

ESCHATOLOGY IN THE THESSALONIAN CORRESPONDENCE

Introduction

Paul addressed two letters to a specific church in Europe, the church in Thessalonica. They are quite unique and concentrate on eschatology. After having taken a look at the background information we will focus on their teaching about the end.

I. Background

1. The Historical Situation

Thessalonica was an important city in Macedonia. The city still exists and is called Salonika. It is located at the Gulf of Salonika, and an ancient road, the Egnatian Road, which connected the East with Rome passed through it. The excellent location made it of great commercial importance. Acts 17:1 mentions that a Jewish synagogue was there. Consequently, a large Jewish settlement must have been in Thessalonica.

Paul preached the gospel to the inhabitants of this city during his second missionary journey after he had left Philippi. He approached the Jews first. On three Sabbaths he interpreted Messianic prophecies of the OT in their synagogue and won some followers. Among them were Godfearing Greeks and influential women. Probably, his ministry in Thessalonica lasted longer than just three weeks, because in 1Thess 2:9 Paul remembers: “For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God.” Furthermore, he was supported by the church of Philippi (Phil 4:16). Paul must also have reached quite a number of gentiles (1Thess 1:9).

“Mob violence, stirred up by the Jews, brought Paul’s preaching to the attention of the Roman authorities, but the charge that the apostle was guilty of treason in presenting the doctrine of Christ’s coming kingdom was not accepted by the magistrates. That Paul and his companions were not officially expelled from Thessalonica and debarred from returning, is evident from the fact that the apostle found it necessary to explain to the church why he had not returned (ch. 2:17, 18), and from the fact that Timothy did return (ch. 3:2).”¹ Paul moved on to Berea. Luke praises the Jews

¹Nichol, 7:224.

there, because they were open-minded and studied Scripture in order to see whether or not Paul's proclamation agreed with the OT (Acts 17:11). However, opposition stirred by Jews arriving from Thessalonica forced Paul to leave also Berea. He went to Athens where he probably met Timothy. Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica to encourage the new church members (1Thess 3:1-2,6), while Paul moved on to Corinth. There he met Timothy and Silas again (Acts 18:1,5). Timothy brought good news from the Thessalonian believers, and Paul responded by writing a letter to them. A couple months later he sent another letter.

2. Author

Both letters claim to be written by Paul mentioning also Silvanus and Timothy. Within both letters one further reference to Paul is found respectively. In 1Thess 2:18 Paul mentions himself by name and states that he and his companions wanted to return to Thessalonica: "because we wanted to come to you -- I, Paul, again and again -- but Satan hindered us." In 2Thess 3:17 we read: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write." These references show us that Paul is claimed to be the primary author of the letters. Obviously, Paul used a secretary to whom he dictated the letter. Toward the end he added some words in his own peculiar handwriting. Thus, in both letters the internal testimony points to Pauline authorship. The external evidence is also strong in both cases.²

However, starting with the 19th century Pauline authorship of 2Thessalonians was challenged.³ The main objections are a change in eschatology, a change of tone, the readers, and the similarities in language. All these objections can be rejected. Why should Paul not express ideas about eschatology in another way after his first explanation may have been misunderstood by some? Why should he not change his tone if problems were not resolved and had to be addressed anew? It is said that the second letter requires a greater knowledge of the OT, although church members were predominantly Gentiles Christians. "But there are no allusions in this Epistle which Gentiles

²Both letters are mentioned in Marcion's list of Pauline works as well as in the Muratorian Canon. 1Thessalonians is quoted by Irenaeus and acknowledged as genuine by Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian. The second letter is mentioned by Irenaeus and was probably even known to Ignatius, Justin, and Polycarp, so that the external evidence for 2Thessalonians is even stronger than that for 1Thessalonians.

³See, for instance, Keck, 114-115.

could not have appreciated.”⁴ The last argument is maybe somewhat strange. If you do not find many parallels between two documents, common authorship is denied. If you have many close parallels, common authorship is also denied. Which way around do we want to have it?

Some have suggested that the order of the two letters should be changed, the one now counted as the second should actually be the first. But it is difficult to see how the warm tone of 1Thessalonians should have followed 2Thessalonians. Idlers are briefly mentioned in 1Thessalonians. Obviously the problem has deepened and is dealt with more extensively in 2Thessalonians. A reversed order is not very convincing.⁵

3. Date and Place

Since Paul met Timothy and Silas in Corinth when he received the good news about the believers in Thessalonica, it is best to take Corinth as the place where 1Thessalonians and 2Thessalonians were written. The year was probably 51 A.D. With the possible exceptions of the Letter of James and of Paul’s letter to the Galatians the two epistles to the Thessalonians may be the oldest part of the NT.

4. Purpose

It can be assumed that 1Thessalonians and 2Thessalonians were written to encourage the new believers in Thessalonica. Paul could not spend as much time with them as he would have liked. A letter would be of some help. He had also heard that some were worried about loved ones that had passed away and wanted to address this question as well as related questions dealing with the Second Coming of Jesus. He also was aware of some problems within the church that we wanted to address such as the danger of adopting pagan standards with regard to sexuality, the problem of idleness, and calling in question the authority of leaders.

⁴Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 572.

⁵Cf. Carson, 350-351; Guthrie, 575-578.

5. Content and Structure

a. First Thessalonians

The letter starts with an introduction in which the apostle introduces himself and his companions and sends a greeting or blessing. The rest of chapter 1 contains a thanksgiving in which Paul states that the Thessalonian Christians have followed the example of Paul and his companions and have themselves become an example for other believers in Macedonia. Verse 3 mentions faith, love, and hope. These characteristics are also found in 1Cor 13:13. The passage is quite positive.

1Thessalonians 2 consists of two basic parts. The first one is a review of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians and a description of the mutual relations. This first part of chapter two is a review and sounds a little defensive. Paul claims he could have used his authority as an apostle, which he has not. Paul sees himself as a mother and a father that care for their children. The review continues with the second part of chapter 2. However, here Paul focuses on their reception of the gospel and the following consequences, namely persecution. He also mentions that he wanted to visit them. 1Thess 3 is a report on Timothy's visit with the Thessalonians and on the comfort that the good report brought to Paul. For a third time thanksgiving is mentioned.⁶ Chapter 3 ends with a prayer for the Thessalonians in which Paul expresses his desire that they may grow in love.

Chapters 4 and 5 contain exhortations starting with the issue of sexual purity and followed by brotherly love and the passage on the Second Coming and the resurrection of the dead. Eschatology is also found in 1Thess 5. Admonitions on different subjects follow. Verses 23-24 may be another prayer for the Thessalonians. Then follows the conclusion.

The letter can be outlined in the following way:⁷

⁶Cf. 1Thess 1:2; 2:13; 3:9.

⁷For various outlines, see, F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 4; Guthrie, 579-580; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), vi-vii; Francis D. Nichol et al., eds., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 7:225-226.

Introduction and Thanksgiving (1:1-10)

- I. Review and Relations with the Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)
 - 1. Paul's review of his ministry to the Thessalonians (2:1-12)
 - 2. Reception of the gospel and consequences (2:13-16)
 - 3. Paul's desire to visit the Thessalonians (2:17-20)
 - 4. Timothy's visit and its effects (3:1-10)
 - 5. Prayer for the Thessalonians (3:11-13)
 - II. Instructions and Exhortations (4:1-5:22)
 - 1. On sexual purity (4:1-8)
 - 2. On brotherly love (4:9-12)
 - 3. On the Second Coming and the resurrection (4:13-18)
 - 4. On the preparedness for the Second Coming (5:1-11)
 - 5. On various Christian duties (5:12-22)
- Prayer and Conclusion (5:23-28)

b. Second Thessalonians

As in the first letter Paul introduces himself and adds a salutation which is also a blessing. Again there is a long section which starts with thanksgiving and ends with prayer. The second chapter concentrates on the antichrist. Another passage on thanksgiving including some admonitions is found at the end of chapter 2. Chapter 3 contains a request for prayer and different admonitions. It ends with a closing prayer and the normal conclusion of a letter. Both letters to the Thessalonians have a pastoral orientation.

Here is a possible outline of the letter:⁸

Introduction and Thanksgiving (1:1-12)

- I. The Coming of the Antichrist (2:1-12)
 - II. Thanksgiving, Admonition, and Prayer (2:13-17)
 - III. Requests and Admonitions (3:1-15)
- Prayer and Conclusion (3:16-18)

6. Contribution

Although 1Thessalonians and 2Thessalonians are not large, they make some distinctive contributions to the NT. There are many topics that would be worth to concentrate upon them. For

⁸For other outlines, see, Bruce 140, Guthrie, 581-582; Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, vii; Nichol, 7:262-263.

example, Donfried suggests that there is a special emphasis on election in 1 Thessalonians.⁹ Christian lifestyle, thanksgiving, prayer, and the word of God are other important contributions. But we will now focus on eschatology.

II. Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians

1. Texts Containing Eschatological Statements

a. First Thessalonians

The Second Coming of Jesus permeates 1 Thessalonians. In 1 Thess 1:3 Paul constantly remembers the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Second Coming is clearly in view in 1 Thess 1:10: "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

In 1 Thess 2:12 the apostle challenges his audience "to walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

The next clear reference is found at the end of the second chapter, 1 Thess 2:19: "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?"

Again the third chapter ends with the hope of the Second Coming, 1 Thess 3:13: "so that he may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

In chapter 4 there is an entire passage on the second coming, 4:13-18:¹⁰ "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be

⁹Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28-30, 62.

¹⁰Cf., Donfried, 34

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Chapter 5 continues with this theme in a related way, 1Thess 5:1-11: “Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.”

The last reference is found in 1Thess 5:23: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is an impressive list of eschatological texts. C. Wanamaker points out that eschatology is “the only significant doctrinal issue raised in the letter, namely, the problem of the return of Jesus from heaven, which is dealt with in 4:13-5:11.”¹¹

b. 2Thessalonians

Eschatology is also dominant in 2 Thessalonians. In 2Thess 1 Paul addresses the sufferings and persecutions of the Christians in Thessalonica and encourages them by pointing out that the Lord Jesus will judge their adversaries at his coming, 2Thess 1:5-10: “This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

¹¹Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 89.

and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed.”

Another long section is found in 2Thess 2:1-12 dealing with what commonly has been called the antichrist. There are two different *parousias*: “Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.”

The last more specific reference to eschatology occurs in 2Thess 2:14: “It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2. Important Terms

These passages in the two Thessalonian letters contain a number of important terms that will be listed below:

(1) *Terms describing the Second Coming of Jesus*

Five terms describe the Second Coming of Jesus. Some of them are standard terms, whereas others are used only rarely.

- (a) *Parousia*. The word “means basically ‘presence’ (as in 2 Cor. 10:10, where the NIV has ‘in person’), but it came to be used as a technical expression for a royal visit. In the New Testament it became the accepted term for the second coming of the Lord”¹² The term is found twenty-four times in the New Testament, fourteen times in the Pauline corpus and ten times in Matthew, James, Peter, and 1John.¹³ In the non-Pauline material it always refers to Christ’s Second Coming. This is quite different with Paul. Only half of the occurrences *parousia* refers to Christ’s return. The other seven texts talk about a coming of Paul’s coworkers,¹⁴ his own presence,¹⁵ or the coming of the antichrist (2Thess 1:9). Seven of the fourteen Pauline references are found in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Furthermore, the *parousia* of Christ occurs six times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and only once elsewhere in Paul, namely in 1Cor 15:23.¹⁶ In other words, in the Thessalonian letters the *parousia* is only the Second Coming of Jesus¹⁷ and the public appearance of the antichrist. Thus the heaviest concentration of the term is found in these two letters. In addition in these two letters the term always has a future orientation. The Second Coming of Christ is imitated by antichrist. Nevertheless, the Lord’s *parousia* clearly dominates.
- (b) *The day (of the Lord)*. The “day” is found nine times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but

¹²Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 68.

¹³Matt 24:3,27,37,39; Jam 5:7,8; 2Pet 1:16; 3:4,12; 1John 2:28.

¹⁴1Cor 16:17; 2Cor 7:6,7; Phil 1:26.

¹⁵2Cor 10:10; Phil 2:12.

¹⁶Cf., Wanamaker, 124.

¹⁷1Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2Thess 2:1,8.

only six times does the term directly or indirectly refer to the day of the Lord.¹⁸ The full expression “day of the Lord” occurs in the NT only in 1Cor 1:8; 5:5, 2Cor 1:14; 1Thess 5:2, 2Thess 2:2; and 2Pet 3:10. A similar expression is found in Rev 6:17.¹⁹ The day of the Lord is the Second Coming of Jesus.²⁰ The expression goes back to the Old Testament where judgment is associated with it (Amos 5:18-20). Consequently the judgment idea is also found in the New Testament when the day of the Lord is addressed.

- (c) *To come (erchomai)*. This common verb is found six times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but only in 1Thess 5:2 and 2Thess 1:10 does it refer to Christ’s Second Coming.
- (d) *Apokalupsis*. The term describes an action of uncovering, disclosing, revealing and is translated “revelation.” Paul uses it thirteen times. In the rest of the New Testament five additional references are found. The word denotes a divine revelation that people may experience (1Cor 14:6). This may include a vision but is not limited to it. Secondly, it depicts the revelation of Jesus Christ at his second coming (1Cor 1:7). *Apokalupsis* is the first word that occurs in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1:1). Probably its title is taken from there. In the letters to the Thessalonians it is found in 2Thess 1:7 only and refers to Christ’s Second Coming. The respective verb *apokaluptō* is found in 2Thess 2:3, 6, 8 refers to the revelation of the man of lawlessness only. Thus, 2Thessalonians describes two different revelations and two different *paraousias* which are opposed to each other, the genuine and the counterfeit, Christ’s coming and antichrist’s coming.
- (e) *Epiphaneia*. In the New Testament “appearance” is a Pauline word. It is found in 2Thess 2:8 and five times in the Pastoral Epistles.²¹ It describes a visible manifestation of a divine being. In the NT it is used of Christ exclusively and depicts

¹⁸1Thess 5:2, 4, 5, 8; 2Thess 1:10; 2:2.

¹⁹“The great day of their wrath” points to God and the Lamb, cf. Rev. 6:16.

²⁰I. Howard Marshall, “Jesus as Lord: The Development of the Concept,” in *Eschatology and the New Testament*, ed. by W. Hulitt Gloer (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 143.

²¹1Tim 6:4; 2Tim 1:10; 4:1,8; Tit 2:13.

his first coming to earth (2Tim 1:10) as well as his future coming (1Tim 6:14).

(2) *Terms related to the Second Coming of Jesus*

- (a) *Hope*. The term “hope” occurs fifty-three times in the New Testament. Paul uses it forty-one times. It is found in 1Thess 1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8; 2Thess 2:16 and is not only future-oriented—which is normal, because the term implies that—but it is oriented toward Christ’s Second Coming.
- (b) *Kingdom*. The term abounds in the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels. Paul uses it rarely. In 1Thess 2:12; 2Thess 1:5 the kingdom has a future orientation especially for the Thessalonians.²²
- (c) *Glory*. This word is used 166 in the New Testament. More than half of the references are found in Paul.²³ Of the five places where it occurs in 1 and 2 Thessalonians²⁴ four have an eschatological setting (1Thess 2:12, 20; 2Thess 1:9; 2:14) and three talk about God’s or Jesus’ glory (1Thess 2:12; 2Thess 1:9; 2:14). The other two refer to humans.

(3) *Terms describing positive effects of the Second coming*

- (a) *To rise*. Because Jesus died and rose again (1Thess 4:14), the dead in Christ will also rise (1Thess 4:16). The verb occurs frequently in the New Testament,²⁵ but Paul employs it only seven times and only in the letters to the Thessalonians does he talk about the future resurrection which is associated with the Second Coming.

(4) *Terms describing negative effects of the Second coming*

The following terms describe negative effects on those who persecute Christians and do not believe in Jesus. With the exception of the first term the others are rare words and do not occur more than four times each in all of the Pauline writings:

- (a) *Wrath*--1Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9.

²²“Kingdom is found in the New Testament 162 times and in Paul 17 times. The Synoptic Gospels employ the word 121 times.

²³84 times.

²⁴1Thess 2:6, 12, 20; 2Thess 1:9; 2:14.

²⁵108 times.

- (b) *Destruction*--1Thess 5:3; 2Thess 1:9.
- (c) *Judgment*--2Thess 1:5.
- (d) *Retribution*--2Thess 1:8. (9 NT, 4 Paul)
- (e) *Punishment*--2Thess 1:9.²⁶

These terms show that the Thessalonian correspondence is strong in eschatology. But it is not only the quantity of eschatological statements that is surprising, but also the employment of specific and rarely used vocabulary. Thus, 1 and 2 Thessalonians have a unique emphasis different from other Pauline letters. In the second letter there is also a sharp contrast between the divine side and that of the opponent. The conflict will reach so far that the “Son of lawlessness” will imitate Jesus’ Second Coming, a grandiose deception for those who do not love the truth. In any case, eschatology permeates the two Thessalonian epistles.

3. 1Thessalonians’ Eschatological Passages Reviewed

a. 1Thess 1:3

In 1Thess 1:3 Paul praises among others “your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Morris writes: “*Hope*, in a Christian context, always has an air of certainty about it. It is a confident expectation, not the unfounded optimism we often mean by the word. More particularly, the Christian hope is directed towards the second advent which seems to be in mind here (so Findlay, Milligan, Masson, etc.).”²⁷ In the beginning and at the end of 1Thessalonians we find the triadic formulation faith, love, and hope (1:3; 5:8). The individual elements are found throughout 1Thessalonians and 2Thessalonians. The last element in this triadic formulation is hope (1Thess 1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8; 2Thess 2:16). The Thessalonians have “hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” In 1Thess 4:13 the believers are contrasted with those who have no hope. But Christians have hope in Jesus’ coming and in the resurrection. They maintain the hope of salvation. It seems as if Paul in

²⁶“Wrath” is found in the NT 36 times and 23 times in the Pauline writings. “Destruction” is used by Paul only. It occurs twice in 1 and 2 Thessaolians and twice in other Pauline literature. “Judgment” is used 47 times in the NT and four times by Paul, but only once in 2Thess. “Retribution” and “punishment” are also specific terms employed only once in 2Thess. “Retribution” is found nine times in the NT and four times in 4 Paul, whereas “punishment” is only used by Paul, namely three times in total.

²⁷Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 43.

1Thessalonians introduces the triadic formula and subsequently spells out how these elements relate to Christians in Thessalonica. First, he develops what faith means. Then he focuses on love. Finally, he discusses hope and clearly links it to Christ's Second coming.

b. 1Thess 1:9-10

The next text—1Thess 1:9-10—reports how the believers in Thessalonica turned away from idols and began to serve the living God. This included to wait expectantly²⁸ for the risen Lord who rescues from the future wrath, i.e., the eschatological wrath. Jesus' resurrection and his second coming including his complete deliverance are associated. God's wrath over sin²⁹ is taken seriously as is Christ's perfect salvation. The resurrection of Christ would still be quite meaningless for his disciples if it would not lead to his Second Coming. However, the belief in the *parousia* "is explicitly part of the belief to which the Thessalonians have converted . . . Actually, the soteriological dimension is even connected directly with Jesus' final coming which will deliver the faithful from the wrath to come."³⁰ Wanamaker claims "Had the early followers of Jesus not believed that he would soon return from heaven as the messianic Lord, Christianity would almost certainly not have come into existence. Belief in the parousia of Christ is what gave the resurrection its real significance by promising the realization of Christ's messianic rule on the plan of human history. . . . "The implication of vv. 9f. is that the parousia expectation lay at the very heart of the Thessalonians' faith."³¹

²⁸Ibid., 47: "The word *wait for* (*anamenein*, here only in the New Testament) means 'wait expectantly.'"

²⁹Cf., 1Thess 2:16.

³⁰Eduard Schweizer, "The Significance of Eschatology in the Teaching of Jesus," in *Eschatology and the New Testament*, ed. by W. Hulitt Gloer (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 9. Wanamaker, 87: "This was a foundational belief both of Paul's apocalyptic theology . . . and of earliest Christianity in general . . . It enabled the early Christians to maintain that Jesus was the messiah in spite of his failure to actualize his messianic rule during his earthly lifetime . . ."

³¹Wanamaker, 87-88.

c. 1Thess 2:12

In 1Thess 2:12 Paul used the term “kingdom” which was so common in Christ’s proclamation and told his audience that God had called them to his kingdom and glory. For Jesus “kingdom” was not a static concept, not a realm but rather “God’s rule in action”³² which in one sense is already present and its full realization is still future. Christians therefore live in two overlapping ages, the present evil age and the new age. The believers in Thessalonica had not yet finally entered the kingdom or dominion of God and his glory, because this would be fully realized with the *parousia* only when the dead in Christ would be resurrected and the living saints be transformed.

d. 1Thess 2:19

Paul considered the Thessalonian believers to be his hope, joy, and crown of exultation when the Lord comes—*1Thess 2:19*. The context is one of suffering on the part of the Thessalonian believers pointing also to Paul’s desire to see his new converts again, although he was hindered by Satan more than once. The expectation of Christ’s *parousia* gave the oppressed Christians a certain power and helped them “to endure with hope.”³³ Morris suggests that the frequent use of *kurios*, Lord in 1 and 2 Thessalonians describing Jesus as “the one who is in the highest place” may have been due to the strong stress on his Second Coming.³⁴

e. 1Thess 3:13

In 1Thess 3:13 Paul expressed his wish that his audience would be blameless “in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” Expecting the Lord

³²Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 61. He goes on to describe this kingdom, 61-62: “The kingdom is closely associated with the person of Jesus, and, while the kingdom and the cross are not explicitly linked, we cannot but think that the death of the Christ was necessary to the establishment of the kingdom. It is a gift from God (Lk. 12:32), not the result of men’s labours; it is not explicable but is always sheer miracle (Mk. 4:26-29). The thought of the Gospels is that God has broken into this world of space and time in the person of his son, and it is in this way that the kingdom is brought in.”

³³Wanamaker, 125.

³⁴Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 68. The term is used 24 times in 1Thess and 22 times in 2Thess.

will lead to ethical behavior. 1Thess 3:13 is found right at the transitional point where Paul after his review turns his attention to exhortation and ethics and stresses holiness and sanctification. Eschatology will and must influence the Christian lifestyle. Otherwise it is only an academic exercise and intellectual construct without practical implications.

In a special way, 1Thessalonians stresses sanctification (4:3-4,7; 5:23). This is linked to ethical behavior, in this case especially to the right use of the gift of sexuality. Another lifestyle issue is to work with the own hands and not to be idle (1Thess 4:11-12; 5:14). Whether or not the hope of the Second Coming was misunderstood and church members felt they should stop working, in any case idleness is unacceptable. Since the problem was not resolved after Paul had written his first letter, he came back to this issue in 2Thessalonians and spent even more space on it (2Thess 3:6-15). He noted that whoever refused to work should not eat or be fed either. Paul seems to mention even church discipline in the case a change does not occur. Another, yet positive aspect is patience or endurance (1Thess 1:3; 5:14; 2Thess 1:4; 3:5). Christians are patient in persecution and patient with each other, because the Lord is patient. Patience is also linked to faith, love, and hope. Ethics in the two Thessalonian letters is found in the context of eschatology. “In other words, there is a very keen relationship between eschatology and ethics in 1 Thessalonians; in fact, it seems clear that the intimate relationship between eschatology and ethics is at the heart of Paul’s consolation and encouragement.”³⁵ “For the Apostle, then, it is the eschatological gift of faith that determines our lifestyle, and not our lifestyle that determines the ethical content of the gospel. One reason the church today is so ineffectual in certain parts of the world is because it no longer offers pagan society an alternative intellectual or ethical option. Not only does the church seldom exist as a contrasting community over against the mores of society, but often it baptises and incorporates into its existence behaviours that are blatantly opposed to the sanctified life in Christ Jesus.”³⁶

1Thess 3:13 uses the term *parousia* the second time in this letter. The Lord’s *parousia* is with all his saints. Who are these saints? Two suggestions have been made: (1) angels or (2) “saints who

³⁵Donfried, 45.

³⁶Ibid., 76.

have departed this life.”³⁷ Wanamaker argues: “The Christian saints, however, will not come with Christ at his parousia. Rather they will rise to meet him in the air according to 1 Thes. 4:15-18. In light of this it seems likely that the ἀγίοι of 3:13 are the angels . . .”³⁸

One observation must be added. Paul counted on the imminent return of Christ. Why would he stress the need to be ready if he thought Christ’s coming would be in the far future? This may contain a lesson for Christians today who have get used of putting off the *parousia*. Genuine discipleship requires to believe in the imminence of the Lord’s return.

f. 1Thess 4:13-18

A long section dealing with eschatology is found in 1Thess 4 and 5. We will separate 1Thess 4:13-18 from 1Thess 5:1-10, because these two passages seem to be two different although somewhat related sections, and we will for now focus on the second part of 1Thess 4. In verse 13 Paul expresses his concern that his audience is uninformed, ignorant, or failed to understand some of his teachings and therefore, whenever a believer dies, grieves in a way that is similar to the grieving process of a society which has no hope. Paul wants to remedy this situation and wants to present to the Thessalonian believers the Christian hope and the correct understanding of the *parousia* and the related events of the resurrection of the faithful dead and the transformation of the living saints. This will have an influence on their behavior. Already in 1Thess 3:10 Paul had mentioned that he wanted to “complete what is lacking in [their] faith.”

The question is, What was the real problem for the believers in Thessalonica? Different answers have been provided such as:³⁹ (1) Paul had not given systematic instruction about the resurrection—probably because he could not stay in Thessalonica long enough—and wanted to provide it now. (2) Gnostics had created doubts concerning the resurrection and had spiritualized it. Church members were confused. (3) There was a loss of confidence in the *parousia*. “Some of the Thessalonians had evidently understood Paul to say that all who believed would see the parousia.

³⁷Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 78. He holds, 79, that these saints consist of “all who will be with the Lord when he returns,” which would at least include deceased humans.

³⁸Wanamaker, 145.

³⁹See, Wanamaker, 164-166.

Some believers had died. Did this mean that they would be at a disadvantage when the Lord came? . . . Some may even have felt that these deaths discredited the whole idea of the parousia.”⁴⁰ (4) The Thessalonians had received instruction about the resurrection but “had not fully appreciated it.”⁴¹ And (5) church members did not have a problem with the belief that dead Christians would share in the resurrection but they feared that these would be disadvantaged and would not have a chance to be taken to heaven. Whatever the problem was precisely, Paul need to help these believers. So he wrote down this passage which has become one of the most important passages of the New Testament dealing with Christ’s Second Coming and the Resurrection of the dead.

Another point of discussion is whether or not Paul was persuaded of the imminence of the Lord’s coming. How should we interpret the statements “we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord” (v. 15) and “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (v. 17) in which Paul included himself? The opinions differ. Morris asserts that Paul may have thought that he would be alive at the Second Coming, but this cannot be proven. He also suggests that sometimes Paul included himself with the audience without participating in some of their activities. Therefore, he concludes that the “we”-statements cannot help to determine whether or not he believed in Christ’s imminent return.⁴² Guthrie, on the other hand, is much more positive:

“The nearness of the coming seems to have been the mainspring of Paul’s thought in several of his epistles, although never more clearly than in 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff. . . . by using the first person plural, Paul implies a distinct possibility that he might be present . . . The most natural understanding of the passage is that Paul expected an imminent parousia. . . . If the time was unknown, Paul had no alternative but to expect it as imminent . . . Even if Paul was later obliged to think that he would not after all be alive at the parousia, this cannot be construed as a blunder which had to be modified or corrected. In any age it is possible to contemplate a coming at any moment without being guilty of a delusion if it does not happen within one’s lifetime. The expectation of the event is more important than its timing. . . . for the Christian it is always five minutes to midnight. . . . There is, in fact, no evidence that

⁴⁰Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 89.

⁴¹Wanamaker, 166.

⁴²Cf., Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 92. On the same page he writes: “Paul has a little-noticed habit of classing himself with those to whom he is writing, even in activities in which no-one would expect him to take part, like eating in idol’s temples (1 Cor. 10:22; cf. Rom 3:5; Gal. 5:26, etc.)”

Paul made any change in his eschatology, although as he grew older he would realize that the possibility of his being alive at the parousia was diminishing. This does not mean that even at the end of his life Paul abandoned his belief in the imminence of Christ's return."⁴³

1Thess 4:14 connects Christ's resurrection with the future resurrection of the believers. It is interesting that a distinction is made between the death of Jesus and the death of his followers. Whereas Paul clearly states that Jesus "died," he maintains that the believers "sleep." Obviously there is a qualitative difference between Jesus' death and the death of his followers. Because Jesus died and saved those who belong to him, they do not die in the ultimate sense but sleep waiting for the resurrection.⁴⁴ The fate of the unbelievers is not discussed in this passage.

The end of verse 14 can be understood differently. The first question is, Who is "him"? Is it God the Father or is it Jesus? The flow of thought and the close proximity of "him" to "through Jesus" make it probable that the meaning is: God will bring with him, i.e., Jesus, those who sleep. Then the next question is, What is the direct antecedent of the phrase "through Jesus"? Does it refer to those who sleep or to the verb "to bring"? If it refers to the verb "to bring" then we have an awkward duplication: "God will bring with him, Jesus through Jesus those who sleep." Furthermore, in such a case the sleeper would not be identified. It is better to take "through Jesus" with the preceding word: "Those who sleep through Jesus God will bring with him (Jesus)." Jesus will take along only those who are asleep in him.⁴⁵ What does "will bring" mean? Wanamaker suggests: "Thus ἄξει ('will bring') does not refer to the resurrection of the dead in Christ but to their being brought to heaven at the parousia of the Lord. They will be assumed to heaven like those who remain alive until the coming of Jesus."⁴⁶

⁴³Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, revised edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 804-805, 810.

⁴⁴Cf., Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 90: "Christ endured the full horror of that death that is the wages of sin and thus transformed death for his followers into sleep. In the New Testament Christians are never said to die; they fall asleep. But Christ is not said to fall asleep (though cf. 1Cor. 15:20); he died for us."

⁴⁵Cf., Wanamaker, 169: "It has often been missed that Paul changes from the present participle κοιμωμένων in verse 13 to the aorist participle κοιμηθέντας in verse 14. This means that verse 14 refers to the moment of their dying (cf. Bruce, 98), when the issue of whether they belonged to Christ or not was of central importance for their future salvation. God will not bring with Christ all those who sleep but only those who have died while in relationship to him."

⁴⁶Ibid., 170.

In 1Thess 4:15 Paul claims the highest possible authority, the authority of the Lord: “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord.” Paul may quote an actual statement of Jesus that was not preserved elsewhere, a so-called *agraphon*, or he may allude to it, or he may—under inspiration—summarize the teaching of Jesus as found, for instance, in Mat 24.⁴⁷ It would be possible that verse 15 is a summary statement, whereas verses 16-17 are the “word of the Lord.” The *parousia* of Christ is certain. When it will come about, the dead in Christ will not be disadvantaged over against those who will be still alive.

1Thess 4:16-17 contain a chronology of events. After a description of the *parousia* resembling Mat 24:29-31 the accompanying resurrection is mentioned. Simultaneously, the raised believers as well as the living and now transformed believers will be taken to the Lord. The three audible acts of verse 16, namely the shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God are understood by some as a single event: The command of the Lord, possibly addressed to the dead to come out of their graves, is expressed through the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God.⁴⁸ Jesus himself will return, not a representative. The end of the age is brought about by him. At the same time this end will be a new beginning. Trumpet and clouds are signs of a theophany (Exo 19:16; Dan 7:13). The Lord will descend from heaven, whereas the redeemed will ascend to meet him in the air. They will be with the Lord always; but Paul does not tell us precisely what is going to happen next. It may be assumed that they are taken to Christ’s heavenly home, but details are missing here and are furnished by other parts of Scripture. Important for Paul are the certainty of the *parousia*, the resurrection of the dead who will not suffer any disadvantage for having died prior to Christ’s coming, the transformation of the living, and the assumption of all believers. Finally, they will be reunited with their Lord and with each other. Christians have a wonderful hope with which

⁴⁷Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 91, holds: “There is nothing improbable in the suggestion that Paul is quoting an otherwise unrecorded saying, for there is much that is not included in the canonical Gospels (Jn. 20:30; 21:25).” Cf., Wanamaker, 170. On page 171 he writes: “The similarities between Mt. 24:29-31, 40f. in particular, and the images and language used in vv. 16f. suggest that Paul was utilizing what he took to be the teaching of the Lord regarding the end of age.”

⁴⁸Wanamaker, 173 suggests “that Christ’s cry of command is directed to the dead, whom he calls to the resurrection by means of the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. This interpretation is perhaps supported by the statement in Jn. 5:25-29 that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and will come forth to the resurrection and the judgment.”

they comfort each other in the dark hours of loss and grief (1Thess 4:18).

g. 1Thess 5:1-11

After having discussed the resurrection of the dead associated with Christ's Second Coming, Paul gives attention to the time of the *parousia* and to proper Christian behavior, namely watching. In verse 1 "Paul is saying that there is not need for him to write on any aspect of the time of the *parousia*."⁴⁹ The Lord's return will be like a thief in the night, completely unexpected (v.2).⁵⁰ People will be surprised. While they believe everything is fine, the day of the Lord will suddenly overtake them. The illustration of a pregnant women serves to stress the suddenness of the event (v. 3). While unbelievers will be unprepared, church members should be aware of the imminence of the day and should not be astonished: "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief" (v.4). 1Thess 5:1-10 is a parenetical section.⁵¹

Believers are told:

- A You are all sons of light
- B and sons of day.
- B' We are not of night
- A' nor of darkness (v. 5).

As such they must be alert and sober and should not sleep (v. 6). Because they await the day of the Lord they are already here and now "sons of light" and "sons of the day." This is a Hebraism, but the point is that they already belong to that specific day and will triumph on that day while they still live their lives on this earth. ". . . the metaphor 'sons of the day' in the context cannot be divorced from the theme of the passage, the day of the Lord. To be a 'son of the day' is to be one who awaits with expectancy the day of the Lord."⁵² Such people have "the hope of salvation" (v.8) and are "not

⁴⁹Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 95.

⁵⁰Ibid., 96, Morris quotes Leith Samuel who says, "if there is one thing certain about the timing of the Lord's return it is this, that we cannot be certain of the timing . . . It is inevitable, but unpredictable."

⁵¹Wanamaker, 176, writes: "The theme of the *parousia* is still very much the topic of the discussion in 5:1-11, but the focus shifts to parenesis concerning the need for constant vigilance and readiness for the arrival of the *parousia*."

⁵²Ibid., 182.

destined . . . for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9). Whereas in later Pauline letters salvation is already present (e.g., Eph 2:8; Col 1:13), here it is still future.

Verse 9 connects our life to Jesus’ death. Salvation is always dependent on Jesus. Verses 6 and 7 contained a call not to sleep and talked about those who do sleep and therefore belong to night. The same Greek word *katheudō*, “to sleep” that is found in 1Thess 5:10 occurs in these two verses. But there is a shift in meaning. Whereas in verses 6 and 7 it referred to those who were unprepared for the Lord’s coming, in verse 10 it refers to those believers who have passed away. Although it is different from the term used in 4:14 Paul returns to some extent to the theme of the previous passage, to those who are dead and those who are alive at Christ’s Second Coming. Verse 10 can only apply to believers, because together with verse 9 it talks about life and salvation through the Lord Jesus. Thus, the negative term of the previous verses is used with a different meaning.⁵³ This becomes also evident when we look at the context: “We will live together with him” of 5:10 is parallel to 4:17: “we will be with this Lord always.” And the last verse of our passage, verse 11 is closely related to 4:18 which also concluded a section of the letter dealing with the *parousia*. Some English translations are not as clear as the Greek text is:

4:18: “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Ōste parakaleite allēlous . . .

5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another . . .”

Dio parakaleite allēlous . . .

So both paragraphs are pulled together. Believers have strong hope for salvation. Today they watch and are vigilant. Expecting the *parousia* and their salvation will “encourage proper religious and ethical conduct.”⁵⁴ But whether they die before the Lord returns or whether they are still alive at the Second Coming does not make a basic difference. They will not be disadvantaged but will live and be with the Lord always.

h. 1Thess 5:23

⁵³Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 101, notes: “*Whether we are awake or asleep* means ‘whether we live or die’ (cf. Rom. 14:8); it is physical life and physical death that are in mind, not the ethical use as in verse 6 . . .”

⁵⁴Wanamaker, 189.

Once more Paul mentions the Second Coming. At the end of his first epistle after having penned a number of exhortations he adds a prayer in 1Thess 5:23. Christians are called to hold up high standards. But doing that they need the sanctifying power of God which touches every part of their being. It is God who can preserve them “complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And Paul confirms: “Faithful is he who calls you; he also will bring it to pass” (v. 24).

i. Summary

The information on the Second Coming given in 1Thessalonians is the following: (1) Jesus who was raised from the dead will come again. (2) He will come from heaven with his saints. (3) His Coming will be audible. (4) Those who have died in Christ will be resurrected at the second coming, and together with the living believers they will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. “Paul affirms that the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus is a pledge that those who have died in Christ will not be forgotten at the *parousia*; they will, in fact, rise first.”⁵⁵ (5) This is the real “rapture.” (6) The Second Coming of Jesus means final salvation for the believers but at the same time the coming of God’s wrath on the unbelievers. (7) They will be with the Lord forever. (8) Yet the Second Coming of Jesus will be like the coming of a thief. There will be an element of surprise. (9) Early Christians expected the Coming of Jesus and so should we. (10) It is important to be prepared, to be awake, and to be sober. The Second Coming is one of the most important topics in 1Thessalonians if not indeed the most important one.

4. 2Thessalonians’ Eschatological Passages Reviewed

a. 2Thess 1:5-10

The first passage of 2Thessalonians’ containing eschatological statements is found in chapter 1. It reflects ideas we have already noticed in 1Thessalonians. The coming of the Lord will be payday. God will “repay with affliction those who afflict you” (v. 6). It will be a day of retribution (v. 8), a day of “penalty of eternal destruction,⁵⁶ away from the presence of the Lord and from the

⁵⁵Donfried, 63.

⁵⁶Wanamaker, 228, is not willing to take this statement in the physical sense and therefore takes it metaphorically.

glory of His power” (v. 9), which reminds us of God’s wrath associated with the day of the Lord in 1Thessalonians. It will affect “those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” (v. 8). But there is not only the negative aspect. The Second Coming of Christ will have a double effect. The very same passage that describes the terrors of the unbelievers highlights the blessings of the Lord’s which will come upon his children. For them it means to “be considered worthy of the kingdom of God” (v. 5). This concept we also found already in 1Thessalonians. Believers will enjoy the rule of God. They also will enjoy rest and relief (v. 7). The coming of the Lord is described as an *apokalupsis*, a revelation (v. 7). He was concealed but now he will be revealed. This term was not found in 1Thessalonians. But how will he be revealed? The passage answers: (1) from heaven, (2) with the angels of his might,⁵⁷ (3) in flaming fire.⁵⁸ Fire is often connected with God’s presence (Exo 3:2; Isa 66:15-16). Whereas 1Thess 4 stressed an audible aspect of Christ’s coming, we now encounter a visible aspect. In the end God will be glorified in his saints (v. 10).

b. 2Thess 2:1-12

Chapter 2 is the most important section in 2Thessalonians. The passage clearly deals with the *parousia* and “and our gathering together to him ” (v. 1) and thus refers back to 1Thess 4:13-18. But it also goes further and mentions an interim, a period of time which precedes the *parousia*. Thus it provides the big picture of what is going to happen. This passage is somewhat difficult to interpret. It contains incomplete sentences in verse 3 and possibly in verse 7. Nevertheless, we are able to hear Paul’s basic message.

In 2Thess 2 Paul addressed the idea probably espoused by many Thessalonian believers that the Second Coming of Jesus was immediately at hand. He balanced the expectation of the imminence of the *parousia* with the concept that still something had to happen prior to Christ’s return. This passage was supposed to help church members not to become fanatical. They may have

⁵⁷This is the better translation. The emphasis is not on the angels’ authority and power but on Jesus’. Cf. Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 120.

⁵⁸The “flaming fire” is better taken with the preceding verse as a number of translations do. Cf., Wanamaker, 227.

taken his counsel in 1Thess 5 very seriously and may have gone into extremes.⁵⁹ One wonders whether or not those who were idle (2Thess 3:6-16) belonged to the fanatical part of the church and had a false understanding of Christ's return. In any case, Verse 2 indicates that they had become unsettled and alarmed--an expression used by Jesus in Mat 24:6 and Mark 13:7--and irritated by some form of communication. "The church members in Thessalonica had failed to heed the advice of Christ not to get overly excited about current events."⁶⁰ The passage is a passage on the antichrist, who would bring about apostasy, pretend to be God, and take his seat in the temple of God and yet seems to prefer to work behind the scenes. The *parousia* would only come after his public appearance or revealing and would lead to his destruction.

Who are the main figures in this passage? In verse 3 we encounter "the man of lawlessness," "the son of destruction" who is responsible for the apostasy. In verse 4 he is further described, namely as the one "who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." Obviously he wants to take the place of God on the throne of the universe. "The language here is like that in a number of passages in Daniel (see Dn. 7:25; 8:9-12; 11:36-37), but Paul is not simply reproducing the thought of Daniel."⁶¹ It also reminds us of Satan who is the adversary in Zech 3:1-2 and the one who aspires God's throne hiding behind the king of Tyre (Eze 28:2,6,12-17) and the king of Babylon (Isa 14:12-14). Whereas the mystery of lawlessness is mentioned in verse 7, the lawless one appears again in verse 8. He will be slain by the Lord at his coming, but before that he will have his own deceptive *parousia* "in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish" (v.9-10). "The 'revealing' of the person of rebellion should not be thought of as the making known of some formerly unknown or unidentified figure. Rather, just as Paul uses the noun ἀποκαλύψις to denote Christ's parousia in 1:7, so the cognate verb is employed here to refer to the public manifestation of the person of rebellion in vv.9f. As those verses show, that person's manifestation is a deceptive

⁵⁹Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994), 95.

⁶⁰Paulien, 96.

⁶¹Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 128.

parody or ‘anti-parousia’ of Jesus’ future coming.”⁶² Paulien correctly notes that present tense participles in verse 4 point to the fact that this power or person is already at work in Paul’s time and will continue to be at work.⁶³ This is supported by verse 7. It seems best to understand the “man of lawlessness” as Satan himself and as agencies through which he works. Since the language of Daniel is employed, the little horn power, secular Rome and the papacy seems also to be involved.⁶⁴ Our passage contains several parallels to Mat 24. One is this concept of lawlessness. In Mat 24:12 Jesus talked about the fact that the lawlessness would increase and that the love would grow cold in many. Then he added the promise that “the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” (Mat 24:13) before in Mat 24:14 he showed the counterpart to the lawlessness: “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.” Whereas Jesus portrays the end in this verse from a positive perspective, the spread of the good news of salvation in Christ, Paul in 2Thess 2 portrayed it from the other side, the increasing apostasy and deception.

Another person in 2Thess 2 is the restrainer of verse 7. As long as the restrainer is present, the man of lawlessness is not fully revealed. This restrainer is described as a person (v.7; masculine) and also as a power (v. 6, neuter).

“The restrainer is a law-upholding power . . . that is on a divine time mission (he continues his work until an appointed time—verse 7). In a sense the restrainer, by holding back the revelation of lawlessness, is holding back the end itself. . . Not only is the restrainer powerful enough to restrain the revelation of Satan or his agent, he (it?) appears to continue in operation until just before the end itself (verse 8). The lawless one is destroyed almost as soon as he appears. And according to the Greek of verse 7, it is not clear whether the restrainer is ‘taken out of the way’ . . . or has the authority to remove himself’ . . .”⁶⁵

In any case it is a restraining force and a restraining person. Several suggestions have been made as to who the restrainer is. Morris lists seven possibilities: (1) the Roman Empire, but this is

⁶²Wanamaker, 245.

⁶³Cf., Paulien, 97.

⁶⁴Cf., Paulien, 97. Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 128, denies that it is Satan: “He is not Satan, for he is distinguished from him (v. 9); but he is Satan’s instrument, imbued with Satan’s spirit.” Wanamaker, 255, allows for Satan to be present in verse 7.

⁶⁵Paulien, 98.

long gone, (2) some angelic being, but there is no way of knowing, (3) The preaching of the gospel and Paul who was preaching the gospel, (4) the Jewish state, (5) God the Father or the Holy Spirit, (6) Satan, or (7) an unknown power or person.⁶⁶

At the end of our passage God is portrayed. He is in control. He “sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.” (v.11-12). God will force people to make a decision for or against him and/or will bring judgment on those who have not accepted the truth but the lie. Ultimately, God is portrayed as being in control of whatever the “man of lawlessness” is doing. The *energeian planēs* of verse 11 finds its counterpart in verse 9: *energeian tou Satana*. “Paul presents God as so completely in control that He even ‘sends’ the working of Satan at the end. Ultimately only God can restrain Satan, and only God can hold back the Second Coming.”⁶⁷ Therefore, the restrainer should be understood as God and the restraining principle as the availability of the gospel, because our passage has connections to Mat 24 and in Mat 24:14 the end is connected with the preaching of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel unmasks God’s adversary and brings about the final event of world history. People have to make a decision. Those who do not believe will fall prey to the deception of Satan.

What is the temple in which the adversary sits? Some have understood the temple as the Jerusalem temple or Jerusalem,⁶⁸ but such an interpretation may force one to embrace preterism and to reinterpret the *parousia* or claim that Paul was mistaken. In Paul the temple is a picture for the

⁶⁶Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 130-131. He himself seems to choose the last option.

⁶⁷Paulien, 98.

⁶⁸Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 129; Wanamaker, 259. On one hand Wanamaker, 262, states: “The coming of the rebel is clearly intended to imitate the *parousia* of the Lord and is the final great lie perpetrated by Satan in an effort to delude those who are perishing. God ensure that this delusion, which those who are perishing have effectively chosen for themselves, is complete.” On the other hand he holds, 259: “According to v. 4 the rebel, who was probably thought of as a future emperor, would manifest himself at the temple in Jerusalem, where he would take his seat in order to assert his deity. Paul saw this as a work of Satan . . .” And 248: “The passage can no longer be understood as valid, since the temple was destroyed in AD 70 without the manifestation of the person of lawlessness or the return of Christ occurring. In order to maintain the continuing validity of the passage, some deny the obvious reference to the historical temple at Jerusalem . . . A more straightforward way of treating the problem is to admit that the passage meant something very different to Paul and his original readers than it can mean for us today.” He seems to have in mind that the passage has a double function. It shows that the day of the Lord has not come, and it addresses the situation of persecution in Thessalonica by referring to a first century context such as the “imperial rule under Gaius Caesar.”

church (1Cor 3:16,17; 2Cor 6:16). This passage clearly teaches the future *parousia* of our Lord which is the same *parousia* that we have encountered elsewhere in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In verse 8 it is also called *epiphaneia of his parousia*. It is the true *parousia* which unmasks the *anti-parousia* of the “man of lawlessness” (v.9) and will bring him to an end. It is difficult to see, how the other references to the coming of the Lord in 1 and 2 Thessalonians can be understood as pointing to the yet still future *parousia* and this one should be different.

In any case, 2Thess 2 presents a large picture of the time from the first century to Christ’s Second Coming. It portrays a time in which the mystery of lawlessness is active. The secret power is not yet openly revealed but it is at work. At the same time the gospel is preached. With the gospel climax the restraint is removed. The great deception going to happen. Satan will imitate the Second Coming of Jesus. Then Christ intervenes and returns. The “man of lawlessness” and his followers with him will perish. God’s people will be saved and vindicated.⁶⁹ Ellen G. White has described this final scene of world history:

As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. The church has long professed to look to the Saviour's advent as the consummation of her hopes. Now the great deceiver will make it appear that Christ has come. In different parts of the earth, Satan will manifest himself among men as a majestic being of dazzling brightness, resembling the description of the Son of God given by John in the Revelation. Revelation 1:13-15. The glory that surrounds him is unsurpassed by anything that mortal eyes have yet beheld. The shout of triumph rings out upon the air: "Christ has come! Christ has come!" The people prostrate themselves in adoration before him, while he lifts up his hands and pronounces a blessing upon them, as Christ blessed His disciples when He was upon the earth. His voice is soft and subdued, yet full of melody. In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. He declares that those who persist in keeping holy the seventh day are blaspheming his name by refusing to listen to his angels sent to them with light and truth. This is the strong, almost overmastering delusion. Like the Samaritans who were deceived by Simon Magus, the multitudes, from the least to the greatest, give heed to these sorceries, saying: This is "the great power of God." Acts 8:10. But the people of God will not be misled. The teachings of this false christ are not in accordance with the Scriptures.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Cf., Paulien, 101.

⁷⁰Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, 1911 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1950), 624-625.

c. 2Thess 2:14

The last text with a clear reference to the *parousia* is found in 2Thess 2:14. Paul addresses his church member and thanks God that he has chosen them “from the beginning for salvation” (1Thess 2:13). And again he reminds them of their goal, namely “that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The term “glory” was also used in 1Thessalonians even in the connection with the kingdom. Believers wait for the future glory.

d. Summary

Although 2Thessalonians does not contain as many texts about the Second Coming as 1Thessalonians contains, it still has major passages. Of special importance is 2Thess 2, because it presents a big picture of the end time scenario. The Second Coming is described with different terms and is the event to which Christians are looking forward to. It means for them deliverance from evil powers and salvation. However, they should refrain from fanaticism and know about an interim, and yet count with the future glory.

III. Implications

Two of the earliest books of the New Testament are filled with references to the *parousia* of the Lord. Both of them give us important information. The first tells us about the privilege to be finally saved. It tells us of the signs of the Second coming and the accompanying events such as the resurrection. The second book tells us that it means deliverance for us and informs us about the signs in the interim. Both books let us know that the doctrine of Jesus’ Second Coming is foundational for Christians. Therefore, it must have a proper place in our belief system. Other doctrines are dependent on the *parousia*. But doctrines are not sterile and irrelevant statements of ecclesiastical bodies. Doctrines influence and shape our lives. To know that there is a resurrection and transformation to eternal life gives meaning to our lives. This is evident when we read 1Thessalonians.

On the other hand, the Second Coming of Jesus must be more than a teaching. It must be part of your daily life. Although in church history Christ’s Second Coming was almost forgotten or replaced by human traditions, it is crucial for our everyday life. By believing in it we have a strong hope. We live with clear priorities. The Second Coming of Jesus encourages us to live a moral life

and take seriously what Jesus has commanded us. We do not look to the future only, but live as God's stewards here and now helping others and improving the quality of life for others. On the other hand, we are not only focused on what is temporary and transient but know that there is more than this earth with its pleasures and sufferings and that this live of toil and anguish is just the prelude to the glorious life to come.

The Second Coming of Jesus encourages us to seek a close relationship with the Lord. We meditate on what he has done for us. His return is possible only because he was raised from the dead. And he was raised from the dead because he died for us. The Second Coming ties together many important events in history and is our final salvation.

The two letters to the Thessalonians tell us to await Christ's coming, to look forward to his return, to watch and be vigilant. It is not wrong at all to count on Christ's imminent return. This is what other Christians did too, and they were blessed. However, we have to be careful not to become fanatical, to set dates and become irrational in our faith or our behavior. As his followers we want to represent Jesus fairly and correctly so that others are attracted to him. Sometimes we need to go back to the foundation and be reminded what it means to expect the Lord's return. And we confess that we are not afraid of our Lord, but long to see him face to face and be united with him. We are called to his kingdom and glory! Therefore we pray: "Your kingdom come!"

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