Eschatology in the Thessalonian Letters

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Eschatological texts tend to elicit one of two responses from most readers: fascination leading to preoccupation or confusion resulting in neglect. Whether or not one is impressed by or interested in things eschatological, those seeking to ascertain the message of the New Testament on its own terms can ill afford to ignore the category of eschatology. In fact, any attempt to read the New Testament without taking into full account the eschatological materials therein is like "selecting raisin toast for breakfast and then eating around the raisins."

Stated differently, eschatology is part of the warp and woof of the New Testament documents. This is true of the New Testament in general and of Paul in particular. And none of Paul's epistles is more eschatological in orientation and expression than 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In fact, eschatology suffuses the Thessalonian letters. Not only does Paul address in some detail the eschatological concerns which had arisen among the Thessalonian congregation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, but he also broaches end-time topics in 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:6; 5:23 as well as in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 2:14. Although I will examine only the three central eschatological passages in the Thessalonian correspondence in this article (i.e., 1 Thessalonians. 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), one should note that eschatology is nowhere far from the fore of Paul's mind in these—and (most) all of his other—epistles.

To begin this study, I will delineate the term eschatology and will indicate how this word is used herein. I will then turn to consider the aforementioned eschatological texts in their canonical sequence. By way of conclusion, I will offer some theological/pastoral reflections as to how the eschatological contents of 1 and 2 Thessalonians might be appropriated by Christians living near the dawn of a new millennium.

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Disentangling the Term Eschatology

In its relatively short history (approximately two hundred years), the word eschatology has come to have a maddening number of meanings. Because the word is so slippery, one scholar has even suggested that it be buried. Regardless of how appealing such a proposal might sound to some, it is not possible. For better or worse, eschatology will remain a part of theological vocabulary.

Getting a grasp on the term, however, is no small task. Broadly defined, the word seems simple enough to understand. It means “the study or doctrine of the destiny of humanity and history.” When construed in this sense, eschatology would refer “to teaching about such events as the parousia [i.e., the “coming” of Jesus], the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, heaven and hell.” But things are seldom as simple as they seem. Not a few theologians, a group that plays second fiddle to few others as “spin doctors,” have fashioned this term to fit their own interpretive programs. George B. Caird has noted eight distinct scholarly usages of eschatology, and I. Howard Marshall has catalogued no less than nine.

Fortunately, for the purposes of this paper we do not need to meander through this terminological maze. The basic definition of eschatology set forth in the previous paragraph will suffice. In an effort to be more precise, one might wish to describe Paul’s particular eschatological outlook as apocalyptic. In doing so, however, there is a risk of jumping from the frying pan into fire—for apocalyptic is another convoluted term. If by employing the word one has in mind a thought-world which emphasizes, among other things, dualism, judgment, and imminence, then Paul’s eschatological orientation might be rightly conceived and depicted as apocalyptic. Interestingly, “apocalyptic eschatology” is nowhere more pronounced in the Pauline epistolary corpus than in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. We now turn to examine three pericopes in the Thessalonian correspondence which are part and parcel of this theological perspective.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: The Lord’s Parousia

Having addressed the topic of “brotherly love” (philadelphia) in 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12, Paul turns in 4:13-18 to offer his converts instruction (ou thelomen de hymas agnoein, 4:13) and consolation (parakaleite allélous en tois logis toutois, 4:18) concerning those Thessalonian Christians who had fallen asleep, i.e., who had died (peri tôn koimômenôn, 4:13). Presumably, Paul is responding in these verses to a concern raised by the assembly in writing and/or via Timothy (see 3:6). Although scholars have expended much energy attempting to determine precisely why the congregation was under-informed, if not uninformed, regarding the destiny of the Christian dead, a consensus has yet to emerge. Could it be that Paul had so thoroughly emphasized the proximity of the parousia while he was with the Thessalonians that he had not adequately emphasized and his converts had not fully entertained the prospect that death
might come before Jesus did? Furthermore, might it be that those who remained were fearful that their departed sisters and brothers in Christ would be disadvantaged at the *parousia* or even excluded from God’s “kingdom and glory” (2:12)?

Regardless of the precise reason(s) for the Thessalonians’ consternation, Paul’s purpose for constructing these verses is clear enough: he wants to instruct and thereby comfort his converts regarding the destiny of the Christian dead with special reference to the *parousia* “so that they might not grieve as do the rest [i.e., unbelievers] who have no hope” (4:13). It is also important at this point to observe what Paul does not say or seek to do in this passage. He does not command the Thessalonians to forego grieving, nor does Paul presuppose that his recipients’ hope has become “disengaged from their faith”—though he is obviously concerned that they (re)gain hope for those who have died prior to the *parousia*. Furthermore, Paul does not attempt here (or for that matter elsewhere in his extant epistles) to answer all of the Thessalonians’ (and our) questions concerning the *eschaton*. As one commentator aptly puts it: “Paul’s pastoral concern [in this passage] was to guide the way the Thessalonians were living, not provide them with eschatological gnosis.” Another interpreter rightly suggests that Paul’s purpose in 4:13-18 “is not to teach a system of speculative eschatology but to comfort alarmed believers who are worried about their deceased relatives and friends missing out at Christ’s return.” If this much can be granted, then it seems Hermeneutically inappropriate, if not irresponsible, to take aspects of this passage out of context (e.g., the “rapture” of which Paul speaks in 4:17) or to import to these verses eschatological details from other texts (e.g., the tribulation or the millennium) in an (misguided, if well-intentioned) attempt to formulate some grand end-time scenario or to construct some finely detailed calendar of ultimate events.

How is it, then, that Paul does seek to console his dear children (2:8, 10) in their grief? Paul’s strategy is two-fold. Firstly, Paul seeks to engender confidence among his converts for the future of their departed loved ones by appealing to their shared belief (*ei gār pisteuomen*) in what may well be an early Christian creedal statement: “Jesus died and rose again” (*Iêsous apethanen kai anestē*, 4:14a; cf. 1:10; 5:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:3-4, 12; Rom. 14:9). Jesus’ resurrection in the midst of time functioned for Paul as the paradigm for the resurrection of Christians at the end of time (cf. 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:12-19; 2 Cor. 4:14). To be sure, Paul does not explicitly refer to the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in 4:14b. This is presumably due to Paul’s immediate desire to allay his converts’ fear that the dead in Christ will miss out on or be disadvantaged at the *parousia*. Nonetheless, the resurrection of Christians is clearly implied when Paul declares that God will bring with him (i.e., Jesus at the time of his *parousia*) those Thessalonian believers who have died through Jesus (cf. 4:16: “the dead in Christ will rise first”). In 4:14, then, Paul draws upon the crux of the ancient Christian *kerygma*, “Jesus died and rose again,” in an attempt to encourage his converts in the midst of their mourning. He reasons that even as God raised Jesus, so also God will raise the Christian dead and will bring them with Jesus when he
comes. Not even death can rend asunder the intimate and unique bonds that believers share with Christ and with one another.

Having appealed to the resurrection in 4:14 to encourage his converts in respect to the Christian dead, Paul proceeds in 4:15-17 to offer them additional instruction and thereby consolation predicated upon a “word of the Lord” (en logo kyriou). Paul's reference to a logion of Jesus in 4:15a has spawned a number of questions. Two of the most pressing are: 1) What was the precise origin of this “word”?: and 2) what words in 4:15-17 actually constitute the Lord's word? We will consider these questions in turn. The first query is typically answered in one of three ways. Interpreters have construed this logion as: a) an otherwise unrecorded statement of Jesus (a so-called agraphon); b) a loose paraphrase of or inference from a teaching of Jesus as recorded in one of the canonical gospels; or c) a revelatory word of the exalted Lord given to a Christian prophet, perhaps even Paul himself.

As to the extent of the logion in 4:15-17, one of two positions is usually taken: a) the “word of the Lord” appears in 4:15, and Paul expounds upon it in 4:16-17; or, b) 4:15b is an inference drawn by Paul from the Lord’s word which is set forth in 4:16-17. Regarding the precise origin and extent of this word from the Lord, there is wisdom in F. F. Bruce’s suggestion that these questions be left sub judice.

Even if much about the logos kyriou of which Paul speaks remains shrouded, the purpose for which he employs the word is clear: he wants to assure those Christians who remain (i.e., the epistle’s recipients) that the faithful dead will not be forgotten at the time of the eschaton.

A full exposition of 4:15-17 is not possible here. Therefore, three additional observations about these verses must suffice.

1. In 4:15, 17, Paul places himself among the living at the time of the parousia. To be sure, Paul indicates elsewhere that he could conceive of dying before Jesus’ coming (5:10; cf. Rom 14:8; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:8-9; Phil 1:19-26). Nonetheless, A. M. Hunter is surely not far from the mark when he suggests: “Paul probably believed to the end of his days in a speedy return of Christ.” The proximity of the parousia is a recurring theme in Paul’s writings (see, e.g., 1 Cor 7:25-31; 15:51; Rom 13:11-12; Phil 3:20; 4:5 [?]) and is certainly emphasized in 1 Thess 4:15-17.

2. 1 Thess 4:16-17 indicates that the Lord’s coming will be public and climactic. In describing the event Paul draws upon apocalyptic imagery as well as language utilized to speak of the arrival (parousia) and reception (apantësis) of a visiting dignitary in Greek antiquity. His pictorial presentation of the parousia includes metaphors of sight/space (i.e., the Lord descending from heaven; Christians being caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air) and sound (i.e., a cry of command, the archangel’s call, and the sound of the trumpet of God). Paul maintains that the Lord’s coming will result in the raising of the Christian dead, the rapturing of the Christian living, and the (re)uniting of both with their Lord. According to Paul, these things will occur consecutively and will usher in eternity (“so we will always be with the Lord”). For Paul, then, the parousia would mark the culmination of human history. To describe this reality, Paul employed metaphoric speech. And this should come as no surprise: “For in
all things that transcend human experience we have no choice but to use metaphor" (see 1 Cor 2:9; 13:12). 46

3. Lastly and most central to Paul's purpose in crafting this text, 4:15-17 stresses that the faithful dead will in no way be disadvantaged at the parousia. Not only will they be involved in the eschatological festivities, they will be given priority over the living. The latter will not precede the former; the deceased will be raised and raptured first. In 4:18 we discover that Paul wanted his words regarding the destiny of the Christian dead to serve as a pastoral salve for those grieving believers who remained. If the positive reception of these lines by subsequent generations of Christians confronted with the reality of mortality is any indication, then Paul's words of comfort to the Thessalonians accomplished their desired purpose.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11: The Day of the Lord

Although a few in the Thessalonian fellowship had died, the congregation's passion for and even preoccupation with the parousia had not. 47 In fact, it appears that Paul framed 5:1-11 in response to another query from the assembly regarding Jesus' coming. 48 Their question might have run something like this: "Precisely when will the Lord come?" 49 Paul deals with their question rather tersely in 5:1-3 before turning in 5:4-10 to enjoin his converts to be morally prepared for the parousia. He then continues in 5:11, a verse which appears to serve as a general conclusion for the entire section (i.e., 4:13-5:10), to admonish the fellowship to keep on encouraging and building up one another (cf. 4:18).

As to when (the "times" [chronoi] and "seasons" [kairos] 50) the "day of the Lord" (hêmera kyriou = yom yhwh) 51 would occur, Paul contends that the Thessalonians do not need written instruction (5:1b; cf. 4:9, 13). Presumably Paul had spoken fully and frequently about the parousia while in Thessalonica (note 1:10; 2:19; 5:23; cf. 2 Thess. 2:5) and thereby regarded them sufficiently tutored on the topic ("you yourselves know well" [5:2]). 52 In 5:2-3, Paul is content to set forth two metaphors which underscore the unpredictability and inevitability of the "day." In 5:2 Paul likens the day of the Lord to the coming of a thief in the night (cf. Matt. 24:43-44/Luke 12:38-39) in order to stress that the day "would come both at an unexpected point in time and that it would be a threat to those unprepared for its arrival" (cf. 5:4). 53 The second metaphor functions similarly. Even as outsiders assert that all is well ("peace and security" [eirêne kai asphaleia] 54), ineluctable, inescapable destruction will come upon them like labor pangs upon a pregnant woman. In response to the Thessalonians' question, Paul refuses to speculate precisely when the day would come (though as we saw above he seems to have thought that Jesus would return sooner than later). 55 Instead, he contends that the day of the Lord—whenever it occurs—will come suddenly and will shock the ill-prepared.

Paul turns in 5:4-10 to elaborate upon the need for his converts to be prepared for the parousia. In these verses Paul presupposes that all of his recipients are children of light (5:5, 8) destined for salvation (5:9). Contrastingly,
he regards unbelievers to be of the night (5:4, 5) and subject to wrath (5:9; cf. 1:10; 2:16; 5:3). Even though he anticipates that his spiritually-enlightened converts will not be caught off-guard by the day of the Lord (5:4), he nevertheless admonishes them to stay on guard by staying awake, keeping sober, and putting on spiritual armor (5:6-8). In contradistinction to non-Christians, the Thessalonians should neither slumber (5:6) nor become intoxicated (5:6, 8). Such nocturnal activities, Paul maintains, are unbecoming of those who have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and who are awaiting the Lord's coming. Those rescued from wrath should remember that the death of Christ offers life with Christ both here and hereafter (5:10). This theological reality should impact their ethical activity until he comes; who they are should affect what they do. The indicative and imperative meet in Paul once again.\textsuperscript{58}

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12: “Let No One Deceive You”

This passage is one of the most perplexing (and peculiar) in the Pauline letter corpus, laden as it is with interpretive conundrums. And the fact that Paul, if it is indeed he as I am inclined to think, presumes knowledge on the part of his recipients to which we belated readers are not privy only exacerbates an already complicated exegetical enterprise (see 2:5). Furthermore, scholastic treatments of and proposals about this text proliferate, making an already daunting task more intimidating still.\textsuperscript{57} My goal in overviewing this pericope is necessarily modest. All that I can hope to do here is to consider what occasioned the instruction contained in 2:3-12 and to comment upon a few of the more outstanding features in these verses.

Building upon previous comments concerning the present affliction of the Thessalonians\textsuperscript{58} and the future punishment of their oppressors at the time of Christ's coming (1:5-10), Paul proceeds to take up (yet again) the topic of the parousia (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-5:11). He begins by pleading for his converts “not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or word or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come” (2:2).\textsuperscript{59} Paul is not sure how (by spirit, word, or letter) nor from whom (the “idlers”?; see 3:6-15; cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 5:14) this claim arose. It may be that one or more of the Thessalonians with a heightened expectation for the parousia and in the throes of affliction (mis)appropriated Paul's previous oral and/or written instruction by equating some external calamity with the commencement of the day of the Lord.\textsuperscript{60} Regardless of the precise cause of this eschatological turmoil, Paul is clearly concerned that this erroneous claim might unsettle, if not undo, the assembly.\textsuperscript{61} He turns, therefore, in 2:3-12 to dissuade the Thessalonians from being deceived regarding the coming of the Lord.

Paul propounds that, prior to the parousia, two events must first transpire: the “apostasy” and the revelation/parousia of the man of lawlessness/son of perdition (2:3). Although Paul does not expound upon the “apostasy” to which he refers, expectation of rebellion against God in the last days was not an
uncommon feature in Jewish and Christian literature roughly contemporaneous with Paul and is likely what he has in mind here.\textsuperscript{62} Paul does offer, however, a fuller description of the man of lawlessness who seems to function as the leader, if not the instigator, of the rebellion. We will briefly consider the activity and destiny of this figure in what follows.

Paul maintains that the \textit{parousia} of the lawless one will be in keeping with the work of Satan. His coming will be characterized by power, accompanied by false miraculous manifestations, and marked by wicked deceit which will result in the ultimate condemnation of those who refuse to believe the truth (2:9-12; cf. Rom 1:18-32). This sinister character is presented as one who will perceive himself as and proclaim himself to be God. Apparently drawing upon the prophetic books of Daniel (9:27; 11:31; 12:11; cf. Mark 13:14/Matt 24:15), Isaiah (14:13-15), and Ezekiel (28:2) and perhaps also reflecting upon the profane activity of such rulers as Antiochus Epiphanes (who entered the Temple), Pompey (who entered the Holy of Holies), and Caligula (who sought to erect an image of himself in the Temple in 41 C.E.), Paul describes this figure as audaciously evil enough to seat himself in the Temple (2:4).

Paul goes on to contend (and this is his primary point) that the mystery of lawlessness, though presently at work, has yet to crystallize in the man of lawlessness. Therefore, Paul flatly denounces the spurious claim that the day of the Lord has come. He maintains that before Jesus returns the lawless one must first be revealed.\textsuperscript{64} In order for this to occur, however, that which/the one who restrains must be removed.\textsuperscript{65} Only after the removal of this power/person will the man of lawlessness be made manifest (2:6-8a). The appearing and coming of the lawless one will be countered by the revealing and coming of the Lord. Paul contends that the latter will slay the former by his very breath (2:8b-9).

How are we meant to construe this amazingly complex passage: literally, figuratively, or a combination thereof? My inclination is to take this text as well as other ancient texts cast in an apocalyptic hue as figurative.\textsuperscript{66} I readily admit, however, that I neither know the mind of Paul nor the Thessalonians. Furthermore, even if Paul meant this depiction of the man of lawlessness to be construed symbolically, this is no guarantee that it was or will be. I. Howard Marshall suggests that the degree to which apocalyptic texts are taken literally or metaphorically both in Paul's day and our own has much to do with who is doing the reading/listening. Regardless of one's interpretive predisposition toward this and other eschatologically oriented texts which employ apocalyptic imagery, we may agree with Marshall when he writes: "What matters . . . is the spiritual truth conveyed by the imagery [employed by Paul in this passage], namely, the reality and menace of the power of evil which attempts to deny the reality and power of God."\textsuperscript{67} To paraphrase Paul here, that which and/or those who seek to thwart the purposes and people of God will not perpetually prevail.\textsuperscript{68}
Conclusion

Is it still possible to appropriate the eschatological instruction contained in the Thessalonian correspondence in a context which differs considerably from that of the writer and original recipients? While acknowledging that Paul employs apocalyptic and symbolic language in describing the eschaton and that such imagery is not meant to be taken literally, contemporary Christians can and, in my estimation, should continue to take the parousia seriously and to affirm with our forerunners in the faith the reality of God’s ultimate triumph through Christ at his coming.69 Believers on the precipice of the twenty-first century may genuinely and energetically join the eschatological chorus begun by first century Christians by praying Maranatha! (1 Cor 16:22).70 Indeed, “Living in the imminence of Christ’s return is . . . the privilege and the proper stance toward life of every generation of Christians.”71

Regarding Christ’s coming, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to be hopeful (1 Thess 4:13-18). He also admonishes them to be watchful for (but not too much so) and faithful until his return (1 Thess 5:1-11; 2 Thess 2:1-12). It seems to me that our posture towards the parousia should be similar. This does not mean, of course, that we jettison our jobs, sell our possessions, don white robes, and occupy a mountainside staring into space. Nor does it mean that we should expend precious time, energy, and resources trying to pinpoint precisely when Christ will come.72 Rather, it means that we should continue to trust that “the One who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Christ” (Phil 1:6).73 While sober reflection about and preparation for the Lord’s coming is commendable, rabid preoccupation with and speculation about the parousia is deplorable (and does much harm to the gospel).

In an essay entitled “The World’s Last Night,” C. S. Lewis, the thoughtful Irish professor of English cum lay theologian, suggested that the New Testament’s teaching on Christ’s “second coming” could be summarized thusly: “1) That he will certainly return. 2) That we cannot possibly find out when. 3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him.”74 Regarding one’s readiness for the Lord’s return, he espouses what I regard to be a responsible position for any given generation of Christians. His words, even if now dated in some ways, offer a fitting conclusion to this article:

Frantic administration of panaceas to the world is certainly discouraged by the reflection that ‘this present’ might be ‘the world’s last night’; sober work for the future, within the limits of ordinary morality and prudence, is not. For what comes is judgement: happy are those whom it finds labouring in their vocations, whether they were merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil. The curtain has indeed fallen. Those pigs will never in fact be fed, the great campaign against white slavery or governmental tyranny will never in fact proceed to victory. No matter; you were at your post when the inspection came.75
Those in the former category frequently heighten the aversion of those in the latter to eschatological passages. As we approach the year 2000, one can rest assured that eschatological passions and predictions will be at an all time high. Regarding such, see the timely and insightful remarks by James D. G. Dunn, “He Will Come Again,” Interpretation 51 (1997): 42-56. See also the still useful comments of C. S. Lewis on eschatology in “The World’s Last Night” in Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), 65-85.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, First and Second Thessalonians, “Interpretation” (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 76. After offering this analogy, Gaventa goes on to suggest, “Eschatology may occupy the periphery of our understanding and experience, but it is not a peripheral matter.”


Some scholars have argued that the canonical order of the Thessalonian correspondence is not the historical order in which Paul wrote the epistles. This argument has been advocated most recently and forcefully by Charles A. Wanamaker, The Epistles to

8 I. Howard Marshall ("Slippery Words. I. Eschatology," Expository Times 89 [1977-78]: 264-69) reports that German theologian K. G. Bretschneider was seemingly the first to use the word in a work published in 1804. Marshall also notes that American scholar George Bush was apparently the first to use the term in English in a work published in 1845.


11 So Marshall, "Eschatology," 264. For other theological topics which one might study under this heading, see Ladd, "Eschatology," 130; and Kreitzer, "Eschatology," 253.

12 In Language and Imagery, 243-71, Caird suggests that scholastic work on eschatology has sought to emphasize various features of eschatological thought and may be placed under one of the following headings: individual, historical, consistent, realized, inaugurated, existential, newness, and purpose.

13 In the interest of space, I will not set these forth here. See, however, "Eschatology," 267.


15 Keck ("Paul and Apocalyptic Theology," 230) suggests that "apocalyptic" may be the most misused word in the scholar's vocabulary because it resists definition. For a useful introduction to the scholarly conversation regarding the word apocalyptic, see Richard E. Strum, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic': A Problem in Biblical Criticism," in Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn, ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L.

16 On apocalyptic in general and within the Thessalonian letters in particular, see further my Conflict at Thessalonica, ch. 8.


21 For a plausible reconstruction of the contents of Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica, see Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," 516-17. Cf. my Conflict at Thessalonica, chs. 8.3.a and 11.4. Some scholars regard 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 as illustrative of Paul’s proclamation among the Thessalonians. Cf. Luke’s stylized summary of Paul’s preaching in the Thessalonian synagogue in Acts 17:3-4.

22 For a similar line of reasoning, cf., e. g., David J. Williams, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, New International Biblical Commentary 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 80; and David Wenham, Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 298.

23 While ancient people outside of Christian communities were not entirely void of hope regarding life after death, I am not presently aware of any Greco-Roman ancient literature or inscriptive evidence that does not in my perception appear rather vague or even vacuous regarding life beyond when read alongside the New Testament. For a useful survey of Greek and Roman beliefs concerning life after death, see the overview in John P. Mason, The Resurrection according to Paul (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 46-60.

24 Contrast Shepherd of Hermas 41.5: "Rid yourself, therefore, of grief and do not oppress the Holy Spirit that lives in you, lest it intercede with God against you and leave you"! John R. W. Stott (The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, The Bible Speaks Today [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991], 94) rightly observes: “What Paul prohibits is not grief but hopeless grief.”


The Latin verb *rapio* was used in translating the Greek *harpazein*. We derive the English word *rapture* from this Latin verb. Paul does not, of course, suggest that those who remain will be "caught up" or "snatched away" from a time of tribulation. *Contra*, e. g., John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1955), pp. 80-83. Rather, Paul maintains that at the time of the *parousia* the Christian living will be "raptured" along with the resurrected dead in Christ in order to be henceforth united with their Lord and with one another. Malherbe (*Exhortation in 1 Thessalonians,* 256, n. 84) rightly notes: "Whereas the word [*harpazein*] usually denoted the separation from the living, Paul uses it [in 4:17] to describe a snatching to an association with Lord and other Christians."


Cf. Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*, 76: "The rule 'What happens to Christ also to the Christian' expresses solidarity with Christ."


So rightly, Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*, 71-76. I take *dia tou Iēsou* with *tous koimêthêntas*. So also, e. g., Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 97; and Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 169.


Precisely where God will take those who sleep (or wake) at the time of the *parousia* is a matter of scholarly debate. Some maintain that the destination is earth (e. g., Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 124-25; Martin, *Thessalonians*, 155; Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*, 158; Holmes, *Thessalonians*, 151), others contend heaven (e. g., Paul Ellingworth, "Which Way Are We Going? A Verb of Movement, especially in 1 Thess 4:14b," *The Bible Translator* 25 [1974]: 426-31; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 175-76). I am inclined to the former. Regardless of the destination, neither 4:14b nor 4:17a support "the Dispensationalist view of a pretribulation rapture of the saints so that they will avoid the messianic woes that precede the end of history" (Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*, 158). So also, Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 100-11. * Pace, e. g., Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 276-79.

Meeks ("Social Functions of Apocalyptic Literature," 694) points out that the eschatological instruction which Paul offers here could buttress further the solidarity of the community. Believers are bound together in life and death.


Of course, variations of these three basic positions abound. For a discussion of the various interpretive options and proponents thereof, see Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 170-71; Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*, 78-81; Wenham, *Paul*, 305-7, 332-33; and Dunn, *Paul*, 303-4. See also Robert H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and


40 Thessalonians, 99.

41 Wanamaker (Thessalonians, 170) rightly notes that the function of 4:15-17 all too frequently gets lost in the dust of scholastic debate. See also Malherbe, “Exhortation in 1 Thessalonians,” 254-56.


43 Commenting on 1 Thess 4:15, Wenham (Paul, 298) writes: “Paul anticipated that the Lord would come soon and thought that he himself would be alive at that time.” So similarly, Bruce, Thessalonians, 99; Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 171-72. Contrast Marshall, Thessalonians, 127; and E. M. B. Green, “A Note on 1 Thessalonians iv. 15, 17,” Expository Times 69 (1957): 285-86.


46 Dunn, “He Will Come Again,” 48. Cf. the apposite remarks of Marshall, Thessalonians, 128: “ . . . texts about the parousia must be taken symbolically. A real event is being described, but it is one which cannot be described literally since the direct activity of God cannot be fully comprehended in human language.” See also, Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 173.

47 Pace Jewett (Thessalonian Correspondence, 97) who thinks that the Thessalonians’ “intense experience of realized eschatology, so to speak, sustained an unwillingness to live with the uncertainty of a future eschatology.” Barclay (“Conflict in Thessalonica,” 517) rightly observes that the Thessalonians’ expectation of the parousia was increasing, not waning.


49 Scholars have rightly rejected Gerhard Friedrich’s proposal that 1 Thess 5:1-11 is a post-Pauline interpolation (“1 Thessalonicher 5,1-11, der apologetische Einschub eines Späteren,” Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 10 [1973]: 288-315).

50 Marshall (Thessalonians, 132), who is followed by Holmes (Thessalonians, 165), suggests that the congregation posed this question because they were unsure whether they were spiritually prepared for parousia. While this suggestion is not without some merit, I am inclined to think that it was the church’s eager expectation regarding the eschaton that prompted this inquiry (cf. 2 Thess 2:2).

51 Although some scholars have sought to differentiate between “times” and “seasons” with the former understood as chronological periods and the latter as significant moments (so, e. g., Morris, Thessalonians, 148-49), it is now widely recognized that these terms are more or less synonymous (so, e. g., Bruce, Thessalonians, 108-9).
In 4:13-5:11 Paul uses *parousia* and *hēmēra kuriou* interchangeably. So rightly, e. g., Martin, *Thessalonians*, 156; and Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 179. Holmes (Thessalonians, 166) offers the plausible suggestion that Paul switches from the former word to the latter phrase in 5:2 so as to underscore the theme of judgment. On "the day of the Lord" in the Old Testament and Paul's employment of this phrase and variations thereon, see, among others, Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 179.

So also Joseph Plevnik, "Pauline Presuppositions," in *Thessalian Correspondence*, 50-61 (56-59).

For the argument that this phrase is a Roman imperial slogan which Paul regards as foolishness, see my *Conflict at Thessalonica*, ch. 10.4.c.

On the timing of Christ's coming and Paul's succinct response to the Thessalonians' question in 5:2-3, Marshall (Thessalonians, 132) writes:

> It is worth observing that many people today crave detailed information about both the time and the course of the last events, and there are writers who are prepared to answer the question in minute detail and with not a little imagination. Some advocates of 'dispensational' teaching about the second coming of Jesus are particularly prone to offering exhaustive and elaborate timetables of future events. Not so Paul. When he was asked for detailed information, he had nothing more to say than he says in this passage. Christian teachers today would do well to follow his example and so avoid 'going beyond what is written.'


On the nature, cause, and results of the Thessalonians' affliction, see my full-length study *Conflict at Thessalonica*.

On 2 Thess. 2:2, see, e. g., Gordon D. Fee, "Pneuma and Eschatology in 2 Thessalonians 2.1-2: A Proposal about 'Testing the Prophets' and the Purpose of 2 Thessalonians," in *To Tell the Mystery*, 196-215.

For a useful and to my mind convincing reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* which gave rise to 2 Thessalonians in general and 2:1-12 in particular, see Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," 525-29. Although some of Paul's converts in Thessalonica might have differentiated between the day of the Lord and the coming of the Lord, Paul obviously did not as this text makes manifestly clear.

It is not infrequently suggested that Paul is reacting to some sort of realized eschatology among the Thessalonians in 2:1-12 (so, e. g., Jewett, *Thessalian Correspondence*, 176). This proposal is rightly rejected by, among others, Gundry, "The Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," 177, n. 45.

Barclay ("Conflict in Thessalonica," 530) comments, "The Thessalonian Letters show how an apocalyptic sect can get so caught up in its own rhetoric that it develops tendencies towards economic and social suicide."

For a listing of some of the pertinent texts, see Gundry, "The Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," 171.

It is now impossible to know for sure whether Paul perceived of the "man of
lawlessness” (cf. the figure of the Antichrist in 1 John 2:18; cf. also 1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Revelation 13) as an actual individual (so, e. g., Stott, Thessalonians, 166-67; and Herschel H. Hobbs, “Commentary on 2 Thessalonians,” in The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 11 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971], 291) or as a metaphorical representation of utter evil (so, e. g., Dunn, “Until He Comes,” 50; and John T. Townsend, “II Thessalonians 2:3-13,” Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Paper [1980]: 233-46 [238]). Cf. further Wanamaker (Thessalonians, 250) who suggests that 2 Thess 2:3-4 “reads like prophecy about historical events to come, and it is almost certain that this is how Paul and his readers would have understood it.” He continues by suggesting: “This passage can no longer be understood as valid, since the temple was destroyed in CE 70 without the manifestation of the person of lawlessness or the return of Christ occurring.” No perspective vis-á-vis the “man of lawlessness” is unproblematic. Stott’s contention (Thessalonians, 167) “And whether we still believe in the coming of [a literal, human] Antichrist will depend largely on whether we still believe in the coming of Christ,” strikes me as overstated.

The ambiguity of the identity of the “man of lawlessness” has generated a legion of suggestions over the centuries as to whom he might be. These range from Roman emperors, to popes, to church reformers, to contemporary political and theological figures, to political and theological movements. Recently, I was told that a metroplex pastor identified Prince Charles as the Antichrist (and ultimately lost his job over this interpretive point! There is more than one reason to proceed with caution on this topic!). For a list of would-be Antichrists, see Stott, Thessalonians, 165-66; and Holmes, Thessalonians, 241. On the figure of the Antichrist in biblical studies, see the excursus of Bruce, Thessalonians, 179-88. On how this character has been construed in America from colonial to contemporary times, see Robert C. Fuller, Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

For interpretive options regarding the temple of God of which Paul speaks in 2:4, see Marshall, Thessalonians, 190-92; Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 246-47; and Townsend, “II Thessalonians 2:3-12,” 235-37.

Longenecker (“Paul’s Early Eschatology,” 93) rightly sees that Paul’s argument in 2:1-12 is essentially negative. Paul reasons as follows: “... if the Day of the Lord had already come, Thessalonian Christians would be able by hindsight to identify ‘the apostasy’ and ‘the man of lawlessness’ (vs. 3-4) spoken about in Christian tradition and by Paul in his preaching among them (v.5)—but since they can’t, it hasn’t!”

Numerous proposals regarding the nature of the restraining force (to katechon) or restrainer (ho katechôn) are on offer. These include: the Roman empire as personified in the emperor; the principle of law and order; the Jewish state; Satan; a force and person hostile to God; God and his power; the Holy Spirit; the proclamation of the gospel by Christian missionaries, particularly Paul; and an angelic figure restraining evil until the gospel has been preached to all nations. For these suggestions and representatives thereof, see Holmes, Thessalonians, 233-34. Beyond eliminating those proposals which construe that which/restrains as evil, I have no settled opinion at present. Indeed, “There are some things in [Paul’s letters] hard to understand ...” (2 Pet. 3:16). Happily, I have good company in my confoundedness. When confronted with 2:6-7, Augustine (City of God, 20.19) remarked: “I frankly confess that I do not know what he means.” We might be wise to make a similar confession. Cf. Morris, Thessalonians, 228.

Drawing upon the work of his teacher George B. Caird (Language and Imagery in the Bible), N. Thomas Wright, “Putting Paul Together Again: Toward a Synthesis of Pauline Theology (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon),” in Pauline Theology. I. Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 183-211 (211), contends that “it is high time that ... we released ourselves
from the woodenly literal reading of apocalyptic language which has been such a strange characteristic of an otherwise linguistically sensitive age.” Contrast Jerry Falwell, who has recently claimed that the Bible dictates that the Antichrist will be a Jewish male (“Falwell Apologizes for Antichrist Comment,” Baptist Standard 111.7 [1999]: 9). He is, of course, not the first to posit such. E. g., Irenaeus (c. 180 C.E. in Adv. Haer. 5.25-30) and Hippolytus (c. 200 C.E. in On Antichrist 14) were likewise convinced. Nevertheless, this interpretive position regarding the identity of the Antichrist surely does not rise to the level of “traditional Christian belief” despite Falwell’s claims to the contrary.

67 Marshall, Thessalonians, 192.

68 The third stanza of Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” serves as a useful commentary on 2 Thess 2:3-12:
And tho’ this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For Io, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

69 Cf. Marshall, Thessalonians, 143; and Dunn, “He Will Come Again,” 55-56.

70 Cf. the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds which maintain that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead.

71 Ellis, Pauline Theology, 17, n. 45.

72 So rightly, Holmes, Thessalonians, 173.

73 Cf. Longenecker (“Paul’s Early Eschatology,” 93), who maintains that Paul’s “commitment was not first of all to a programme or some timetable of events but to a person: Jesus the Messiah.”

74 “The World’s Last Night,” 79.

75 Ibid., 82-83.