "In" is a legitimate translation of *en*, but *en* can also mean "on" or "with." Most commentators have connected these clouds with the cloud in which Jesus arose to heaven (Acts 1:9) and other clouds that veiled God's presence. They take them as atmospheric clouds rather than as clouds of human beings.

*"It was thus that the Lord Himself ascended; for in all things we are to be like Him—an important circumstance here. Whether transformed or raised from the dead, we shall all go up in the clouds."*⁵

¹See Zola Levitt, *A Christian Love Story*, on how this event corresponds to Jewish wedding customs.

²Ryrie, *First and ...*, p. 66.

³Milligan, p. 61.

⁴E.g., Ironside, p. 51.

⁵Darby, 5:101.

Living saints will experience translation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-53; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Phil. 3:20-21)—their bodies will become immortal—and saints who have died will experience resurrection with immortal bodies. Both kinds of Christians will "meet" (Gr. *apantesis*, cf. Matt. 25:6; Acts 28:15) in the air with Christ, with whom they will remain, never to experience separation from Him.¹

Since Christians will "always be with the Lord" from then on, we will therefore go with Christ to His Father's house in heaven (John 14:2-3), return to earth with Him at His Second Coming (Rev. 19:14), participate in His earthly millennial kingdom with Him (Rev. 20:6), and finally dwell with Him in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:3-4). Old Testament believers will evidently experience resurrection at the end of the Tribulation (Dan. 12:1-13; Isa. 26:13-19).² Probably Paul included himself in the living group because he believed that the Lord's return was imminent. He set an example of expectancy for the church for the entire Church Age.³

Why will God snatch Christians up into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air?⁴ Pretribulationists answer that we will go with Christ to heaven, where we will abide with Him in the place that He has prepared for us there (John 14:1-3). We will receive our rewards at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), and await our return with Him at His Second Coming (Rev. 19:14). Thus we will spend the seven-year Tribulation with the Lord in heaven, not on the earth.

Posttribulationists respond that Christ does not actually return to the earth in such a view. He has to change direction and return to heaven immediately. This seems unnatural to them. Pretribulationists say this is not unusual in view of what Jesus

¹See Kevin D. Zuber, "Metaphor & the Rapture," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond*, pp. 343-56, for discussion of *apantesis*.

²See John F. Walvoord, "The Resurrection of Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:493 (January-March 1967):3-15.

³Lightfoot, p. 67.

⁴See J. Gregory Sheryl, "Can the Date of Jesus' Return Be Known?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:673 (January-March 2012):20-32, for a review of date-setters through history.

said about His coming to take His bride, the church, to His Father's house (John 14:3).

Posttribulationists say that God will snatch Christians up to meet Christ in the air to join Him and then He and they will immediately return to the earth to set up His kingdom.¹ 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."²

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

"Those who meet the Lord in the air (the space between the earth and the heavens in Jewish cosmology) are caught up in a heavenly ascent by the clouds without any indication that they then return to earth."³

Most amillennialists, of course, do not believe that there will be an earthly messianic (millennial) reign for Christians or Christ to return to the earth to participate in. Barclay took this section as poetry, a seer's vision that the reader should not take literally.⁴

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

¹E.g., Ladd, *The Blessed ...*, p. 78; Marshall, p. 131.

²Thomas, p. 279. Cf. Milligan, p. 61.

³Wanamaker, p. 175.

⁴Barclay, p. 236.

the dead (vv. 14-17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52). However we disagree about which resurrection is in view.

Some posttribulationists identify this resurrection with one that will take place at Christ's Second Coming.¹ Some of them hold that this resurrection is "the first resurrection" referred to in Revelation 20:4-5, and that no resurrection will precede this one, specifically one before the Tribulation.²

However, pretribulationists point out that there has already been at least one other "first" resurrection, namely, Christ's resurrection. The resurrections of Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus were technically only resuscitations since these people died again.

Consequently "first" must not mean the first ever but first in relation to others, probably the first of the two mentioned in Revelation 20:4-5. Therefore this first resurrection, in Revelation 20:4-5, evidently refers to a resurrection of believers that will take place at the end of the Tribulation. The second resurrection of the two, the resurrection of unbelievers, will occur at the end of the Millennium. This interpretation allows for the possibility for another resurrection of believers before the Tribulation.³

Marvin Rosenthal offered an interpretation that he called the "pre-wrath Rapture."⁴ 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).⁵ His is a modified midtribulation view, though for him the Rapture does not occur in the exact middle of the Tribulation.

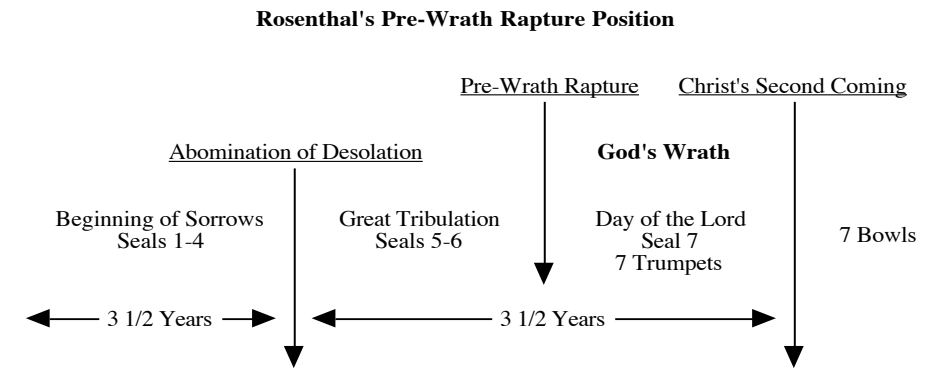
¹E.g., Reese, pp. 214-15; Gundry, pp. 134-39.

²E.g., Ladd, *The Blessed ...*, p. 82.

³For a very helpful account of the history of the Rapture debate, see Stanton, pp. 306-401.

⁴Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*.

⁵The chart below is from John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):388.



Most premillennialists have understood "the day of the LORD" to describe the whole seventieth week (seven years) plus the earthly messianic (millennial) kingdom.¹ We view the whole seven-year Tribulation as a period of the outpouring of divine wrath (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1).²

"Just as each day of creation and the Jewish day consisted of two phases—a time of darkness ('evening') followed by a time of light ('day') [Gen. 1:4-6]—so the future Day of the Lord will consist of two phases, a period of darkness (judgment) followed by a period of light (divine rule and blessing)."³

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

¹See Showers, pp. 30-40, and Stanton, pp. 70-91, for excellent discussions of "the day of the LORD." See also David E. Olander, "The Pre-Day of the Lord Rapture," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond*, pp. 269-91.

²For refutations of Rosenthal's view, see Gerald B. Stanton, "A Review of *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):90-111; idem, "The Doctrine of Imminency: Is It Biblical?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 227-32; Paul Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* and Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique*.

³Idem, *Maranatha ...*, p. 33.

Thessalonians that their fellow Christians who had died would participate on equal terms with them in the salvation experience accompanying the parousia of the Lord."¹

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

4:18 The expectation of being reunited with saints who have died and, what is more important, with Christ, gives believers a hope that we can and should use to comfort one another when believing 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."²

Note that it is not the Lord's return alone 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.

"The principal happiness of heaven is this, *to be with the Lord*, to see him, live with him, and enjoy him, for ever. This should comfort the saints upon the death of their friends. We and they with all the saints shall meet our Lord, and be with him for ever, no more to be separated either from him or from one another for ever."³

Both pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the revelation that Paul presented in this passage is a comfort to believers. The hope of translation before death, which Paul revealed, is even greater than the hope of resurrection after death, which the Thessalonians had already held. The hope of

¹Wanamaker, p. 176.

²Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, p. 204.

³Henry, p. 1880.

translation before death is greater because translation avoids death.

Will this translation occur before the Tribulation or after it? Pretribulationists say it will occur before. Consequently we have a very comforting hope. Not only might our translation precede our death, but it will also precede the Tribulation. Furthermore it may take place at any moment. Posttribulationists say that our hope consists only in the possibility of our being translated before we die. According to them we might have to go through the Tribulation. Therefore the Rapture is not imminent (possible at any moment) in their view. Many of them believe that imminent means in any generation, not at any moment.¹

"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]."²

"... 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 posttribulation 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."³

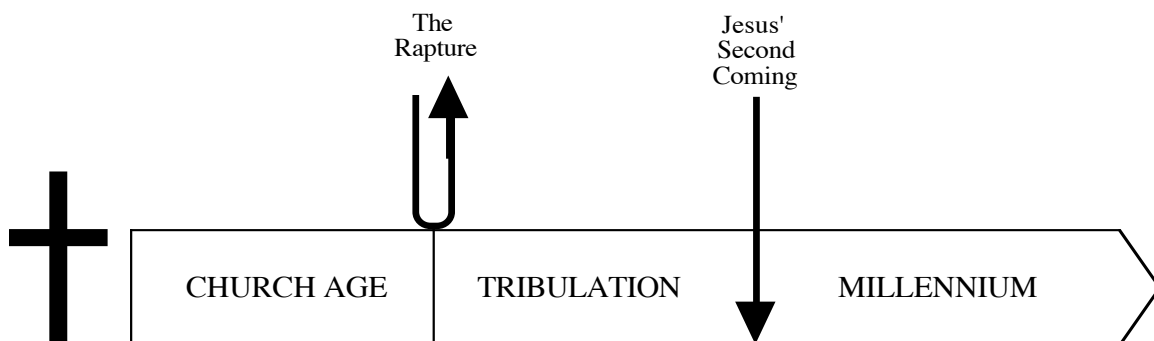
¹See Richard R. Reiter, "A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, p.30.

²Walvoord, *The Blessed ...*, p. 96.

³James Montgomery Boice, *The Last and Future World*, pp. 41-42.

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

THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE



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

John 14:1-3	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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¹See Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (July-September 1995):306-17; Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 85-103; Grant R. Jeffrey, "A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 105-25; John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies*, pp 265-304.

Trouble (v. 1)	Sorrow (v. 13)
Believe (v. 1)	Believe (v. 14)
God, me (v. 1)	Jesus, God (v. 14)
Told you (v. 2)	Say to you (v. 15)
Come again (v. 3)	Coming of the Lord (v. 15)
Receive you (v. 3)	Caught up (v. 17)
To myself (v. 3)	To meet the Lord (v. 17)
Be where I am (v. 3)	Ever be with the Lord (v. 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.¹

1 Thessalonians 4	Revelation 19
The righteous are central.	The wicked are central.
This coming is imminent.	This coming is preceded by prophesied signs.
The coming is for rescue of the righteous.	The coming is for judgment of the wicked.
The righteous dead are raised to life.	The wicked living go to death without a resurrection.

¹See J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 312; P. D. Feinberg, "The Case ...," pp. 80-86; John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy*, pp. 112-17; idem, *The Rapture ...*, p. 102; Edward E. Hindson, "The Rapture and the Return: Two Aspects of Christ's Coming," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, p. 156-58; idem, "The Rapture and the Return: Two Aspects of Christ's Coming," in *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 326-38; Lewis S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, ch. XI: "God the Son: His Coming for His Saints," pp. 56-61, and ch. XII: "God the Son: His Coming with His Saints," pp. 62-67.

The saints ascend to meet the Lord.	The saints descend with the Lord.
The saints are the guests at the marriage supper of the Lamb.	The wicked constitute the supper of the great God.
The saints enter the Father's heavenly house.	The saints enter the earthly millennial kingdom.
The saints are forever with the Lord.	The wicked are cast into the lake of fire.

Posttribulationists have denied these and other differences in various ways. Since the issue of the time of the Rapture is not explicitly revealed in Scripture, we must base our conclusion on both exegesis and theology. That is, we need to examine what the passages that refer to the Rapture and the Second Coming say, and we need to harmonize what these passages say with other revelation that bears on this subject. When we do this, I believe that the weight of probability favors pretribulationism.

Four theological arguments have been advanced in favor of pretribulationism:¹ First, Christians are assured that we will not experience the wrath of God (1:10; 5:9), and the Tribulation will be a time of the outpouring of God's wrath worldwide. Second, there will be believers with non-glorified (mortal) bodies who enter the millennial kingdom (Isa. 65:20; Rev. 20:7-10). These will be people who have become believers after the Rapture and before the Second Coming. If the Rapture and the Second Coming are the same event, this will not be possible, since all believers will at the Rapture receive glorified bodies. Third, the marriage supper of the Lamb will take place in heaven at the end of the Tribulation (Rev. 19:1-10) and the church will be in heaven for this event. Fourth, the judgment seat of Christ (the judgment of Christians) will take place in heaven (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10) before the marriage supper of the Lamb.

¹John S. Feinberg, "Arguing About the Rapture: Who Must Prove What and How," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 187-210.

C. PERSONAL WATCHFULNESS 5:1-11

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

"The former [paragraph, i.e., 4:13-18] offered instruction concerning the dead in Christ; this [paragraph] gives a word of needed exhortation to the living."¹

"... though the principal ground of their disquiet had now been removed (iv. 13-17), the prevailing restlessness and excitement were such ... that the Apostles were led to remind their converts of what they had already laid down so clearly in their oral teaching, that 'the day of the Lord' would come as a surprise (vv. 1—5), and consequently that continued watchfulness and self-restraint were necessary on the part of all who would be found ready for it (vv. 6—11)."²

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

"The question which is answered in 1 Thessalonians 5 is 'What relationship has the coming of Christ [at the Rapture] to the Day of the Lord?'"³

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

5:1 Paul had previously taught this church about "the day of the Lord" (v. 2), and the Old Testament prophets had much to say about it. Jesus had also taught His disciples about it (cf. Matt. 24:4—25:46; Mark 13:5-37; Luke 12:39-40; 21:8-36). They had taught about the chronological periods ("periods," Gr. *chronos*, extended periods) and the major features of those periods ("times," Gr. *chairos*, a definite period) that lay ahead in the future, namely, in the end time.⁴ "periods" and "times" may describe the end times from two perspectives (cf. Acts

¹Hiebert, p. 207.

²Milligan, p. 63.

³Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 51.

⁴Cf. Lightfoot, p. 71.

1:7; 3:19-21).¹ But probably they mean virtually the same thing (cf. Dan. 2:21; 7:12; Acts 1:7).²

"... 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."³

5:2 The phrase "the day of the Lord" in Scripture usually refers to a time in history characterized by God's working in the world in direct, dramatic ways.⁴ It contrasts with the day of man, in which affairs appear to be proceeding without divine intervention. The eschatological day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament begins with the Tribulation and continues through the Millennium (cf. Isa. 13:9-11; Joel 2:28-32; Zeph. 1:14-18; 3:14-15; et al.). It contains both judgment (in the Tribulation) and blessing (in the Millennium), though in some passages only judgment is spoken of and in other passages only blessing is spoken of.

Just as the Jews counted the nighttime as the first part of each day, and the daytime as the second part (cf. Gen. 1:5), so the day of the Lord will begin with a dark period (the Tribulation) followed by a light period (the Millennium). People living on the earth when the day of the Lord begins (i.e., unbelievers—since Christians will be with the Lord in heaven immediately following the Rapture) will not expect it.

Paul did not discuss the entire day of the Lord here, only its coming. That is why he dealt only with the judgment aspect of that day here.

¹G. G. Findlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*, p. 107; Morris, *The First ...*, pp. 149-50.

²Wanamaker, p. 178.

³Bruce, p. 108.

⁴See *ibid.*, p. 109; Pentecost, pp. 229-32.

"The meaning [of "like a thief"] would be not that the Day will come as unheralded as a thief, but that it will surprise people ..."¹

"The Lord Jesus does not come to the church like a thief in the night. The church is looking for and waiting for the Lord to come. ... However, the Lord Jesus does come like a thief to the world *after* the church has been raptured."²

"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)."³

The phrase "the day of the Lord" also refers specifically to the Second Coming of Christ (cf. Joel 3:9-16; Zech. 14:1-5; Matt. 24:43-44; Rev. 16:12-16; 19:11-21). Christ's second coming is the climactic event in the day of the Lord, and it will occur between the Tribulation and the Millennium. Thus Scripture uses the term "the day of the Lord" in a broad sense (the Tribulation and the Millennium), a narrow sense (The Tribulation or the Millennium), and a particular sense (the return of Christ).

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

¹Morris, *The First ...*, p. 155.

²McGee, 5:399-400.

³Thomas, p. 281. Cf. Pentecost, p. 230; and McClain, pp. 186-91.

expression 'the Day of the Lord' has both a broad and a narrow sense in relationship to the future."¹

Some posttribulationists believe that "the day of the Lord" as used here refers only to the Second Coming of Christ.² 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).³

Gundry contended that "the day of the Lord" begins after the Tribulation but before the battle of Armageddon.⁴ But if this is true, none of the judgments before Armageddon are judgments of the day of the Lord. That is a conclusion that few interpreters, posttribulationist or pretribulationist, have accepted.⁵

"The only way to hold that this meeting with Christ in the air is an imminent prospect [the pretribulation view] is to see it as simultaneous with the beginning of the divine judgment against earth [the Tribulation]. 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.

¹Showers, *Maranatha ...*, p. 35.

²Ladd, *The Blessed ...*, pp. 92-94; Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, pp. 182-86.

³Reese, pp. 172-73. Cf. Craig A. Blasing, "The Day of the Lord and the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):259-70.

⁴Gundry, p. 95.

⁵See Paul D. Feinberg, "Dispensational Theology and the Rapture," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 225-45, for a critique of Gundry's view, the views of posttribulationists Douglas J. Moo and William E. Bell, and the view of midtribulationist Gleason F. Archer.

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)."¹

"There is no reference in the Old Testament to saints being raptured, taken from earth to heaven without dying. There are many references to Christ coming back to the earth and of resurrection from the dead, but no rapture, no translation in the Old Testament, except by way of illustration in the cases of Elijah and Enoch."²

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

"... the figure must not be pressed to denote more than the *suddenness* of the coming ..."⁴

No one living on the earth then will in any way (a double negative for emphasis in the Greek text) escape the turmoil that will follow. They cannot escape it any more than a pregnant woman can escape the labor pains leading to the

¹Thomas, p. 281. Paragraph division omitted.

²Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 49.

³See Showers, *Maranatha ...*, pp. 58-63.

⁴Milligan, pp. 65-66.

delivering of her child. This seems to argue against midtribulationism. No one on earth who is living in peace and safety during the first half of the Tribulation will escape the destruction coming in the second half, except those who die.

"The dissimilarity which this verse presents to the ordinary style of St Paul is striking. We seem suddenly to have stumbled on a passage out of the Hebrew prophets. This phenomenon appears frequently in the New Testament writers where they are dealing with Apocalyptic questions and with denunciations of woe, and in fact explains anomalies of style which otherwise would create considerable difficulty. The writers fall naturally into the imagery and the language. Such is the case in some degree with the second chapter of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (see also 2 Thess. i. 7); and to a still greater extent with a large portion of St Peter's Second Epistle, where the Apocalyptic portion [the portion describing the catastrophic end times] is so different in style from the rest, that some have thought to settle the question of its genuineness by rejecting this portion and retaining the remainder. It explains also to a great extent the marked difference in style between the Revelation of St John and his other writings."¹

5:4 The Thessalonians were not ignorant ("in darkness") of these events, since Jesus and Paul had revealed them (cf. 4:13-17). However Christians do not know precisely when the day of the Lord is coming. Yet we are not in danger of being overtaken by the beginning of that day, since we will be in glory when it begins, having been caught up to meet the Lord in the air at the Rapture.

5:5 In both Semitic and Greek thought to be described as a son of something was to be characterized by that thing.² In this case

¹Lightfoot, pp. 72-73.

²Morris, *The First ...*, p. 156.

what characterized the Thessalonians was the "light" (in contrast to darkness) and "day" (in contrast to night). They belonged to a different day: the day of enlightenment. They were not walking in wickedness either (represented as darkness). God had removed the Thessalonians from Satan's kingdom of darkness and placed them into God's kingdom of light (cf. Col. 1:13).

Darkness was a common negative figure in antiquity. In the Old and New Testaments it describes those who are ignorant of or opposed to the Lord (cf. Job 22:9-11; Ps. 82:5; Prov. 4:19; Isa. 60:1-3; Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; 6:14; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). It also describes life apart from God (cf. John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; Acts 12:46; 26:18; Rom, 2:19; 13:12; 1 John 1:6; 2:9, 11; et al.)

"What is the point? The point is that just as the translation of the church is the end of the day of grace it also marks the beginning of the Day of the Lord. In other words, the one event [the Rapture] seems to do two things: it serves as the closing of one day and the beginning of the other. If that is true, it gives us some very positive and definite teaching along the line that the church will be taken out of the world before the day of trial and trouble overtakes the world."¹

5:6 Paul exhorted the Thessalonians therefore to remain "alert" (watchful) and "sober" (self-possessed), not asleep (insensible) to things that God has revealed like others are (cf. Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35; Luke 21:34). This is a moral exhortation that goes beyond simple mental alertness.²

If the church must pass through the Tribulation (Daniel's seventieth week) before the Rapture (the posttribulationist

¹Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 52.

²Milligan, pp. 67-68.

view), it is useless to watch for Christ daily.¹ Rather, in that case, believers should be looking for the Antichrist.

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

"The hope of salvation which is the helmet ... means the full realization of our salvation in the future. The assurance of this hope being fulfilled is the fact that God has appointed us not to wrath but to salvation."²

5:9 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 destined us for wrath"—in any form or at any time (cf. 1:10). In the context the wrath of the day of the Lord (in the Tribulation, not eternal wrath following the Great White Throne judgment) is in view specifically.

"In this passage he [Paul] is expressly saying that our appointment is to be caught up to be with Christ; the appointment of the world is for the Day of the Lord, the day of wrath."³

Instead of appointing Christians to wrath, God has appointed us to full "salvation" (4:15-17). Whereas Christians do experience divine discipline (cf. Heb. 12), and troubles of

¹See James H. Brookes, "Kept Out of the Hour," *Our Hope* 6 (November 1899):154; Brindle, pp. 144-46.

²Ryrie, *First and ...*, p. 73.

³Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 54.

various kinds in this life, we will not experience divine wrath (cf. Rom. 8:1).

"First Thessalonians 5:9 is not a 'both/and' statement. The believer is not appointed to wrath and to salvation—to the Day of the Lord and the Rapture (the posttribulational view). The verse states 'not one, but the other.' The believer is appointed not to wrath, but to salvation; not to the Day of the Lord, but to the Rapture (pretribulationalism). The believer's hope is the Rapture. We are not watching for wrath, but for the Lord."¹

"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."²

5:10 This deliverance from divine wrath is certain because Jesus Christ died as our Substitute and took all of God's wrath that was directed 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 for us.

In verse 10 was Paul contrasting watchfulness with unwatchfulness, or being alive with being dead? The Greek word translated "asleep" in verse 10 is from the same root as the word translated "sleep" in verse 6 (*katheudo*), where the reference is to spiritual lethargy. It is a different Greek word from the one translated "asleep" in 4:13, 14, and 15 (*koimao*), where the reference is to physical death. This would lead us to conclude that Paul was speaking of spiritual lethargy here in verse 10, not physical death.³ But Paul used *katheudo* to describe physical "sleep" in verse 7. Consequently some Greek

¹Edgar, pp. 206-7.

²Thomas, p. 285.

³Constable, p. 707.

scholars believe that Paul was referring to physical death here in verse 10.¹ Even though the interpretation is debatable, it is clear that God will snatch away all Christians, whether watchful or unwatchful, whether alive or dead, at the Rapture.²

With either *katheudo* meaning (spiritual lethargy or physical death), this statement refutes the partial rapture theory, which is the view that God will rapture only watchful Christians. Either the dead and living combined, or the unwatchful and watchful combined, include all Christians. This verse is another indication that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation, since the Tribulation is a specific time when God will pour out His wrath on those dwelling on the earth (cf. 1:10; Rev. 3:10).

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

This verse contains the first of 22 commandments for Christians that follow through verse 27.³

"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."⁴

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 hope for the future. He moved from dealing with future hope to the subject of present love (cf. v. 8). Paul's exhortation to the Romans is quite similar to what we begin to read here (cf. v. 13b and Rom. 12:18; v. 15 and Rom. 12:17a; v. 16 and Rom.

¹E.g., Milligan, p. 70; Walvoord, *The Thessalonian ...*, p. 55; Hendriksen, p. 128.

²See Thomas R. Edgar, "The Meaning of 'Sleep' in 1 Thessalonians 5:10," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22:4 (December 1979):345-49.

³McGee, 5:402.

⁴Zane C. Hodges, "The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, pp. 67-68. For a good exegetical defense of the pretribulation rapture, see Showers, *Maranatha ...*, and for refutation of the posttribulation view of this passage, see Stanton, *Kept from ...*, pp. 88-91,

12:12a; v. 17 and Rom. 12:12c; v. 19 and Rom. 12:11b; vv. 21b-22 and Rom. 12:11b).¹

"Having charged his converts to edify one another, the Apostle is reminded of those on whom the office of instruction especially devolved, and is led to speak of the duty of the whole body of Christians towards these their teachers."²

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). Clearly there were teachers in the Thessalonian church even though it was a new church. We may assume, therefore, that the apostles had appointed leaders in this church before they departed from Thessalonica, as they had done in the churches of Galatia (cf. Acts 14:23). These leaders were probably Jews who had a solid background in the Hebrew Bible and had come to faith in Christ. Paul's readers were to appreciate these leaders for their diligent 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 leaders naturally draw out more affection from their followers than others, the Thessalonians were deliberately to demonstrate self-sacrificing love to all their leaders.³

The Thessalonian believers were to demonstrate this special appreciation, not because their leaders were personally lovable necessarily, but because of the contribution that they made to the other believers. Even if a leader made a small contribution, those profiting from his ministry should appreciate and respect him for his service because of his personal activity, and because of the intrinsic importance of his work.⁴ Such an attitude would enable the Thessalonians to continue to experience peace in their church (v. 13).

¹Wanamaker, p. 191.

²Lightfoot, p. 78.

³See Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 123-35.

⁴Milligan, p. 72.

"That Paul included such a command shows that relations were not all they could have been."¹

"I have discovered that lack of respect for spiritual leadership is the main cause of church fights and splits."²

"Leaders can never do their best work when they are subject to carping criticism from those who should be their followers."³

"In the New Testament honour is not given to people because of any qualities which they may possess due to birth or social status or natural gifts but only on the basis of the spiritual task to which they are called."⁴

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 to be stirred up to action. Those who were timid or tended to become discouraged, despondent, worried, or sad 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—the spiritually "weak"—were worthy of special support. Above all the Thessalonians were to "be patient" with one another and with everyone. 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."⁵

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

¹Thomas, p. 288.

²Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 16.

³Morris, *The Epistles ...*, p. 99.

⁴Marshall, pp. 148-49.

⁵Thomas, p. 290.

E. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR 5:16-24

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

This section of the epistle on practical instructions and exhortations (4:1—5:24) is somewhat chiasmic in its structure:¹

- A Christian living 4:1-12
- B The Rapture 4:13-18
- C Personal watchfulness 5:1-11
- B' Church life 5:12-15
- A' Individual behavior 5:16-24

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 (cf. Phil. 4:4). Incidentally, this is the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament, not John 11:35.

5:17 Greek writers used the adverb translated "without ceasing" to describe a hacking cough. Paul did not expect his readers to be in prayer every minute around the clock but to continue to pray frequently.

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

¹A chiasmus is a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form.

devote themselves to prayer (cf. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1; Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2, 3)."¹

"If we live in this way, conscious continually of our dependence on God, conscious of His presence with us always, conscious of His will to bless, then our general spirit of prayerfulness will in the most natural way overflow into uttered prayer. It is instructive to read again and again in Paul's letters the many prayers that he interjects. Prayer was as natural to Paul as breathing. At any time he was likely to break off his argument or to sum it up by some prayer of greater or less length. In the same way our lives can be lived in such an attitude of dependence on God that we will easily and naturally move into the words of prayer on all sorts of occasions, great and small, grave and gay. Prayer is to be constant."²

"Luther was above all else a man of prayer, and yet of his prayers we have less than of his sermons and conversations because he succeeded in keeping his students out of the secret chamber."³

"We should rejoice more [v. 16] if we prayed more."⁴

5:18 Christians 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. We need to give thanks whatever happens.⁵

¹Wanamaker, p. 200.

²Morris, *The First ...*, p. 173.

³Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 280.

⁴Henry, p. 1882.

⁵Frame, p. 202.

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 (cf. Eph. 4:30). The image is that of water thrown on a fire (cf. Mark 9:48; Heb. 11:34). The proper response is to follow the Spirit's direction and control without resistance (v. 18; cf. Gal. 5:16, 25). The next verse gives one way in which believers can "quench the Spirit."

5:20-21 There appears to have been a tendency in the Thessalonian church to "utterly reject" certain prophetic utterances (i.e., the announcing of some word from God; cf. 1 Cor. 14:1) and thus to quench the Spirit. Paul warned against regarding these words from God as though they were only words from men.

"Evidently the situation at Thessalonica was the opposite from that in Corinth where Paul later had to warn the church against disorderliness in relation to the gifts of the Spirit. At Thessalonica some were frowning on any manifestation of the Spirit that was at all out of the ordinary. This might be expected from the Macedonians who were more advanced culturally than those who lived in the south of Greece. They would be more prone to want to stifle the exercise of the unusual gifts of the Spirit."¹

However Paul also counseled that his readers should "examine" these utterances. They could do this by comparing what the speaker said with the standard of previously given divine revelation (cf. Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20; 1 John 4:1-3). Their neighbors, the Bereans, set them a good example in this respect (cf. Acts 17:11).

"We must not take things upon trust from the preacher. We must search the scriptures, whether what they say be true or not. But we must not be always trying, always unsettled; no, at length we

¹Ryrie, *First and ...*, p. 81.

must be settled, and hold fast that which is good. Proving all things must be in order to holding [*sic*] fast that which is good."¹

The Thessalonians should "hold firmly" to everything that passed the test ("that which is good"). What did not pass the test they should reject along with all other kinds of evil (v. 22). The difficulty was in discerning true prophecies and true prophets from false prophecies and false prophets (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-3, 15). It was probably not in discerning the true elements from the false elements in a true prophet's prophecy, since a true prophet, by definition, gave true prophecies.²

"The chaff must be sifted from the wheat."³

"Do not look down upon Bible study as something that is beneath you. Do not be indifferent to the Word of God. We have a lot of folk who are in Christian service, but they are ignorant of the Bible and they look down on Bible study. Occasionally I hear such a person saying, 'You just spend all your time in Bible study and you don't *do* anything. What you need to do is get out and get busy.' Well, what is needed is to get busy studying the Word of God, and after you do that you will see how to get busy and really be *effective*."⁴

"We had a Bible study downtown in Los Angeles, averaging fifteen hundred people every Thursday night over a period of twenty-one years—what a thrill that was! What a privilege that was! But sometimes folks would make a remark like, 'You need to get out and do something, not just go to sit and listen to the Bible.' The interesting thing is that those people who came to sit and listen to

¹Henry, p. 1882.

²See R. Fowler White, "Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, p. 85.

³Findlay, p. 129.

⁴McGee, 5:404.

the Bible *did* go out and do something. There are several hundred of those people who are out on the mission field; there are several hundred who are witnessing for God; and there are several hundred in the ministry. I notice that the boys who do not study the Word of God run down like an eight-day clock. Their ministries don't last too long."¹

- 5:22 The Thessalonians should also "abstain from every form of evil" (Gr. *pantos eidous ponerou*). This seems to be the best meaning, in view of the contrast with verse 21. An alternative interpretation is that Paul wanted his readers not only to avoid evil itself but what others might perceive as involving evil ("every appearance of evil," AV; cf. Rom. 14).² 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 human "spirit" is the part of us that enables us to communicate with God. The human "soul" makes us conscious of ourselves. The human "body" is the physical part that expresses the inner person. These are not the only elements that constitute humanity. There is also heart, mind, conscience, will, emotions, et al. But these are the ones that Paul chose to refer to here.³

"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

¹Ibid., 5:404-5.

²AV refer to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*.

³See Robert A. Pyne, *Humanity and Sin*, pp. 101-23.

make a comparable distinction between 'spirit' and 'soul' is forced."¹

"... that man consists of a soul [immaterial part] and a body [material part] ought to be beyond controversy [cf. Isa. 10:18; Matt. 10:28]. Now I understand by the term 'soul' an immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part. Sometimes it is called 'spirit.' For even when these terms are joined together, they differ from one another in meaning; yet when the word 'spirit' is used by itself, it means the same thing as soul ... [e.g., Eccles. 12:7; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59]."²

Paul may have mentioned "spirit and soul and body" because these three aspects point to the believer's relationships to God, himself or herself, and other people. Together they picture wholeness. Paul's desire for his readers was that every part of them, involving all their relationships, would remain without fault and that they would continue to mature and live free from legitimate grounds for accusation until Christ's return. Note again that he believed the Lord's return could precede their deaths. All of Paul's previous references to the coming of the Lord (2:19; 3:13; 4:15) refer to the Rapture, and this one does too.

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

"In a prayer expressing Paul's wishes for the congregation, two of the basic themes of the letter are again highlighted. The prayer utilizes two optative verbs, asking that God 'may ... sanctify' the Thessalonians and that they 'may ... be kept blameless.' The prayer for sanctification reminds the readers of the exhortations in chaps.

¹Bruce, p. 130. Cf. Milligan, p. 78.

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

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)."¹

5:24 Paul was confident that God would do this sanctifying work in the Thessalonians through the Holy Spirit, assuming their proper response to His directives (v. 19). The antecedent of "it" seems to be the sanctification and preservation of the Thessalonians, not the return of Christ.² Their sanctification would be complete when they saw the Lord and were glorified.

IV. CONCLUSION 5:25-28

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

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

"The ministry of prayer is the most important service that the Church of Christ can engage in."³

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

"The practice may have arisen from the customary mode of saluting a Rabbi ..."⁴

¹Martin, p. 188.

²Lightfoot, p. 90.

³D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working with God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, p. 44.

⁴Milligan, p. 80.

5:27 Paul recognized the edifying value of this letter, and perhaps its divine inspiration, so he firmly charged that it be read aloud to the entire congregation of saints. It was customary to read letters out loud because of the difficulty of reading a page of words that had no punctuation marks or spaces between the words, which was the case with Paul's epistles. Perhaps this was the custom too because there may have been some in the congregation who were illiterate.

"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 ..."¹

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

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

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