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Christ's Coming and the Church's Mission in 1 Thessalonians

Charles A. Gieschen

For many Christians in mainline denominations of the United States and a growing number of non-denominational evangelical congregations, the triumphal coming of Christ on the last day plays a relatively minor role in their understanding of the church and her mission. Lectionary readings often set forth this theme for a few Sundays at the beginning and end of the church year, but even then the end-time trumpets may not be blown too loudly in preaching. Why is eschatology not more widely understood as central to the preaching and teaching of the church, especially in light of the emphasis on eschatology in the teaching and preaching of Jesus and the apostles? A possible reason is the widespread understanding that the work of Christ stands functionally complete at his death and resurrection, or at the very latest, his ascension. Even though few of us would admit it, we may neither see nor teach the second coming as an integral part of the work of Christ. "And he will return to judge the living and the dead" becomes almost a creedal add-on that pales in significance to "was crucified, suffered, died, was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead." We may even fear that giving stress to eschatology might identify us with those Christians whose eschatological interests are driven by one of the abhorrent variations of pre-millennialism, or even with false prophets like Howard Camping whose two date-setting predictions of the return of Christ in 2011 were the object of ridicule by both the news media and late night talk shows.¹

The ongoing experience of Satan, sin, and death make it all the more important that we proclaim the second coming of Christ, when everything that he accomplished in his first coming is brought to its visible consummation. If this is not stressed, many are left wondering what difference the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has made in this world

¹ Harold Camping is a Christian radio evangelist who made a very public prediction that the world would end on May 21, 2011. When his prediction did not come true, he then announced that it would happen on October 21, 2011. After this "prophecy" was also shown to be false by passing unfulfilled, he apologized for these two announcements.

where hate, tragedy, war, bloodshed, and death remain all around us. James Moorhead, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary with expertise in pre-millennial American Christian churches, made this astute observation:

Evil comes as the monstrous moral alien that cannot be incorporated into the prevailing culture; and because it cannot be assimilated, horror returns, it moves in an endless loop, it fails to satisfy intellectually, because liberal humanitarianism offers no way of articulating or transcending major acts of human transgression. In its eschatology, mainstream Protestantism has suppressed the blood, the chaos, and the terror of the Apocalypse [i.e., the book of Revelation]; and these have leapt out like the bogey from under the bed. If the mainstream churches cannot give a satisfactory account of the end, is it surprising that many people will choose to go elsewhere where those needs can be met and addressed?²

Certainly Lutherans should proclaim biblical eschatology in its fullness, with all its end-time deceptions and deceivers, resurrection, judgment, hell, and heaven. This study will demonstrate that eschatology, especially the *parousia* or triumphal coming of Christ, was central to Paul's apostolic missionary preaching and remains a vital foundation of the church's ongoing faith, mission, and daily living in hope. Nowhere in the Pauline corpus is evidence supporting this thesis more evident than in Paul's two letters to the church in Thessalonica.³ The term *parousia* [παρουσία] alone occurs six times in these brief letters (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8). Not only do both letters contain extensive teaching sections about the end-times (e.g., 1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess 1:5–2:12), but there are also several brief eschatological summary statements in 1 Thessalonians that serve as thematic discourse markers, pointing the hearers of these epistles to their future hope (e.g., 1:10; 2:12, 16, 19; 3:13; and 5:23). Selby notes the prevalence of eschatology throughout the first epistle:

Each major section and sub-section culminates in an eschatological pronouncement so that a strongly eschatological tone pervades the entire epistle. By using visionary language in this way Paul evokes a perspective from which the Thessalonians are invited to see themselves and their circumstances. They are living near the end of time and awaiting the imminent return of Christ, the resurrection of the

² James Moorhead, "Mainstream Protestants and the End of the World," *InSpire* (Winter 2000): 17.

³ See especially David Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, NTOA 71 (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009). Unlike many critical scholars who dismiss 2 Thessalonians as pseudo-Pauline and inauthentic, I conclude that both letters are from the hand of Paul.

dead, the judgment before God, and the final reward and punishment which will be meted out at that judgment.⁴

This study will limit its focus to 1 Thessalonians, giving attention to Paul's teaching in both the longer eschatological pericopes and the short eschatological pronouncements. Even though only brief comments will be made on most of these texts, a substantial discussion of the theological implications of this evidence will conclude this study.

I. 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Paul's opening thanksgiving in 1 Thess 1:2-10 introduces several themes that are fleshed out in the rest of the epistle, including the triumphal coming of Christ featured at the conclusion of the thanksgiving:

⁹For they themselves are reporting concerning us what manner of entrance we had to you, namely that you turned to God from idols in order to serve the living and real God ¹⁰and also await his Son from the heavens [ἀναμένειν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν], whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath that is to come [τὸν ῥυόμενον ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης].

The language of "turning to God" for conversion is also found in Acts (9:35; 11:21; 15:19; 26:18, 20), especially Paul's preaching at Lystra: "Turn from these worthless things to the living God" (Acts 14:15). Paul's description of God as "the living and real/true God" in 1:9 is probably dependent upon Jer 10:10. His use of this language reflects a well-known polemic against pagan gods not being "living or true" (e.g., Isa 44:9-20; Wisdom of Solomon 13-15; and Philo, *Decal* 52-81, *Special Laws* 1:13-31).⁵ In light of Paul's testimony to Jesus' resurrection in 1:10, the adjective "living" in 1:9 may also indicate the identification of the risen Jesus within the mystery of the one living God (cf. Rev 1:18). The words "from idols" (ἐπὶ τῶν εἰδώλων) in 1:9 indicates that the majority of these Christians were converted from polytheistic paganism and not from monotheistic Judaism (cf. 1 Thess 2:14, 16).⁶ Because the social and economic life in Thessalonica was bound up with the religious and political cultic life, the splash that Paul made through the baptism of pagans into Christianity did not go unnoticed. Even though the outward form of idolatry has often become more refined over the centuries in many cultures, the need to turn to God

⁴ Gary S. Selby, "Blameless at His Coming': The Discursive Construction of Eschatological Reality in 1 Thessalonians," *Rhetorica* (1999): 398.

⁵ Beverly Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 19.

⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: MacMillan, 1895), 16.

from these idols—whatever form they may take—remains in every generation and locale.

The preaching of the resurrection and return of Jesus in the early mission at Thessalonica is made clear in the closing words of this thanksgiving: “And also await his Son from the heavens, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1:10). The gospel that Paul originally proclaimed and continued to echo in both of these letters had a decidedly eschatological focus: after being converted, these Christians began to “await his Son from the heavens.” Paul already signaled this focus at Thessalonica when he wrote of remembering their “endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3), and then blows the end-times trumpet loudly throughout the final two chapters and much of 2 Thessalonians. The pair of present infinitive verbs, “to serve continually” (δουλεύειν) in 1:9b and “to await continually” (ἀναμένειν) in 1:10a indicate the daily tension of a Christian serving in the present circumstances while simultaneously awaiting the future deliverance. Waiting, in contrast to serving, is often viewed as a passive activity. This continuous waiting for the Son, however, is not a dull and sedentary existence as in idly waiting at an airport for the arrival of a long overdue relative whom you are not even excited about seeing; it is the dynamic activity of living in minute-to-minute expectation of the arrival of one’s most esteemed and beloved friend. These Christians appear to have expected the return of Christ imminently in their own lifetimes (1 Thess 4:15, 17; 5:4). I.H. Marshall makes this adept observation: “The point is that the present existence of the Thessalonian Christians was determined by their expectations about the future.”⁷

The designation “his Son,” which appears only here in these two epistles, adds to what Paul proclaimed earlier in this letter about Jesus with the designations “Lord” and “Christ” as well as complements what he wrote earlier about God as “Father” (1:1, 3). Within the salutation and thanksgiving that open this letter, Jesus is confessed to be Lord, Christ, and Son of God. Paul also states here that the Son will come again “from the heavens” (ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν). The reference to the resurrection that follows this phrase implies the ascension and enthronement of Jesus in heaven (Acts 1:9–11; 7:55–56), a reality Paul writes about in Ephesians: “he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named” (1:20–21). “Son,” “heavens,” and the context of end-time judgment in 1:10 indicates that Paul is alluding to the “one like a son

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 58.

of man" scene in Daniel 7:9-14, an apocalyptic text that prominently influenced Jesus and early Christian eschatological expectations (e.g., Matt 25:31-46). Although Paul vacillates between using the singular and plural, the plurality of heavens here probably reflects the consistent use of the Hebrew plural form in various Old Testament texts (e.g., מַלְאָכָה in MT Ps 19:2).⁸ It also possibly reflects the cosmology visible in Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic texts that speak of multiple heavens (e.g., Paul writes concerning three heavens in 2 Cor 12:2). Paul's familiarity with first-century Jewish apocalyptic expectations is an important background for understanding his brief statements about Jesus in these letters.⁹

This continuous waiting for the Son's return from the heavens on the last day is grounded in the certainty of the end-time events that have already taken place in the death and resurrection of the Son: "whom he raised from the dead" (1 Thess 1:10). This relative clause is set forth by Paul elsewhere as public confirmation of Jesus' sonship (e.g., Rom 1:4), but here the resurrection of Jesus functions primarily as an assurance of his return. Several interpreters note the correspondence between this statement about resurrection and judgment and the one made at the close of Paul's speech before the Areopagus: "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).¹⁰ The terse confession of Jesus' resurrection in 1:10 clearly implies not only his death, but also his incarnation, birth, earthly life, and true humanity unto eternity. The centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection in the gospel Paul proclaimed at Thessalonica is clear from confessional statements about Jesus later in this letter: "For because we believe that Jesus died and was raised again" (1 Thess 4:14) and "our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us" (1 Thess 5:9b-10a). This confession of Jesus' resurrection takes on added significance for the Thessalonians in light of their fears about those who died before Jesus' return (1 Thess 4:13-18), the widespread disparaging of "flesh" in Greco-Roman philosophy, and various conceptions of a fearful passage in afterlife present in Greco-Roman religion.

⁸ George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 15.

⁹ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 89.

¹⁰ For example: Lightfoot, *Notes on St. Paul's Epistles*, 17; Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 14; and F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 19. All three note that this speech was probably delivered shortly before the writing of 1 Thessalonians.

Paul concludes his brief description of the enduring hope among these Christians by confessing both end-time salvation and judgment: "Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath that is to come" (1 Thess 1:10c). Rigaux observes that the use of the personal name "Jesus" (Ἰησοῦν) here without any other titles protects against exalting the Son to a docetic status without his humanity and disconnecting the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith.¹¹ Although Paul draws his specific description of Jesus as "the one who delivers us" (τὸν ῥυόμενον ἡμᾶς) from Isa 59:19-20, the "deliverer" language here and elsewhere would have been reinforced by early Christian usage of the Lord's Prayer: "Deliver us from the Evil One" (ῥύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ; Matt 6:13b). There are past, present, and future aspects of salvation: Jesus *delivered* us in his death; he *delivers* us daily through the forgiveness of sins; and he *will deliver* us when he comes again. Paul speaks of the future aspect of salvation here.

First and Second Thessalonians give significant attention to the wrath (ὀργή) that is to come, which is understood as God's end-time judgment against unbelief (1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; cf. 2 Thess 1:5-10; 2:8-12). Although Paul focuses here on the future wrath that *will come* upon all unbelievers, there is also a past and present aspect to the revelation of God's wrath: it *came* upon Jesus for all sin in his death (Matt 26:39, 42; 27:46) and, to a certain extent, it *comes* now upon unbelief in the world (Rom 1:18-32; 1 Thess 2:16). Paul's proclamation of "the wrath that is to come" is grounded in the preaching of the prophets about "the day of the LORD" being not only a day of grace but also a "day of wrath" (e.g., Zeph 1:15-18).¹²

There has been a growing tendency to downplay, dismiss, or ignore this biblical testimony about the wrath of God. C.H. Dodd downplayed it by arguing that Paul depersonalized God's wrath by understanding it as an impersonal process whereby sin causes its own retribution.¹³ More recently, Rob Bell, in his widely read *Love Wins*, has questioned biblical testimony about afterlife punishment for unbelievers.¹⁴ The dismissing or ignoring of this testimony is seen on the popular level by the periodic opinion polls wherein a strong majority affirms some type of afterlife in heaven but only a weak minority affirms the existence of hell. Proclamation of the wrath of God continues to be a vital way to help people see

¹¹ Beda Rigaux, *St. Paul: Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 395.

¹² Gary A. Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6:989-996.

¹³ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 21-23.

¹⁴ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

their need for God's grace in Christ Jesus. It must, however, always be understood as his alien work in relationship to his love: "For whereas love and holiness are part of his essential nature, wrath is contingent upon human sin: if there were no sin there would be no wrath."¹⁵ Paul proclaims that Jesus "delivers us from the wrath to come" and later specifies how Jesus accomplished this: "who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we live through him" (1 Thess 5:10). In Christ, who suffered God's wrath for all sin, God is at peace with all sinners. "The wrath that is to come" will only be experienced by unbelievers who reject this peace. These concluding words of the thanksgiving prepare the reader for the extensive focus on eschatology throughout this letter, especially in 4:13–5:11.

II. 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16

1 Thessalonians 2:16 is another brief eschatological summary; the verses that precede it, however, are necessary for context:

¹³On account of this we also give thanks to God without ceasing, that when you received the word which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men but—just as it truly is—the word of God, that is also at work in you who are believing. ¹⁴For you became imitators, brothers, of God's churches, the ones in Judea that are in Christ Jesus, because you suffered the same things by your own countrymen, just as they also did by the Jews, ¹⁵the ones who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, also persecuting us, not being pleasing to God, and opposing all men, ¹⁶because they are hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles in order to save them, *with the result that they heap up [to capacity] their sins continually* [εἰς τὸ ἀναπληρῶσαι αὐτῶν τὰς ἁμαρτίας πάντοτε]. *But wrath came upon them to the uttermost* [ἔφθασεν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἡ ὀργή].

Here Paul alludes to the passion narrative of the arrest of Jesus by Jewish authorities and their role in his death by crucifixion. He also alludes to the Jews being responsible for a significant amount of the affliction he and the Christian congregation faced in Thessalonica, which is confirmed by Luke's account of Jews from the synagogue inciting legal action against Jason and other Christians at Thessalonica after some significant conversions from the synagogue and "God-fearing Gentiles, including some leading women" (Acts 17:4). Paul uses a judgment expression to signal the result of the rejection of the gospel and persecution by fellow Jews: "they heap up [to capacity] their sins continually" (my translation), which the ESV renders, "so as always to fill up the measure of their sins." Jesus used

¹⁵ Stephen H. Travis, "Wrath of God (NT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:997.

a similar expression in his critique of the Pharisees: “Do you, then fill up the measure of your fathers” (Matt 23:32). Then Paul mentions “the wrath came upon them to the uttermost.” “The wrath” here appears to be the same “wrath that is to come” mentioned in 1:10. What is striking here, however, is Paul’s use of the aorist tense rather than the future. Through the use of the aorist, Paul is stressing that these unbelieving Jews *already* stand under God’s judgment as those who will experience his end-time wrath. The evangelist John conveys a similar idea: “He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

III. 1 Thessalonians 2:17-19

The next text is another brief eschatological summary in the sentences that immediately follow those just discussed:

¹⁷As for us, brothers, after we were separated from you for a short time—in person, not in thought—we endeavored with much longing to see your faces. ¹⁸On account of this, we desired to come to you—I, Paul, did many times—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹*For what is our hope or joy or crown of which we boast before our Lord Jesus in his triumphal coming? It is certainly you, is it not?* [τίς γὰρ ἡμῶν ἐλπίς ἢ χαρὰ ἢ στέφανος καυχήσεως ἢ οὐχὶ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ παρουσίᾳ;] ²⁰Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

Although many in Paul’s audience probably did not understand his allusion, he is alluding to how some Jews thought that they would “boast” (cf. *καυχήσεως* in 2:19) before the Lord about some of their own accomplishments in the afterlife.¹⁶ Even before Paul gets to his discussion of those who have fallen asleep in Christ, he is offering assurance here that the source of his boasting on the last day will not be his obedience to *Torah*, but the Holy Spirit’s work through the gospel that has not only brought the Thessalonian church from idolatry to serving the living God, but also will present them in risen glory alive before our Lord Jesus at his *parousia*. The technical Greco-Roman understanding of *parousia*, namely the public ceremonial arrival of a ruling dignitary, is important for how this term would have been understood by Paul’s original audience.¹⁷ I have translated it as “triumphal coming” in order to capture some of this sense of the word. One of the idolatries that these Christians had turned from is the veneration of the Roman emperor through the imperial cultic sites and

¹⁶ See evidence in Simon Gathercole, *Where is the Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

¹⁷ BDAG, 780-781; see especially Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York, Doubleday, 2000), 271-272.

ceremonies in Thessalonica. The implication here is that Paul and the Thessalonians will be present before their true and only Lord and King, who is none other than the crucified and risen Jesus, at his very public appearance on the last day.

IV. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Another short eschatological summary is found at the end of chapter 3, which brings to a close Paul's extensive reflection on the time he spent in Thessalonica, his departure, and his effort to return in person. Paul brings this section to a close with a blessing:

¹¹Now may God our Father and our Lord Jesus himself straighten out our path to you and ¹²may the Lord increase and multiply your love for one another and all people, just as we have also for you, ¹³*in order that your hearts be established blameless in holiness before our God and Father in the triumphal coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones* [εἰς τὸ στηρίξαι ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας ἀμέμπτους ἐν ἁγιωσύνῃ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ μετὰ πάντων τῶν ἁγίων αὐτοῦ].

Paul makes quite a context shift within this blessing: he begins by asking for the opportunity to visit Thessalonica and for the Lord to continue to increase their love, but then states that the purpose of this growth in love is that their hearts be blameless in holiness at the time of the coming of our Lord Jesus. The imminent return of Christ is clearly in view here; he does not say, "so that you remain blameless in holiness until the day you die." In light of their pagan background, it is not surprising that holiness or sanctification is often brought up in connection with Christ's *parousia*. That this sanctification is the result of divine work is made very explicit by Paul in the final blessing of this letter (1 Thess 5:23-24). As with the opening salutation of the letter, Paul expresses both distinction and unity by identifying the Father with the title "God" and then Jesus with the title "Lord." In the *parousia*, Jesus will be accompanied by "all his holy ones." In light of the intertextual echo here (Zech 14:6 LXX), this is most assuredly referencing created angels as is made explicit in the teaching of Jesus (e.g., Matt 25:31), not "the holy ones" who have died prior to the *parousia* and live with Christ.

V. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

This is the first of the two primary eschatological teaching sections of the letter, a text familiar to pastors because of its frequent use in the pastoral care of those who are grieving the death of a loved one. Some interpreters have even theorized that the situation behind this teaching is

the major impetus for Paul writing this letter. That situation appears to be that a few members of the church had died since the mission in Thessalonica had begun and some of those remaining were distraught because they thought that these believers would not share in the benefits of the *parousia* of Christ since they had died prior to his return. We have quite the opposite problem in much of Christendom today whereby some conceive of their loved ones as already enjoying the fullness of afterlife long before the last day and the resurrection of the body. What Paul writes here addresses both of these situations:

¹³We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning the ones who are sleeping, in order that you do not mourn even as others who do not have hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also God will lead [bring] with Jesus the ones who sleep through Jesus. ¹⁵For we say this to you as a word of the Lord: *we, the ones who live, the ones who remain, to the triumphal coming of the Lord shall surely not precede the ones who have fallen asleep* [Τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν τοὺς κοιμηθέντας;]. ¹⁶*Because the Lord himself—with a cry, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God—will descend from heaven and the dead in Christ will be raised first* [ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον,]. ¹⁷*Then we, the ones who are alive and remaining, will be snatched up at the same time with them into the clouds in order to meet the Lord in the air* [ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἀρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα;]. *Consequently, we will always be with the Lord* [καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα]. ¹⁸Therefore, continually encourage one another with these words.

Paul is not the originator of the language that Christians who have physically died are “asleep” (4:13, 14). He probably used language that was already part of the oral Gospel tradition with which he was familiar (e.g., Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11-13). A similar use of Gospel tradition is visible in his later discussion of Jesus coming “as a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2, 4; cf. Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39). “Sleep” should neither be understood as a euphemism that Paul is using to soften or deny the reality of physical death nor as a technical term indicating so-called “soul sleep” (i.e., an unawareness of the person to after-death life in Christ during the intermediate state prior to physical resurrection on the last day). As with Jesus, Paul uses the language of sleep to communicate the mystery that those who physically die in Christ continue to live on even

though their heart and brain activity cease.¹⁸

Paul explicitly grounds the assurance of the physical resurrection of those who are "asleep" in Jesus' own death and resurrection: "If we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also God will lead with Jesus the ones who sleep through Jesus" (1 Thess 4:14). Next to the confession, "Jesus is Lord," this phrase captures one of the earliest creeds of the church: "We believe that Jesus died and rose." Several interpreters have noted that this is a pre-Pauline formula because it uses the active voice form of ἀνίστημι rather than the passive voice form of ἐγείρω that is more typically used by Paul to speak of the resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor 15:4). That Paul understands Jesus' death as substitutionary atonement for sin is clear later in this letter with his use of the preposition ὑπέρ, "the one who died *on our behalf*" (1 Thess 5:10), a preposition he employs repeatedly in his later epistles in order to proclaim the significance of Jesus' death.¹⁹ Christ's future work of returning and raising the dead is grounded in his past work of everyone dying to sin in his death and all being raised to life in his resurrection (2 Cor 5:14; cf. Rom 6:1-11).²⁰

As Paul begins speaking of how the last day will unfold, he makes a very bold claim: "We say this to you as *a word of the Lord*." In a monograph devoted to the phrase ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, Michael Pahl presents all the possible ways of interpreting this phrase and then falls flat by saying it is a reference back to the death and resurrection of Jesus and not to what follows.²¹ His translation of this sentence is: "In accordance with this message about the Lord, we say this to you." It seems more probable that Paul is throwing the authoritative weight of Jesus behind what follows. In light of the fact that κύριος occurs four times in this section and the other three times the referent is Jesus, it is clear that the referent of κύριος here is Jesus. This means that it is either from the teaching of the earthly ministry of Jesus or from the exalted Jesus by special revelation. It is my conclusion that this reflects teaching from the earthly ministry of Jesus, even though we do not have a gospel account that gives us such a verbatim teaching.

¹⁸ See especially Piotr Malysz, "Paul's Use of the Imagery of Sleep and His Understanding of the Christian Life: A Study in the Thessalonian Correspondence," *CTQ* 67 (2003): 65-78.

¹⁹ This preposition communicates Paul's theology of substitutionary atonement (e.g. Rom 5:6, 8; 8:32; 1 Cor 11:24; 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14, 21; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:2, 25).

²⁰ See the brief discussion in Charles A. Gieschen, "Original Sin in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 31 (2005): 365-372.

²¹ Michael W. Pahl, *Discerning the 'Word of the Lord': The 'Word of the Lord' in 1 Thessalonians 4:15*, Library of New Testament Studies 389 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

The evangelist John said that Jesus did many other signs “that have not been written in this book” (John 20:31); Jesus also said many other things, no doubt, which are not recorded in the four gospels but which circulated in early apostolic preaching.

Against all rapture doctrines that assert a secret coming of Christ that brings about a secret exit of the church, be they pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, or post-tribulation variations of the rapture, Paul writes here of a very public triumphal coming: “Because the Lord himself—with a cry, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God—will descend from heaven and the dead in Christ will be raised first. Then we, the ones who are alive and remaining, will be snatched up at the same time with them into the clouds in order to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). For all who are interested in the verb ἀρπαγησόμεθα “we will be snatched up” which the Vulgate renders *rapiemur* (thus “rapture”), Malherbe’s Anchor Bible commentary cites numerous uses of ἀρπάζω in epitaphs, Lucian, Plutarch, Seneca, Ovid, Ciero, Horace, and Pliny where deceased persons are said to have been “snatched up” by death.²² In what appears to be a wonderful twist on this common usage, Paul uses this same verb here to emphasize that we will be snatched up, not by death, but by the living Jesus unto eternal resurrected life with him!

Obviously there are those who have trouble reconciling the depiction of the last day events here with the judgment depicted in texts like Matthew 25:31–46, and thus conclude these are describing different events. The Scriptures, however, are more interesting than many of us are; they describe the same event with different language and imagery. Paul does not even mention judgment of the righteous and unrighteous simply because his purpose is to console and encourage Christians whose loved ones died in the faith. If he were emphasizing accountability, he would mention judgment, as he does in other contexts within these brief epistles.

One topic that is not discussed much in the commentaries on this text is the various frightening portraits of afterlife in ancient Greco-Roman literature.²³ Most of us are familiar with some of the portraits of afterlife in Hades that are found in *The Odyssey* (c. 8th century BC), such as Tantalus always being tantalized by water and fruit that is habitually swept out of his reach, or Sisyphus being doomed to rolling a huge stone uphill only to have it roll back down again (Book 11:563–600). These Homeric depictions

²² Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 275–276.

²³ See primary text examples in Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Longman, 1977), 238–269.

of afterlife, however, are tame compared with others that followed in later centuries. Two examples will suffice here to demonstrate that there was good reason why some of the pagan converts to Christianity in Thessalonica—who may not have been taught extensively about afterlife, resurrection, and heaven from the Scriptures or Paul's preaching—would have been fearful about what would happen to fellow Christians who died before Christ's *parousia*.

The first example is from the concluding section of Plato's *The Republic* (c. 380 BC) where he recounts Socrates' teaching about afterlife from the supposed experience of Er who had died and returned to life. There is extensive testimony here about the so-called "immortality of the soul" and the soul's 1000-year journey following death. Although there is a heavenly reward in the sky for the souls of those doing good, especially noteworthy is the testimony to divine punishment through underground travel of the soul for the one who did evil:

The first group recounted their experiences, weeping and wailing as they recalled all the various things they had suffered and seen in their journey under the earth, which lasted one thousand years; the other from the sky told in turn of the happiness they had felt and the sights of indescribable beauty. O Glaucon, it would take a long time to relate everything. But he [Er] did say that the essential significance was this: everyone had to suffer an appropriate penalty for each and every sin ten times over, in retribution for the number of times and number of persons he had wronged; that is, he must make one full payment once every hundred years (since that is considered the span of human life) so that he might pay in full for all his wrongs, tenfold in one thousand years. For example, if any were responsible for the deaths of many or betrayed and enslaved cities or armies or were guilty of any other crime, they would suffer torments ten times over for all of these sins individually. . . .²⁴

Another example comes from Vergil's *Aeneid*, written in the first century BC, which further explains the soul as part of the universal spirit, with the so-called immortal soul seeking escape from the physical body and then purging corruption through the 1,000-year cycle of punishment:

In the first place a spirit within sustains the sky, the earth, the waters, and the shining globe of the moon, and the Titan sun and stars; this spirit moves the whole mass of the universe, a mind, as it were, infusing its limbs and mingled with its huge body. From this arises all

²⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 10, section 615. This translation is from Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 246.

of life, the race of men, animals and birds, and the monsters that the sea bears under its marble surface. The seeds of this mind and spirit have a fiery power and celestial origin, insofar as the limbs and joints of the body, which is of earth, harmful, and subject to death, do not make them full and slow them down. Thus the souls, shut up in the gloomy darkness of the prison of their bodies, experience fear, desire, joy, and sorrow, and do not see clearly the essence of their celestial nature. Moreover, when the last glimmer of life has gone, all the evils and all the diseases of the body do not yet completely depart from these poor souls and it is inevitable that many ills, for a long time encrusted, become deeply engrained in an amazing way. Therefore they are piled with punishments and they pay the penalties of their former wickedness. Some spirits are hung suspended to the winds; for others the infection of crime is washed by a vast whirlpool or burned out by fire. Each of us suffers his own shade. Then we are sent to Elysium and we few occupy these happy fields, until a long period of the circle of time has been completed and has removed the ingrown corruption and has left a pure ethereal spirit and the fire of the original essence. When they have completed the cycle of one thousand years, the god calls all these in a great throng to the river Lethe, where, of course, they are made to forget so that they might begin to wish to return to bodied and see again the vault of heaven.²⁵

After reading these two afterlife conceptions that were prominent in the Greco-Roman world in which Paul preached, one does not have to wonder long why some confused Christians at Thessalonica would have been very concerned about what lay ahead for their loved ones who died before the triumphal coming of Christ. Plato speaks of the journey of the disembodied soul under the earth in order to pay for every sin over a period of 100 years, ten times over (i.e., for a total of 1000 years) after which period the soul makes a choice regarding in what it will be reborn, whether human or animal. How depressing! Such teaching helps one understand why Paul's message in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 inspired hope and was to be used as encouragement. An important aspect of Paul's preaching in every context is the forgiveness of sins that has already been won in the death of Jesus and is proclaimed implicitly here in the creedal statement "if we believe that Jesus died and rose" (1 Thess 4:14). There is, therefore, refreshing clarity and certainty with which Christian life after physical death is described by Paul: sleep in Jesus, triumphal coming of

²⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 700-751. This translation is from Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 246.

Jesus, resurrection of the dead, the faithful snatched up, and all Christians with the Lord always. This is pastoral teaching that truly comforts fears about death and encourages hope about the life that continues beyond the grave and climaxes in the resurrection of the body in glory.

VII. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

It is especially in 1 Thessalonians 5 that one can hear the echoes of Jesus' teachings, such as those in the synoptic Gospels. As stated above, Paul's teaching that "the Day of the Lord come like a thief in the night" is probably drawing on Gospel tradition. Here the arrival of the last day and Christ's coming is linked pointedly with sanctification:

¹Concerning the general times and times of fulfillment, brothers, you have no need to have something written to you. ²For you yourselves know accurately that the Day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night [αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἴδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται]. ³When people are saying, "Peace and Security," then suddenly destruction will come upon them just as birthing pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will surely not escape [ὅταν λέγωσιν, Εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὄλεθρος ὡσπερ ἡ ὠδὴν τῆ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ, καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐκφύωσιν]. ⁴You, however, are not in the darkness, brothers, with the result that this day surprises you like a thief [ὕμεις δὲ, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐν σκότει, ἵνα ἡ ἡμέρα ὑμᾶς ὡς κλέπτῃς καταλάβῃ]. ⁵For all of you are children of light, children of the day. We are neither of the night nor of the darkness. ⁶Therefore, then, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For the ones who sleep, sleep at night, and the ones who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸Because we, however, are of the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ [ὅτι οὐκ ἔθετο ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ] ¹⁰who died on our behalf [τοῦ ἀποθανόντος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν], in order that whether we are awake or asleep, we live together with him. ¹¹Therefore, encourage and build up one another continually, just as you are doing.

I follow Karl Donfried and others who argue that the background for this text is the religious and political cultic life of the city.²⁶ The Roman imperial cult promised "Peace and Security" as part of the *pax Romana* propaganda campaign backed up Rome's military might, but *pax Romana* will not be able to deliver people from God's judgment on the Day of the

²⁶ See the bibliography and discussion in Charles A. Gieschen, "Christian Identity in a Pagan Thessalonica: The Imitation of Paul's Cruciform Life," *CTQ* 72 (2008): 3-5.

Lord. The religious cults had drunkenness and sexual revelry under the cover of darkness, but Christians who await the Day of the Lord live as “children of light,” sober with faith, love, and hope, separate from such pagan idolatry and self-indulgence. Notice again how the future deliverance from end-time wrath is grounded in Jesus’ past deliverance at his death for our behalf (1 Thess 5:9–10).

VII. 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

The first epistle ends with a blessing that contains a short eschatological summary that is very similar to the one at the end of chapter 3:

*23*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, *and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* [καὶ ἀλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθείη]. *24*The one who calls you is faithful; he will also do it.

What is made very explicit here is that the sanctifying activity that Paul discusses in the final two chapters of this letter is a divine work: “God himself sanctifies . . . he will do it.” Rome promised peace, but the God of peace who has reconciled humanity with himself through the death of Jesus will deliver everlasting peace at the triumphal final coming of Christ on the last day. Significant here is Paul’s emphasis on the body (τὸ σῶμα) also being sanctified; the future state of the body was not of concern in much Greco-Roman philosophy that viewed the body as a prison for the immortal soul. Paul uses this closing blessing to stress the value of God’s creation through his assurance that the body also will be raised and live eternally.

VIII. Eschatology, the Church, and Mission

In light of this brief tour through the eschatological texts of 1 Thessalonians, what is the Holy Spirit teaching here about the church and her mission? First and foremost, the church is to live with her eyes fixed on both the past work of Christ, especially his atoning death and victorious resurrection that is mediated to the present through preaching and the sacraments, and the future work of Christ when he comes again to raise and judge the living and dead. Paul’s pattern is to begin with Christ’s past work and then proclaim this as the sure basis for Christ’s future work at his coming on the last day. Proclaiming the past and future work of Christ is not an “either . . . or” situation for the church; it is “both . . . and.” According to 1 Thess 1:10, the basis for our “waiting for the Son from heaven” “who delivers us from the wrath to come” is the resurrection of the Son by the Father. Because of the past work of Jesus’ resurrection, we are assured of the future work of his coming and delivering us from evil.

According to 1 Thess 4:13, the basis of our assurance that "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep" is "because we believe that Jesus died and rose again." According to 1 Thess 5:9, "God destined us to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us." There are past, present, and future aspects to salvation in the Scriptures. With the phrase "to obtain salvation," Paul is writing about the future aspect of salvation. The past salvific work of Christ's death is the foundation for the certain hope in Christ's future salvific work of end-time resurrection, deliverance from wrath against unbelief, and restored glory. This means that the inter-relationship and balance between Christ's past and future work should be maintained in the life of the church, especially the teaching and preaching of pastors. The church is where we hear of Christ's past and future work, where we receive the benefits of that past work in the present, and where this past and present work of Christ is the assurance of his future work that will be consummated at his *parousia*.

Second, because the reality of sin in and around the church inherently causes affliction, the church needs to point regularly beyond its past or present affliction to its future glory. It may be difficult for many in the current North American context of Christianity to empathize with the affliction that these first-century Christians and many others in subsequent generations have endured. The church suffers in every generation but often more in some locations than others. When I lectured in Lithuania in 2009, I heard many accounts about Christianity under communism. When I taught in South Africa in 2010, I heard of the many and varied challenges facing Christianity in different western Africa nations. Look at the challenges that Christians in Haiti face following the earthquake of 2010. When the present circumstances of the church are severe affliction, it is all the more important that the apostolic ministry put before the church her future circumstances of resurrected glory and restored creation. Christ's coming on the last day means that the church and individual Christians need never lose hope, no matter how desperate our present circumstances, because our future is as certain and glorious as the risen and returning Lord Jesus Christ.

Third, although God's wrath against sin was visited upon Jesus at the cross and is properly part of our preaching of Christ's past work mediated to us in the present through the means of grace, God's wrath over unbelief is a future reality that Paul proclaims in conjunction with Christ's second coming. Hesitancy among pastors to proclaim the end-time wrath of God over unbelief that leads to eternal death does not help the church to see the dire consequences for the world that rejects Jesus. Proclamation of those

consequences, however, adds urgency to the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. To put it very bluntly: God is seeking to rescue unbelievers not only from the hopelessness of their present idolatry, but also from an utterly hopeless future in hell.

Fourth, because eschatology involves, by its very nature, mysteries that will be fully revealed in the future, there is a greater possibility for the church to be deceived or confused about eschatological events. We see this in the first-century church and yet again in the 21st century church. This possibility should not lead us to avoid the subject, however, but rather move us to engage the subject fully, addressing especially any confusion about the subject for the well-being of the church, even as Paul does in these epistles.

Fifth, preaching and teaching focused on the second coming of Christ should not lead the church or individual members of Christ's body to try to escape the responsibilities of daily vocation but to embrace these responsibilities with more fervor because our time on earth is limited and the day of the Lord is coming soon. Martin Menken has made a significant contribution to our understanding of these epistles by emphasizing that an over-realized eschatology led some at Thessalonica to think that the curse of Genesis 3—working by the sweat of one's brow—no longer applied to those who were a new creation in Christ Jesus. There are two allusions to this situation in the first letter.²⁷ 1 Thess 4:11-12 states, "[But we encourage you. . .] to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on no one." Among the list of exhortations at the end of the letter in 1 Thess 5:14 is this phrase: "admonish the undisciplined." This emphasis on vocational activity is very explicit, extensive, and blunt in the second letter. Paul writes in 2 Thess 3:6-13,

[6] Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. [7] For *you yourselves know how it is necessary to imitate us* [οἴδατε πῶς δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς], because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, [8] nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we not be a burden to any of you; [9] not because we do not have the right to this, but *in order to offer ourselves as an example for you, in order*

²⁷ M.J.J. Menken, "Paradise Regained or Still Lost? Eschatology and Disorderly Behavior in 2 Thessalonians," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 271-289.

that you imitate us [ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τύπον δῶμεν ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς]. [10] For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. [11] For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. [12] Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. [13] But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

Paul's blunt statement, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (1 Thess 5:10b) is an obvious corrective to the over-realized eschatology held to by some of the Thessalonian Christians.

This study has argued that eschatology, especially the *parousia* or triumphal final coming of Christ, was central to Paul's apostolic missionary preaching and remains a vital foundation of the church's ongoing faith, daily living in hope, and mission of proclaiming salvation from the wrath to come. As with Paul and the Thessalonian church, it is vital that the integration of Christ's past and future work be heard in our present preaching and teaching, in order that this message shape the daily faith, love, and hope of his church in mission with the result that she ever lives in eager expectation of his coming on the last day.

